Connecting the past to the future: a vision for reconciliation and remembrance in Anlong Veng, Cambodia

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Abstract

During the Democratic Kampuchea regime in Cambodia, which ruled from 17 April 1975 to 7 January 1979, more than 2 million people, a quarter of the country’s population estimated at the time, perished as a result of overwork, starvation, disease or execution. The Choeung Ek ‘Killing Fields’ and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, are the two most frequently visited memorials dedicated to this period. Since 2010, there has been a significant increase in the number of local visitors to both memorials, with the Khmer Rouge Tribunal sponsoring ‘study tours’ in Phnom Penh. However, with the Khmer Rouge Tribunal now drawing to a close, the ongoing need for healing Cambodia’s old wounds and exacting social justice has shifted from these large outreach programs designed to educate interested locals about the past, to smaller scaled activities where reconciliation is ‘worked through’ in the context of workshops and guided walks through history.

The Anlong Veng Peace Centre (a non-governmental research organisation), an initiative developed by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam), aims to heal the wounds of the past by documenting, researching, and sharing the history of the Khmer Rouge period; this paper addresses a means of remembrance and reconciliation driven by a pedagogical perspective in which preserving ‘perpetrator sites’ to heal the past is considered the way forward.

Significance of Anlong Veng

Better known as the last stronghold of Khmer Rouge regime, the far-flung northwestern district of Anlong Veng remains ‘home’ to many ex-Khmer Rouge soldiers, civilian followers of the movement and their descendants (approximately 85% of the population), who to this day experience isolation, polarisation and marginalisation because of their complicity in Cambodia’s brutal past (Dy & Dearing 2014, p. 28).

Following the Democratic Kampuchea rule (1975-1979), a twenty-year long civil-guerrilla war (1979-1999) was waged between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese-backed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PKR) which, after the Vietnamese withdrawal in 1989, was briefly known as the State of Cambodia. During the UNTAC period (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, 1991-1993), the dwindling Khmer Rouge forces made minor territorial gains, giving rise to renewed political violence in the lead up to the May 1993 elections. After the newly elected Royal Government of Cambodia was installed, the Khmer Rouge, who had boycotted the elections, were officially outlawed in 1994. Yet they continued their struggle until their final collapse in March 1999, when the last senior military commander, Ta Mok, was captured by the Cambodian authorities.
Located in Oddar Meancheay Province, Anlong Veng first gained prominence after the Democratic Kampuchea fell on 7 January 1979. Toppled by the Vietnamese and Cambodian Renaske (anti-Khmer Rouge forces), the Khmer Rouge cadre and frightened civilians who had been immersed in anti-Vietnamese propaganda, fled to the Cambodian-Thai border. However, by late 1979, the Vietnamese-backed People’s Republic of Kampuchea forces controlled much of the Anlong Veng region, and established several strategic military bases to fortify the area with the aim of reducing Khmer Rouge infiltration (Dy & Dearing 2014, p. 45).

Under the leadership of military commander, Ta Mok, the Dangrek mountain range, or more specifically the codenamed ‘Mountain 1003’, became the military hub for the Khmer Rouge combatants to regroup, rearm and resume offensive guerrilla operations in effort to retrieve the country from what they claimed to be ‘the Vietnamese puppets’ or ‘the Vietnamese enemy’ (Dy & Dearing 2014, p. 57, 107). The majority of people who relocated to ‘Mountain 1003’, thirty kilometres up the escarpment from Anlong Veng, were selected from other Khmer Rouge strongholds which dotted the 830-kilometre Cambodian-Thai border. A significant number of inhabitants also arrived from the former Democratic Kampuchea Southwest Zone, the area Ta Mok controlled from 1975-1979, and where he first earned his grisly reputation, ‘The Butcher’.

Between 1979-1989, the Khmer Rouge forces stationed along the Cambodia-Thai border, launched several attacks to reclaim the Vietnamese-occupied Anlong Veng area, but without success. However, when the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia in 1989, the Khmer Rouge immediately reclaimed the Anlong Veng plateau, with senior commander Ta Mok initiating a building program in the early 1990s, which included a school, a hospital, a dam and a bridge.

For many local villagers, Anlong Veng is still revered today as ‘Ta Mok’s Country’. Ta Mok, who died in 2006 before he could be brought to trial, is still widely remembered as the benevolent leader who brought much-needed improvements to the lives of his followers; a sharp contrast to his ruthless reputation as ‘The Butcher’ arising from when he directed several purges prior to, and during, the Democratic Kampuchea era. As 59-year old local resident Mr. Chhim Phon, who joined the Khmer Rouge resistance forces in 1981, reflects: ‘I see a very big difference between the period under Ta Mok and now. Under Ta Mok, the people could live a better life, but the problem was that there was constant gun fighting in this area. But Ta Mok provided everything, even medicine; Ta Mok provided food for survival’ (Ly 2016, p. 2).

This is precisely the kind of contradiction that has posed substantial challenges in determining how the past should be remembered. The potential to glorify either the regime or martyr its victims, has caused divisions among various stakeholders whose identity, as well as their present livelihood, are entrenched in this historically violent space. However, in helping others to understand the workings of the Khmer Rouge ideology which left the country in ruins, villagers like Chhim Phon can offer further insight into the reasons for the regime’s continued support after 1979. Understanding why the present-day villagers supported the Khmer Rouge movement, and why thousands defected in amnesty deals granted by the government in the late 1990s, is critical to the reconciliation process. By paving the way toward a resolution for various historical disputes, the original sources of conflict responsible for destroying the country would fail to dangerously ignite in the future.

For international visitors – there are reportedly an average of 50 visitors per month (Fitch Little & Muong 2015), Anlong Veng registers mostly as the place where Pol Pot was denounced by his comrades in a ‘show trial’ in 1997 after ordering the execution of senior KR official Son Sen and fourteen members of his family. Nine months later, on April 15 1998, Pol Pot reportedly died of heart failure (suicide is more accurate, see Thayer 2018) while under house arrest in the Dangreak mountain range, and was hastily cremated upon a makeshift pyre of rubbish and old tyres. Today, the cremation site lies in a clearing directly opposite the recently refurbished Sangam Resort and Casino, which is located five-hundred metres away from the Thai-Cambodian Chong Sa Ngam-Choam border crossing. At night, the neon lights from the casino cast a psychedelic glow over Pol Pot’s otherwise unremarkable remains. Pol Pot, the architect of the Cambodian genocide, is deemed a traitor by the villagers of Anlong Veng, who clearly favoured Ta Mok as their leader. Ta Mok’s remains, on the other hand, are memorialised
by an ostentatious Angkor-inspired mausoleum in nearby Tumnup Leu village, which provides a stark contrast in the local public memory between the two leaders.

**Turning Anlong Veng into a ‘historical tourism’ site**

In much the same way the Choeung Ek ‘Killing Fields’ and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum began as propaganda tools to assert the 1979 Vietnamese ‘liberation’ narrative, the plan to turn Anlong Veng into a ‘historical tourism’ site was to reinforce the Cambodian People’s Party 1999 victory over the last remnants of the Khmer Rouge. In both cases, the need for the state to control the narrative is a pertinent one. In protecting the ex-Khmer Rouge cadre who presently hold positions in the current government, the intention was to heighten the sense of ‘them’, the perpetrators, and ‘us’, the victims, ahead of the long-awaited Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

While Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng continue to work as evidence of crimes against humanity in that they deal exclusively with the victims, Anlong Veng further supplements the state narrative by offering an explanation for the incomprehensible events during and after the Democratic Kampuchea period. Ledgerwood notes in her seminal study of Tuol Sleng, that narrowing and personalising the responsibility of genocide to the ‘Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique’ was critical to the 1979 victory narrative (Ledgerwood 1997, p. 87). So, in the context of Anlong Veng, the place where the outlawed Khmer Rouge riven by internal discord started to disintegrate in the 1990s, and where Pol Pot drew his last breath, would provide tangible, biographical evidence to support the meta-narrative of a handful of key perpetrators responsible for the entire Cambodian genocide.

As early as 2000, the Anlong Veng region featured on the government’s list of planned sites for ‘historical tourism’ related to the Khmer Rouge (Fitch Little & Muong 2015). Then in 2001, a circular ordered by Prime Minister Hun, declared the Anlong Veng region of ‘historic importance in the final stage of the political life of the leaders and military organisation of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge’ (The Government of Cambodia 2001). Subsequently the area was earmarked ‘to become a historical museum for national and international tourists’, on the basis that Choeung Ek and Tuol Sleng had emerged as commercial successes, becoming respectively the second and third most visited places after Angkor Wat in Siem Reap. According to Tom Fawthrop, one of the first to report on the government’s plans to turn the area into ‘tourist spots’: ‘Officials hope that many of the approximately 330,000 tourists that visit Angkor annually, will make their way onto Anlong Veng’ (Fawthrop 2002 in Wood 2009, p. 10). In 2003, Dr. Thong Khon the Deputy Minister for Tourism at the time, recognised the commercial potential of the venture: ‘This will become an international attraction. Today, only a handful of people visit this place but when we finish, there will be tens of thousands of visitors’ (*The Age*, 3 September 2003).

Plans to turn Anlong Veng into a tourist destination sparked outrage. Critics referred to the government’s plans of profiting from the country’s legacy of atrocity, as a future ‘Pol Pot theme park’ or a ‘Disneyland of death’ (Baker 2001, Falby 2003). ‘This is debasing the memory of all those people who were killed by the Khmer Rouge. It’s all about money and this is just going to become another Disneyland with busloads of tourists and stalls selling fried chicken and Coca-Cola’ said Youk Chhang, the Director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (*The Age*, 3 September 2003). For Chhang, commercialising the Khmer Rouge regime was doubly insensitive as not only did this show a blatant disregard for the victims’ feelings, but at the time the debate raged, no one had been formally charged with genocide-related crimes. Turning Anlong Veng into a ‘historical tourism’ site was a little premature given that in 2001, with the exception of Pol Pot and Son Sen the Minister of National Defence and the Deputy Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea (1976-1979), all other senior Khmer Rouge leaders were still alive.

And yet the events leading up to the demise of the Khmer Rouge is what the Ministry of Tourism were determined to capitalise on under the weak guise of ‘education’. ‘We want the tourists to come and we want to educate all people to know about the Khmer Rouge, the genocide and how they destroyed our nation, especially the younger generation’, argued Dr. Thong
Khon (Fawthrop in Wood 2009, p. 290). Khon’s insistence that the project would preserve the history of the Khmer Rouge to remind future generations of the atrocities committed during and after the Democratic Kampuchea period, falls secondary to the imaginary droves of international tourists he envisaged making the three-hour trip from Siem Reap, for presumably a keen spot of dark tourism. The assumption that Anlong Veng would be redeveloped with international tourists in mind is not so far-fetched considering how it has since emerged that the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum was originally curated for this purpose (Ledgerwood 1997, see also Hughes 2003).

Researcher Dylan Wood has argued that the delays in tourist development were largely due to the Ministry of Tourism wanting to control the interpretation of the sites (Wood 2009, pp. 255-56). Colin Long and Keir Reeves go further, suggesting that the lack of interpretation, and consequently the lack of control of how information is conveyed at the sites, is symptomatic of the government abandoning ‘the search for justice’ in favour of protecting ex-Khmer Rouge members who occupy positions in the current government regime (Long & Reeves 2007, p. 76). They are both correct. However as with Wood, both Long and Reeves were conducting their research just as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal was getting underway, a time when the history of the Khmer Rouge regime had yet to be incorporated into the public school curriculum. So it remains unclear as to whether the public education programs which now accompany the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, or the widely distributed textbook A History of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1979 (Dy 2007), or the recently installed information labels at Ta Mok’s House about the DK period and the Tribunal, would have changed their perception of the area as a ‘perpetrator site’ worthy of preserving. Anlong Veng, as they saw it in a mostly ‘interpretation-free’ state at the time, ‘does little or nothing to further understanding or commemoration of Cambodia’s tragic and painful past’ (Long & Reeves 2007, p. 80).

For Long and Reeves, reconciliation should take priority over remembrance (Long & Reeves 2007, p 68), though what is overlooked in their early analysis, is just how the two concepts are interrelated. While ‘justice’ is often interpreted as the result of the fair and proper administration of the law, such as the anticipated outcome of the Khmer Rouge Trial, ‘justice’ can, and must, play an effective role in reconciliation, since the attributes of fairness, and moral rightness, is what should underpin all remembrance processes. As the last bastion of the Khmer Rouge regime, Anlong Veng does indeed present challenges to the concepts of legal and social justice, but interpreting the place as a ‘perpetrator site’ in the same breath as Hitler’s bunker, Saddam Hussein’s palaces and Stalin’s summer home (Long & Reeves 2007, p.77), only serves to reinforce the divide that has continued to separate and marginalise the locals from the rest of Cambodia. The complexity of Anlong Veng’s Khmer Rouge sites is that the ex-followers of the movement who were little more than pawns in a power-play, are also victims:

I was somehow disappointed since my parents were Khmer Rouge who participated in some activities. After I studied about the Khmer Rouge regime, I understood that they were just simple people; they knew nothing. The war took place in our country; they participated in the war and they just followed the orders from the top. They did not want to do so, but they had to. If they had not done that, they themselves would have been killed or tortured. They did that to protect themselves. (Unnamed, male senior student from Anlong Veng High School in Ouch Makara, film, 2015)

Yet the same questions Long and Reeves asked just over a decade ago, remain pertinent ones. Can ‘perpetrator sites’ further the understanding and the commemoration of painful, tragic pasts? Is there a way to interpret, preserve and display a difficult past without commercialising suffering? Answers to these challenging and difficult questions have been recently explored by the DC-Cam, who have worked ‘on and off’ with the Ministry of Tourism in relation to their 2001 decree to develop Anlong Veng as a place worth visiting (Fitch Little & Muong 2015).

**Development of Anlong Veng: value and measures**

Delays in developing Anlong Veng into a tourist destination can be rather unsurprisingly attributed to lack of funds, but to also underdeveloped heritage conservation practices where
tourism has been all too often interpreted as a panacea for the country’s economic woes. In 2002, the Ministry of Tourism revealed plans to rebuild some of Khmer Rouge leader’s houses with the vision of creating a more authentic historical atmosphere. The ruined homes of Pol Pot and other senior leaders, including their offices and munition warehouses, were to be rebuilt by the same carpenters who had erected the original buildings in the early 1990s. These replicas would be accompanied by a museum and a theatre in Anlong Veng village to further enhance the pedagogical role of the sites (Wood 2009, p. 291). With DC-Cam’s involvement, the Ministry of Tourism organised research teams to interview Anlong Veng residents about the history of specific sites, to ensure their historical validity. The information gathered would be cross-checked with the documents held at the DC-Cam’s archives, and would supplement the Ministry of Tourism’s masterplan for the region.

However, financing the establishment of an Anlong Veng historical area proved to be a major hurdle, with the Royal Cambodian Government being ultimately unprepared to allocate funds to develop a master plan to be submitted for Royal approval (Wood 2009, p. 17). It should also be noted that around the same time, discussions were taking place between a Japanese company, JC Royal, and the Royal Cambodian Government, regarding a 30-year commercial deal which would see the Choeung Ek ‘Killing Fields’ owned and operated by a foreign company. With JC Royal securing a 30-year lease for Choeung Ek in April 2005, it became apparent that any future funding for the Anlong Veng historic site would have to be sourced from the business community, if not from outside of Cambodia. In 2006 and then in 2010, plans to turn Anlong Veng into a tourist area resurfaced, but did not progress much further, other than the erecting of blue signs indicating sites of historical significance.

For DC-Cam who had railed against previous plans to develop Anlong Veng as a commercial centre, the delays would prove advantageous in getting a meaningful dialogue started about the long-term educational value of the sites. Rather than developing a ‘Pol Pot theme park’ as a cash collecting strategy for the government, DC-Cam sought to create a centre which would provide educational and tourism-related programs designed to preserve the oral and tangible history of region, with the aim of building peace and reconciliation between and across social divides. The urgency to involve the younger generation in the healing process, can be best illustrated by Youk Chhang’s comment which argues that the culture of forgetting is akin to denial:

> With the future of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal limited to a small number of high profile leaders, and a modern Cambodian population of which some 70% of the population was born after the worst of the Khmer Rouge genocide, Cambodia is facing a turning point. On the one hand, Cambodians run a real risk of losing a firm grip on understanding, memorializing and ultimately accepting a difficult past. On the other hand, a rapidly globalizing Cambodia must take on new challenges of sustainable growth, democratic integrity and human rights (Youk Chhang in Dearing & Ly 2016, p. 2).

By incorporating the history of Anlong Veng into DC-Cam’s existing Genocide Education Program, the history of the area could be better connected to the present challenges endured by the villagers to advocate positive change and urgently promote sustainable development objectives. The long-term goals of this initiative – ‘peace, education and sustainable tourism’ (DC-Cam website) – runs parallel to heritage conservation and sustainable development, but most importantly, it places the Anlong Veng community at its centre. Thus the benefits of tourism would go straight back into the community, in aid of their ongoing integration into Cambodian society.

When the Khmer Rouge surrendered to government forces in December 1998, the local population of Anlong Veng who had either voluntarily joined or were coerced into joining the Khmer Rouge movement, were officially reintegrated into regular society in February, 1999. Following disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, the locals were unsurprisingly perceived as ‘perpetrators’; this is a label not so easily discarded, where being on the ‘right side’ of moral history is often reinforced by the polarising terms of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’. While the younger generation of Cambodians have expressed greater curiosity toward finding out more about what happened during the Khmer Rouge regime and the civil war years than either
their parents or grandparents’ generation, fear and uncertainty still surrounds their perceptions of Anlong Veng’s villagers. As one student from Phnom Penh reveals about her visit to Anlong Veng in a pilot study of DC-Cam’s first human rights tour: ‘I was afraid that they (the younger generation in Anlong Veng) were biological fathers and sons; I was afraid that they inherited the cruelty. But now they are educated, they would not act the same’ (Makara Ouch, film, 2016).

In dispensing with these stereotypes, a more sensitive approach in dealing with the past is required, one in which the nuanced understandings of conflict in general could be more fully explored with the goal of peace and reconciliation in mind, indeed one in which the very definitions of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ could perhaps merge with the more neutral term of ‘survivor’. To reach this goal – respect and mutual understanding between and across communities – calls for a collaborative effort so that healing and reconciliation has the best chance to succeed.

In working towards the goals of ‘peace, education and sustainable tourism’, the Anlong Veng Peace Centre’s present mission is to: preserve and develop Anlong Veng’s fourteen historical sites; host researchers from Cambodia and abroad; organise study tours of the Anlong Veng community; train professional tour guides for the community; develop a master plan for the Anlong Veng community; document the history of each of Anlong Veng’s 68 villages and promote reconciliation and development in Cambodia by raising awareness of the Anlong Veng community (Sleuk Rith Institute/DC-Cam 2017).

Ta Mok’s meeting house atop the Dangrek mountain range has been restored to the Anlong Veng Peace Centre, the project’s headquarters, which functions as a classroom and as a public library of materials relating to the Cambodian genocide. Almost raised to the ground by a fire which had travelled up the escarpment during the 2010 land-clearing season, the meeting house was restored as the Anlong Veng Peace Centre headquarters in 2015. Its relative proximity to the area where Pol Pot’s trial was held and his cremation site, provides a snapshot of the dying days of the outlawed Khmer Rouge movement. It also gives further insight into the remote lifestyle of the leaders and cadre during the civil war period. But perhaps more significantly, the meeting house encourages participants to inevitably reflect on the past while invoking a new future through a lookout point which offers exquisite views of the entire Anlong Veng region.

Figure 1: Anlong Veng Reintegration Ceremony, 9 February 1999 (photo by unknown, reproduced with permission from DC-Cam).
Since February 2016, 20 tours have been conducted, involving more than 200 students from Phnom Penh and Anlong Veng. Conducted over four days, students from Phnom Penh’s universities and colleges, and seniors from Anlong Veng High School (formerly Ta Mok’s School), are invited take part in a dialogue about their country’s traumatic past, while being offered a window into the daily lives of the ex-Khmer Rouge cadre and their families residing in the area. ‘The tour is designed to be rehabilitative to former KR cadres in that it provides both groups an opportunity to reflect on, and impart their understanding of, their experiences during the Democratic Kampuchea period and the civil war years that followed’, says Dr Ly Sok-Kheang, the inaugural director of the Anlong Veng Peace Centre (Ly 2015).

The study tour also boldly encourages students to rethink the polarising terms of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ to allow for more balanced views to emerge and to take the shape of genuine healing and reconciliation. Thus finding innovative ways to appropriately remember a traumatic history, whilst simultaneously encouraging better social cohesion among the people of Anlong Veng, is the main objective behind this project. This is facilitated through a number of activities which include: seminar-style discussions on the history of Democratic Kampuchea period and the significance of the Anlong Veng district post-1979; interviewing local villagers who have remained in the area following the demobilisation of the Khmer Rouge in 1999; tours around key places such as the former homes and the cremation or burial sites of senior KR leaders; and, community-based tasks such as tree-planting, visiting local schools and erecting much-needed new signage for sites deemed of historical significance.

In April 2017, the Anlong Veng Peace Centre hosted five victims party to the proceedings of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, to seek their opinions on the long-term benefits of the project. As Anlong Veng Peace Centre’s research-associate Katie Hetherington notes, the civil parties interpreted the initiative as a necessary means of continuing their respective journeys in relation to reconciliation and justice. They furthermore stressed the importance of genocide education and conflict studies to ensure that such atrocities will never happen again (Hetherington 2017).

For students joining the tour in Phnom Penh, the opportunity to interview an ex-Khmer Rouge villager as part of the wider cultural mapping project of documenting the 68 villages, is the highlight of the journey. Some feel apprehensive about the prospect of coming face-
to-face with those whose lives are inextricably linked to the brutal regime, while others feel intergenerational anger, seeking out answers to match the stories they have heard through their families. ‘Some people think that they would not go because they are scared. But for me, at first, I was scared too. I wondered whether I would be arrested like what had happened during [the Khmer Rouge] time’, recalls an unnamed female student in a short film about the first Anlong Veng Peace Tour (Ouch Makara, film, 2016). Despite these tensions, and reports that the interviewing process can be frustrating due to interviewees being either elusive or evasive about their past, the overall impression is one of warmth and friendliness, which enables students to empathise with their subject’s reasons for becoming part of the Khmer Rouge movement and their present struggles today:

I used to think Anlong Veng must be an isolated place with little to no development; also that there was no effort to preserve Anlong Veng because of its connection to Khmer Rouge whereby the residents of Anlong Veng had to rebuild their lives [...]. The people of Anlong Veng live peacefully and honestly through occupations like trading, fishing, and farming. After the interview, I felt empathy toward the Cambodian people who lived through the Khmer Rouge regime. (Heang Samith, Female, Regional Teacher Training Center-Prey Veng, August 2018, DC-Cam)

One consistent response to the tour, is that the students are often surprised by the welcoming nature of the villagers, who frequently display excitement in having a visitor. ‘When I went to interview the people at Kork Sampor village, Lamtong commune, Anlong Veng district, Oddar Meanchey province, I saw everyone there was very friendly and welcoming. They spent their valuable time sitting through the interviews and speaking about their experience during the Democratic Kampuchea period. Some of them were victims of the regime while others were former Khmer Rouge cadres.’ (Son Sreypich, Female, Regional Teacher Training Center-Prey Veng, August 2018, DC-Cam).

Students also feel compelled to seek sustainable solutions for a brighter future, with some of their ideas recently incorporated in a future master plan for the region. During the third Anlong Veng Peace Tour, April 19-22, 2016, participants came up with a proposal to plant trees to restore denuded areas caused by land disputes, illegal logging and irresponsible development. According to programme coordinator Ly Sok-Kheang, the ‘one-student-one-tree’ programme had stemmed from their understanding of the area’s potential to become one of the most attractive tourist sites in Cambodia (Ly 2016, p. 6).

Site issues, complications and solutions
Reconceptualising Anlong Veng as a place of healing and commemoration – as opposed to the commercial ‘roast chicken, fried bananas, blue tents’ and children-selling-wristbands approach to historical tourism – has taken considerable readjustment in thinking (Falby 2003). Cambodians – domestic travellers and particularly the locals – need to be at the heart of any masterplan, not the international tourists for whom the place is little more than a passing curiosity. The Anlong Veng Peace Centre and ‘study tour’ takes on a grassroots approach to tourism and seeks to transform the visitor’s experience. The visitor is a person who is inquisitive about the past but is also invested in the future of the country.

Based upon DC-Cam’s work in the area, the London architecture firm DaeWha Kang Design has reconceptualised Anlong Veng as a ‘city of Peace, Regeneration, and Prosperity’. Underpinning this vision proposed in June 2016, is the philosophy of ‘healing the landscape, healing society’ which takes a holistic view of a 50-km long stretch of Anlong Veng district. It attempts to combine large scale infrastructure (national monument and museum, vocational training centre, manufacturing and eco-urban residential zones) with sustainable development (sustainable forestry and agricultural practices). In this masterplan, the Anlong Veng district is linked by a system of ‘golden threads’ of rehabilitated landscape. ‘The golden thread is an interpretive corridor through the landscape which will connect all the sites together into a single journey for people to take, like a pilgrimage’, says Dae-wha Kang (personal communication, email, 4 October 2017). The ‘golden threads’ are also said to evoke the Hindu-Buddhist symbolism of
wrist bracelets worn as protection from harm and evil. In the context of Anlong Veng, the ‘golden threads’ symbolise the ties that bind the people and the landscape toward a new future.

Most impressive and inspiring is the concept of transforming sites either associated or deeply connected with past trauma and violence into ‘sites of regeneration’. The area where a warehouse once stood for the manufacturing and storing of landmines, for example, is reconceptualised as the site where crutches, wheelchairs and bicycles are to be manufactured. Given that a quarter of the Anlong Veng’s population are said to be suffering from physical disabilities as a result of landmines and other injuries sustained in a prolonged guerrilla war, transforming the sites into a place that enhances mobility and provides jobs, places the community at the centre of healing and reconciliation. The site where senior Khmer Rouge official Son Sen, his wife and children were executed, and where it is also believed that two of his daughters were raped prior to their murders, is planned as a ‘Women’s Centre’, offering counselling and support for women suffering from gender-based violence.

In this masterplan, the visitor is also envisaged as an active participant in rehabilitating Anlong Veng’s landscape, where mass-deforestation has severely impacted on the environment. Starting at Anlong Veng Lake (formerly Ta Mok’s Lake), each visitor receives a map and a seedling to plant at a designated point, on the ‘golden thread’. So rather than being a quick stop-over on route to the World Heritage Preah Vihear temple, for example, a visit to Anlong Veng is envisioned as a three-day journey on foot through the rejuvenated landscape formerly characterised by violence. This sensitive approach towards rehabilitating the landscape also takes into account visitors who are unable to pursue the journey by foot, where eco-friendly,
locally-made bicycle rickshaws will be made available. Though there are obviously many practicalities to take into consideration regarding the amount of time visitors will have on their hands, what this proposal reveals, is a genuine commitment toward securing a future through interaction with, and a broadened understanding, of Anlong Veng’s history.

**Conclusion**

Although it is too early to assess the programme’s success in terms of its impact on the local community, the Anlong Veng Peace Centre, since its formation in May 2016, has already shown itself to be an inspiring case study, offering a glimpse into how we may facilitate heritage management and reconciliation in other post-conflict societies still reeling from the aftermath of war, civil unrest and uneasy peace agreements.

Bringing this initiative to reality will undoubtedly be fraught with the same challenges that other plans to develop Anlong Veng have met in the past. The important difference, however, is that it places the Anlong Veng community at its heart. This is in distinct contrast to previous proposals that have trenchantly emphasised commercialism or have focused on a limited vision of Anlong Veng as a ‘perpetrator site’ simply not worthy of remembrance.

Anlong Veng will forever remain a place associated with violence and trauma. But as DC-Cam’s work has so far demonstrated, it need not be repressed by its past nor should people be chained to that past. Through knowledge, understanding and acceptance of what happened in the past, Anlong Veng may be able to move beyond the burden of its history into a better future for the next generations. As a historical marker for the entire country, Anlong Veng holds the key to a more secure and prosperous future for all Cambodians.

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