Heritage and Identity: Local Community Connections with the Historic Relics of the Angkorian Past

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Abstract
Angkor Park in Cambodia is a complex array of archaeological features and heritage monuments spread over an area of 400 square kilometres. Research in recent decades has expanded the cultural region to approximately 1000 square kilometres. The Theravada Buddhist Khmer communities living amongst the predominantly Hindu temples are seemingly disconnected from the monumental remains. On closer examination the worship of neak ta (animistic spirits) in some of the temples becomes evident. These practices continue to the present but the relevance and strength of beliefs is diminishing in the modern world. Escalation in tourism and changes to the land due to leveling and large scale developments has caused undue stress on the fragile archaeological landscape making reality of cultural heritage management difficult. It is imperative to understand the changes to cultural belief systems and local community views of their cultural landscape for purposes of effectively managing this unique world heritage site. The author conducted preliminary field work in Angkor, Cambodia in late 2006. The preliminary findings have helped in a basic and limited understanding of local community connections with the Angkorian landscape. The cultural connections of local community with the historical landscape created by the Angkorian kings are not immediately obvious to the outsider. On closer examination however, it is evident that a connection exists however fragile it appears to be.

Introduction
For many years now Cambodia has been a battle zone for local as well as superpower interests. The consequences of these ongoing rivalries have had a devastating effect on the Khmer people, their ancient civilisation and culture (Szajkowski in Vickery 1986: Preface).

Cambodia has gone through a period of ‘political trauma’ in the recent past. A considerable amount of cultural material has been lost since the Thai invasions after the downfall of the Angkorian Empire. This loss continued through the time Cambodia was colonised by the French, when statuary and sculptures were removed over the years of French occupation (Edwards 2007). The years that followed Cambodia’s independence in 1952 did not remain peaceful for long. The political instability and the Khmer Rouge period followed by the Vietnamese occupation led to a period of trauma (Chandler 1994). Khmer society has suffered severely as a result of being displaced in its homeland. This has seriously affected the community, its values and its cultural practices. The tangible heritage remains have been extensively looted, plundered and vandalised over the recent past, leading UNESCO to publish ‘One hundred missing objects’ (UNESCO 1997).

This paper examines the present situation in Angkor, focussing on some of the professional challenges for heritage managers in Angkor. To date, the local community, its values and belief systems, which are critical to an integrated management of the World Heritage site have not been given due attention. The issues discussed in this paper reflect the primary findings from field research conducted by the author in Angkor in November 2006.

Heritage Management at Angkor
The Age of Reason in Europe paved the way for critical thinking regarding heritage buildings, John Ruskin’s (1898) writings and William Morris’s (1877) Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) mark the establishment of the modern conservation movement in Europe. However, it was the severe damage caused to historical and traditional buildings during World Wars I and II that provided the movement with impetus. The Venice Charter (ICOMOS 1964) laid down thirteen resolutions on restoration and created ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites). The concepts were largely derived in the context of Europe, its culture and cities. It was not until the 1990s that there was a shift from this Euro-centric focus. The Nara document on authenticity (UNESCO 1994) for the first time referred to cultural diversity, responsibility with regards to heritage management and respect for all cultures.

Gradual but tentative acceptance of the importance of intangible heritage internationally can be illustrated by three key moments of change: the acceptance of symbolic value as the prime reason for inscription of Auschwitz as a World Heritage Site in 1979; the acceptance of “cultural landscapes” as heritage-worthy in the World Heritage Convention Guidelines in 1992; and the rethinking of UNESCO’s 1989 “Recommemadion on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore” in the 1990s that resulted in the launching of a new Intangible Heritage Convention in 2003 (Deacon 2004; UNESCO 2003).

At the turn of the twenty first century, emerging trends in cultural heritage concepts emphasised a holistic approach to heritage management including both the tangible and the intangible values.

To date, the prime focus of the Angkor World Heritage site management has been on monumental temples and the significant tangible heritage features. Recent research in Angkor however, has led to the mapping of a number of smaller and less prominent archaeological features through remote sensing (Evans 2002; Pottier 1999). These features have added considerably, to the existing knowledge base of Angkor...
and included features other than the monumental temples. To enable effective management of the cultural heritage; including new findings, the existing management system needs to incorporate an integrated and holistic approach. The author's research is set in this context of establishing the cultural significance of Angkor from the perspective of its local community. This paper attempts to highlight some of the current challenges in managing this cultural heritage.

Research at Angkor: An Historical Overview

Henri Mouhot, arrived at Angkor in 1863 and was immediately filled with wonder. ‘Angkor would no doubt remain in his imagination as it became in European conceptions and as it first appeared to him in that moment of awed discovery: as the fantastic, picturesque burial ground of a “dead” civilisation’ (Edwards 2007: 20). The signing of the treaty between the Cambodian king and the French in 1864, established the French presence in Cambodia for the next hundred years.

Angkor in reality was not ‘discovered’. It had never been forgotten or lost in the first place, according to Father Charles-Emile Bouillevaux, a missionary who had been to Cambodia earlier and had written a short account before Mouhot had even left Europe. In fact Angkor was mentioned by various missionaries and a number of Portuguese travellers in the 16th century. The earliest known writings, however, are of Chou Ta-Kuan, the Chinese traveller who spent a year in Angkor in 1296 and this remains the closest insight into the Khmer way of life in the Angkorian era (Dagens 1995).

Chandler (1978) points out that though Angkor is claimed to have been discovered by the Europeans in the mid-nineteenth century; the supposedly forgotten ruins and much of the statuary were associated with Cambodian names. Through an examination of the statue and toponyms in his study of the famous legend of the leper king in Cambodia and Thailand, he argues that ‘folk memories of Angkor were more persistent and more accurate than many nineteenth and twentieth century French savants were willing to grant’ (Chandler 1978: 14). The cultural connections of the local community with the Angkorian landscape are thus important in a comprehensive understanding of the living cultural heritage resource.

In 1898, École Française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) was set up in Siem Reap to conduct systematic researches on the architectural monuments of the Khmer country. The setting up of a permanent office, the Conservation d’Angkor, in Angkor further reinforced the EFEO’s research and provided a platform to develop long-term strategies on research (Pottier 2000).

The monuments were documented, and extensive research was carried out in the fields of architecture, archaeology, art history and epigraphy. The local communities, their lifestyles and belief systems received far less attention than the monuments themselves (Luco 2000). European philosophy in conservation was employed and the temples were treated as monuments for their architectural, artistic and aesthetic values. Neither the living heritage dimension of the temples, nor the socio-cultural or community values were considered. The temples were cleared of vegetation, and considerable spaces around them were also cleared to enable the temples to be easily viewed. Practising monks and locals were removed from the immediate vicinity (Edwards 2007). Angkor was declared an archaeological park by Conservation d’Angkor in 1925. The boundaries that defined the park focussed on the protection of the monumental temple remains and its immediate surrounds. Villages were left outside the park boundary (Pottier 2006).

The maps that were created over time by the various researchers centred on the Archaeological Park giving emphasis to Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom and the monuments. It took more than a century for researchers to move beyond the vicinity of the monuments. B.P Groslier’s map of 1979 (see Figure 1), showed a systematic overview of the hydrological features and his map showed some details to the north of the Park. His theory on the ‘cité hydraulique’ brought to light many aspects previously not considered and encouraged critical thinking about theories related to Angkor’s downfall (Groslier 1979). The systematic research carried out in Angkor over a century has enhanced the knowledge about the tangible heritage features. However, there has been little research carried out on the people and their connections to the monumental heritage.

Recent Research on Angkor

In recent years knowledge of Angkor and its cultural region has expanded considerably owing to advancements in remote sensing techniques. Pottier has extensively surveyed not only the Archaeological Park itself, but also the immediate region around the park and the area to the south. His research brought to light the network and density of archaeological heritage elements in that part of the landscape. Pottier identified water bodies, canals, embankments, village shrines and archaeological mounds establishing its seamless nature (Pottier 1999).

Pottier’s systematic survey of 1999 was supplemented by the work of Evans (2002) His analysis of the AIRSAR (RADAR) imagery has resulted in the identification of a much larger cultural region. Though this map (see Figure 1) needs to be confirmed by ground-based fieldwork, it establishes the significance and complexity of the Angkor Cultural landscape in a global context (Evans 2002; Fletcher et al. 2003; Pottier 1999). In response to this complexity the Greater Angkor Project is a collaborative research project of Australian, Cambodian and French researchers. Angkor, the medieval Khmer capital, was the most extensive pre-industrial city on Earth. The city’s massive, delicately balanced infrastructure of canals and embankments covered more than 1000 sq km. New integrated analyses of this networks development, operation and failure, and the dynamics of the landscape, will identify the inter-connected role of infrastructural inertia and environmental impact in the demise of Angkor.

The Angkor World Heritage site with its high density of monuments is now understood as a much larger cultural region than that encompassed by the inscribed Angkor Archaeological Park. Research has brought to light an intricate network of hydrological features and remarkable aspects of Khmer engineering that point to a complex system of managing the landscape. Heritage management approaches today need to be re-evaluated in the light of these recent findings.

Angkor World Heritage Site

The Angkor site, along with its monuments and the archaeological zones, was inscribed onto the list of World Heritage sites in 1992 based on criteria I, II, III and IV of the
World Heritage Convention. At the time of Angkor’s inscription, Cambodia’s political instability caused the intervention of the United Nations. Cambodia was placed under the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) (Chandler 1994).

According to the World Heritage Committee nomination documentation, the committee inscribed the site of Angkor on the list of World Heritage in Danger so as to deal effectively with the urgent problems of conservation. Accordingly, the relevant authorities were charged with the required tasks that would allow removal of Angkor from the list of World Heritage in Danger. If the state party failed to accomplish this, the World Heritage status of the site could be revoked. As per the recommendations of ICOMOS, an official advisory body to UNESCO, the authorities concerned were required to meet certain obligations, which included:

- a) enact adequate protective legislation;
- b) establish an adequately staffed national protection agency;
- c) establish permanent boundaries based on the UNDP project;
- d) define meaningful buffer zones;
- e) establish monitoring and coordination of the international conservation effort (UNESCO 1992)

Contemporary Society and its Cultural Connections

Angkor is one of the main archaeological sites of South-East Asia. Stretching over some 400 square kilometres, including forested area, the Angkor Archeological Park contains the splendid remains of the different capitals of the Khmer Empire, from the 9th to the 15th centuries, including the famous temple of Angkor Wat and, at Angkor Thom, the Bayon temple with its countless sculpted decorations (UNESCO 1992: 1)

There are about 100 villages in the Angkor Archaeological Park and the population of the park is around 100000 (APSARA 2005). The local community within the Angkor Park continue to live, cultivate and carry out their daily tasks amongst the Angkorian monuments. According to Luco (2000), Angkor is not only a fabulous archaeological site, but also a living place. The great stone skeleton is the realm of divinities and a city of mortals, where day-to-day life is rich in customs from a prestigious past.

‘More than an outdoor museum, Angkor is home to religious and rural life revolving around the temples’ (Luco 2000: 42).

The cultural connections of the locals to the historical capitals of the Angkorian kings are not immediately obvious to the outsider. On closer examination however, it is clear that a connection exists however fragile it may appear to be.

The religious affiliations of the society have undergone considerable change. Evidence of Hinduism, Buddhism (Vajrayana) and syncretism of the two exist in the numerous monumental temples and shrines and their sculptures and statuary. Theravadin Buddhism became the state religion and by the fifteenth century the Khmer were largely Buddhist. Despite the shift in religious beliefs, one aspect that has remained constant in the Khmer consciousness and cultural practices is the worship of animistic spirits and ancestral deities. The earth, the sun and moon hold great significance for the Khmers, which is manifest through their worship of the animistic spirits referred to as anak ta (Ang 1995).

Some Hindu statues in the Angkor temples have been appropriated by the Khmer as neak ta (the patron spirit of ‘ancestors’) that are perceived to affect the lives of the people. The most significant of these is Ta Reach (Grandfather Royal),
a Vishnu statue located in the peripheral gallery to the west of Angkor Wat. This neak ta is considered very powerful in the region. The local population believe that every ancient Hindu or Buddhist temple has at least one neak ta (Muira 2005).

Contemporary Cultural Connections
The author conducted field research in the Siem Reap province of Cambodia in November 2006. The objective of the field survey was to examine connections between the local population in Angkor and the tangible monumental remains. It is hoped that the cultural values recorded will help to establish the significance of Angkor from the perspective of its local community.

The site of the first capital of Angkorian kings – Hariharalaya (modern day Roluos) was chosen as the study region. The group of monuments at Roluos include the Lolei Baray, Bakong temple, Preah – Ko and Prei – Monti complex. Apart from these on the main tourist circuit, there are a number of other temples, ruins, prasat platforms, temple mounds, occupation mounds and archaeological features (Pottier 1999). Three case-study villages were selected for the primary research on the basis of a prominent heritage feature in the landscape with a group of villagers living in the immediate vicinity. The villages chosen include Lolei (the village is located along the embankment around the Lolei Baray), Ovlok (village surrounding the Bakong – mountain temple) and Thnal Trang (village to the east of Bakong) (Refer Figure 3).

The data was collected by interviews with key informants including the village chief, commune chief, head monk and experts in Siem Reap as well as some of the local villagers. A series of questions was used to identify the connections of the locals to the Angkorian monuments, their perceptions on the importance of Angkor and the temples, their views about heritage management and their belief systems and cultural practices. The tangible heritage remains and the social values attached were mapped using GIS.

It is important to understand places and their meanings from the perspective of the locals:

Getting at the meaning of places should not reside with professionals alone but with the people who use and visit and construct their own meanings out of places. We need a system for taking measure of and working with the reception side of cultural heritage. Here conservators can take an active role; however, they also need to be open to the possibility that the places they conserve for one purpose may take on very different meanings over time (Bluestone 2000:67)

Perceptions of the Local Community and Emerging Issues
A total of three villages were surveyed and around twenty five semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted of which two were group discussions of five and six participants respectively. Ten interviews were also conducted amongst APSARA staff, provincial government staff and key researchers in Cambodia. Some of the local community views, their cultural connections with the Angkorian landscape and some key issues of concern emerging from the preliminary interview findings are presented here.

The local villagers living amongst the Angkorian landscape understand the landscape in terms of its physical features very well. The raised ground (kok) is significant during the wet season; for the heavy monsoons cause low-lying areas to be flooded. Hence, kok is used for building houses. This raised ground coincides with the archaeological/occupation mounds which therefore continue to be occupied in the present day.

In relation to the baray at Lolei (Indratataka) ‘the laying out is traditionally attributed to King Yasovarman (late 9th C), but he only reigned 11 years, which is rather short for such extensive works. At the death of King Indravarman the work must have been almost complete and he was able to credit himself with the complete undertaking’ (Dumarçay and Royère 2001: XXI). The baray is known amongst the villagers in the present day as baray sngout, which means ‘dry reservoir’. This reiterates the point raised by Chandler (1996) on folk memories and helps in establishing local community understanding of the landscape today.

Figure 2 Examples of anak tā (Ancestral spirits)
Anak Tā Bay Kaek: Ruins of a prasat in Trapeang Seh village (west of Angkor Wat)  
Figure 3 Base map of study region. SPOT image overlaid with Pottier map (1989) and EFEO inventory
Use of *trapeang* (old ponds) in the landscape are restricted by the APSARA authority, since they are a cultural feature. The locals do not use the water from the *trapeang* for agriculture. However, the lotus which grows profusely in these ponds is harvested and the water is sometimes used for livestock.

The sites of ancestral deity worship vary in significance. Some are significant to the entire province and some are significant to the region, but some are important only to the local villagers. In the present day however, globalisation and changes due to development are affecting the cultural practices and associations of the people. Some of the interviewees are concerned that the cultural practices and worship of neak ta is diminishing in importance. Thus it is crucial to document the intangible values of the Khmer at this point of change.

Based interviews carried out during this study, it is evident that many older people (say above 50 years old) do not visit the temples due to the practical inconvenience of climbing up to them. While they are generally aware that the temples are old, they often know little regarding neither the gods that are represented, nor their historical values. However, most temples are associated with ancestral spirits (*neak ta*), and villagers perform cultural practices when the need is felt.

The concept of heritage management advocated by APSARA, the managing authority, is common knowledge among the locals. This has been fostered through the signs erected by APSARA. Locals are aware that “no digging, no new construction and no damage to cultural property” is allowed in the archaeological zones. APSARA also organises meetings amongst various stakeholders in the community, on aspects related to heritage management. However large sections of the community are not aware of other implications of World Heritage listing and the restrictions to development. Divergent aspirations often create a tension between the managing authority and the sections of the community.

Most people view tourism and the changes it brings positively. Heritage tourism in the province of Siem Reap has caused a great deal of development and created a number of jobs. Every family benefits from the consequences of tourism directly or indirectly. However, some of the older villagers were not completely convinced as to why the temples are regarded as significant. In their opinion they are just old buildings and ruins, and they are confused as to why people come from very far to visit Angkor; nevertheless they welcome the tourists.

The scars of the war and the lasting impacts of political instability and the Khmer Rouge are still evident amongst some of the older interviewees. They are not eager to share information regarding their cultural practices and are reticent about sharing their perceptions and stories. In general, the community is largely oblivious of the implications of World Heritage status and as such is not happy with the restrictions imposed by APSARA. This is causing considerable tension between sections of community and the managing authority, which comes to the fore during any new development.

**Conclusions**

Preliminary investigations in the field along with the interviews conducted amongst the villagers have helped to establish an understanding of the Angkor Archaeological Park. The complexities of the landscape and difficulties with regard to managing heritage are clear. It is critical at this juncture to establish the intangible values of the local community living in the park and identify their connections to the Angkorian landscape. The fragile monumental remains are in need of immediate conservation however the success of any conservation works will depend as least in part on acceptance by the local community. There is therefore a need to incorporate the cultural values of the local community and their perceptions into Angkor's long term management.

As Lucio points out, 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 (Lucio 2000: 43)

The preliminary research findings reveal that; in the Roluos zone, there is a great deal of development owing to the location of villages along the Route 6; the highway connecting Siem Reap with Phnom Penh. Unchecked development can cause undue stress on the heritage, the environment, and the villages if not dealt with immediately.

As mentioned above use of *trapeang* in the landscape is restricted for use by the APSARA authority, since it is a cultural feature. Yet APSARA is de-silting the moats around Bakong and cleaning them of vegetation thereby altering the archaeological traces. Such contradictory management practices are making it increasingly difficult for the local villagers to understand the importance of heritage management.

A preliminary finding of the research is that fragile connections exist between the local people and the Angkorian landscape. Thus, it is critical at this point in time to focus on ‘community-inclusive’ approaches to manage the Angkor World Heritage site. The Angkor World Heritage site can be seen as a living cultural landscape the active domain of local communities; however the management strategies largely focus on monument conservation, enhancing tourist experiences and the provision of associated infrastructure. The ‘living’ aspects of the World Heritage site need to be prioritised so as to include the local community in the heritage management process. Effective strategies could be devised to benefit the day-to-day lives of the locals and help in their understanding of the implications of World Heritage status, the role of APSARA and the need for development restrictions. An understanding of the local population’s cultural connections and identification of their cultural values will help in building a ‘sense of pride’ amongst the Khmers and contribute to the empowerment of the people. Moreover, knowledge and understanding of cultural connections can help heritage managers and authorities to work together with the local community in safeguarding Cambodia’s national icon.
References


UNESCO. 2003, Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage.