The impact of tourism on local communities in Beng Mealea, Cambodia

Phlong Pisith

Since the political changes in Cambodia in 1993, tourism has become an important income sector for the government and local people. The Cambodian government promotes tourist opportunities for outsiders, by providing facilities to travellers, such as on-arrival visa at every border check point, the open-sky policy for Siem Reap International Airport and more opportunities for investment in tourism developments such as hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, etc. As a result of these policies, more foreigners now come to Cambodia, to work, to do business, to do research, and especially for tourism.

Many tourist sites, both historical and natural, have been opened. Angkor has become the most popular tourist attraction, but faces many dangers, due to the large crowds of tourists, as well as looting. To deal with these issues, the Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor Region (APSARA) was created by the Constitutional Council of Cambodia in 1995 to help protect and preserve all cultural heritage sites in the Angkor Region, with the cooperation of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, and international research institutes. Under this new management system, there have been more discoveries of archaeological remains, which are resources for cultural heritage, and attractions for visitors.

Within these last few years, many historical and natural sites inside and outside the Angkor Region have been opened to visitors, with the private investment and government control including: the Kulen Mountain water falls, Sambor Prei Kuk temples in Kampong Thom Province and Kirirom Park in Kampong Speu Province. Recently, a few more historical sites: Koh Ker (tenth century), Prah Khan of Kampong Svay (second half of twelfth century), and Beng Mealea (mid-twelfth century) are being opened to the public. These sites have not yet been researched in depth.

I conducted nine months of research to gather data for my BA dissertation in Archaeology at Beng Mealea Temple, focusing on the date of the site. Now I am becoming more interested in the changes in the area and the local communities as the site is developed for tourism. My current topic is an attempt to draw attention to the impacts of tourism on the cultural heritage and on the lives of the people.

Beng Mealea temple

The name Beng Mealea refers both to the modern village and to the Angkorean-period temple.

The temple compound is c. 1000 m by 500 m, about two-thirds the size of the Angkor Wat compound. It is in Svay Leu District, Siem Reap Province, about 75 km east of Siem Reap town, at the junction point of two ancient roads, one to Koh Ker and the other to Prah Khan of Kampong Svay.

Both the 1952 research by Jean Boisselier and my own place Beng Mealea temple in the late Angkor Wat Style, about the middle of the twelfth century. Some researchers had assumed that Beng Mealea was the model for Angkor Wat, and must therefore pre-date it. But recent research, based on a comparative study of arts, decoration, and construction techniques, place it later. No inscription has yet been found that can give an exact date for the temple.

The temple is in a state of ruin, and is much threatened, especially by tree-growth. This state of collapse has been seen...
Recent history of the site
After years of war, since 1975, many remote places were not accessible because of poor security and mines. By 1995, with the government campaign to integrate Khmer Rouge soldiers into the government, Cambodia became more politically secure and tourist places began to reopen to visitors. Beng Mealea was opened in 2000 to the public, but there were still some mines in the area. In late 2002, as there were more tourists going to the temple, the APSARA authority was authorized to preserve the site, with the cooperation of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. By March 2003, the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) began to clear mines from the temple’s compound, and now the site is under process of investment by a private company to develop the site into a tourist site like that of Angkor Wat.

Tourism Development
The Royal Government’s strategy is to position Cambodia as a leading ‘Culture and Nature Tourism Destination’ – a tourism development policy that is formulated to provide economic and social development, protect the natural environment and preserve and present Cambodia’s distinctive culture and heritage. This is also a way to strengthen the national identity of Cambodia. By this means, Beng Mealea has been opened as tourist destination with private investment, under APSARA and local authority control. Under this agreement, APSARA is responsible for site conservation, while the private company has the right to develop the site for tourism by contracting out certain services such as the provision of food and shelter. Hence there is a government policy to preserve the cultural heritage at the site.

But problems remain, and the most affected group is the villagers. To draw attention to the development of the tourism industry, I would highlight some of the advantages and disadvantages to the various stakeholders of Beng Mealea temple:

Advantages:
• The road from Siem Reap to the temple has been improved,
• Job opportunities for the villagers: we found that a few villagers have been employed as guardians at the temple, to protect security.
• Family economic improvement: a few families near the temple set up small restaurants to serve food, drinks and a few people work as local guide and get some money from visitors.

Disadvantages:
• The activities of road improvement are removing some parts of the ancient road and bridge.
• Profits from tourism only go to a few main people in the village, mostly police, village authority and the investment company. Villagers who are the owners and preservers of culture at temple (ritual practices, ceremonies, etc) get very few rewards. This shows an uneven distribution of interest among the stakeholders.
• Some villagers have sold their land at low prices, and so

Surrounding environment
Beng Mealea is at the far eastern end of the Kulen Mountain, surrounded by forest and inhabited by about 300 households. The region is rich in cultural heritage, and Angkorean-period infrastructure such as a reservoir (about 1500m by 750m), a stone-quarry (used for the monument), ceramic kilns, minor temples such as Prasat Chrei, Prasat Kong Phluk, Prasat Don Chan, a rest house (Dhammasala), a surrounding moat, and the ancient roads and bridges that link this complex to those of Koh Ker, Prah Vihear, and Prah Khan of Kampong Svey.

The majority of the local people are farmers, who grow rice and vegetables, raise animals and poultry, and hunt and gather in certain seasons in accordance with ancient traditions. The central gathering place of people in the village was the Buddhist monastery inside the compound of Beng Mealea temple.

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have lost land for farming.
• There has been an increase in the cost of living (food, accessory). The decrease of farming means that more food products have to be imported from outside.
• The Buddhist monastery inside the temple compound was moved to the outside.

To my concern, the list above shows that villagers lose more than they benefit; the cost of living has increased, their land was exploited by outside investors, and their way of life was disrupted and changed since the temple opened to visitors. In this regard, I should like to draw the attention of researchers, investors, and relevant government bodies, to the issue of protecting the interests of local people, and to giving them more benefits, as they are the owners, preservers, and the presenters of the cultural heritage site.

In conclusion, tourism is about to bring changes and development, but there should be preservation of historical heritage (tangible and intangible assets), national identity, and authenticity for future use.

In this rapidly evolving situation, I hope that there will be more interest in uncovering the archaeology and anthropology resources around the Beng Mealea site, especially within the context of cultural resource management.

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