

# Landscape, Memory and Heritage: New Year Celebrations at Angkor, Cambodia

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This paper examines tourism, memory and notions of heritage at the World Heritage Site of Angkor, Cambodia. Rather than viewing heritage and social memory as abstract concepts, the paper explores domestic tourism at Angkor as the context within which Cambodia's recent history is re-articulated and made meaningful for a population recovering from decades of national turmoil. In exploring the various values and meanings associated with the national festival of Khmer New Year, the paper argues that an understanding of Angkor as a form of 'living heritage' remains neglected within a management framework which conceives the site as a form of material culture of the 'ancient' past. It is therefore suggested that exploring the values and meanings associated with Angkor's cultural heritage in this way provides valuable insight into the complex relationships of landscape, memory and identity.

**Keywords:** Angkor, Cambodia, Heidegger, heritage, identity, memory

## Landscapes of Heritage and Memory

In Angkor – a geographical region, an archaeological site and a cultural concept – lies much of Cambodia's future. (UNESCO, 1996: 165)

In recent years, considerable attention has been given to the fundamental dialectic between time and space within studies of landscape and place. By conceiving each as mutually constitutive, increasingly sophisticated conceptualisations have been offered regarding the often complex role landscapes play within notions of heritage and memory (Boswell & Evans, 1999; Edensor, 2002). Attention has also been given to the role heritage landscapes play in the formation of collective identities articulated in either cultural, religious or national terms (Edensor, 1998; Picard, 1997). In the case of the Acropolis, for example, Yalouri argues that the site not only reflects certain identities, but also serves to communicate and reproduce the values and meanings that underpin those identities. As she states:

The study of monument is then of necessity also a study of time and of memory . . . the Acropolis [is] a 'vehicle of agency' which informs the way Greeks understand their national identity. (Yalouri, 2001: 17)

Underpinning this literature is an implicit understanding that heritage and landscape are not normative concepts. By contrast to earlier conceptualisations of landscape as abstract, objective and value neutral, recent studies have centred around ideas of spatial multiplicity and the contestation arising from the variegated social actualisation of place (Bender, 1993; Macnaghten & Urry, 1998; Prazniak & Dirlik, 2001). One notable example has been Bender's extensive analysis of Stonehenge. Outlining the presence of multiple interpretations and

historical narratives, she illustrates how contestation arises within a socio-political environment characterised by unequal relations (Bender, 1993, 1999). Exploring spatial diversity through a multi-vocal text, she also highlights the struggle of certain marginalised stakeholder voices in the face of institutionalised and hegemonic value systems (1999). Similarly, Yalouri (2001) argues that, in the case of the Acropolis, the desire to re-present the site for both national and international tourism consumption creates a tension around the selective presentation of memories and their mode of narration. Together with Edensor's analysis of the Taj Mahal (1998), Yalouri identifies the complex political web arising from a discourse of heritage attempting to encapsulate intersecting local, national and global memories of place.

Such authors are part of a rich vein of academic enquiry that explores the complex interplay of local, national and global formations of landscape and heritage and their intersection with the politics of ethnicity, religion and culture (Leask & Fyall, 2000; Oliver, 2001; Walsh, 1992). This paper attempts to explore these issues further in the context of a festival which holds immense symbolic significance for a Cambodian population still recovering from decades of social turmoil.

By examining tourism as a form of social praxis, it is suggested that rather than viewing Angkor as a monumental landscape of the 'ancient' past, the site needs to be considered as a form of 'living heritage' pivotal in the articulation of contemporary cultural and national identities. Accordingly, it is argued that such understandings remain marginalised within a discourse of cultural tourism which gains its hegemony from a desire to present Angkor as a site appropriate for international touristic consumption. In this respect, the paper illustrates how spatialised formations of power underpinning dominant paradigms of tourism, culture and heritage act to conceal and marginalise alternative values and practices.

This paper draws on recent emphasis on the inter-relationships of identity, place and history in terms of memory (Connerton, 1995; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 2001; Küchler, 2001). Eschewing the idea that history is situated in the landscape itself, the focus on memory switches attention to the ways places and times are actively constituted and reconstituted in multiple ways on an ongoing basis (Duncan & Duncan, 1988). In this light, landscapes as *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1998) also conceptually emerge as the medium through which multiple histories are simultaneously remembered and forgotten (McCrone, 1998).

In attempting to appreciate how both Cambodia's recent and ancient histories are articulated as social memories through the practice of tourism, Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* is considered instructive here. For Heidegger, 'Being' in the world is fundamentally temporal, where abstractions of a social, public time are derived from an 'existential time' of the self (Heidegger, 1962). By centring the subject around its temporality, Being becomes a practice rather than a fixed state. Effectively, this temporal practice of engaging with the world is captured in his notion of *Dasein*, in which the subject finds 'itself already enmeshed in a series of social and material relationships' (Thomas, 1996: 41).

World and self are never two separate entities which exist side by side with each other. Rather they are inextricably linked parts of a structure of Being. (Heidegger, 1962: 81)

Heidegger draws attention not only to how the embodied experience of place is given meaning through the imagined presence of subjective pasts and futures, but also to the process that serves to articulate understandings of abstract public times – in this case, recent events in Cambodian history. In effect, it is argued here that the practice of ‘playing at being a tourist’ (Urry, 1990: 101) actually serves to give meaning to that history in subjective, embodied and reflexive ways. Examining the tourist encounter in this way addresses the intimate and dynamic relationship between Cambodian tourists and their space of consumption. In addition, it clarifies how Angkor is understood as a place where recent histories are simultaneously erased, remembered and re-appropriated as socially practised collective memories.

### **Monumentalising Angkor**

The World Heritage Site of Angkor occupies around 400km<sup>2</sup> of flat plains in northwest Cambodia. The landscape incorporates four main elements: tropical forest, areas of cultivated land, a number of isolated villages, and the architectural legacy of the Angkorean period. Although assigning precise dates to ‘The Angkor Period’ remains a subject of debate amongst historians, it is generally recognised that the kingdom emerged as a major seat of power early in the 9th century CE. This period lasted until the capital was abandoned in the middle of the 15th century (Tarling, 1992). Indeed, today’s architectural remains testify to both the scale and wealth of Southeast Asia’s greatest empire, an empire that covered much of today’s Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.

As the region absorbed the cultural influences of early Indian traders, a fusion occurred of Hinduism and Buddhism and the already well-established indigenous forms of spirituality and religion (Chandler, 1996a). It was a synthesis which elevated Jayavarman II, who ascended to the throne in 802 and is popularly regarded as the first Angkorean king, into a ‘*Devaraja*’, or god king. Proclaiming himself the kingdom’s first ‘universal monarch’, Jayavarman II was the first ruler to reign over a centrally governed and largely unified state: one that would later become Cambodia.

Although a number of Angkorean kings built little or nothing, those who enjoyed prolonged periods of prosperity and peace often followed increasingly extensive construction programmes, typically including irrigation work and vast reservoirs, statues of deceased parents or ancestors, and mountain temples dedicated to the ruling king himself (Chandler, 1996a). It was a tradition that would culminate in Jayavarman VII’s vastly extravagant 13th-century Angkor Thom city complex. Unsurprisingly, the demands of such an extensive architectural programme are often cited by historians as a major factor in the empire’s eventual decline around the mid-15th century (Jacques & Freeman, 1997).

The looting of Angkor by the Thais in the early 1430s heralded the beginning of an undistinguished period in Cambodian history and shifted regional power towards Siam (Tarling, 1992). With temple construction superseded by a more trade-oriented society centred on Phnom Penh, Angkor’s abandonment meant that the intense tropical climate and surrounding forest savagely attacked the stone temples and destroyed any wooden structures neglected by the few remaining Buddhist villages in the vicinity.

Although some Spanish, Portuguese and Asian travellers visited the region after Angkor's demise, the late 19th-century travel diaries of Henri Mouhot, a French botanist, were pivotal in awakening interest in Europe to the existence of the site (Dagens, 1995). Encountering a labyrinth of monumental structures entangled with tree roots and lichen, in 1860, Mouhot presented an account of his 'discovery' of Angkor and described it as a 'lost', even dead, civilisation (Norindr, 1996). Despite the presence of numerous local villages, a powerful mythology of loss and rediscovery was reinforced by the very aesthetics of Angkor's seemingly abandoned, wild and ruinous landscape. The mythology endures today.

Notwithstanding the dubious nature of Mouhot's account, themes of rediscovery and restitution played a crucial role in legitimising the subsequent political and cultural construction of the French administrative territory of *Indochine*. Angkor also became central in the constructions of a national history and identity of an emergent *Cambodge* (Wright, 1991). Primarily through the scholarly work of the *École Française d'Étrême Orient* (EFEO) it was temporally and spatially fashioned as a once glorious, yet lost, cultural, national and ethnic heritage of the 'ancient' past. However, as Edwards notes, while the vision of a Cambodian nation was largely moulded around French colonial agendas, the inscription of Angkor as a national monument also involved a vital fusion of 'native and European . . . ideas of culture and politics' (Edwards, 1999: 3). Indeed, as the 20th century progressed, the idea of a noble Khmer, along with a vision of a Cambodian cultural heritage and national history all converged on a totemic Angkor and, in particular, on Angkor Wat.

After independence was obtained in 1953, 'an imagining of history and power' (Anderson, 1991: 185) continued to pervade the Khmer psyche and sense of national identity. Throughout subsequent decades, imaginings of a once glorious Angkor remained central within Cambodia's political rhetoric. Barnett, for example, argues that during the Sihanouk era (1955–1970), the Prime Minister projected himself as the reincarnation of Jayavarman VII, conflating his own vulnerability with the idea of a Cambodia endangered by its cold war context (Barnett, 1990: 123). Moreover, although Sihanouk maintained a stranglehold over Cambodian politics until his fall in 1970, he was far from alone in seeking political mileage from Angkor. Notwithstanding the ideological variations across individual parties, the political appropriation of an idealised Angkor occurred on a number of levels in the years after independence. First, it represented the opportunity for party leaders to claim guardianship over an invaluable national heritage. Secondly, Angkor provided the reference points for visions of a national revival and, finally, its regal history supplied the authority for visions of absolutist power (Sorpong Peou, 2000).

Sihanouk's eventual overthrow by military coup in 1970 was also largely legitimised through a particular reading of Angkor's history. Parallels of an Angkorean demise brought about by monarchical decadence were cited by Lon Nol as a way of condemning Sihanouk's style of leadership (Edwards, 1999: 387). Claiming to liberate Cambodia from Sihanouk's indulgent nostalgia for a grandiose past, Lon Nol incorporated descriptions of a glorious Khmer culture, Khmer ancestry, Khmer blood and Khmer land into the propaganda of a government Sorpong Peou (2000) has described at length as an authoritarian republic.

In April 1975, paralysed by years of US bombing and civil war, Cambodia witnessed the start of one of the most radical and brutal social experiments ever inflicted on a nation. Promising to free the country from the tyranny of both Vietnamese and American intervention, Saloth Sar, latterly known as Pol Pot, proclaimed the end of 2000 years of history and the return of Cambodia to 'year zero' (Ponchaud, 1978). However, despite rejecting any historical precedents, it will be seen shortly that Pol Pot's extreme socialist ideology was once again partly inspired by the once-glorious agrarian civilisation of Angkor. Tragically, it is now believed that well over one million people, or one in seven of the population, died prior to the eventual liberation of Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh by Vietnamese troops in January 1979.

In recent decades, as well as suffering the short but brutal regime of the Khmer Rouge (Democratic Kampuchea), Cambodians have also endured an extended civil war, the effects of war in Vietnam, and subsequent occupation during the 1980s by the Vietnamese government. As a consequence, Cambodia has only recently begun to make significant progress towards a nationwide cultural, social and economic rejuvenation. However, despite the various political appropriations of Angkor since independence, the site has retained its widespread populist appeal and iconic status as national, ethnic and cultural symbol. Indeed, for a country composed of over 90% Khmers, it is hard to overestimate the deeply symbolic significance of Angkor within Cambodia today, not least because of the suffering endured in recent decades.

### **The 1990s: Stability and International Tourism**

The international isolation of Cambodia under Pol Pot and its subsequent decade-long occupation by a Vietnamese administration meant that Angkor's conservation programme only regained the momentum of previous French efforts during the early 1990s. As Angkor formally came under the umbrella of the World Heritage Committee in December 1992, the International Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of Angkor (ICC) was created to oversee efforts to protect the newly listed World Heritage Site.

Incorporating all the major international and domestic organisations involved in Angkor's management, including UNESCO, the ICC met twice a year to review technical and strategic issues relating to monumental conservation and the development of the site for tourism. The ICC was also instrumental in the creation of the Authority for the Protection and Safeguarding of the Angkor Region (APSARA), the Cambodian authority for Angkor which became operational during the mid-1990s. In the virtual absence of a Cambodian tourism industry, and alarmed at the large-scale disrepair of the temples in the early 1990s, both the ICC and APSARA initially set about establishing a body of archaeological and architectural expertise capable of addressing Angkor's need for emergency restoration.

As a consequence, the ICC was overwhelmingly composed of international experts principally concerned with the conservation and restoration of Angkor's temples. The ICC conceived the site as a material heritage of the 'ancient' past – a vision which largely reproduced a construction of Angkor conceived during a period of French colonialism. By focusing on the preservation and restoration of

temples in such static and temporally frozen terms, there was little recognition of the monuments, or the site itself, as a living, contemporary landscape. More specifically, anthropological or sociological understandings of the site – in both a historical and contemporary sense – were essentially ignored within a rational, scientific discourse of architectural conservation.

More recently, however, Cambodia's political stability, and the country's position within the heart of a rapidly expanding Southeast Asian tourism industry, has led to increases in international visitors to Angkor of about 30% a year, with some 466,365 visitors in 2000 (Ministry of Tourism, 2000). The pattern is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

As a response to this new era UNESCO and such transnational bodies as the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) have set about constructing a language of 'cultural tourism' as a key to Angkor's future development. In so doing, they are attempting to reap the optimum social and financial rewards of tourism whilst affording protection to the cultural 'assets' it draws upon. Such a strategy is commonly associated with the promotion of 'quality tourism', as evident in a recent UNESCO publication on Angkor:

The challenge will be to improve the quality of the experience, while increasing the capacity of the sites to meet the demand and to develop facilities for cultural tourism so as to prevent the onslaught of low quality mass tourism provoking irreversible destruction of Angkor's cultural and natural heritage. (UNESCO, 1996: 157)

The suggestion that 'a policy encouraging high quality / high price tourism . . . is indispensable' (UNESCO, 1996: 159) clearly implies the aim of reaping the maximum benefit from low numbers of tourists while minimising the impact on an infrastructure recovering from decades of social and economic turmoil.

When promoting cultural tourism, it is undoubtedly hard to integrate cultural and economic values in a mutually beneficial relationship. However, such a discursive abstraction of tourism marginalises understandings of the ways in which Angkor is produced as a tourist space by socially contextualised, reflexive and knowing agents. Moreover, although UNESCO recognises the need to improve 'the quality of the [tourist] experience' and safeguard a 'natural heritage', the architectural inclinations of the ICC referred to earlier have forged cultural tourism policies overwhelmingly centred on the protection of Angkor's 'ancient' monumental culture. As a consequence, a particular spatial representation has emerged which firmly regards Angkorean culture as of the past, frozen, even dead. It is a policy that clearly resonates with Bender's concerns regarding the commodification of such landscapes through heritage:

More often than not, those involved in the conservation, preservation and mummification of landscape create normative landscapes, as though there was only one way of telling or experiencing. They attempt to 'freeze' the landscape as a palimpsest of past activity . . . freezing time allows the landscape or monuments in it to be packaged, presented and turned into museum exhibits. (Bender, 1999: 26)

Such authors as Dahles (2001) and Picard (1997) have pointed out that programmes of cultural tourism have recently emerged as powerful resources

for numerous countries attempting to formulate notions of national identity. Within a context of international tourism, the Cambodian government has also taken inspiration from previous colonial readings of Angkor as an architectural masterpiece and glorious, powerful kingdom of the past. Indeed, this reassertion of Angkor as a glorious national and cultural heritage has become the principle asset for a government attempting to profit from the highly lucrative, yet competitive, industry of Southeast Asian tourism.

To conclude, we can see that a discourse of cultural tourism has been offered in an attempt to maintain an appropriate balance between the preservation of a material culture of the past and the presentation of a 'high quality' tourist destination. However, as the following analysis of domestic tourism will demonstrate, a concept of cultural tourism which principally conceives Angkor as an 'ancient' templed landscape fails to incorporate more inclusive understandings of how the site is imagined, practised and valued by Cambodians today.

### **Khmer New Year**

It is argued that an exploration of the values and meanings associated with Angkor's cultural heritage provides valuable insight into the complex relationship between landscape, memory and identity. In developing this argument, there is a focus on the Khmer New Year celebrations held in April 2001. The responses presented here are drawn from 29 interviews conducted with individuals, couples and families at three different sites within the Angkor park: Angkor Wat, the West Mebon and at Srah Srang. These three sites were selected because lengthy interviews could be undertaken while subjects, who were randomly approached, were picnicking, talking to friends, or simply relaxing by the water. Discussions were semi-structured in nature and centred on a series of themes. Interviewees were asked about their activities at the Angkor complex, their modes of transport and length of stay, why it was important for them to attend the festival, what they knew about Angkor prior to arrival or how they imagined it, as well their attitudes towards conservation and development. Essentially undertaken as 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess, 1990: 103), these interviews were conducted in Khmer through a translator, and recorded on mini-disc. They lasted between one and two hours.

Additional material was obtained from interviews conducted with the chief monks of two monasteries located inside the Angkor Thom complex. Undertaken in Khmer with a translator, these focused primarily on the role played by monasteries in the festival and on the reasons they are visited by Cambodians today.

In turning to consider Khmer New Year, the aim is to identify certain values and meanings Cambodians ascribe to a festival which has become an important yet overlooked aspect of Angkor's development as a tourist space. In particular, the analysis presented below examines the New Year festival in relation to the atrocities endured across Cambodia in recent decades. Crucially, however, Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* reminds us that such historical events do not exist only as external realities for Cambodians; instead, it focuses our attention on how such realities are articulated through subjective, embodied experiences at Angkor today. It will be argued that in recent years this annual event has come to

symbolise a recovery from the social, political and economic forms of oppression which have characterised Cambodia's recent past. However, before developing this argument, it is necessary to provide a brief outline of the festival itself.

For most Cambodians, the new year serves as a welcome 'liminal, time out' (Turner, 1995) from the agricultural efforts of an increasingly hot dry season. Although not officially promoted or advertised by the government, a decade of relative political stability has enabled increasing numbers of Cambodians to travel to Angkor from around the country for the mid-April celebrations. At the time of writing, statistics on such journeys were not available. While a significant proportion of the tourists interviewed came from provinces across the country, infrastructural constraints meant that a large proportion of domestic visitors to Angkor travelled from areas linked by major highways, most notably Phnom Penh.

Because there is no ticketing system, assessing the scale and scope of the festival over recent years is difficult. However, as indicated below, the suffering and destruction endured during the Vietnam war and Pol Pot regime – which essentially removed any possibility of large-scale celebrations – means that the number of Cambodians visiting Angkor over the New Year period today remains unprecedented. The lack of accurate data was acknowledged during the ICC technical conference in December 2000, and again recognised at an international conference on Cultural Tourism held in the same month where estimates of domestic visitors to Angkor over the New Year period ranged from 100,000 to 250,000 (Veng Sereyvuth, 2000).

Staying in local hotels and guesthouses, these tourists typically spend between two and four days visiting Angkor. There are no formally organised events or celebrations, and the festival is characterised by families, couples and individuals moving across a broad range of activities. In addition to visiting the numerous Angkorean temples within the park, regular visits and offerings are made to a number of modern Buddhist monasteries. Typically, hot afternoons are spent swimming at the West Mebon reservoir, driving around the park in open-top vehicles, or relaxing at picnic spots, the most popular of which is the west gate of Angkor Wat. With a strong emphasis placed on socialising and meeting new people, the four-day festival is defined by an interweaving of leisure, tourism and religion as visitors continually move between swimming, picnicking, temple visits and prayer.

As noted earlier, for Cambodians, Angkor represents the material legacy of a once glorious past. In illustrating this, the following interviews also show how the site plays a pivotal role in articulating contemporary formations of cultural, national and religious identities – collective formations that have become greatly reified through the events of recent decades. Indeed, even the ostensibly innocuous activities of drinking, praying, swimming and picnicking at Angkor over New Year signify a departure from the 'dark years' of the 1970s, and as such denote a national passage of time. As Meng, a local businessman from Siem Reap, who is in his 30s, states:

It is good to see a lot of people here, and to see a lot of people employed. If there is no life at the temples then it feels like the time of Pol Pot. So I like to see many people at the temples, both visiting and working. If there is

no-one selling things and no life it is like the dark years of Pol Pot. It is relief from the war to see people going to the temples and visiting them regularly. This really started from 1980 onwards, people started putting incense at the temples, so this needs to carry on today. Before, we were not allowed.

The sense of social liberation expressed in incense burning by Meng here remains a powerful dimension to today's New Year celebrations for a number of reasons. In April 1975, Pol Pot's revolutionary party (*angkar*) swept into Phnom Penh, declaring the end of '2000 years of Cambodian history' (Chandler, 1996a: 214). As Kiernan states, 'history was to be undone, in terms of population as well as territory' (1996: 27) by cleansing Cambodia of its religious, educational, legal and other social infrastructures.

Despite Pol Pot's claims of returning Cambodia to 'year zero', significant elements of his radical ideology drew inspiration from a vision of a once glorious Angkorean period. In particular, Pol Pot's vision of wealth creation through the annual export of a rice surplus was taken from a reading of Angkorean history (Vickery, 1999). It was believed that self-sufficiency could be achieved through the planting of rubber, cotton and coconut crops, a notion that drew considerably on the hydraulic theories of early 20th-century French scholars (Barnett, 1990). In fact, Pol Pot's attempt to massively reproduce Angkor's irrigation technology was to have horrific consequences for the population.

The Angkorean dream entertained by the Pol Potists, for which tens of thousands of Cambodians died as they slaved building canals, was in large part historical fantasy. (Barnett, 1990: 121)

Based on misguided beliefs that multiple, season-defying harvests could be achieved through complex irrigation systems, grossly unrealistic aims were to lead to progressively worse annual famines. From his examination of party speeches, Chandler indicates that Angkor was cited as an example of the power of mobilised labour and 'national grandeur which could be re-enacted in the 1970s' (1996b: 246). A vision of a glorious Angkorean history thus ensured the site remained protected and was even appropriated as a political resource within the revolutionary ideology of the Khmer Rouge.

Under Pol Pot, however, ordinary Cambodians had no freedom of travel and were thus denied the opportunity to visit and experience Angkor as a landscape of collective heritage.

The regime had its own form of nationalism, defined in particular by hatred of Vietnam. At the same time, however, it denied its citizens a celebration of their own cultural heritage . . . [and] . . . traditional Cambodian holidays were not observed. (Gottesman, 2003: 13)

Today, after two decades of steady recovery, the modern festivities therefore represent a reclaiming of the site as a collective 'memory', a populist symbol of history enabling Cambodians to better 'understand their national identity' (Yalouri, 2001: 17).

As Meng, a local businessman commented:

Angkor Wat is a symbol and creation of Khmer culture, a symbol of national culture. That is why it is important for me, and why it is important for me to come here.

His words were echoed by Sovanna, another informant in her 30s from a village 20 kilometres north of Angkor:

Angkor is the Khmer ancestor heritage and each year we like to see more and more people here at new year. It is a place many people want to come and it is good fortune to come as many people are still unable. After the war many people want to see Angkor, to see their heritage.

Kiernan's reference to the undoing of history in territorial terms raises the importance of spatiality in this reclamation of a Cambodian 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991). Subsequent to the evacuation of the country's major urban centres in April and May 1975, the country was divided into seven zones (*phumipeak*), comprising 32 administrative areas (Chandler, 1996a: 209–26; Kiernan, 1996: 31–101; Vickery, 1999: 69–201). In an effort to destroy religious traditions, abolish private land ownership, maximise human resources, and to fundamentally reconfigure the country's political demography, major programmes of forced migration across these regions were implemented. With most families dispersed to camps of forced labour, all freedom of movement was abolished. In effect, Pol Pot's revolutionary experiment represented one of the most profound severing of ties between an entire national population and its geographical base.

It was also a four-year period that was straddled by further major political and social turmoil. Indeed, from the American bombing campaigns across eastern provinces during the early 1970s, until the Khmer Rouge's retreat to the provinces adjacent to the Thai border in the late 1990s, Cambodia's physical infrastructure suffered long-term destruction and neglect. Such events, combined and associated with abject poverty, meant that Cambodians were politically, economically and physically inhibited from freely travelling within their own country. In such a historical context, the possibility of travelling to Angkor from different provinces today represents an ongoing rehabilitation from this situation. As Howan, aged 40, a shop owner from the northwest town of Battambang, puts it:

Yes. I like the crowds over the New Year period. It's a good atmosphere meeting people from other provinces. I like to see that and I like to talk to people from other provinces because we are the same nation. I like to come and see people from different parts of the country. Since I was young, people came to Angkor Wat, up until 1968, before Lon Nol, and then it started again in 1979. But it was more local people then because it was under Vietnamese control... Since the late 1980s more and more people can come, which is good for Cambodia.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Li, a woman in her 50s from Kampong Cham, near the Vietnamese border:

We met when we came here, some of us met in Phnom Penh. But we are all from different provinces now, but we are family, we are all Khmer. We are

staying three days. We have heard about Angkor for a long time, and it is the first time we are all able to come together after many dark years for Cambodia. But it is Khmer heritage, built by our ancestors. We wanted to meet here.

Likewise, for Hong, a 30-year old man from Pailin, an area occupied by the Khmer Rouge as recently as 1998, New Year clearly represents a new era of national stability and freedom to travel:

It's good we can now come here over New Year to see the crowds, to worship in the temples. I used to come for one day on my own since 1994, but it was not safe to bring my family as we live near the Thai border. I was a soldier on the Thai border.

Such quotes demonstrate that the festival period represents a metaphoric rebuilding of the nation through a reclaiming of traditions, territories and material heritage. These personal touristic experiences of Angkor over New Year enable the events in Cambodia's recent history to be simultaneously remembered and forgotten. In this respect, the festival facilitates the emergence of a social memory which valuably informs the articulation of a collective identity.

By understanding New Year as a series of sociocultural practices, we are reminded of Turner's notion of *communitas* (1995). He argues that festivals represent liminal moments occurring in both time and space within which collective identities can emerge. Meeting people and developing friendships is an experience that depends on the dynamics and symbolic potency of Angkor's landscape. Crouch's account of tourism as practice may also be applied in this context. He suggests friendship 'is embodied because it . . . makes particular use of space. People being physically together, sharing activities, the body becomes aware of a shared body space that is also social space' (Crouch, 1999: 272). Crucially however, it is only over the time of new year when this social space is fully constituted through the collective picnicking, praying, swimming and socialising of thousands of Cambodian visitors. It can thus be suggested that this festival represents a unique time/space moment of *communitas* within which a sense of a nation in socioeconomic and cultural recovery is collectively articulated. This is further illustrated in the following responses:

We come every year to see Angkor Wat, to have fun with the family, to see lots of people. We just drive around. A few families from our village have come. We've been coming for the past five years and now it's different in that there are a lot more people here and there has been more restoration. We don't know much about the history, so we like to picnic here [Angkor Wat] and the baray [reservoir]. These places have the most people, the other places are too quiet. We like to see it crowded, both with foreign people and Cambodian people. No matter how busy we are, we come here over new year, we feel we have to come to see the people at this time. (Hok and Huant, husband and wife, both in their 30s, farmers, who travelled from Kampong Cham Province)

We like to picnic here at the waterwheel, at the Baray or at Angkor Wat. It's cooler, close to the water, good for picnics and it's a good atmosphere at

those places. Over new year we like to feed the monks at the Bayon, go to Phnom Kulen to see the waterfall and people there and worship the spirits of Khmer mythology at Banteay Srei, Neak Pean, Preah Khan I feel it is very important for my family to see this, to do these things and be here at this time. (Sok, farmer, in his 20s, from Siem Reap Province)

Among those visiting Angkor over the New Year there is also a noticeable optimism that many of the temples from the Angkorean Period will be significantly repaired over the coming years:

Yes. I would like to see the temples restored because the country has suffered four generations of war and so a lot of Cambodian people aren't knowledgeable about the Khmer history. I was born in Siem Reap. I used to come to the temples during the Sihanouk period and I used to come to the temples until Pol Pot, when I had to leave. I had to move 200 kilometres away, but I returned here in July 1979, I came back to Angkor. I am happy to see it being restored, especially the Baphuon temple. Philip Groslier was restoring it up until the war and now they are doing it again, which I am happy to see. People in the country are so poor and for them to see the glories of these temples restored makes them happy to see Cambodia's glory restored once again. Yes it makes people very happy. (Chhin, in her 50s, farmer and mother of six, on a family day trip from a village 15 miles north of Angkor)

Yes. I want to see Angkor as a modern tourist site, but they need to keep the traditional structures. They should restore the outer moat of Angkor Wat for Cambodian people to sit on, and restore these ruined temples for Cambodians to see their heritage. Cambodia is now at peace and to see Angkor restored is good for the country. (Sok in his 20s, a farmer from Kratie Province, who came by truck and is staying at Angkor for four days)

Yes, to see more restoration is good. It would be nice for foreigners and Cambodians to see Angkor Wat and all the other temples restored. Cambodians need to be proud of their heritage and country and for many it is only now that they are able to come here. It is important for them to see Angkor rebuilt. It gives strength to our poor country. (Hong, shop owner in his 30s, from Pailin, staying for three days)

Architecturally, Angkor is symbolically charged not only through its Angkorean temples, but also through the presence of numerous Buddhist pagodas that have been constructed during the last 15 years. Over the new year period, the frequent visits to pagodas centre around prayer, blessings and the personal merit attained from feeding monks and financially supporting the ongoing reconstruction of the buildings, many of which were damaged or destroyed during the 1970s. The following responses given by two head monks of pagodas situated within the Angkor Thom complex vividly illustrate the important role their monasteries play during the festival:

There are many people that come here, they come from town, from villages and they go to many monasteries, not just this one. They want to pray here because the monks are here. They use the old temples in the same way as

the pagodas, using incense, praying to the Buddha. Many people like to pray for their relations so they bring food to the monks. They believe food earns them merit as when they give food to the monk he prays for their relative so the food feeds the spirit . . . People have given money to help build the *Vihear* (congregation hall). It brings them good luck and when that happens they believe in that pagoda and keep coming.

Similarly,

People come from Siem Reap town, the province, Battambang, and from the border with Thailand. They especially like to come during the festivals. They like to come to Angkor during the festival time. They like to give money. They believe all the pagodas inside the Angkor area are more significant than pagodas in their local areas, so they like to give donations.

Clearly, the potency of these pagodas is derived not only through the long-standing religious traditions they embody, but also from a series of value regimes very contemporary in nature. More specifically, they are valued because they are active, living sites. Nevertheless, during the first six months of 2002, significant speculation surrounded the future of these pagodas. Local government officials referred to them as 'eyesores', a 'security hazard to the temples' and a 'threat to foreign tourists' (*Cambodia Today*, 2002)

According to reports in the Cambodian media, local authorities intended to evict around 170 Buddhist monks and nuns from pagodas that were deemed 'illegally built'. Despite such strong claims, ascertaining their legal status is far from straightforward, and is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, it can be argued that objections to the presence of these pagodas were directly related to the development of the site's international tourism industry. Local officials drew on the lack of historical authenticity of the pagodas as a justification for their othering within a policy oriented towards the aesthetic presentation of an 'ancient' monumental landscape.

The director of APSARA, Angkor's management authority, subsequently gave an assurance that the monasteries would be safe. But this dispute provides an example of how the practices and values of domestic visitors to Angkor have come to be a frustration for some within the government aspiring to present the site for international cultural tourism. Indeed, these monasteries, considered by Ang Chouléan as 'the most striking manifestation' (1988: 36) of Cambodia's characteristic syncretism between Buddhism and animism, can be regarded as a 'living heritage'. They are potentially under threat from the desire to construct an all-encompassing relationship between the conservation of 'ancient' monuments and the presentation of the site for international tourists.

By contrast, it is suggested here that Angkor is important to a population recovering from a period characterised by US bombing campaigns, a domestic genocidal regime, and the political incursions of neighbouring Vietnam. At Angkor, there is a convergence of past histories, both glorious and tragic, erased, remembered and transposed into optimism about the future. Moreover, Angkor's increasing popularity as a national festival site and the ongoing reconstruction of its architecture are symbolically elevated into an optimistic vision for

the country's future. It is a feeling expressed by Suoan, a young businessman in his 20s from Phnom Penh, who was visiting Siem Reap for four days:

Angkor Wat is for the young generations. It is good to see the crowds coming; it is good for the younger generation to see more and more people coming to the temples. I believe they will restore it one day. Angkor Wat is different from other countries in terms of the architecture. It gives strength to the Khmer people and the nation.

In recalling Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*, we can see that such temporalities of history do not exist as abstract, external realities for such visitors as Suoan. Rather, they are articulated through the personal, embodied experiences of visiting Angkor today. In this respect, Angkor serves as a metaphoric space for a nation in recovery. Not only is it a recovery of the geographical and ethnic presence of a population, but also it is a recovery of their past, present and future.

By contrasting these tourist narratives with the spatial representations of the ICC, we can see that the role of Angkor as a 'living heritage' remains inadequately understood within a framework which conceives and values Angkor as a material culture of the 'ancient' past. The focus on the international tourism market has meant that there has been little or no understanding of Angkor's role as an important landscape in *domestic* tourism. It thus follows that the importance of such festivals as Khmer New Year also remains unrecognised by a management oriented primarily towards presenting Angkor's temples for an international tourism market.

## Conclusion

In examining tourism at Angkor as a form of spatial practice, it has been argued that the presence of certain prevailing discourses and framings, in this case cultural tourism, serves to marginalise alternative understandings of heritage and memory. By viewing formations of landscape and heritage as inherently contested, and thus far from normative, the analysis offered here has highlighted some of the tensions underpinning Angkor's recent transformation into commodified tourist space.

The arrival of large-scale international tourism in Cambodia undoubtedly necessitates difficult decisions regarding both the preservation and the presentation of Angkor. While the current strategy of developing cultural tourism succeeds in presenting a 'high quality' landscape of 'ancient' monuments for an international audience, the practices and values of domestic visitors remain inadequately appreciated.

By contrast, this paper has drawn upon the concept of memory to illuminate how the recent traumatic historical events of a nation are simultaneously re-appropriated, remembered and forgotten through the personal experiences of being a tourist at Angkor today. Examining tourism through the Heideggerian lens of *Dasein* has powerfully illustrated the ways in which activities such as picnicking, swimming and driving are symbolically and metaphorically imbued with a sense of national recovery for Cambodians today. We have also seen how the ongoing reconstruction of Angkor's temples and modern pagodas, in the

context of an increasingly popular festival, also provides Cambodians with an optimism regarding the country's future.

Addressing the complex interplay between time and space in this way provides valuable insight into the processes through which encounters with heritage landscapes can be translated and abstracted into formations of collective identities. Clearly, new year at Angkor is an example of a tourism practice whereby the 'the activity and its space are enlarged in the imagination' (Crouch, 1999: 271).

As post-conflict Cambodia vividly demonstrates, the material heritage of 'ancient' monumental landscapes does not merely remain part of a nation's past, but can actively serve as a living heritage contributing to the ongoing constitution of national, cultural and ethnic identities. This analysis of domestic tourism at Angkor, as a series of creative sociocultural practices, is thus offered in an attempt to advance the understanding of such vital processes

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