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 Abstract: <u>Heritage and Identity: A case of local community connections with the historic relics of the Angkorian past</u>

This paper talks about contemporary cultural connections of the local community and the ramifications on the heritage management of the Angkor Archaeological Park in Cambodia.

Angkor archaeological park is a complex array of temples, water reservoirs, ponds, canals, bunds, roads, embankments, village ponds, shrines, ruins and archaeological mounds. The complexity of the landscape is yet to be understood.

The local community living amongst this treasure trove of archaeological remains is as 'fragile' as the cultural resource itself. The Theravada Buddhist community has cultural associations with the historical temples predominantly dedicated to Hindu deities through the worship of *Neak ta* (ancestral spirits). These practices continue till date but the relevance and strength of beliefs is diminishing in the modern world and is not enough to sustain protection of the heritage fabric.

Escalation in development is causing a great deal of pressure and stress on the fragile, culturally rich archaeological landscape. Changes to the land due to looting, leveling, modern constructions and large scale developments make ground reality of 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 managing this unique world heritage site. This paper forms part of a PhD research titled: *Re-Interpreting the Greater Angkor Cultural Landscape: An Integrated approach to Cultural Heritage Management using GIS and Spatial Modeling*

Biography: Senthilpavai Kasiannan trained as an architect with specialisation in Architectural Conservation. She worked as a Heritage Consultant on a number of projects related to Heritage Management including Cultural Resource inventorying, Mapping of Heritage resources, Database for Heritage inventories, Restoration plans, Conservation Management plans, World Heritage Site Assessment report and was involved in restoration and renovation of some key heritage buildings in different parts of India and Australia. She is currently pursuing her doctoral research in University of Sydney. Her research aims to re-interpret the Greater Angkor Cultural landscape using Geographical Information Systems. She aims to establish the significance of Angkor through the perspective of its local community.

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'.[1]

Cambodia has gone through a period of 'political trauma' in the recent past. 'Cambodia has been victimised since 1800 or so by five countries – Thailand, Vietnam (twice), France, the United States and china. Before 1850 it was the battleground for Thai and Vietnamese notions of hegemony. From 1863 to the 1950s it was preserved in catalepsy by the French…' (Chandler, 1994)

Extensive loss of cultural material has taken place ever since the Thai invasions after the downfall of the *Khmer* empire. This continued through the time Cambodia was colonised by the French, when a number of statuary and sculptures were removed over the years of French occupation. (Edwards, 2007) However, the years that followed Cambodia's independence did not remain peaceful for long. The political instability and the *Khmer Rouge* period followed by the Vietnamese occupation; led to period of trauma. The *Khmer* society has suffered severely being displaced in their homeland. And this 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'. (1997)

This paper seeks to examine the situation that exists today in Angkor. The local community, its values and belief systems are critical in the management of the World Heritage site in an integrated manner. This paper seeks to address some of the professional challenges that heritage managers in Angkor are dealing with. The issues discussed in this paper reflect the author's primary findings from the field research conducted in Angkor in November 2006.

HERITAGE MANAGEMENT: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Age of Reason in Europe paved the way for critical thinking with regards to heritage buildings. Ruskin Bond's writings and William Morris's Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) established the foundations of the modern conservation movement, which originated in Europe. (Morris, 1877) However, it was the severe damage caused to historical and traditional buildings during the world wars that created an international movement geared towards conservation. The Venice charter (1964) laid down thirteen resolutions on restoration and created ICOMOS (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 90s that there was a shift from the Euro-centric philosophies. The Nara document on authenticity (1994) for the first time referred to cultural diversity, responsibility with regards to heritage management and respect to 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 'Recommendation 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 lay emphasis on a holistic approach to heritage management which includes the tangible and the intangible values. Recent research in Angkor has led to the mapping of a number of archaeological features through remote sensing. These features have added considerably, to the existing knowledge base of Angkor. Owing to the new findings, and to enable effective management of the cultural heritage; an integrated approach needs to be incorporated within the existing management system. The author's research[2] is set in this context of establishing the cultural significance of Angkor from the perspective of its local community. This paper attempts to highlight on the current challenges existing in heritage management.

Angkor World Heritage Site

Angkor and the monuments along with the archaeological zones were inscribed onto the World Heritage list in 1992, based on criterion (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv).

The criteria are as follows:
> (i) – The Angkor complex represents the entire range of Khmer art from the 9th to 14th centuries and includes a number of indisputable artistic masterpieces.
> (ii) – the influence of Khmer art, as developed at Angkor was a profound one over much of SE Asia and played a fundamental role in its distinctive evolution.
> (iii) – The Khmer empire of the 9th to 14th centuries encompassed much of SE Asia and played a formative role in the political and cultural development of the region. All that remains of that civilisation is its rich heritage of Cult structures in brick and stone.
> (iv) – Khmer architecture evolved largely from that of the Indian sub-continent, from which it soon became clearly distinct as it developed its own special characteristics, some independently evolved and others acquired from neighbouring cultural traditions. (UNESCO, 1992 p. 147)

At the time of Angkor's inscription, Cambodia's political instability caused the intervention of the United Nations. It was placed under the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). (Chandler, 1994)

'In order to deal with the urgent problems of conservation quickly and effectively, the Committee has inscribed the site of Angkor on the List of World Heritage in Danger, and

has requested, on the recommendation of ICOMOS, that the authorities concerned take the necessary steps to meet the following conditions:
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 p. 1)

The historical context of research in Angkor is discussed in the following section.

Research at Angkor, a historical overview

Henri Mouhot, when he first arrived at Angkor was filled with wonder. 'Angkor would no doubt remain in his imagination as it became in European conceptions as it first appeared to him in that moment of awed discovery: as the fantastic, picturesque burial ground of a 'dead' civilisation' (Edwards, 2007) p20. 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 could not have been '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 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 had spent a year in Angkor in 1296 and this till date remains the closest insights into the *Khmer* way of life in the Angkorian era. (Dagens, 1995)

Chandler points out 'European discovery of Angkor in the mid-nineteenth century was that the supposedly forgotten ruins and much of the statuary came equipped with Cambodian names'. He has tried to establish the legend of the Leper King in history. Accordingly he states that 'the myth of the leper king suggests 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)

The École Française d'Extrême-Orient was set up in Siem Reap in 1898 to conduct researches into the Architectural wealth of the historical empire. The creation of the EFEO and the setting up in Angkor of a permanent office, the Conservation d'Angkor, provided the framework 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, spaces around cleared considerably to view the temples and practising monks and locals were removed from the immediate vicinity. (Edwards, 2007)

Angkor was declared as 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. For ease of management, effort was taken to leave villages outside the park boundary. (Pottier, 2006)

The maps created over time by the various researchers were centred on the Archaeological Park giving emphasis to Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom and the monuments. However, it took more than a century for researchers to move beyond the park boundary. B.P Groslier's map of 1979, for the first time showed some of the hydrological features and his map showed details to the north of the Park. His theory on the '*citë hydraulique*' brought to light many of the aspects previously not considered and encouraged critical thinking into theories related to Angkor's downfall. (Groslier, 1979)

Recent Research on Angkor

In the recent years the comprehension of Angkor and its cultural region have considerably expanded owing to advancement in remote sensing techniques. Pottier surveyed the Archaeological Park and the region south of the park extensively. His research brought to light the network and density of archaeological heritage elements in the landscape. Pottier identified water bodies, canals, archaeological mounds establishing its seamless nature. (Pottier, 1999)
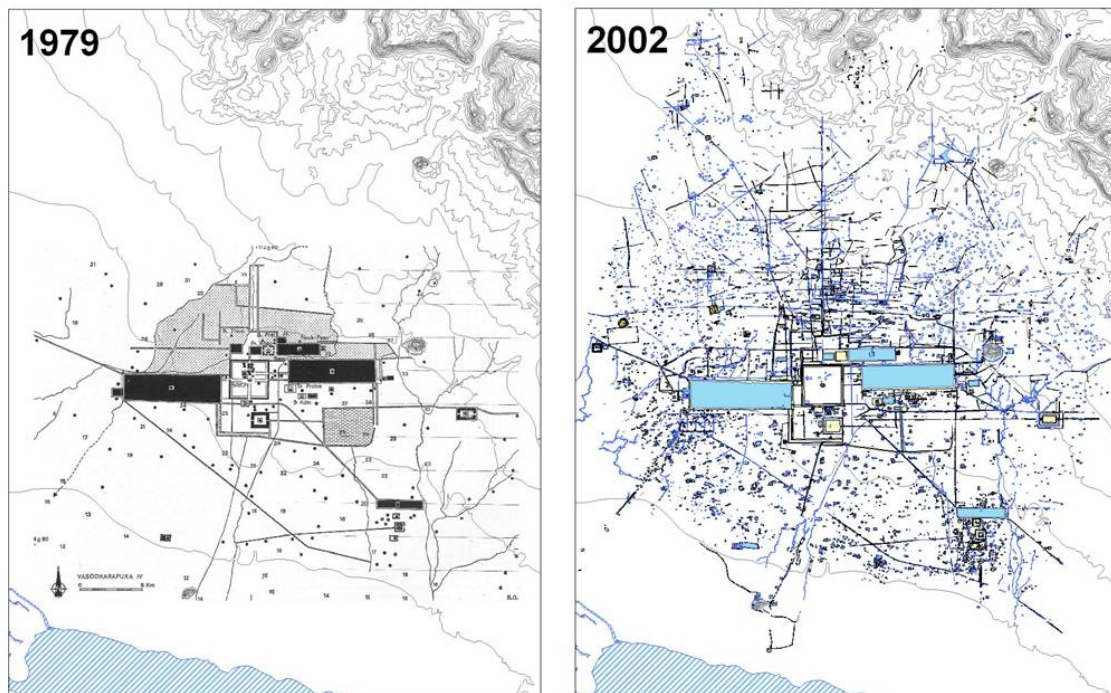

Fig 1: B.P. Grosliers map on the left (1979); Map of Angkor (2002) – Angkor park and south of Angkor mapped by Pottier, North of park mapped by Evans.

Pottier's systematic survey of 1999 was supplemented by the work of Evans where his analysis of the AIRSAR (RADAR) imagery has resulted in much larger cultural region. Though this map needs to be largely ground – truthed, it still tends to establish the significance of the Angkor Cultural landscape in a global context. And it clearly establishes the complexity of the Angkor cultural region. (Evans, 2002, Pottier, 1999, GAP, 2003)[3]

The Angkor cultural region with its considerably high density of monuments has now grown in comprehension to a much larger cultural region, larger than the inscribed Angkor Archaeological Park. The research brings to light the complex network of hydrological features and the remarkable aspects of *Khmer* engineering and their complex system of managing the landscape. The heritage management approaches need to be re-evaluated in light of the recent findings.

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 p. 1)

There are around 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 on their daily lives amongst the Angkorian monuments. 'A fabulous archaeological site, this great stone skeleton is also a living place, at once the realm of divinities and a city of mortals, where everyday business is steeped in customs from a prestigious past.' (Luco, 2000)

'More than an outdoor museum, Angkor is home to religious and rural life revolving around the temples'. (Luco, 2000) 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 evident that a connection exists however fragile it may appear to be.

The religious affiliations of the society have undergone considerable changes over history. Evidences of Hinduism, Buddhism (Vajrayana) and syncretism of the two have existed over the centuries. This is evident through the numerous monumental temples and shrines and their sculptures and statuary built over time in history. Theravadan Buddhism came into being as the state religion at some point in history and by the fifteenth century the *Khmer* were largely Buddhist. One aspect that has remained in the *Khmer* consciousness and cultural practices is the worship of ancestral deity. The earth, the sun and moon hold great significance for the *Khmers*, which is manifest through their worship of the ancestral deities referred to as *anak tā*. (Ang, 1995)

'Some Hindu Statues in the Angkor temples have been appropriated by local people as powerful *Neak ta* (the patron spirit of `ancestors') that are perceived to affect the lives of the people. Ta Reach (Grandfather Royal), in the form of Vishnu, which stands in the outermost west gallery of Angkor Wat, has been considered as the royal *Neak ta*, the most powerful *Neak ta* in the region who, in a sense, `reigns over' minor *Neak ta*. The local population believe that every ancient temple, whether Hindu or Buddhist, has at least one *Neak ta* (the number of *Neak ta* depending on the scale and type of the temple), enhancing the sacredness of the Angkor site. The *Neak ta* cult predates Hinduism and Buddhism.' (Muira, 2005)

Evidences of Cultural connections in Angkor

The author conducted primary field research in Cambodia in November 2006. The objective of the field survey was to examine if connections existed between the local population in Angkor and the tangible monumental remains. It is hoped that the cultural values recorded in the process will help in establishing 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 identified. (Pottier, 1999) Three case-study villages were selected for the primary research. The villages were chosen on the basis of a prominent heritage feature in the landscape and the group of villagers living in the immediate vicinity. The villages chosen include *Lolei* (village is located along the embankment around the *Lolei Baray*), *Ovloak* (village surrounding the *Bakong* – mountain temple) and *Thnal Trang* (village to the east of *Bakong*).

The information was collected by interviews with key informants including the village chief, commune chief, head monk and experts in Siem Reap and elsewhere and the local villagers. A series of questions were used to identify the connections of the locals to the Angkorian monuments, their perceptions of the Angkor's significance, their views to heritage management and their belief systems and cultural practices. The tangible heritage remains and the social values attached have been mapped applying concepts of UNESCO's (UNESCO, 2006) cultural mapping.

It is important to understand places and their meanings from the perspective of the locals as re-iterated: '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)

Perceptions of the local community and emerging issues

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 the low-lying areas to be flooded. And hence, *kok*, is used for building the houses; this coincides with the archaeological / occupation mound and appears to have been continually occupied through history. The *Lolei Baray*, which has remained dry since historical times, is known amongst the villagers as *Baray* smooud, which means 'dry *Baray*'.

Trapeang in the landscape is restricted for use by the APSARA authority, since it is a cultural feature. The locals do not use the *trapeang* for any purposes due the restrictions.

The concepts of heritage management advocated by APSARA, the managing authority is common knowledge for the locals. They are aware of the fact that 'no digging, no new construction and no damage to cultural property' is allowed in the archaeological zones. This has been enabled through the signs erected by APSARA.

Based on interviews, it is evident that the older population (above 50s) do not visit the temples due to the practical inconvenience of climbing them. They are aware that the temples are old, but do not know any further details with regards to the gods or the historicity. Most temples are associated with ancestral spirits (*anak tā*), and cultural practices are performed when the need is felt by the villagers.

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, created a number of jobs and every family benefits from the consequences of tourism directly or indirectly. Some of the older villagers however were not completely convinced as to why the temples are regarded as significant. And they are confused that people travelled from all parts of the world to visit the Angkor world heritage site; though they welcome the tourists.

The scars of the war and the lasting impacts of political instability and *Khmer Rouge* are still evident amongst some of the older interviewees. They are not very eager to share information regarding their cultural practices. It takes a great deal of convincing explanations for them to share their perceptions and stories.

The community is oblivious to the implications of a World Heritage status and as such is not happy with the restrictions on their life imposed by APSARA. This is causing considerable stress amongst sections of community and the managing authority, which is evident during any new development.

Conclusions

The preliminary investigations in the field along with the interviews conducted amongst the villagers have helped establish an understanding of the Angkor archaeological park. The complexities of the landscape, the difficulties with regards to heritage management

are very evident. 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 and so is the need to incorporate the cultural values of the local community and their perceptions with regards to Angkor's management.

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. The cultural practices and worship of *anak tā* is diminishing in importance. It is very crucial to document the intangible values of the *Khmers* at this point of change.

As Luco 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.' (Luco, 2000)

In the *Roluos* zone, there is a great deal of development owing to the location of villages along the route 6; highway connecting Siem Reap with Phnom Penh. Unchecked development can cause undue stress on the environment and villages if not dealt with now.

As mentioned earlier *trapeang* in the landscape is restricted for use by the APSARA authority, since it is a cultural feature. On the other hand, APSARA is de-silting the moats around *Bakong* and cleaning them of vegetation thereby altering the archaeological traces. Contradictory attitudes to CHM are making it increasingly difficult for the local villagers to understand the significance of managing heritage.

The findings so far establish that fragile connections exist between the local people and the Angkorian landscape. It is critical at this point in time to focus on 'community-inclusive' approaches to manage the Angkor world heritage site. This can be best achieved by understanding the cultural connections of the people to the land.

In the case of *Shirakami-sanchi* World Heritage Area a natural World Heritage Site in Japan, Kato's paper 'examines what underlies the local community's conservation commitment, formed through long connection with a place and which is in essence a spirituality that makes an ordinary life-place sacred. The paper also questions how spiritual connection may be maintained and communicated today'. (Kato, 2006) Methods need to be established to map the cultural values in Angkor and its significance established through the perception of the locals to include them in the management process.

An understanding of the local population's cultural connections, identification of its cultural values will help in building a 'sense of pride' amongst the *Khmers* and contribute to the empowerment of the society.

Endnotes

[1] Szajkowski's editor's preface in Vickery's Kampuchea: Politics, Economics and Society

[2] The author is currently pursuing doctoral research at the University of Sydney. This paper forms part of the PhD titled: 'Re-interpreting the Greater Angkor Cultural Landscape – An integrated approach to Cultural Heritage Management using GIS'. The PhD is an APAI (Australian Postgraduate Award – Industry) scholarship, part of an ARC (Australian Research Council) Linkage grant titled 'Living with Heritage: Integrating time, place and culture for World Heritage Conservation'; a multi-disciplinary project collaborating with UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), EFEO (École Française d'Extrême-Orient), APSARA (Autorité pour la Protection du Site et l'Aménagement de la Région d'Angkor) and other industry partners.

[3] 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 infra-structural inertia and environmental impact in the demise of Angkor.

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