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The Angkorian Palimpsest: Daily Life of Villagers Living on a World Heritage Site. (Angkor in Cambodia) By Fabienne Luco - Anthropologist

(Fig. 1 - Fishing in Bayon temple moat)

ABSTRACT:

Nowadays, traditional Khmer farmers are living on the framework of the ancient capital cities of Angkor, which is also visited by more than 2 million tourists a year. They are torn between the aspiration of profiting from the country as it opens to the market economy and to mass tourism, and the restrictions of living in a place that is mummifying into a museum representation. With international heritage developers advocating the re-creation of an ancient idealized space, the solutions offered to the new generation are whether to leave the site or to become part of its folklore. But the approach these inhabitants chose when settling in this area whilst developing it within the framework of their living culture shall be taken into consideration. Angkor is not stuck in the past. These populations lay new layers on the partly erased ancient structure. Ancient developments, far from being simply archaeological remains to be preserved, are used on a daily basis in residential, farming, and religious activities. Angkor is not just an archaeological site, it is also a living territory.

1. ANGKOR, THE MYTH OF THE ABANDONED CITY

For the foreign explorers[1] who came between the 16th century and the late 19thcentury, Angkor appeared as a forgotten antique city of stone engulfed by the jungle. They evoke a golden era**,** followed by the ransacking of the city and its subsequent abandonment to the forest in the 15th century.

1.1. The Stone and Soil Skeleton Studied and Restored by Outsiders.

In 1907 Siam retroceded Siem Reap province to Cambodia. The French School of Asian Studies (*EFEO, École française d'Extrême Orient*) was set up to study and to manage the restoration and

[1] Portuguese and Spanish missionaries: Diego Do Couto (1550), Gaspar de Cruz (1556) and French travellers: Father Charles Emile Bouillevaux (1857), Henri Mouhot (1860).

the conservation of the monumental site of Angkor. Foreign researchers who travelled among the entourage of the French protectorate began the task of piecing together this gigantic puzzle. It was an overwhelming project. The first works carried out by the architects and archaeologists focused mainly on clearing the forest, and on recording and restoring the countless remains. They started with the visible remains: a stone (sand stone, brick, and laterite temples) skeleton buried in the forest.

Divinity shrines and remaining engraved inscriptions glorifying the kings have left the most visible traces. The first structures dealt with were the stone religious buildings. Architectural, epigraphic, and iconographic studies reveal that this site was home to a succession of royal capitals which reigned over a large territory from the 9th until the 15th centuries, where the practiced religions were imported from India: Vishnuism, Shivaism, and Mahayana Buddhism.

The dwellings of the people, built with perishable materials (wood, thatch), as depicted on the temple bas-reliefs (Fig. 2 Daily life represented on the bas-reliefs of Bayon temple - 12th century) did not survive the aggressive climate, the passage of time, and the insects. As a result, very little has been studied and is known about them. The tale of the journey of a Chinese diplomat, Tchou Ta Kuan[2], survives as the single living account of life at the court of Angkor in the 14th century.

More recently, as the restoration and conservation of religious stone constructions continue, researchers have wondered about soil structures (dikes, causeway, water tanks, and canals). They have undertaken to study the planning of the Angkorian territory: Satellite images, test pits, and archaeological excavations have exposed the stone and soil framework. Besides the stone temples, living areas have been discovered and analyzed, such as a concentrated urban habitat inside

Q : THERE IS A FOOTNOTE NUMBER MISSING HERE. 2 PELLIOT P., Traduction de "Mémoires sur les coutumes du Cambodge", récit de Chou Ta Kuan, suivie d'un commentaire inachevé de Paul Pelliot, publié en 1951, Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient (Paris), 178 pages.

Angkor Thom[3] and a scattered habitat at the actual location of the Siem Reap airport.[4] Still, very little is known about the daily life in the past.

1.2. In the Shadow of the Huge Remains: A Living Place

Although it has distanced itself from the romantic image of a forgotten city that had been abandoned as a capital city, this place named Angkor has lived and thrived OKthroughout middle and recent history, albeit with less panache.

Presently, it is difficult to determine clearly if there has been continuity or discontinuity of human occupation in Angkor. Thus, it appears that according to the local population, the local history is made of breaking off such as political disorders followed by periods of insecurity making displacements of the local population numerous in the past. We can only say that the populations that currently inhabit Angkor have managed to live on an old framework whose cultural codes does not seem to be foreign to them.

Occupation of the site is attested to at different modern periods. In the 16th century, the Royal Chronicles mentioned that several kings moved the court back to Angkor Thom for a short time. They carried out the restoration of some sections of Angkor Wat and finalized some bas-reliefs and the building of Buddha statues, notably at the Baphuon and at the top of the Phnom Bakheng. Several remains of terraces in Angkor Thom testify to the late addition of Buddhist monasteries constructed in wood. The fame of Angkor Wat[5] as a sacred Buddhist site attracted pilgrims from far away destinations. A Japanese merchant even drew a plan of it in the late 16th century.[6]

When explorers came at the end of the 19th century, Angkor was not a totally abandoned jungle.

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[3] Greater Angkor Project de l'Université de Sydney - Mission archéologique Franco-khmère sur l'aménagement du territoire dirigée par Christophe Pottier- Mission archéologique française sur l'archéologie urbaine à Angkor Thom dirigée par Jacques Gaucher. Q: SHOULD THIS FOOTNOTE BE TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH? YES (Falser) NO (LUCO)

[4] BATY P., BOLLE A, Sanctuaires habités sous l'aéroport de Siem Reap. Archeologia, 2005, no 427, pp 18-23.

[5] Furthermore, this temple did not wait for the French to become the geo symbol of the country. The image of the temple had already been used as a symbol on a seal and on coins in the middle of the 19th century.

[6] DAGENS B. « Angkor, la forêt de pierre », Découverte Gallimard, Paris,1989.
« Un plan japonais d'Angkor Vat », BEFEO XXIII, pp 119-126.

These explorers mentioned villages and monasteries but did not really take any interest in the social, religious, and farming practices of the dwellers, which were deemed decadent OK decadent when contrasted with a glorified past.

The Angkor site is now mostly considered an archaeological and tourism area. But far from being merely a fossilised site of the past, it is also a present living place. Visitors to the site often do not notice groups of fruit trees (sugar palms, mango trees) growing between the temples, a sure sign of past or present human settlements. Unnoticed and set back from the circuit roads, 85 villages with a population of nearly 100,000 are settled in the extended site of Angkor covering 401 Km2.

(Fig. 3 – Bakheng village)

2. THE ANGKORIAN PALIMPSEST: LIVING ON THE TRACES OF THE PAST SETTLERS

Daily life for those living in these rice farming villages remains very traditional, and numerous gestures (OK gestures, attitudes carved in stone on the temples) seem to reproduce those seen carved on the temples' bas-reliefs: habitation in wooden houses on stilts, transportation on ox carts, market scenes, fishing, and cooking practices. However, these activities are not only seen in the precinct of the Angkor site; neighbouring inhabitants also practice them. The specificity of the people living in Angkor is that they live within an archaeological landscape and they have used it for their habitation, water needs, and religious practices. They have added a new layer on top of the old half-erased one.

2.1. Natural Environment Restrictions: The Management of Water

As already highlighted by Jean Delvert[7], a geographer, the specificities of the Cambodian climate are "a tough dry season" and the "lack of regular rainfalls". Therefore, water management (abundant or scarce) throughout the year is of paramount importance. Seen from the sky during

[7] DELVERT J., « le paysan cambodgien », l'harmattan,Paris, 1994, p. 44

the monsoon, the settlements in Cambodia look like a huge inundated rice plain, from which knolls, hills, and causeway-dykes emerge. There is no irrigation system here that could alleviate the lack of regular rainfall. The farmers are dependent on the weather factor to yield a harvest.

The main concern of the inhabitants is to find emerged soils to build houses that are safe from the floods and to find nearby low flat lands to hold rainwater for wet rice cultivation. The location selected for the settlements must also take into account the rigors of the dry season. The presence of a nearby water reservoir either on the ground or just beneath it is therefore vital. The solutions to these dual constraints are either to find emerged land near a water supply, which can be accessed all year round (river, pond), or to shape the landscape adequately.

2.1.1. Taking Advantage of a Shaped Landscape in Angkor: The Use of High Grounds for Habitation

On the Angkor site, present-day dwellers have been able to take full advantage of the reliefs shaped by ancient developments. Huge architectural and hydraulic developments have drastically changed, shaped, and scarred the landscape with folds, holes, and bumps: causeway dykes, earth levies around the huge water reservoirs (*baray)*, and ponds (*tropeang)*, and man made mounds. These places are favourable for the settlement of rice farming families. The population lives on the higher ground and takes advantage of easy access to water for domestic needs.

Thus, long strips of houses stretch along the non–flooded lands of the Angkorian framework: the dikes of the eastern *baray* (Thnol Toteung, Thnol Bandoy villages) and western *baray* (Kok Beng, Kok Thnôt villages), and raised roads on dikes (Bo Em, Kirimenuan villages).

2.1.2. Taking Advantage of a Shaped Landscape in Angkor: The Use of the Low Lands for Rice Cultivation

This developed landscape is also favourable for rice farming, even if the mediocre quality of the

soil does not produce strong yields. The deep ponds and moats keep in the rain water for a sufficient duration, so that rice can be farmed late and for a better yield: inside the *tropeang*, ancient ponds, in the Angkor Thom moats, inside the eastern baray and in the inner and outer peripheral canals of the eastern baray.

2.2. Taking Advantage of a Sacred Framework

2.2.1. The Construction of Monasteries beside Angkorian Temples

The remains of stone and brick temples strongly mark the landscape. The abandonment of Angkor as the royal capital corresponded with religious changes. Theravada Buddhism replaced the Brahmanic and Buddhist Mahayana official religions. This new cult was organized in an empty space where congregations gathered, and it could not take place in filled spaces such as ancient mountain-temples or the labyrinth of the galleried temples. These spaces were thus, no longer used. Besides this, as indicated in construction traditions, once a building started showing signs of fatigue, or if any misfortunes occurred, construction was abandoned to make way for new works. Therefore, no restorations of places filled with the miasmas of the past were carried out, letting the decay complete the demolition work. But since these places were already consecrated, they were considered to be full of supernatural power, even when in ruins. Contemporary Buddhist monasteries are built next to ancient temples, as if wanting to benefit from their older sacred presence. This is the case with monasteries located on both sides of Angkor Wat and of those more recently built in the precinct of Angkor Thom. Indeed, a total of 11 monasteries have been built in Angkor monumental zone.

2.2.2. The Cult of the Land Spirits: The neakta

However, the stone remains were not completely abandoned. In the enclosure of the temples and in the Angkorian landscape, traces of cults can be still be observed, particularly in the alms that are left in front of statues or of carved stone fragments.

(Fig. 4 *neakta* land spirit - south gate of Angkor Thom)

This is part of an indigenous cult, a composite of several Brahmanic and Buddhist divinities, and ancestor spirits. Angkor is said to be controlled by land spirits (*neakta)* that are organized within a hierarchy rooted in the territory. If Buddhism looks to the future and the forthcoming incarnation, the cults dedicated to the land spirits are believed to affect daily life. The *neakta* act as ancestors guarding a territory, and punish those who act mischievously by cursing them with illness or calamity. They do, however, reward those who honour them. Villagers communicate with *neaktas* through medium. Represented by a stone or a fragment of Angkorian statue, the *neakta* are located in ancient habitats that are now abandoned, inside a temple or on the boundary of the present-day village. Lesser *neakta* guarding a small space are supervised by a greater *neakta* that controls several villages. These, in turn, are under the authority of the great protector of Angkor territory, *Ta Raj*, who lives in a Vishnu statue located in Angkor Wat.

(Fig. 5 Ta Raj in Angkor Wat)

However, the *neakta* cult is becoming gradually less important. As old medium die and are not replaced, thus, the *neaktas* also disappear. Statue smugglers loot their materialized images and their shelters fall into decay and are not rebuilt.

2.2.3. Echoes of Angkorian Temples: The Ephemeral Temples

A study of the décor of the great Angkorian temples highlights representations of vegetal structures made in wood and decorated with flower foliage. Echoing these forms carved in stone, vegetal ritual constructions are made in villages during domestic ceremonies such as the construction of a house, cutting the tuft, cremation etc.

The mount Meru, as it is magnificently represented in the Angkor vat towers, can also be seen in the shape of the sand mounds that are made for religious ceremonies.

(Fig. 6 Ephemeral temple)

Shaded by the great stone temples, these ephemeral temples recall that a culture can live when it conveys—even when reformulating it—the vocabulary of its identity.

2.2.4. Desacralizing Angkor: Control of Religious Practices

Although the local populations and many visitors consider Angkor a sacred site, since the late 1990s some of the religious practices in the temples have been tightly controlled if not forbidden. For instance, the expansion of Buddhist monasteries has been drastically controlled and private religious ceremonies are now forbidden. Those serving popular religious practices, such as mediums and fortune-tellers, were driven out of the Angkor Wat galleries. But one may still observe that whilst layers of the palimpsest of these sacred places fade, others are added. Religious life still finds a way to survive through statue adoration, in particular at Angkor Wat and at the Bayon. This concerns mainly non-local populations made up of mostly Asian tourists.

(Fig. 7 - Korean tourists making offerings to Preah Ko statue, Phnom Bakheng)

Thus Angkor, far from merely being a tourism park turned into a museum, must also be considered as a living and religious site where contemporaneous expressions of these activities must be acknowledged and not shunned.

3. FAILED MEETING (it is not negociations, it is a meeting like meeting somebody) BETWEEN THE LOCAL POPULATION AND OUTSIDE DEVELOPERS

3.1 The Past

The relationship between the villagers and the non-local developers has been from the outset a case of misunderstanding. The French assessment was Western-biased, favouring written and oral knowledge over gesture. The local populations were considered ignorant as they did not write down any history of Angkor and could not read the inscriptions. The French overlooked other

types of silent communication, which form daily practices.

Requisitioning "coolies" (number if needed)

However, the villagers had one important asset: they were very useful as manpower to clear the surrounding areas of the temple and to move stones. The first so-called "coolies" requisitioned were forced labourers. After trying out prisoners, the Angkor conservators finally decided to remunerate the labour to develop worker loyalty among the local population.

Relocation of villages

In the early 20th century the French were the first to name the site an archaeological park. Their concern regarding the preservation of what was called the "ruins" and hydraulic development were not in accordance with neighbouring villager activities. Hence, the population living too close to the Angkorian remains were quickly considered a disturbance. The solution was simply to relocate them.

Relocation started with a few dwellers from hamlets located in the precinct of Angkor Thom who were evicted. Their houses were dismantled and relocated in the nearby villages of Angkor Krau, Kok Beng, and Ta Chan. The monasteries located in front of Angkor Wat were also moved to the sides.

In the mid-1950's, development works in the western *baray*[8] were carried out. The aim was to increase water storage capacity. The villages located inside had to disappear. Kok Thnot, Kandal, and Baray villagers dismantled their houses and created the villages of Kok Thnot and Kok Beng, located on the northern dike of the *baray*.

The villagers located opposite Angkor Wat (Tropeang Ses, Veal, and Teaksen) were relocated in the early 1960s to lands close to the airport. After the Khmer Rouge fell in 1979, they settled back

[8] A huge Angkorian water tank.

onto their ancestral land before being again displaced in the early 1990s to lands located north of Siem Reap, a place that became the Phum Thmey or “new village”.

3.2. The Current Situation

The Rapid Opening to International Regulations and Mass Tourism.

The early 1990s marked a turning point for the site, namely the inscription of Angkor to the World Heritage List in 1992 and the internationally recognized national elections in 1993, which resulted in opening Cambodia to large-scale international help.

At Angkor, the inscription on the World Heritage List and the regulations that ensued - the opening to mass tourism and to development - have produced new social and economical impacts on the local population.

(Fig. 8 Shop sellers in front of Ta Prohm temple)

Site developers have again questioned the traditional occupancy practices of the Angkorian spaces, which have been mentioned above. Angkor has become a place for often-antagonistic debates where the equation between the protection of the temples and the environment versus tourism and the socio-economic development of the local populations still needs to be resolved. The question of relocating the villagers has been discussed but abandoned.

An authority created by a royal decree, the APSARA, has been entrusted with setting up a comprehensive policy for the management of the site and to coordinate the different stakeholders. Five protection zones were delimited in 1994 along with attendant regulations. The most restricted zones for the local population is Zone 1 (the monumental site) and the larger Zone 2 (protected archaeological reserve).

In the field this has translated into existing villages stalling in their present condition. It is

forbidden to build new houses, extend crops, sell land to people from outside the village, cut firewood in the forest, fish, or bring cattle to drink in ancient ponds. The level of education is still very low and the issue of accessing new land for habitat and farming as well as new occupations has been raised for the new generation.

A small number of villagers have been offered an alternative, which consists in the creation of a residential and farming area located outside Angkor in Run Ta-Ek for the new generation.[9] On this land, “eco-villages” will be created and tourists will be able to see the “typical life of villagers", with the danger of making them merely a part of the Angkor folklore.

It is highly recommended that future programmes take into account the particularities of this living site where the population has, up to now, preserved their culture from generation to generation whilst continually reformulating it and adapting it to the transformations of the environment and history. By shunning a space that moves towards fossilization and the excess of “folklorization", a dialogue between the past, present, and future human beings needs to be instigated. It is neither the 1st or the second option. I would replace “instigated” by “questioned”?

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