

Cambodia: History, Memory and the Arts
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Hundreds of Burning Torches: An overview of precolonial Cambodian history

For most non-specialists living outside of Southeast Asia, Cambodia can be summarized by two phrases: Angkor Wat and the Khmer Rouge. The first, Angkor, represents a pinnacle of human ingenuity, the second, the Khmer Rouge, a nadir of human tragedy. Little is known about Cambodia across the longer stretch of time. What came before Angkor Wat? What were the cultural, economic, religious and political foundations for that mighty civilization? Why did Angkor fall, and what happened during those long, quiet centuries before Cambodia re-emerged on the international scene as a piece of the French colonial empire? Were these so-called Dark Ages really so dark?

This morning, my first undertaking will be to situate the Angkorean period in a longer chronology stretching from prehistory to the 18th century. I'm not a Cambodia expert, which on the downside means I'll only be able to talk in layman's terms; on the upside it means I'm unlikely to lose you in a sea of technical discussions from the field. I want to note at the outset my debt to the real scholars of Cambodian history, on whose work I will lean heavily today. We're fortunate to have a number of very knowledgeable people in our audience today and I hope they'll step in to offer not only corrections but also additions and reinterpretations of the material I'm going to present. I'll conclude today by offering five suggestions for ways material from precolonial Cambodia might be incorporated into world history or Asian history curricula.

Sources

Primary sources for early Cambodian history are limited. Much of what we know about early Cambodia we know from stone inscriptions. These inscriptions are few and far between, scattered across the landscape and sprinkled over the centuries. Historian David Chandler, who has written extensively on early Cambodia, describes the difficulty of trying to create a narrative history out of this fragmentary record:

The history [the inscriptions] give us is comparable, in a way, to the lighting and extinction of hundreds of torches, here and there, now and then, over the landscape of eastern mainland Southeast Asia. As each is lighted, we can look around and discern a few details of historical fact: Temple X was dedicated to such and such an Indian god, by so and so, on such and such a date... and then the light goes out. We know little about the way this temple fitted into the context of its time, whether its patrons enjoyed official status, or whether the temple remained in use for months or centuries. (Chandler 1996, 31; italics in the original)

Filling out what we know from inscriptions, we also have the temples themselves, the materialization of ruling ideologies, and often filled with statues and covered with narrative bas-relief; folk history and legend, transmitted orally; Khmer-language epics; the travel accounts of missionaries, envoys and traders; and the court chronicles of the neighboring countries of Thailand and Vietnam. The Cambodians also wrote chronicles, but these documents served as tools for political legitimization rather than instruments of historical accuracy and have not proven too useful for the work of historical reconstruction.

Given the limitations posed by the sources, scholars now know a surprising amount about the early history of Khmer civilization, which I will anachronistically call Cambodia this morning for ease of reference. Most scholars divide pre-colonial Cambodian history into four periods:

- 1) Prehistory
- 2) The “Early Kingdoms” period
- 3) The Angkorean or “Classic” period
- 4) The post-Angkorean or post-Classic period

I’ll say a bit about each era, with the hopes that we can put the Angkorean period into a historical framework.

Prehistory

Scholars don’t know exactly how long people have lived in Cambodia or where the first people came from. Evidence suggests human inhabitants at least 50,000 years old with a hunting and gathering lifestyle. By 3600 BC, Cambodia entered what Michael Coe calls the “age of villages,” as people transitioned from a hunting and gathering lifestyle to a more sedentary subsistence economy based on paddy farming. People lived in fortified circular villages.

Early Kingdoms

The second period, called the EK era, lasted from about the 1st to the 9th century, and it coincides with the arrival of Buddhism and Hinduism in Southeast Asia.

Indianization

According to one myth, Cambodia was born of a local dragon princess and a foreign Brahman. At their wedding, father of the dragon bride outdid all other guests with his generous largess: he drank up the water covering the country and presented the reclaimed lands to the newlyweds as a gift. This myth hints at the importance of irrigation and drainage to royal power in Cambodia, a recurring theme which assumes monumental force in the Angkorean age.

Featuring the marriage of a local woman with a foreign man, the myth also hints at the process of Indianization which transformed Cambodia in the Early Kingdoms period.¹ During the first five centuries of the Common Era, Indian ideas and institutions gradually seeped into Cambodian society, not by force or overt colonization, but rather by a peaceful process of cultural osmosis, helped along by the deliberate appropriation of Indian themes by Cambodian leaders.

Though gradual, the cumulative effect of Indianization was profound, as David Chandler's checklist makes clear:

During the first five hundred years or so of the Christian era, India provided Cambodia with a writing system, a pantheon, meters for poetry, a language (Sanskrit) to write it in, a vocabulary of social hierarchies [though not the caste system per se], Buddhism, the idea of universal kingship, and new ways of looking at politics, sociology, architecture, iconography, astronomy and aesthetics. (Chandler 1996, 12)

Lest we begin to feel like Cambodia is nothing more than a poor copy of a famous original, it is important to keep in mind that the process of Indianization was always at the same time one of "indigenization" – that is, Indian concepts were continually reworked on the ground, woven into native belief systems and selectively altered to fit with local realities. Chandler reminds us: "Without India, Angkor would never have been built; yet Angkor was never an Indian city, any more than medieval Paris was a Roman one" (*ibid.*).

Oc Eo

In the early centuries of the Common Era, there was not a large-scale unified kingdom. Instead, we see a society of competing principalities, each probably focused on trade and subsistence. This political pattern has been described as one of multiple centers or *mandalas*, each center with its own ruler. Of course, with a multiplicity of centers, Cambodia was effectively de-centralized. The two most important centers from the pre-Angkorean era are known as Oc-Eo and Chenla.

Located in the Mekong Delta about 9 miles from the sea in what is now Vietnam, Oc-Eo was a prosperous trading city from the 1st to the 6th century AD, a way-station used by pilgrims and traders moving between India and China in the first centuries of the Christian era. As a stopping off point along the journey, Oc-Eo would have served as a place for travelers to rest and resupply and for traders to warehouse goods. In addition, traders at Oc-Eo could procure wildlife and forest products harvested from the Indochinese interior and in turn supply inland people with market items. In its heyday, inland people probably traveled huge distances to Oc Eo, bringing rare forest goods into the international market network while bringing international ideas home to the quiet forests of the inland. Not surprisingly, given these international connections and its location on the pilgrimage route between China and India, Buddhism flourished at this

¹ The ethnologist Eveline Poree-Maspero believes the snake-woman symbolizes an indigenous local tradition of matrilineal descent associated with the moon, and the foreign husband the introduced notion of patrilineal descent connected with the sun. This theory is described by Michael Coe, p. 33.

time, and in fact Buddhist religious objects were one of the main objects of trade on the China-India circuit.

While trade and the harvesting of forest products were the most visible elements of the Oc-Eo economy, sometime in these first centuries of the Common Era, systematic irrigation was developed for rice cultivation, with wet rice technology probably introduced to the lower Mekong region in the 4th or 5th century AD. Irrigation was only on a small scale and the village remained the most important sociopolitical unit.

Oc-Eo was excavated during World War II by Louis Malleret under very trying circumstances. Until recently many scholars believed it was the seaport for a large kingdom called “Funan” in Chinese sources. A principality of this name offered tribute to the Chinese emperor between 253 and 519 AD. However, other evidence of an important kingdom from this time has not been forthcoming, and it is now believed more likely that various small chieftains banded together and called themselves a kingdom simply for the purpose of communication with China. Disappointing as this is to scholars eager to find continuities with the mighty Angkor civilization several centuries later, Oc-Eo in fact resonates more with the market-oriented post-Angkor society based around Phnom Penh than it does with the inland rice-growing world of Angkor.

There is no evidence of large-scale unified kingdoms from this time. Instead, a collection of small states co-existed in a competitive environment. Nonetheless, each “king” considered himself a “universal monarch”. The leaders at this time were “men of prowess,” their skill measured in terms of battle success, charisma, and the capacity to provide protection to followers.

We see in this early period evidence that leaders sought supernatural protection, mainly from Siva. Siva is a Hindu god with strong links to Rudra, “the howler,” a deity of mountains and wilderness. He can be recognized by his unruly locks, the animal skin he sometimes wears, and his mount, the ox Nandin. Siva is the destroyer of the world, although at time he also acts as its creator and preserver. He is symbolized by the linga, a stone phallus. The stone linga, which sometimes grow naturally out of the land, and are closely associated with territory, thus linking Shiva in Khmer thought to indigenous place ancestors. Through their ritual devotion to Siva, the overlords at Oc Eo and neighboring principalities were able to transmit Siva’s potency to the soil and the people.

“Chenla”

Records relating to Oc-Eo dry up in the 6th century. Around the same time the population and economy began to shift its focus from the river delta to the interior. A new set of overlapping inland principalities developed, known collectively as “Chenla” but probably never unified into a single centralized state. Instead, Khmer country continued to consist of a multitude of little realms and princedoms. The wealth of the new inland principalities derived from wet rice agriculture and the coordinated mobilization of manpower, laying the groundwork for the Angkorean age.

The Age of Angkor

The Angkorean period is also known as the Classic era, which allows us to situate Cambodian history into regional patterns and encourages comparisons between Angkor and other “classic kingdoms” of early Southeast Asia like Vietnam’s Thang Long, Siam’s Ayudhya and Burma’s Pagan.

The Angkor period is usually dated from 802 to 1431. During these five centuries, Cambodia housed the mightiest kingdom in Southeast Asia. Felicity talked in some detail about the kings and temples of the great Angkor period, so I will not spend much time on this era.

The many temple complexes from the Angkor era were sited in the interior of Cambodia and relied on sophisticated irrigation works and wet rice agriculture. The man credited with founding Angkor, Jayavarman II, apparently came to mainland Southeast Asia from Java and then resided in five different parts of Cambodia, welding together disparate regions into a coherent kingdom through a program involving military campaigns and strategic alliances. When he took the throne he was designated a “universal monarch” in what was described in a later inscription as a *devaraja* ritual.

The *devaraja* cult has been the subject of a great deal of fascination. The word literally means god-king, but the nature of the relationship between the god and the king is left ambiguous. Is the *devaraja* a king who *is* god, the king *of* the gods, or perhaps a king who is god-like, or god-supported, or a king devoted to the gods.

Whatever his mystical association with the gods, the Angkorean king also derived strength from his administrative network of underlings, drawn into a web of personal obligations and influence. It is possible to see the bureaucracy at Angkor as a network of relationships between powerful families and the king. Loyalty was established through an oath.

Royal power during this time was multifaceted, which is to say it was reinforced on many different fronts. David Chandler (1996) highlights three foundations for Angkorean kingship:

1. First, the king maintained a cult to Siva, the Hindu god represented by the linga and closely linked in Cambodian thought to the soil, fertility and ancestor spirits. Siva and his consort Uma were gods of what lay below the earth, and by sacrificing to them, the Angkorean kings became the patrons of agriculture.
2. Second, the king was associated with the sky, the sun, Indra and Vishnu. In this guise, he acted as a “living superlative,” the embodiment of virtue, a superhuman being akin to the heroes of Indian epics. Says Chandler: In this guise the kings were “a kind of polestar from which society, flowing outward and downward, metaphorically organized itself.” (Chandler 1996, 46)
3. The patron of agriculture and a superhuman hero, the king was at the same time a political operator working in the very human world of entangled relationships,

responsibilities and expectations. In this guise, he had to do, approve and know about a wide range of things, from bestowing titles to granting land, from staffing temples to serving as the court of last appeal.

As Felicity has shown us, each of the Angkorean kings left his mark on the built environment. Royal construction often followed a three-part pattern. First a new king would construct public works, for example rest houses, hospitals or waterworks. Next he would erect temples in honor of his parents, and finally he would design his own temple-mountain. The temple mountains served as the “high center” of the kingdom, the abode of divinity and royal power, an earthly representation of the mythical Mount Meru, and eventually the royal tomb.

The Post-Angkorean Era

It is easy to see the post-Angkor era as a slow slide into darkness and obscurity. Indeed, some refer to the 14th to 18th century as Cambodia’s Dark Ages. However, new scholarship points to previously-unsuspected liveliness in this time. It turns out that what declined was not Khmer civilization *per se*, but only its expression in the inland, rice-cultivating kingdom of Angkor. As the light of Angkor dimmed, bright new centers of population, power and prosperity began to glow further south and closer to the sea, near the confluence of the Mekong and the great lake Tonle Sap.

The two most important trends in the post-Angkorean era are:

1. Shift of the capital away from Angkor;
2. Increasing importance of foreign powers in Cambodian internal affairs.

Shift of the capital

In the build-up to the Angkorean era, as we have seen, the Cambodian center of gravity shifted from trade-oriented delta principalities around Oc-Eo inland towards the rice-growing states of Chenla and Angkor. Now, in the 14th century, that trend reversed itself. After Angkor, civilization again moved from the interior back towards the coast, drawn by the flourishing international commerce of the early modern era.

If the emblematic image of the Angkorean era is Jayavarman VII staring out serenely in all four directions, we could think of the post-Angkorean gaze in terms of a shrewd, entrepreneur scanning for deals in three directions. From the new capital at Phnom Penh, located at the confluence of Tonle Sap lake and the Mekong River, the Cambodians oversaw three promising channels of trade:

- trade in fish, rice and pottery from the Tonle Sap area,
- trade in forest products from the interior, transported down the Mekong,
- and maritime trade with China, Southeast Asia and India

With so much commerce, Phnom Penh and other nearby centers like Lovek and Udong became bustling, cosmopolitan places, with special quarters set aside for foreigner

residents, including for Chinese, Japanese, Arabs, Spanish, Portuguese, Indonesian and briefly, Dutch and British visitors. Foreigners marveled at the wealth but also noted the disparity between the nobles and the toiling classes. A Spanish missionary named San Antonio, who visited in the 1590s, offered an eye-witness account:

Among them there are nobles and commoners. ... All the nobles have several wives, the number depending on how riche they are. High ranking women are white and beautiful; those of the common people are brown. ... The nobles dress in silk and fine cotton and gauze. Nobles travel in litters, which people carry on their shoulders, while the people travel by cart, on buffalo, and on horseback. (Chandler 1996, 87)

This same missionary relates a curious tale about Cambodian wealth at that time. “There are so many precious things in Cambodia that when the king fled to Laos, he scattered gold and silver coins, for a number of days, along the road so that the Siamese would be too busy gathering them up to capture him” (*ibid.*). This legend points to the extravagant wealth of this trading society, but at the same time indicates a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity.

Increasing foreign influence

With eyes focused ahead on trading opportunities, leaders at Phnom Penh at the same time had to keep glancing over their shoulders in three directions:

- to the west towards the growing Thai power at Ayudhya, as San Antonio’s tale of royal flight suggests
- to the east where Vietnamese rule was expanding aggressively
- and to a certain extent back towards the inland rice-growing areas of the Cambodian interior

The Thai capital at Ayudhya was consciously modeled on Angkor Thom and in civilizational terms could be seen as the child of Angkor, but a child with patricidal tendencies, bent on destroying its progenitor even as it modeled itself in his image. As Siam emerged as a regional powerhouse, the royal capital at Ayudhya became something akin to the Paris of the interwar period, attracting poets, philosophers and priests who came for months or even years, then returned home with fresh ideas. Unlike interwar Paris, many of the Khmer guests in Ayudhya actually arrived as prisoners of war. Whatever the circumstances of transmission, Thai ideas permeated Cambodian culture in the post-Angkorean period.

Ayudhya and Phnom Penh were linked by trade, by culture, and also by constant warfare. As one became confident of its strength, it attacked the other, sometimes establishing a temporary position of dominance until the other recovered and attacked back. The military goal was always to sack the capital. During the second half of the 16th century, the Burmese sacked Ayudhya, and the Khmers took advantage of this temporary power vacuum in the capital to attack Thai territory several times. However, in 1594, the tables turned. Backed by Spanish forces out of the Philippines, Thai forces conquered the

important Khmer city of Lovek, located on the Tonle Sap near its confluence with the Mekong, some 30 miles north of Phnom Penh.

In local mythology, the fall of Lovek in 1594 is remembered as a traumatic turning point. According to this legend, the Cambodian citadel at Lovek was protected by a thick bamboo hedge. Inside the citadel were two statues, *preah ko* the sacred cow and *preah kaev*, the sacred gemstone, and inside the bellies of these statues were sacred books containing knowledge about the whole world. One day the Thai forces attacked with cannons, firing into the bamboo hedge. But here is the mysterious thing. These Thai cannons didn't fire shells; instead they fired silver coins. Having heard San Antonio's account of the greedy Thai who were so distracted by coins that they lost interest in pursuing the runaway king, you will not be surprised to learn that these coins were a mighty temptation. When the Thai retreated, the Cambodians cut down the hedges to gather the coins, and thus had no defenses when the Thai returned to sack the city. The Thai carried the pregnant statues home and opened them up, discovering the books inside and therefore becoming superior in knowledge to the Cambodians. David Chandler suggests that this story might conflate the fall of Lovek with the earlier decline of Angkor and express a more general sense of cultural loss at the hands of Thai imperialism. At the same time, the repeated motif of coins distracting people from what really matters might also be read as a rebuke to a society which got overly infatuated by the riches of the market and let other elements of civilization slide.

While many now see the fall of Lovek in 1594 as the beginning of the end for a free and prosperous Cambodia, the Khmer rallied again in the early 17th century. In the second half of that century an increasingly dominant Vietnam took over the Mekong delta and choked off Cambodian access to the sea while overseas Chinese wrested control of the maritime trade. Meanwhile the Thai asserted control over Cambodian politics, going so far as to perform the coronation ceremonies for the Cambodian monarch in Bangkok in the 1790s, firmly establishing the Khmer king as a Thai vassal. From then on out, Cambodia was tossed back and forth between Viet and Thai forces. "Phnom Penh became a backwater, and by the 18th century, Cambodia was largely a blank area on European maps" (Chandler 1996, 89).

One last great leader emerged, King Ang Duong, who rose up under Thai protection and ruled for 12 peaceful and enlightened years from 1848 to 1860. Three years after his death, his successor Norodom, the great-grandfather of Norodom Sihanouk, signed a treaty offering the French timber concessions and mineral exploration rights. The colonial era had begun.

Themes

How might early Cambodian history be incorporated into courses on regional or world history?

- 1) Processes of state formation – Situating the Angkorean period into a longer history, we can ask interesting questions about the processes of state formation. What factors enabled the formation of a stable centralized kingdom in the 9th

century? Without discounting the importance of historical contingency and influential leaders, we could look comparatively at the role played by factors such as agriculture, irrigation, trade, diplomacy, bureaucracy and religion in furthering cohesive state projects?

Along these lines, the Cambodian case can help us think about different kinds of states. John Miksic of the U of Singapore has borrowed a dichotomy first developed to describe medieval France and applied it to premodern Southeast Asia. He identifies two distinct types. *Orthogenetic* cities were located well inland, with low population density, were correlated with the production of a surplus staple crop, had impressive public monuments of a religious nature, and were marked by stability and ritual. In contrast, *heterogenic* cities were found along coastlines and borders, had high population density, had few public monuments, and were characterized by entrepreneurship and intensive trade. Early Cambodian history allows us to examine both types of cities and the states they produced, an examination with interesting potential for cross-regional comparison.

- 2) Divine kingship – In civilizations around the world, kings share a special relationship with the divine, and it would be instructive to look side-by-side, for example, at French, Ugandan and Angkorean royalty. What is the nature of the compact between earthly and ethereal authorities? In ritual and rhetoric, how do kings bridge the gap between humanity and the gods? How do different societies handle divine kings gone devilish? And even in cases where the king stays good during his life time, how do different societies handle divine kings gone dead? How do sacred and secular bases for power cooperate and compete?
- 3) High centers – The temples at Angkor create an example of what has been called a “high center,” a magic capital at once in the middle of the kingdom and at the same time morally, politically and economically above it. Angkor could be added into a comparative consideration of the architectural rendering of power and polity.
- 4) Finally, early Cambodian history offers an interesting study in local-global dynamics. Challenging the underexamined notion that “globalization” began with Columbus’ voyages to the New World, the international traffic through Oc-Eo and the widespread dissemination of Buddhism and Hinduism in the first centuries of the Common Era provide an early example of cross-regional flows of ideas and ideologies as well as of commodities and people. The Khmer adaptation of Siva devotion to local worship of place ancestors provides just one example from Cambodian history which helps illuminate how so-called “Great Traditions” or “World Religions” become reworked and refracted in local settings, at times to later be re-exported in fresh form back to a sending country.

I hope with this quick layperson’s overview of precolonial history, I’ve sparked some ideas about the ways that material on Cambodia could be incorporated into world history

surveys, regional history courses, or thematic investigations in the study of anthropology, religion or politics. Thank you.

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