

Re-imagining Khmer Identity:  
Angkor Wat during the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979-1989)

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## ABSTRACT

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The People's Republic of Kampuchea period between 1979 and 1989 is often overlooked when scholars work on the history of modern Cambodia. This decade is an academic blind spot sandwiched between the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime and the onset of the United Nations peace process. Utilizing mediums such as popular culture, postage stamps and performance art, this thesis will show how the single most identifiable image of Cambodian culture, Angkor Wat became a cultural binding agent for the government during the 1980s. To prove the centrality of Angkor in the myth-making and nation building mechanisms of the People's Republic of Kampuchea, primary source material from Cambodia's archives, along with interviews will form the foundation of this investigation. By studying Angkor Wat during Cambodia's revolutionary moment one can view the malleability of national identity, and the situational political methodology constructed by newly formed, fragile regimes.

## Acknowledgment and Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to thank the professors and support staff at Concordia University. Their guidance and patience has constantly inspired me. In particular, my thesis supervisor Dr. Matthew Penney who has the gift of knowing exactly what to say, crucially at exactly the right time. I cannot thank Dr. Penney enough for the trust he placed in me with this work. My life partner Laurie Murphy who makes everything I do possible and can now get a break from hearing about postage stamps and temples. Mom and Dad in England who are always with me whatever and wherever I go.

Finally, I dedicate this work to the people of Cambodia. Your kindness openness after everything you have endured is a constant reminder of how much I still have to learn about life. Arkun!

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## Introduction

I have never seen anything in the world more wonderful than the temples of Angkor, but I do not know how on earth I am going to set down in black and white such an account of them as will give even the most sensitive reader more than a confused and shadowy impression of their grandeur.<sup>1</sup>

The words of Somerset Maugham ring through my head each time I visit Angkor. To simply state its beauty, grandeur and design somehow fails to capture something of its majesty. Historians can become mired within well-ploughed furrows of subject matter. We are all distracted by major events, personalities, expected teleologies and conventions of periodization, however hard we attempt to develop a unique voice or work on material we believe fresh and worthy of wider attention. This academic trap is exemplified in the historiography of Cambodia. Genocide, the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot and Angkor Wat cast such long shadows that historians seem to prefer elaborating the minutiae of these four subjects rather than cast their gaze onto less understood periods. Noted Cambodian scholar David Chandler accurately summed up the historiography of Cambodia as being like “two heavily laden baskets connected by a slender carrying pole”, one basket labeled ‘Khmer Rouge’, the other ‘Angkor Wat’.<sup>2</sup> Other works do exist outside this paradigm, but all roads seem to work towards understanding Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea regime (DK).<sup>3</sup>

A new arc of research has recently attempted to break away from the two “heavily laden baskets” by investigating the massive United Nations' aid program in the 1990's. This work

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<sup>1</sup> William Somerset Maugham, *The Gentleman in the Parlour* (London: Vintage, 2001).226

<sup>2</sup> David, Chandler. *Bijdragen Tot De Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 163, 4. Brill, KITLV, Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies. (2007):563.

<sup>3</sup> Democratic Kampuchea was the name of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979).

primarily concentrates on corruption and charts the rise of Prime Minister Hun Sen from Khmer Rouge *cadre* to one of the longest-serving heads of state in the world. But what of the post-Khmer Rouge period prior to the United Nations mandate? This 10-year stretch (1979-1989) appears largely peripheral to the Cambodian historiography. This survey will attempt to plot a trajectory away from the discussions on the DK period (1975-1979). Instead, I will situate this investigation on how the Vietnamese constructed Peoples Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) imagined the nation and, in particular, the role of Angkor within this re-imagining process. I accept the critique that, as Chandler may point out, I am merely concentrating on one of the two “laden baskets” or more replacing one with another, but by foregrounding what connects rather than only delving into previously mined material I hope to live up to Chandler’s challenge.

In any attempt to move outside the pre-existing paradigms of academic investigation, primary source material is vital. This work will be utilizing areas often neglected by academia such as postage stamps, currency and performance art. Only by foregrounding such realms can any conclusive argument be constructed that places cultural heritage as a primary aspect of the national project. One particular seam of this inquiry is to identify if and where Khmer actors reinserted agency during the period. Too often the 1980s is viewed through a lens of Vietnamese occupation or a concerted attempt of Vietnamization of Cambodia, an argument I will show is limited and overly simplistic. A key personal contact for this work is Mr. Paul Cummings. Mr. Cummings through his Australian based company Orbitours gained exclusive rights to bring groups of tourists into the PRK beginning in 1983. Interviewing Mr. Cummings allows an intriguing perspective on the period where casual observation facilitates the opportunity to confirm or challenge more orthodox academic voices.

At its core this investigation orientates itself around cultural heritage, which in itself poses an instantaneous problem. The term cultural heritage is somewhat amorphous, slippery to those in favour of fixed clearly understood definitions. One must be wary of defining cultural heritage in terms of sculpted stone and temples as music, food, art, fashion even language can fall under the umbrella of cultural heritage. In terms of Cambodia I have chosen to work around the UNESCO definition, which is broad but gives some sense of boundaries. UNESCO break down their definition into two key points. Under tangible cultural heritage the following are included: moveable cultural heritage (paintings, sculptures, coins, manuscripts. Immoveable cultural

heritage (monuments, archaeological sites). For Intangible cultural heritage oral traditions, performing arts, rituals are listed.<sup>4</sup>

When discussing the role of Angkor Wat during the 1980s it would be easy to focus primarily on the tangible aspects of cultural heritage, this would make an interesting read but not plough new ground or truly get to the point. I will endeavor to resist the magnetism of the temples and statues and instead investigate the ephemera of cultural heritage bringing postage stamps, money and posters to the fore as more immediate universally viewed identifiers of cultural heritage. Diverging from the tangible stone temples, this work will discuss the intangible elements of cultural heritage such as classical dance, performance art and song. Only by weaving these elements together will a clear picture of the importance of Angkor during this period begin to emerge.

The modern history of Cambodia is as convoluted as it is sad. More often what we know today as the Cambodian state was constructed and deconstructed by outside forces. Western empires such as the Dutch, Portuguese, British and French have all interfered, occupied or determined Cambodia's fate. Prior to Cambodia's colonial period, powerful regional forces such as Thailand, China, and the states that would become Vietnam, eroded the limits of the Angkorian empire that had reached its zenith in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century CE. The main focus of this study is Cambodia's recent history, by that I mean the late 1970s and 1980's. With these constraints in mind it is necessary to look past this period to situate some of the main actors who will be discussed. Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953 where Norodom Sihanouk became a constitutional monarch a title to which, the word constitutional was lip-service and not representative of the control he held over the nation. Sihanouk abdicated in 1956 and became Prime Minister, although he maintained his image of a god-king and linear descendant of the Angkor kings. The 1970 coup against Sihanouk installed the US backed General Lon Nol as Prime Minister, who tacitly approved pogroms against ethnic Vietnamese and communists. Communist Cambodians who were labelled by a supportive Sihanouk as "Red Khmer" began to rise up against Lon Nol supported initially by North Vietnam. The "Red Khmer" or Khmer Rouge leadership of Ieng Sary and Pol Pot gradually moved from the marquis

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/illicit-trafficking-of-cultural-property/unesco-database-of-national-cultural-heritage-laws/frequently-asked-questions/definition-of-the-cultural-heritage/>

through rural Cambodia gaining support from the peasants tired of corruption, foreign land ownership and government nepotism. US bombing campaigns on neutral Cambodia assisted with communist propaganda campaigns that promoted the Khmer Rouge as defenders of a pure Khmer identity and heritage, in the face of foreign exploitation and violence. On 17 of April 1975 Phnom Penh fell to Khmer Rouge forces, ushering in the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) and the subsequent genocide of up to 2 million Cambodians. Reacting to Khmer Rouge intrusions into Vietnam, the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia in November 1978. On January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Phnom Penh fell to Vietnamese forces aligned with allied Cambodian soldiers. The Peoples Republic of Kampuchea was established by ex- Khmer Rouge cadres and Vietnamese “advisors” while the remnants of the Khmer Rouge forces fled to the mountains around the Thai border and began a guerilla war that would last until 1993.

## HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DISCUSSION

Angkor Wat is situated about three miles north of the town of Siem Reap in Cambodia. It is the largest religious monument on earth and the destination for millions of tourists each year. The only solid facts we have about the temple are that Angkor Wat was constructed in the early part of the twelfth century during the reign of Suryavarman II, that it was dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu and later turned into a place of worship for Buddhists as Buddhism became the national religion towards the end of the 12th century. After this Angkor becomes open to interpretation. What cannot be challenged is the abundance of Angkor imagery associated with Cambodia during the modern period. One of the most crucial books written on the subject is *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization* by Michael Coe.<sup>5</sup> In this easy to digest book Coe weaves a narrative that places Angkor as part of an ever-changing historical landscape, central, but not as unique when viewed in context with some two hundred other temples dotted around the region. Coe’s book is one of the most read on the Angkorian civilization and it is sold outside most of the temples, illegally copied, priced at a couple of US dollars and so commonly found discarded in hotel rooms and cafés around Siem Reap. The strength of the work is Coe’s ability to condense epoch spanning events in a logical and thought-provoking text. To Coe, Angkor and

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<sup>5</sup> Michael D. Coe, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003).

the Angkorian civilization are the historical legacy of the modern Khmer, not a “lost civilization”. This is important because it allows Angkor the ability to connect with Cambodians past any romantic Atlantian mythology. The bright future Coe envisions for Cambodia is built upon the foundations of this tangible legacy of Angkorian civilization.

There seems little doubt that however one looks at Angkor it transcends mere stones and carvings. Scholars universally endow the temple with a power to be representative or symbolic of the Khmer people. Jinah Kim writes a nuanced article that traces the conversion of Angkor from a Hindu temple to a Buddhist site of pilgrimage.<sup>6</sup> In this article, Angkor is discussed as being a “metonym for the nation of Cambodia” and “the icon of original Khmerness”.<sup>7</sup> Kim proceeds to characterize Angkor as being “centre stage in nationalist political discourse” in Cambodia.<sup>8</sup> The point of Kim’s article lies not in national identity or symbolism, but in the arrival of Buddhism to Cambodia, which forces scholars to discuss the role Angkor plays in such national themed conversations. Kim describes the vibrancy of Angkor through religious “reappropriation” that has historically adapted to cultural changes in worship.<sup>9</sup> This historical hybridity at Angkor is according to Kim a reason the temple has remained so central to Cambodian identity. The multitude of messages one can view in Angkor’s carving and statuary reflect a society that has known tumultuous changes. Articles such as Kim’s are ideal for investigating the fluid cultural and religious history of Angkor that in turn reflects a back onto a broader discussion of Cambodian identity.

The PRK regime understood the importance of Angkor as a symbolic metaphor for strength and rebirth. As early as November 1980 the PRK government allowed a team of archaeologists from India to survey the damage inflicted by war upon the temples. India was the only non-Soviet bloc nation to recognize the legitimacy of the PRK and which possessed academic experience in the preservation of large temples. Writing on this initial engagement between India and the PRK, K.M. Srivastava’s book *Angkor Wat and the Cultural Ties to India* is a curious text written primarily as a defence of India’s involvement and perceived historical influence over Cambodia’s cultural heritage.<sup>10</sup> What this book allows for is a unique discussion on the situation

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<sup>6</sup> Jinah, Kim, “Unfinished Business: Buddhist Reuse of Angkor Wat and its Historical and Political Significance” *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 70, No. 1. 77-122, (2010).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>10</sup> K. M. Srivastava, *Angkor Wat and Cultural Ties with India*. (New Delhi: Books & Books, 1987).

at Angkor on the ground in the early 1980's. Srivastava notes that Cambodia was emerging from isolation and war thanks primarily to Vietnam's intervention and fraternal aspirations. The constant threat of Khmer Rouge attacks permeates the text and helps construct an image of the PRK, acting alongside Vietnam, as the protectors of the temples. Half the book attempts to solidify Angkor as a hybrid of Southeast Asian and Indian architecture, the other half is a scientific archeological description of the state of the temples during the 1980's. The preface to the book appears to be lifted from PRK propaganda as the DK government is labelled the "tyranny of the Pol Pot Ieng Sary clique".<sup>11</sup> About Angkor's importance to the PRK as a symbol of national identity, the book is silent, simply noting in one passage that Angkor is part of the ongoing program of "national revival".<sup>12</sup>

One aspect of Cambodia during the 1980s that receives little attention is popular culture. It is perhaps perceived as either non-existent or so extraneous to the multiple challenges faced by the PRK that scholars excluded it from the discourse. This is why *Cambodian Culture Since 1975* is such a breath of fresh air to the historiography.<sup>13</sup> This edited series of essays reflects popular Khmer culture inside Cambodia and in the diaspora. Khing Hoc Dy's chapter on "Khmer Literature Since 1975" indicates that the PRK Ministry of Culture set up a publishing house in Phnom Penh called Angka Baoh Pum Phsay Vobbathoa.<sup>14</sup> The brief laid out from the Ministry was to write novels about "terror" and "misfortune" under DK.<sup>15</sup> Minister of Culture Chheng Phon also required work that thematically invoked Angkor. Dy's analysis of these works depicts the thematic narrative of Angkor being used to "fortify the heroic spirit of the revolutionary army" to defend Cambodia's cultural heritage from the Khmer Rouge and American imperialists.<sup>16</sup> In the introduction to *Cambodian Culture Since 1975*, Angkor is identified along with Khmer art forms such as music and dance as being able to "embody what it means to be Khmer".<sup>17</sup> It is a challenge to identify a monument as something more than architecture, however stunning it may be. With Cambodia, the scholarship clearly identifies Angkor as more than just a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, IX.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> May M. Ebihara, *Cambodian Culture Since Nineteen Seventy-Five: Homeland and Exile*. (Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Khing Hoc Dy, "Khmer Literature Since 1975" in May M. Ebihara, *Cambodian Culture Since Nineteen Seventy-Five: Homeland and Exile*. (Cornell University Press, 1994) ,31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 22.

temple. Whether discussing archeology, popular culture or nationalism, Angkor is the primary locus for the discussion.

Any survey of the literature on the PRK regime must include Margaret Slocomb's work. Slocomb has directed her academic narrative towards the 1980s, often acting as a lone voice in a field dominated by the writing on the 1970s. As its name suggests, Slocomb's book, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979-1989* has broad aspirations. Mostly supportive in its discussion of the PRK, Slocomb's work defends the Hanoi-backed regime's failings in cementing a definitive plan to guarantee food and providing security to areas outside of major cities, goals she labels "inherently unrealizable" in light of DK.<sup>18</sup> Broadly speaking, Slocomb argues that people's lives in 1989 were on the whole comparable to those of early 1970s which after DK should be viewed as a victory against unmeasurable odds. By foregrounding the PRK's quest to restore Cambodian society, Slocomb's work precludes any discussion of what constitutes her understanding of society, offering no theoretical framework to her monograph. Slocomb is unique in prefixing "so-called" to the word "occupation" when discussing the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia during the 1980s, thus showing her hand early in the book. One of the initially stated thrusts of Slocomb's book is the equal importance of Cambodia's social reconstruction as opposed to political and economic themes, so it is surprising that this topic is relegated to the final quarter of the work. When Slocomb does directly engage Angkor, she defines the temple as the "core symbol of the nation".<sup>19</sup> Such a strong statement deserves further discussion but Slocomb leaves the reader without any further explanation. One can understand Angkor is not the focus of Slocomb's work but by introducing the temple as symbolic of Cambodia, Slocomb owes the reader some insight into how she believes Angkor is such a "core" part of Cambodia.

The year 2003 would prove to be a false dawn for academic engagement with the PRK. Alongside Slocomb's broad overview, Evan Gottesman's *Cambodia: After the Khmer Rouge* was released.<sup>20</sup> Since they were released in the same year, there is no direct engagement between

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret, Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989: The Revolution After Pol Pot*. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003). XI

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 184

<sup>20</sup> Evan, Gottesman. *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

the authors, which is a shame and something to look out for in any future reprints. Gottesman is light on quantitative data, instead utilizing government sources as a springboard for a more cultural understanding. Unlike Slocumb, Gottesman liberally uses occupation without any prefix, yet acknowledges how vital Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia was, however one ultimately regards the PRK's achievements. Crucially, Gottesman challenges the mantra of Angkor Wat as somehow representative or symbolic of Cambodian nationalism. For Gottesman, the emblematic understanding of Angkor Wat is at best "tenuous".<sup>21</sup> Gottesman points out the polyglot nature of Angkor and how, before the colonial period, few Cambodians had seen, visited or known about the temples.<sup>22</sup> Gottesman is correct, few Cambodians had visited Angkor prior to the 1990s due to the logistical nightmare of travel within Cambodia. He is also correct in identifying the "polyglot" nature of the temples. This matches the work of K.M. Srivastava's and others who have identified the architectural parallels with Indian and Sri Lankan Hindu temples. What Gottesman fails to appreciate is that these facts are largely irrelevant. Angkor does not need to be visited or touched to be a symbol. Angkor functions as a conceptual part of Cambodian identity because of its position within the historical indigenous networks of invented and reinvented tradition. Historically there exists a duality to situating Angkor within the Cambodian identity discourse, the fixed real architecture and the created imagined identity that can be more malleable and adapt to a multitude of mythmaking, meanings and messages.

Whether Angkor was or was not central to the PRK's rebuilding project is not explicitly discussed by Gottesman. Instead, he introduces the multi-tiered challenges that history poses to autocratic regimes. The focus of the PRK propaganda machine was the demonization of DK and, in particular, Pol Pot. Gottesman implies that by placing the blame for the hardships suffered under DK on Pol Pot and Ieng Sery, and not Marxism *per se*, the fledgling PRK could still utilize values such as collectivism, just not as forcefully as in Vietnam. During the 1980s, Pol Pot and the remnants of the Khmer Rouge formed a nationalist anti-Vietnamese alliance with former king, Norodom Sihanouk. As Penny Edwards has discussed at length, it was the French *École française d'Extrême-Orient* which bequeathed a linear heritage to Sihanouk's dynasty, tracing back to the god-kings who ruled Angkor.<sup>23</sup> This process of identification would add further

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 14

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

complexity to how Angkor was perceived during the 1980s. The alliance constituted a block of anti-Vietnamese, anti-Soviet resistance that put Sihanouk, the last god-king and heir to Angkor, forward as a spokesman.<sup>24</sup> This heady mix of royalty and defiance of Soviet ambitions proved irresistible to the United States and Great Britain who promptly disregarded the PRK's public claims as saviours of Cambodia and instead supported DK's position as the Cambodian representatives at the United Nations. As the PRK evoked Angkor, they would be forced to reconstruct a timeline to remove Sihanouk from the mythology. Gottesman labels this conundrum as recreating "Khmer traditions without generating nostalgia".<sup>25</sup> As Gottesman notes, the Vietnamese tactically underestimated Sihanouk, who they thought would become a figurehead for their newly instated regime even if that meant a return to some degree of royal presence alongside their one-party, socialist state. Holding his nose and putting aside the fact that the Khmer Rouge held him prisoner for four years and murdered most of his family, Sihanouk chose Pol Pot as an ally of convenience over anyone the Vietnamese put forward. The god-king was prepared to accept the Khmer Rouge concept of Cambodian nationalism if it meant a return to the throne. The strength of Gottesman's work is his understanding of the complexity of the opposition to the PRK. This is no simple task, and one Slocomb engages only on the periphery of her work.

The differences between the two books by Slocomb and Gottesman are striking. Slocomb views the PRK as saviours of Cambodia who, at the very least, stabilized the lives of the population yet ultimately failed in their aspirations due to a unique situation in Cambodia in 1979. This "shattered society" narrative describes how the PRK inherited a traumatized and starving population in a country devoid of even the most basic infrastructure. Gottesman challenges Slocomb's narrative of limited progress and sees the period as culminating in a confused, pre-revolutionary state far removed from the mythological idyll created in the minds of everyday Cambodians. Gottesman challenges the improvement theory of Slocomb, stating how the Vietnamese occupation and sudden withdrawal in 1989 sowed the seeds for the "nepotism and patronage" in contemporary Cambodia.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> It is important to note the Soviet Union played a crucial role in supporting Vietnam financially and logistically during the PRK. This was primarily to form an active resistance to China gaining influence in the region.

<sup>25</sup> Gottesman, 219.

<sup>26</sup> Gottesman, 320.

Panivong Norindr perceptively investigates the multiplicity of meanings that have been attributed to Angkor in his chapter “The Fascination for Angkor Wat and the Ideology of the Visible” in *Expressions of Cambodia: The Politics of Tradition, Identity and Change*.<sup>27</sup> Norindr defines Angkor as “not simply a monument to man’s creativity, a repository of cultural values, or an object of pure aesthetic enjoyment; it is the site of intense aesthetic re-imagining, and political and economic appropriation”.<sup>28</sup> This aspect offers the chance to consider Angkor as a unique barometer of Khmer culture away from the obvious monumentality. Norindr identifies how scholars have rarely discussed Cambodians outside the suffocating narrative of victimization. For Norindr, the appropriation of Angkor by scholars has “overdetermined” its role in the lives of Cambodians.<sup>29</sup> Norindr is writing from a subaltern standpoint directly challenging how non-Khmer historians have forced Angkor’s importance onto Cambodians. This is a fair critique, but does not take into consideration how the PRK and DK worked Angkor into their imagery and concepts of national identity.

Building on Penny Edwards’s work arguing that it was the French who constructed what we now know as Angkor, Norindr criticizes viewing Angkor as a shortcut to discuss Cambodian history because it overemphasizes “high culture over popular forms of knowledge”.<sup>30</sup> This gets to the crux of Norindr’s analysis that scholars must engage with Cambodians in their work not just as subjects to recount genocide. It is important to note it is estimated one million people lived in or around Angkor in antiquity. We know so little about their lives, but what we do have are the temples *bas-reliefs* that show scenes of everyday life including cooking, hunting and farming. This is a unique perspective and Norindr demands that it should become the focus of serious investigation. These are the same *bas-reliefs* that would inspire the DK and PRK propaganda departments to begin the task of appropriating Angkor into their socialist understanding of Cambodian identity. Norindr’s work forces those working on Angkor beyond an archeological framework to reflect on their hierarchical emphasis. This critical engagement with Cambodian history reflects David Chandlers warning that the “heavily laden baskets” of Cambodian history is only part of the overall story. Writing on Angkor must involve work that

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<sup>27</sup> Panivong Norindr “The Fascination for Angkor Wat and the Ideology of the Visible” in Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier, and Tim Winter Eds. *Expressions of Cambodia* (New York: Routledge, 2006). 54.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

interacts with diverse source material to guard against repetitive interpretations of royal power and grandeur.

Part of Norindr's text involves a discussion on Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh's motion picture, *The People of Angkor* (2003).<sup>31</sup> This film turns the camera lens away from the temple onto the people who live and work inside the temple and its grounds. This focus on the inhabitants rather than the stones brings to the fore the localized human interaction with Angkor. It is in this film that Norindr views the knowledge and repository symbols of Angkor for the Khmer people. The *bas-reliefs* that many tourists glance at, photograph and walk beside have a real, tangible quality to the people in Panh's film. As one local Khmer interviewee notes, the *bas-reliefs* he views daily on the walls "mirror the life of hardship that is still a common plight of today's farmers".<sup>32</sup> This one comment manages to decentralize Angkor away from the monumentality of god-kings and reflect an image that resonates with contemporary Cambodians. The insight gained from this Cambodian's contemporary interpretation of Angkor helps one to understand the ways in which the temple can be molded to fit a diverse constructed narrative.

As I have noted little has been written about the PRK and even less about how the regime worked out identity, nationality, and cultural heritage. Yet these were real concerns in the government offices in Phnom Penh. If the PRK did not consider Angkor vital to the rebuilding of Cambodia, why waste resources on setting up a government position dedicated to handling the temples? Part of the report of the archeological survey undertaken by a team from India identifies Chheng Phon as "Minister of Culture", responsible for temple preservation and Pich Keo as the "Curator of the Angkor Monuments".<sup>33</sup> The importance of Chheng Phon as the Minister of Culture is also supported by Khing Hoc Dy in his work on the Ministry's publication of Khmer literature as he is identified as the primary decision maker on what was, and was not, woven into the PRK's literary output.<sup>34</sup> Two people working for a ministry are not enough to conclusively argue the importance of Angkor during the PRK. The fact the regime thought it necessary from the outset to delegate educated individuals and crucially fund the renovation of the temples when it is catalogued how few of the intelligentsia survived DK does indicate Angkor being part of the national Cambodian narrative of re-building.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 66

<sup>33</sup> Srivastava *Angkor Wat and the Cultural Ties with India*. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Khing Hoc Dy, "Khmer Literature Since 1975". 31.

It is indicative of the scant monographic studies of 1980s Cambodia that a vital part of understanding Angkor during the PRK comes from a magazine article. In May 1982, *National Geographic* published two articles on the current situation in Cambodia. One was a general piece on the growing normalization of life under the PRK and the other focused on Angkor. Wilbur E. Garret's article "The Temples of Angkor: Will they Survive" defined a political agenda that would last well into the twenty-first century placing Angkor under threat but belonging to the entire world, not just Cambodians.<sup>35</sup> Having visited the temples in 1968, Garret evaluated the surprisingly limited damage inflicted during the decades of war on the temples. Garret constructs the article around a premise of saving Angkor, saving it from war damage, looting, vandalism and sheer neglect. He makes an impassioned plea to all the factions involved in the civil war of the 1980s to "demilitarize Angkor and permit the work of saving and restoring this remarkable site to resume".<sup>36</sup> An unintentional message can also be read in Garret's plea that Cambodians alone cannot protect Angkor alone. This narrative would reach its zenith towards the end of the PRK period when the United Nations would lead Angkor's preservation. An element of fatalism about how Cambodians view Angkor that is visible throughout this article. Garret is typical of scholars who blindly repeat that Angkor is the crowning glory of a lost civilization. By stating Angkor was built by a civilization that has subsequently vanished, Garret erases modern Cambodians as heirs of the temples a common viewpoint constructed during the colonial period, yet alive and well in the 1980s.

A second, more in-depth article written by Peter T. White challenges the perception of Khmer identity built around Angkor by explaining in layman's (if oversimplified) terms that the "Khmer owe their existence as a nation to India as the French do to the Roman occupation".<sup>37</sup> It is true that Angkor Wat is dedicated to Vishnu as are many of Cambodia's temples, and likewise that the remaining Angkorian written text (of which there is little) is in either Pali or Sanskrit, both languages originating from India. But to claim that India is the wellspring of the Khmer people and culture is eductive. Indian traders mixed with the indigenous people of the region we now know as Cambodia, as did Thai, Cham, and Chinese. Even K.M. Srivastava's work, sponsored by the Indian government, on the ties between Cambodia and India does not offer

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<sup>35</sup>Wilbur E. Garret "The Temples of Angkor: Will they Survive" *National Geographic* May 1982. 548.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 551.

<sup>37</sup> Peter T. White, "Angkor: Ancient Glory in Stone" *National Geographic* May 1982. 566.

such a singular linear understanding of Cambodia's ancient history. Aside from being overly ambitious in aspiration, the articles in *National Geographic* raise some interesting points that would form the backbone of how Angkor was increasingly viewed outside of Cambodia during the PRK. Primarily, the PRK sought to internationalize the conservation of Angkor. This shared worldwide responsibility is exemplified by a quote attributed to a PRK Minister for Monuments who asked the authors "through your presence here we would like to ask international opinion to help us restore the Angkor temples. They are our national patrimony, but they also belong to the patrimony of the world".<sup>38</sup> Another obvious point of the article is the politicising of Angkor. The front line in the civil war between the PRK and Khmer Rouge ran perilously close to the temples, a point made clear in the articles as the authors have a full military escort to visit the temples.

Only one book utilizes the fascinating insights in the *National Geographic* articles: Michael Falser's collected work *Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission: From Decay to Recovery*. Falser's chapter "Representing Heritage without Territory—The Khmer Rouge at UNESCO in Paris during the 1980s and their Political Strategy for Angkor" is one of the few explorations of Angkor during the PRK and utilizes Garret and White throughout. Falser explores the appropriation of heritage by all the players in post-DK Cambodia. The chapter on Angkor in the 1980s orientates itself around the United Nations move to "save Angkor". In particular, according to Falser, safeguarding of Angkor was promoted as an inseparable part of the diplomatic struggle towards national independence by the coalition of Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk at the United Nations. These always uncomfortable partners attempted during the 1980s to create a unified front appropriating Angkor as the archaeological if not mythological proof of Khmer uniqueness. Falser indicates the importance of the *National Geographic* article from 1982 in allowing the outside world to view the temples in the current state of neglect, but on the whole unaffected by the years of war. Falser writes with a deep passion and sensitivity for cultural heritage but over emphasises the role of the exiled DK leadership and Sihanouk in the decision making process. Methodologically and structurally, Falser constructs the book's framework around the belief that "The self-legitimation of political regimes in modern history was and often still is attempted through a twofold strategy: (a) a normative assessment of the ruled country's past and present, and (b) the enactment of a concrete committed action

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 589.

programme to guide the nation towards a better future”.<sup>39</sup> To Falser, Angkor and Cambodia are never quite as linear or straightforward as one might expect. Falser argues that during the 1980s Angkor was used by the competing factions as a totem for their unique concept of a civilizing mission.<sup>40</sup> By invoking a phrase more at home during the colonial period than the 1980s, Falser looks to offer a new understanding of the role of Angkor through the debates and meetings at the United Nations (the third player in this complex situation). For the PRK Angkor was, according to Falser, the glorious past before the evils of DK. For the remnants of the Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk on the Thai border, Angkor was the symbol of liberation/occupation. Falser identifies Angkor barely appeared in the documentation of DK, which Falser defines as a deliberate process of “provincializing” the temple, removing any semblance of history or cultural importance to the Khmer Rouge revolution.<sup>41</sup> This is quite true, but only up to 1977. The last two years of the regime saw a marked increase in the use of Angkor for propaganda. As DK looked outside of Southeast Asia for support, Angkor played a key role in softening the image of the Khmer Rouge. Those allowed inside Cambodia during the DK period all mention trips to Angkor that included KR emphasizing how Angkor fit into the revolutionary narrative.<sup>42</sup>

According to Falser, after the Vietnamese invasion, the Khmer Rouge adopted a two-pronged attack on the Hanoi-backed regime, on the battlefield and through international diplomacy based on a “newly invented political mission for the protection of Cambodian cultural heritage, a mission to civilize using the adopted humanitarian rhetoric of and for a Western-democratic audience”.<sup>43</sup> For the West, one symbol of Cambodian cultural heritage that resonated most acutely was Angkor. *Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission: From Decay to Recovery* deserves a primary position in the recent historiography of Cambodia and worldwide cultural heritage. The chapters on Cambodia are rich and illuminating. French historian Henri Locard, in particular, denies any substantive importance of Angkor during DK in his chapter “The Myth of

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<sup>39</sup> Michael S. Falser, “Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission: Methodological Considerations” in *Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission: From Decay to Recovery*. Michael S. Falser, ed. (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2015), 16.

<sup>40</sup> Michael S. Falser "Representing Heritage without Territory—The Khmer Rouge at the UNESCO in Paris During the 1980s and Their Political Strategy for Angkor" in *Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission: From Decay to Recovery*. Michael S. Falser, ed. (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2015), 491

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 506

<sup>42</sup> One of the most striking accounts of Democratic Kampuchea from an eyewitness is Elizabeth Becker. *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*. (New York: Public Affairs, 1998)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 507

Angkor as an Essential Component of the Khmer Rouge Utopia”.<sup>44</sup> But it is the editors’ chapters that resonate with a unique discussion on post-DK cultural heritage and identity. Falser’s work is limited only by his choice of source material which is overly reliant on United Nations and government issued documents. This limitation is understandable as records are scant in Cambodia but this does foster a one-sided feel and leaves the reader always asking how these policies were understood or implemented by Cambodians outside the tiny elite. Slocomb shares this limitation, but as Gottesman has shown, interviews inside Cambodia can open up work to answer questions that simply reading documents can never truly illuminate.

Any discussion about identity or nationalism quickly brings into focus some of the talismanic authors who write on the subject. One such voice is Benedict Anderson whose “imagined communities” theory is found in the bibliographies of books and papers on a variety of subjects not limited to nationalism.<sup>45</sup> The concept of how nations are “imagined” is well argued by Anderson but frequently scholars shoehorn it into work where it becomes part of a theoretical checklist and not relevant. Cambodia appears in *Imagined Communities* not simply in passing but on page one and as part of the overall book’s framework.<sup>46</sup> Anderson foregrounds the 1978-1979 wars between DK and Vietnam as well as the border war between Vietnam and China as indications that nationalism was the primary impetus for conflict between these nations. Anderson unpacks how these three nations who have “undeniable revolutionary credentials” fought each other without invoking independence, anti-capitalism or imperialism or any of the typical Marxist *isms* as slogans. Anderson argues that the end of nationalism prophesied by Eric Hobsbawm in the 1970s is far from close; in fact, according to Anderson, “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time”.<sup>47</sup> According to Anderson, one of the key mechanisms for nationality to percolate through the national consciousness is through print media. This technique was utilized by the PRK in an attempt to unify the nation and identify the regime as the saviour of Cambodia and Khmer culture.

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<sup>44</sup> Henri Locard “The Myth of Angkor as an Essential Component of the Khmer Rouge Utopia” in *Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission: From Decay to Recovery*. Michael S. Falser, ed. (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2015), 435.

<sup>45</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

For the PRK, print media allowed for the appropriation of Angkor as a symbolic focus of Khmer identity. Falser explains that Angkor was pushed to the fore in publications and speeches emanating from the PRK during the early part of the 1980s.<sup>48</sup> Unlike Gottesman or Slocomb, Falser has at his disposal obscure PRK and Vietnamese documents and pamphlets to better understand the place of Angkor within the regime. One such Vietnamese printed work *Cambodia—Victory by a Pure Revolution* is used by Falser to indicate that Angkor was used by Hanoi to build a narrative of Khmer workers building the temples under the guidance of a centralized authority. This socialist conception of the monuments is best understood through the following quote from the book used by Falser: “Angkorian glory,” was a result of the “hard labour work of the Khmer people [who were full of] love, independence, justice and diversity [...] and hated any kind of pressure regime.”<sup>49</sup> Although offering more to scholars of Angkor’s role in the PRK than either Gottesman or Slocomb, Falser quotes the latter liberally. One passage from Slocomb’s work in particular is used by Falser to indicate how the PRK believed the Khmer Rouge had “dug holes” under the temples to “destroy our national cultural wealth”.<sup>50</sup> Falser’s work builds on Slocomb and to a lesser extent Gottesman’s foundational work on the PRK by clearly showing Angkor was more than a symbol on the national flag. The temples had their own department and budget which utilized print media to situate Angkor as a primary element in the national identity of post-DK Cambodia. This emphasis on Angkor as a unifying symbol in print media echoes the discussion on popular culture during the PRK described by Khing Hoc Dy’s work on 1980s Khmer popular culture.<sup>51</sup> By contrasting how official government documents quoted in Falser’s work match the themes laid out in Dy’s investigation of novels, a picture emerges of Angkor acting as central symbolic representation of Khmer identity during the 1980s.

The most often repeated part of Benedict Anderson's catalogue of work is the “imagined communities” theory. Nations seen as “imagined” or socially constructed challenges, a belief that there exists a primordial national identity which fits quite nicely with any discussion on post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. In light of Anderson's denial of national identity having been a tangibly identifiable wellspring, Penny Edwards has written multiple works on how Angkor, in

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<sup>48</sup> Falser, 498.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 500.

<sup>50</sup> Slocomb, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Hoc Dy, 31.

particular, has a challenging non-linear timeline that problematizes its use as an origin story for Cambodians. Edwards has also achieved the difficult task of writing on Cambodian history without dedicating, at least, half the work to the Khmer Rouge period. Instead, Edwards has become the most important voice on colonial and pre-colonial Cambodia. Edwards's book *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation 1860-1945* dissects the notion of Angkor being part of Khmer identity throughout history.<sup>52</sup> The inspiration for Edwards's investigation of pre-independence Cambodia appears influenced by a much-repeated statement from David Chandler that "the French bequeathed to the Khmer the unmanageable notion their ancestors had been for a time the most gifted people of mainland Southeast Asia".<sup>53</sup> Prior to this monograph, Edwards wrote a chapter in *Propaganda, Politics, and Violence in Cambodia: Democratic Transition under United Nations Peace-keeping* that identifies the inherently problematic nature that Cambodian history built around Angkor. Edwards's own critique of the French colonial understanding of Cambodia is that French scholars "fetishized those parts of Cambodia they found attractive – Angkor Vat, fine arts, the royal dance and dismissed the rest".<sup>54</sup> Edwards has developed her theories of *Cambodge* around Anderson's framework of *Imagined Communities* where Angkor is continually re-imagined in Cambodian politics. Angkor is thus far from a timeless stone temple, it is part of an evolving national narrative, susceptible to the whims of propagandists and nationalists, be they French, Khmer or Vietnamese.

The emphasis on colonial *Cambodge* in Edwards work, rather than Cambodia offers a much-needed fresh perspective on the historiography of Cambodia and the socially constructed pastiche of Khmer history that was imported from the French *metropole*. Edwards's work is vital in attempting to grapple with the ease and nonchalance shown by Cambodian governments in their appropriation of cultural heritage with scant regard for historical accuracy. The imposed nature of Cambodian history from the West has delegitimized it allowing for an often contradictory multiplicity of messages. This is why DK placed Angkor on their flag, yet struggled in making the temple a part of a cohesive national narrative. As Pol Pot stated "Angkor was built in an era of slavery...slaves like us built Angkor under the exploitation of the

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<sup>52</sup> Penny Edwards, "Imagining the Other in Cambodian Nationalist Discourse Before and During the UNTAC Period" in Steve, Heder, Judy Ledgerwood, and David Chandler eds. *Propaganda, Politics and Violence in Cambodia: Democratic Transition under United Nations Peace-Keeping*. (United States: M.E. Sharpe, 1995). 54.

<sup>53</sup> David P. Chandler. *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution Since 1945*, 1991. 6.

<sup>54</sup> Penny, Edwards. *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*.

exploiting classes. If our people can make Angkor, they can make anything”.<sup>55</sup> The PRK would assume a more paternal role over the temples, uncomfortable with Angkor’s feudal past, but ready to foreground the unifying ability of the monuments. As Falser has indicated, DK failed to absorb Angkor into their national identity narrative with any great success. The PRK were clearer but no less flimsy in their constructed narrative for Angkor attempting the difficult task of constructing a socialist understanding onto the temples. What both regimes shared is the belief that only an autocratic authority could build on the scale of Angkor. This viewpoint then reflected back and legitimized their dictatorial state apparatus.

Any discussion of Cambodia requires consideration of the three pillars of the historiography: the works of David Chandler, Ben Kiernan and Michael Vickery. Each of these scholars has had a lasting impact on how Cambodia is understood in academic circles. Where all three are limited in their work is the PRK period. The glare of Pol Pot, DK and genocide seem to be too bright and hypnotic to resist even for these otherwise engaging voices. One needs to dissect their works to find mentions and crumbs that can be used for students of 1980s Cambodia. Kiernan, in particular, keeps his work within a tight framework of genocide and the communist movement in Cambodia up to 1979.<sup>56</sup> This makes Kiernan far from ideal for any discussion on the PRK regime. Vickery, too, concentrates primarily on the Khmer Rouge but does engage with post-DK Cambodia. A more logical place to begin discussing the triumvirate is with Chandler as he offers a perspective on the 1980s.

Chandler is the only one of the three to attempt a broad overview of Cambodia in his book *A History of Cambodia*.<sup>57</sup> Although one tends to avoid books with such a wide gaze in academic work, it is a testament to Chandler’s writing that this book, originally published in 1983, is still an essential part of the historiography of Cambodia. Regular updates to the book maintain contact with contemporary works and avenues of investigation; the 2007 edition consulted for this work is the latest. Chandler is fluent in Khmer and lived in pre-DK Cambodia making his

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<sup>55</sup> David P. Chandler. “Seeing Red: Perceptions of Cambodian History in Democratic Kampuchea” in David Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Anthony Barnett. *Revolution and Its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1983), 44.

<sup>56</sup> For an in-depth investigation into the rise of the Khmer Rouge and Communism in Cambodia see Ben, Kiernan. *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*. (3rd ed. New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008) and Ben Kiernan. *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*. (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2004)

<sup>57</sup> David Chandler. *A History of Cambodia*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009).

credentials for writing a *history of* book impeccable. Kiernan was Chandler's student at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, so the two scholars freely contribute to each other's work. Sadly, Chandler only briefly addresses the PRK period but draws one telling parallel with the protectorate period. Rather than look back at the obvious Vietnamese occupation in the 1830s in considering the 1980s, Chandler relates the PRK regime to the bureaucratic ways the French governed Cambodia. In particular Chandler links protectorate to the 1980s in the way the French colonial office took responsibility for Cambodia's defense, internal security, and foreign affairs leaving less crucial areas in Cambodian hands.<sup>58</sup> When Chandler does explicitly engage the PRK he is not as sympathetic to the regime as Slocomb, but more guarded and always aware of Vietnam as an occupying force. Chandler also reminds his readers that it was the PRK who brought former Khmer Rouge cadres back into Cambodian government positions and offered amnesty to all but the very top of the Khmer Rouge leadership.

It was Chandler who was asked by the Cambodian government to present a paper on Cambodian history to Khmer lower and upper secondary school teachers in 2009.<sup>59</sup> In this presentation Chandler is clear in asserting Cambodian history is more than Angkor and the Khmer Rouge. In this brief yet illuminating discussion, Chandler identifies the failings of the colonial understanding of Angkor as it removed the mass of Khmer workers who built the temples in favour of studying the god-kings. Chandler engages those in Khmer academia with his coherent message that Angkor belongs to ordinary Cambodians, not just foreign tourists. The message is clear: modern Cambodians should view Angkor as a vibrant reminder of *their* cultural heritage. Chandler thus re-inserts contemporary Cambodians into a historical lineage that casts Angkor as both a symbolic ideal and real space of engagement.

Michael Vickery is generally supportive of the PRK, although quick to acknowledge the faults and failures of the regime, especially the deficiencies in food distribution. In fact, in the introduction to *Cambodia 1975-1982* Vickery comments that the book was less than enthusiastically received on its release in 1984 because Vietnam was still seen as the “*bête noire*” of the nations that dominated the United Nations. In 1984 DK ministers still represented Cambodia at the United Nations.<sup>60</sup> Vickery writes in a more direct, confrontational style than

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid, 282.

<sup>59</sup> Chandler revealed this during his interview as an expert on the Khmer Rouge period at the ongoing genocide trials in Phnom Penh. <http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/>

<sup>60</sup> Michael, Vickery. *Cambodia, 1975-1982*. (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984).VI.

either Chandler or Kiernan, which gives his work a certain critical anti-Western edge. In discussing Angkor, Vickery engages with ancient history more than any other author examining discourse on national identity based on the temples. It is Chandler who, of the three premier scholars on Cambodia, offers a more textured approach engaging Cambodia as a modern entity with a rich past that helps form the present.

Propaganda, and more explicitly propaganda based on a constructed identity on Angkor Wat, seamlessly engages with the complex concept of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a double-edged sword: it invokes and limits in its scope; it can be a harmless daydream or a call to arms. With Cambodian nostalgia Angkor is at the fore of any discussion. Svetlana Boym's book *The Future of Nostalgia* offers a valuable insight into the multifaceted appeal of nostalgia and the ways in which it can be generated and enhanced through dedicated processes.<sup>61</sup> Boym makes three central arguments, first nostalgia does not have to be seen as anti-modern. Second, nostalgia or the feeling of nostalgia is not linked to geography but instead to time and, in particular, a slower more tranquil imagined past. Third nostalgia is not exclusively retrospective, it can be prospective.<sup>62</sup> Crucially, in light of Cambodia, Boym argues that 'outbreaks' of nostalgia often follow social upheaval such as revolutions.

As scholars such as Slocumb and Gottesman have detailed, 1979 was a year of enormous upheaval in Cambodia. Invasion, famine and mass displacement back to the cities and ancestral villages created chaotic scenarios for the new government as it began the task of nation building. It fits with Boym's work on nostalgia that a symbol as talismanic as Angkor was appropriated by the PRK during the turbulent post DK period. Michael Falser confirms Boym's theory, identifying Angkor's role at this early stage of post DK Cambodia. He notes that Angkor was present on the PRK flag, mentioned in the constitution, the national anthem and used as imagery for government publications in both Cambodia and Vietnam. The PRK used Angkor to look backwards to the future situating the temples as inherent within the Khmer historical timeline but representative of the potential of all Southeast Asian people. Boym's theories of nostalgia seem particularly useful in understanding the place of Angkor during the 1980s as a historical concept and actual archaeological space.

Vietnam, the guarantor of the PRK, had a flourishing Soviet-style propaganda machine

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<sup>61</sup> Svetlana, Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

during the 1980s. David Heather has put together a vivid collection of these posters depicting Ho Chi Minh along with the now easily recognizable Soviet-influenced factory workers and young revolutionaries.<sup>63</sup> The Vietnamese knew how to promote a particular line of nationalism by the time they invaded Cambodia. The front cover of *Cambodia—Victory by a Pure Revolution* offers a stylized image of one of the towers of the Bayon temple that can be interpreted as Soviet influenced.<sup>64</sup> This book was one of the first studies published after the invasion and sets the tone for the merging of Vietnamese communist artwork and traditional Khmer art forms and images such as the temples. It seems only logical that this style of propaganda would be appropriated by the PRK. Michael Falser has begun the task of identifying how Angkor was used in PRK propaganda and the opposing material produced by opposition factions, but more work, especially work dedicated to this topic, is required. Once again, the weight of material on DK has limited the scholarship on the 1980s, allowing vital primary source material to go unused.

One of Boym's central “plots” for nostalgia to flourish is her belief that nostalgia requires a conspiracy to enable its growth. Here nostalgia walks hand in hand with nationalism theory; both require a conspiratorial element to galvanize the ‘us’ to counter the ‘other’.<sup>65</sup> Much has been written on Vietnam as conspiring against DK.<sup>66</sup> During the 1980s, all factions battling for control of Cambodia utilized this conspiracy theory in the struggle to control the legacy of Angkor. The remnants of DK forced over the border into Thailand painted a picture of Vietnam as a foreign aggressor controlling the single most recognizable element of Khmer culture, Angkor Wat. The PRK took every opportunity to demonize the Khmer Rouge, how behind every anti-Vietnamese sentiment lurked the specter of Pol Pot. The PRK, not able to sit at the United Nations, chose the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to position themselves as the only opportunity for stability and teased that only they could re-open Angkor to the world. DK had closed off Angkor; in its retreat, statues disappeared only to turn up in European and Thai antique markets.

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<sup>63</sup> David, Heather and Sherry Buchanan. *Vietnam posters the David Heather Collection*. (Munich: Prestel.2009).

<sup>64</sup> Michael S. Falser "Representing Heritage without Territory—The Khmer Rouge at the UNESCO in Paris During the 1980s and Their Political Strategy for Angkor" in *Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission: From Decay to Recovery*.554.

<sup>65</sup> Boym, 44.

<sup>66</sup> A good example of the exploration of Khmer Rouge internal documents relating to Vietnam is found in David Chandler, Ben Kiernan, Chanthou Boua, and Yale Center for International and Area Studies. *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976-1977*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988.

This gave the PRK further ammunition and ability to self-describe the regime as a guardian of Cambodia's historical legacy and heritage. The United Nations debates over the protection of Angkor would last until the 1990s. All sides used Angkor to gain worldwide attention for their cause. Sihanouk was the trump card and the voice that carried the most weight with members of the United Nations.

Christine Su investigated Khmer identity during the 1990s and found that Cambodians thought of themselves not only in Angkorian terms, but as crucially not Vietnamese.<sup>67</sup> Although situated outside the PRK period, Su's work is vital because it is based on views of Cambodians in the period immediately after Vietnamese withdrawal, but with their imposed government still in place.<sup>68</sup> Su echoes Boym's work on conspiracy, discovering at its heart the anti-Vietnamese sentiments of her interview subjects imagine a desire for the Vietnamese to take Cambodian land. Su claims these tropes of threat and historical hatred are "integrated into Cambodian identity".<sup>69</sup> Su's work has a unique and welcome element as she interviews Cambodians both in Cambodia and the diaspora posing the same questions. By combining these interviews Su can justify her claims of hereditary anti-Vietnamese views being passed down through the generations even to those Khmer who have never visited Cambodia. This thought process encourages identifying the PRK as an alien government that dismantled DK but was part of a wider conspiracy to enforce Vietnam's hegemony in Southeast Asia.

Su involves Angkor in her investigation of the role of gender in contemporary Khmer identity. Here Su identifies a merging of anti-Vietnamese sentiment and historically constructed legacy. Angkorian Apsara, the delicately carved nymphs that adorn thousands of columns at Angkor Wat, are held up as a symbol of the unique beauty of Khmer women. Su notes the timeless chaste beauty of the Apsara has embedded itself in the minds of both the male and female Cambodians in her interviews.<sup>70</sup> When Su wanted to interview Vietnamese women in Cambodia, her Khmer "acquaintances" advised her to visit one of the many brothels in Phnom Penh. The message is then clear, Khmer women invoke a mythical beauty, Vietnamese women are depicted as the polar opposite. Su's passage on the Apsara is a window into Angkor being

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<sup>67</sup> Christine Su "Becoming Cambodian: Ethnicity and the Vietnamese in Kampuchea" in Paul, R. Spickard, *Race, and Nation: Ethnic Systems in the Modern World*. (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>68</sup> Although Vietnamese troops began to withdraw in 1989, this was a slow process that lasted into the early 90's. The PRK government renamed itself the State of Cambodia on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 1989.

<sup>69</sup> Su "Becoming Cambodian: Ethnicity and the Vietnamese in Kampuchea", 275.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 281

made to fit any national narrative, however unrealistic. Further to the Angkorian Apsara Su compiles a list of what her interviewees have identified as defining *Khmerness*, one of them is “to be a descendant of the creators of Angkor Wat and the Bayon, massive temples in the north of Cambodia and to acknowledge and respect that history”.<sup>71</sup> The “descendant of Angkor” narrative permeates Cambodian society. The King, the Prime Minister Hun Sen even Pol Pot have at one time have all invoked a direct legacy to Angkor. This unrealistic imagining of historical legacy appears unproblematic in Cambodia and has the creative power to create caste and embody authority.

Su’s work on identity based on the mythological Angkorian Apsara supports Panivong Norindr’s work on the “celestial becomes the modern” through the photographer’s lens.<sup>72</sup> Neither author engages the PRK period in any detail but both offer similar conclusions on the historical role of Angkor in Khmer art. Both works can be used as a foundation to explore how gender and the arts were similar or radically different during the PRK. For instance, were concessions made to de-stylize or limit overtly sexual aspects of the Apsara that have been consistently depicted to represent female Khmer beauty since the protectorate period? Norindr also identifies that modern Khmer dancers are rarely filmed outside the frame of Angkor, or Angkor themed backdrops. For Norindr, this peculiar emphasis on the contextualizing of contemporary performing arts with stylized mythological constructs, maintains a fixed ‘orientalized’ interpretation of Cambodian art. Both Su and Norindr offer the reader a discussion on the ways Angkor has resonated through different periods of Cambodian artistic output often to the detriment of creativity outside Angkorian parameters.

The historiographical output of the PRK is limited. Few scholars are concentrating their focus on this period. This is not due to a lack of sources, as the work in this survey has shown. Instead, the horror of the Khmer Rouge maintains a tight grasp on the attention of historians. One element that weaves a path throughout Cambodian history is the appropriation and understanding of Angkor Wat. Few, if any, other nations situate a monument so centrally in their flags or images of national propaganda as successive Cambodian governments have with Angkor. Greece has the Parthenon, China the Great Wall, Egypt the Pyramids, yet none of these nations, all of whom possess equally instantly recognizable cultural heritage monuments, place the image on

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 273.

<sup>72</sup> Norindr “The Fascination for Angkor Wat and the Ideology of the Visible”. 64.

the flag or centralize it within the national cultural landscape. What scholars such as Panivong Norindr, Khing Hoc Dy, and Christine Su have shown is that Angkor as a symbol resonates beyond monumental architecture and god-kings. These scholars build on the work of David Chandler and Michael Vickery who created the foundations for those who study Cambodia. PRK propaganda constructed a message which situated Cambodia within a Socialist Southeast Asia that, although dominated by Hanoi, allowed for the individual expression of identity. The symbol of national identity that invoked Khmer uniqueness and strength was Angkor, and so Angkor entered the lexicon of images and conceptual understandings at the heart of the PRK regime and the national identity which it projected to its own people and the world.

## WORKING IN CAMBODIAN ARCHIVES

Working in Cambodia is as thrilling and intriguing as it is frustrating. The national archives are stored within a surprisingly stoic colonial building constructed in 1924 and opened in 1926, which regrettably offers little in terms of Khmer artistic architectural elements. Although it is situated close to Wat Phnom, the city's spiritual center, finding the archive building is the first of many obstacles that lay in wait for the visiting academic. Accessing the archives involves some very basic Khmer and ability to understand a complex series of paper requests that facilitate the arrival of documents. French is helpful; as the basic computer system works more on chance than any systematic process, it works better, I discovered, when requests are *En français*. The helpful Deputy Director Mam Chhean is fortunately able to identify the correct way to make a request and then patiently open boxes and importantly recall the relevance of documents written in Khmer.

Mam Chhean has worked at the archives since the early 1980s and explained how during DK, the national archive building was used as a barn for pigs and cows. The documents were pushed to the rear and some used for cigarette paper. Mam Chhean helped clean the building and open the doors for scholars who began to arrive with the UN presence in 1990.<sup>73</sup> In August 1981, a group of scholars arrived in Phnom Penh to visit the national library, archives and

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<sup>73</sup> Mam Chhean (personal conversation, Phnom Penh November 2017).

national museum.<sup>74</sup> This group brought together the pantheon of scholars working on Cambodia, whose work remains vital to anyone wishing to understand Cambodian history, David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan, Michael Vickery, Serge Thion, Chanthou Boua and Milton Osborne. The group investigated the national library finding it shelves, “more or less intact” but archival material is reported to have been seen used as wrapping paper at local markets.<sup>75</sup> The collection of Angkorian bronze and stone sculptures is also reported to be intact.<sup>76</sup> These observations back up the general anecdotal comments that much of Cambodia’s cultural heritage and archival material was ignored and abandoned in situ. The bulk of the damage observed during the PRK period came from neglect and not systematic destruction by the Khmer Rouge as the regime would have liked the world to understand. This neglect rather than wanton destruction supports Elizabeth Becker’s view of Angkor which she viewed in 1978 and identified a “distinct lack of care”.<sup>77</sup>

Even with the assistance of the constantly smiling Deputy Director, documents in the archives from the 1980s are few and far between. One common trait when speaking about the 1980s in contemporary Phnom Penh is a confusion and, more often than not, a blank expression. Since 1979 regimes have become understood not by the period, or political party but by individuals. It was the PRK that identified DK as the “Pol Pot Ieng Sary clique”, thus removing the general Cambodian populace and communist party from any blame. This linguistic move by the PRK regime essentially removed Kampuchea, and the Kampuchean people, from being identified with genocide. Likewise, the label ‘Khmer Rouge’ was problematic as the PRK were both Khmer and Communists, so Pol Pot, and to a lesser extent Ieng Sary, became the label for the entire period and regime.

After numerous failed attempts to gain access to documents or ask questions pertinent to the PRK period (only to receive blank expressions), I developed a linguistic dance which involved stating “The Peoples Republic of Kampuchea”, “République Populaire du Kampuchea” and finally “the 1980s”. None of these terms resonated, but only when I added “Heng Samrin regime” did I receive any signs of acknowledgment. The associating of periods of Cambodian

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<sup>74</sup> David Chandler, "Monash Scholars Got to Phnom Penh," *Bulletin - International Association of Orientalist Librarians*. 1982. 25.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>77</sup> Becker, 417.

history with individuals elevates the repetition of strongmen to become normalized within society. Sihanouk, Lon Nol, Pol Pot, Heng Samrin and now Hun Sen have all come to define periods of modern Cambodian history. Angkorian antiquity has this individual label that matches this modern political process. Guides that work for the Apsara Authority who are paid to show tourists around the temples usually define the period of a particular temple's construction as during the reign of Jayavaraman or Suryavaramn, etc. Only when I began to use the name of the first Prime Minister Heng Samrin, did academic doors of investigation begin to creak open.

Even armed with the knowledge that one would need to use Heng Samrin's name to request information documents were thin on the ground in Cambodia. From anecdotal conversations and piecing together scraps of comments it appears the 1980s suffered from being identified with Cambodia frailty under Vietnamese dominance. Current and lingering historical issues with Vietnam have reduced the 1980s to a period of national embarrassment sandwiched between the genocide of DK and the United Nations period of optimistic capitalist growth. The archives are rich with DK material, mined on a regular basis by academics from all over the world. I encountered American, French and Japanese scholars working on diverse topics yet all revolving around DK. Even speaking to fellow scholars, few knew or seemed overly inquisitive about the PRK period. Likewise, a cottage industry has evolved around DK that casts a shadow over any work inside Cambodia. Conversations match the literature and usually turn back to Pol Pot.

The Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DCCAM) in Phnom Penh is the primary point of archival work for those interested in DK. The archive is rich and diverse, covering almost every facet of the Khmer Rouge regime. Material on the PRK is scant and less easy to locate. One unique item they do offer are the lyrics to one of the first songs composed and written after the fall of DK. "Oh, Phnom Penh Euy" is a song of both intense sadness and hope for the future, a love song for a city and a culture that the singer thought was lost.<sup>78</sup> According to archivist Nhean Socheat the lyrics were written in 1979 by the PRK's Culture and Information Minister Keo Chenda.<sup>79</sup> The lyrics situate Phnom Penh as being stolen from the singer "Oh! Phnom Penh, during the three years we were apart, I missed you and my heart suffered each and every day, because the enemy cut off the affection between you and me".<sup>80</sup> It's clear the enemy is the

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<sup>78</sup> [http://www.d.dccam.org/Archives/Musics/Lyrics\\_for\\_Oh\\_Phnom\\_Penh.htm](http://www.d.dccam.org/Archives/Musics/Lyrics_for_Oh_Phnom_Penh.htm)

<sup>79</sup> <http://dara-duong.blogspot.ca/2011/01/oh-phnom-penh-euy.html>

<sup>80</sup> [http://www.d.dccam.org/Archives/Musics/Lyrics\\_for\\_Oh\\_Phnom\\_Penh.htm](http://www.d.dccam.org/Archives/Musics/Lyrics_for_Oh_Phnom_Penh.htm)

Khmer Rouge who had depicted Phnom Penh as devoid of relevance for their agrarian based revolution. The second verse sets the tone for how the PRK would situate their version of revolutionary ideology and in particular the role of Angkor.

Kampuchea, which was once one of the world's glorious empire.

You prevented the disappearance of Cambodia, the descendant of the majestic Angkor empire.

Oh, the soul of the Khmer nation lives on and, oh, is inspired by the majestic Angkor empire.<sup>81</sup>

Keo Chenda's lyrics directly link the survival of Cambodia in 1979 to a historical timeline that includes Angkor. Written during a period of Vietnamese occupation, the promotion of the Angkorian empire is an awkward insertion as the empire included large parts of the modern state of Vietnam, and has been a bone a historical bone of contention that continues to trouble politicians on both sides of the border today. What this song does is establish a symbolic axis around which the newly established PRK could begin reconstructing their concept of national identity.

## **BANAL VISUALISATIONS**

A considerable amount of this work on the PRK involves utilizing visual sources. This reliance on visual material for supporting one's thesis inherently creates the issue of perception. Historians on the whole struggle with interpretation of art and architecture preferring the medium of documents and the written word. The blurred lines of art history, and to a lesser extent archaeology, define parameters and academic space into which the historian at times fears to venture. Although not a historian, Gillian Rose tackles the issue of interpretation of visual sources in her article "Teaching Visualised Geographies: Towards a Methodology for the Interpretation of Visual Materials".<sup>82</sup> Although aimed primarily at geographers, Rose's article can be used for historians to create a methodology, when confronted by visual state constructs or, artistic interpretations of society. Rose touches on how as a professor, she, encounters students' reluctance to critically engage visual materials. Where Rose's framework is vital for this investigation into Angkor and the PRK is by setting out some basic parameters for visualizing

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Gillian Rose, "Teaching Visualised Geographies: Towards a Methodology for the Interpretation of Visual Materials," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 20, no. 3 (1996).

the media chosen for scrutiny. Rose asks the reader to consider how and who constructed the image, its purpose, its intended effect upon the individual looking at it, and its method of circulation and place within a wider artistic localized moment.<sup>83</sup> Keeping this type of methodology and critical interaction with materials constructed during the PRK regime at the fore is vital in any attempt to ascertain the importance and role of Angkor during this period.

In Michael Billig's landmark concept and book *Banal Nationalism*, the author lays out the framework for a type of nationalism that is more mundane, more opaque, than the traditional concept of "hot" direct nationalism.<sup>84</sup> In this less confrontational or 'cooler' nationalism, elements such as flags and anthems are identified as key elements in how a nation constructs a national agenda and identity. Billig defines banal nationalism to be more broad and comprehensive than what he proves with his sources. If one were to include a more diverse set of national moments, reducing the emphasis on flags and anthems, the overall concept that pins Billig's work together would be strengthened. By casting a wider net, academic arguments are often weakened, but in the case of Billig's "banal nationalism" the case only reveals deeper and more solid foundations.

## PRK POSTAGE STAMPS

One area of investigation that doesn't register within Billig's scrutiny of banal nationalism is postage stamps. These small intricate windows into how a government views itself, its aspirations, its history and crucially, how these tropes are displayed outwardly beyond national borders, is both fascinating and vital when investigating a regime like the PRK that produced little in terms of official printed material. Not one of the established scholars who mine the Cambodian archives to unearth source material for their latest works appear overly interested in philately as a medium of investigation. This is perhaps due to the Khmer Rouge's abolition of a national and international postage system.<sup>85</sup> Scholars not focused on Cambodia have begun to look at postage stamps and found how these everyday elements of government art can be utilized

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

<sup>85</sup> Although the Khmer Rouge abolished the national post office in Cambodia, they did produce a very short run of postage stamps. These stamps are incredibly rare and so highly valued by collectors. The fact stamps were designed and produced for the regime by China hints at the regime's tacit consideration of re-instigating a postal service on some level.

to make some telling statements about the relative security or insecurity a government feels regarding its people and the wider world. Benedict Anderson offers stamps as elements of a nation's "print capitalism", and for scholars of Cambodia, teases that he might cast his gaze towards Angkor by including monuments and the promotion of patrimony in a list of items promoted by stamps.<sup>86</sup> Alas a chance to involve Cambodia passes, as Anderson moves along and leaves postage stamps mentioned but not utilized to their capacity for national storytelling.

A focused study of postage stamps in Finland appears initially to be somewhat 'leftfield' when discussing Southeast Asia, but Paulina Raento and Stanley D. Brunn's article "Visualizing Finland: Postage Stamps as Political Messengers" is an ideal foundation for looking at the PRK and its creation of state postage art.<sup>87</sup> Raento and Brunn construct an exhaustive investigation into the multiple ways postage stamps have been central to the Finnish governments, shifting emphasis on what constitutes the nation of Finland. The authors argue that "Finnish postage stamps played a central role in the building of Finnish nationalist sentiment before independence in 1917 from imperial Russia".<sup>88</sup> The authors use a quantitative approach that involved the authors viewing 1457 stamps that spanned the period 1917-2000.<sup>89</sup> This period is of Finnish independence and so, is free from overt outside influence. The quantitative approach allowed Raento and Brunn to identify trends, patterns and moments of transition. Since independence Finland has enjoyed relative peace (outside the involvement in World War Two) and comparative prosperity, unlike Cambodia. Where Cambodian and Finnish stamps converge thematically and symbolically is in how postage stamps emphasise cultural iconography and become key tools in state promotion of national unity. In concluding Raento and Brunn, note how "over time" postage stamps in Finland reduced their emphasis on government propaganda from "shouts" to "whispers" matching an overall emergence of a more "banal" take on national identity inside Finnish society more broadly.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Benedict, Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 186

<sup>87</sup> Pauliina Raento and Stanley D. Brunn, "Visualizing Finland: Postage Stamps as Political Messengers," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 87, no. 2 (2005).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 150.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

Brunn writes a further article on how stamps are vital cogs in the state propaganda apparatus in the article “Stamps as Messengers of Political Transition”.<sup>91</sup> Brunn utilizes postage stamps to identify the ways in which the Soviet Union and Russia constructed messages of identity and nationalism during the transition from the Soviet Union to the state of Russia. For Brunn, stamps are “among the most important early symbolic decisions at the state level”. Brunn’s work on the transition from Soviet Union to the state of Russia is an ideal template for looking at Cambodia with its transition from Khmer Rouge to PRK regimes. Images in government artwork such as postage stamps do not simply appear, nor are they picked at random, but they are considered and carefully chosen. Brunn widens his focus from stamps to include the banal plethora of state artistic choices that often slip outside the gaze of academics stating “When states emphasize ‘the visual’, which includes maps, postage stamps currency and official websites, they inform and educate their own populations and those beyond about where they are, who they are, and what they are about.”<sup>92</sup> What complicates the use of stamps in Cambodia is the acknowledgment that, initially, decisions such as what is placed on a postage stamp and state art was decided not in Phnom Penh but Hanoi. Thus, this sets up an outside element (in this case the government of Vietnam) as legislators as to what constitutes how the PRK, and equally Cambodia, is viewed both internally and externally.

The discussion around who made the day to day decisions during the PRK period has been discussed at length by Gottesman and Slocomb amongst others. The symbolic third chair explanation is used to describe how many of the key decisions, at least initially, were formulated. The three-chair analogy works once one understands that one chair is the person asking the question, the second is for the Khmer PRK official in whose office the meeting is probably occurring. The third chair is for the Vietnamese “advisor” to whom the Khmer official acquiesces too. This three-chair concept of PRK decision-making is simplistic and belittles the work of many Cambodian officials during the PRK period, but tellingly it is repeated often and consistently by both scholars and PRK officials. It is thus safe to assume that during the embryonic stages of the PRK and probably through until the late 1980s, the artistic elements of postage stamps were decided at least partially in Hanoi or by Vietnamese officials.

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<sup>91</sup> Stanley D. Brunn, "Stamps as Messengers of Political Transition," *Geographical Review* 101, no. 1 (2010): 21.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

The Khmer Rouge had destroyed any semblance of mechanised productivity during their process of reconstructing Cambodian life. It has been documented that banknotes and postage stamps were designed and at least considered during DK. The banknotes were manufactured in China and it's safe to say the postage stamps shared this pathway into DK. Photocopied Examples of these DK Riel notes can be purchased as tourist memento in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap night markets for a couple of US dollars.

Due to the challenging situation in Cambodia in the early years of the PRK regime, the printing of stamps appears to be a project that was outsourced. One could be mistaken for identifying Vietnam as the logical source of stamps, but according to an article written by Johann Smits in the *Phnom Penh Post*, Cuba was the source of PRK stamps.<sup>93</sup> Smits identifies a Cuban state company called COPREFIL as being the printer and exporter of stamps into Cambodia up until 2002 when printing was transferred to Vietnam.<sup>94</sup> The decision to utilize a Cuban company to produce postage stamps appears counterproductive to cost effective business practice. Production of Cambodian stamps in Cuba would entail expenses such as shipping where printing in Vietnam would not. The outsourcing of stamp production to Cuba identifies two common traits within the PRK regime: one, the reliance on Soviet bloc assistance in every aspect of the nation building process, and secondly, Hanoi's desire to lessen the burden of its Cambodian 'project' on Vietnam's fragile economy during the 1980s.

Apart from the ability of postage stamps to shine a light on how a regime views itself and constructs an international image, stamps do have another element that make their inclusion within a work on a government that produced so little vitally important. The pastime of philately (stamp collecting) encourages and offers reward for philatelists to collate and save stamps. What drives many philatelists is the acquisition of rare, valuable and obscure postage stamps. This in turn makes postage stamps emanating from nations in difficulty secluded, in transition, or simply not part of the international community feverishly desired. For instance, if one stumbles upon the mythical un-circulated DK stamps it maybe be the equivalent of Charlie finding a golden ticket. This element of philately has enabled stamps from the PRK to be preserved for investigation, yet

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<sup>93</sup> Johann Smits, "Collectors Revel in a History 'written' on Postage Stamps," *The Phnom Penh Post*, September 28, 2009, , <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/lifestyle/collectors-revel-history-'written'-postage-stamps>.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

echoing Gillian Rose observations on geographers, no historians of Cambodia appear to understand or want to engage with this art based material.

The Cambodian Post Office is situated inside one of Phnom Penh's most splendid colonial buildings. The French architect Daniel Fabre designed the building in the spirit of colonial Indochina with a flair for the grand over the practical. Abandoned during DK, the building was re-instituted as the central post office during the PRK period. As unfortunately all too common with work undertaken in Cambodian archives, the post office offers the viewer a selection of past postage stamps that are all too brief, hinting at what could be unearthed or has been lost. The official website for Cambodia Post includes a section labelled "philately" that shows some of the PRK stamps but only a few, and instead concentrates more on the UN period and today's stamp output.<sup>95</sup>

The lack of official channels for viewing PRK stamps encourages one outside the usual parameters of academic sourcing and into the world of philately and the trading of postage stamps both online and in more traditional retail stores. The largest medium for viewing and trading postage stamps is the internet. Online auction sites such as EBay are a goldmine for all things postage stamp; likewise, collectors offer websites dedicated thematically and nationally to display, or offer, stamps for sale. Patrick Fung, a Hong Kong philatelist, has a dedicated website to showing Cambodian postage stamps focussing on stamps issued after the end of DK.<sup>96</sup> Colnect.com, a website dedicated to collectors of everything and has a comprehensive list of Cambodian stamps including their Michel catalogue numbers. One further avenue for looking at postage stamps on the PRK that is more difficult and costly but in so many ways more rewarding, is to visit Tuol Tom Pong Market in Phnom Penh or as this veritable cornucopia of 'stuff' is better known, The Russian Market. Locals, tourists and ex-pats rarely use the formal Khmer name for the market, preferring to use one of the few holdovers from the PRK period as identification. The market takes its name from the many Russian and eastern bloc officials who frequented this market looking for imported goods and trinkets while visiting and working during the PRK period. Today amongst the heaving stalls, one can uncover genuine elements of the PRK now largely forgotten such as yellowing guide books to Phnom Penh in Cyrillic and, crucially, postage stamps bearing the name Peoples Republic of Kampuchea.

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<sup>95</sup> <https://stamps.kh.post>

<sup>96</sup> <http://cambodiaphilately.blogspot.ca/2009/>

One of the first stamps issued after the invasion of Cambodia has an Angkorian image and an interesting heritage and rarity to the philately community (Fig 1). The actual date of issue is hard to ascertain as is the saturation of the print run. Points of interest in this stamp are many; the image is classically Angkorian showing an illustration of a carving of dancing *Apsara* probably from either Angkor Wat or the Bayon.



Source: <http://cambodiaphilately.blogspot.ca/2009/>

Figure 1



Personal Photograph: The Bayon Cambodia

Figure 2

If one removes the central Apsara from fig 2, carved on the Bayon, the image in the stamp fig 1 is strikingly similar. Importantly, the stamp artists chose not to draw the dancing human Apsara, but to illustrate how these two Apsara look on an ancient temple relief. That is to say the figures depicted are in an unrealistic human pose contained within a sculpted lintel framework, again similar to fig 2. This identifies the image as temple art, rather than any realistic attempt to draw or paint two human figures posed or dancing. Looking past the stylistic and artistic content, the label “*Republique Khmère*” curiously indicates the stamp was issued during the Khmer Republic period (1970-1975). The letters R.P.K imprinted on the stamp stand for *République Populaire du Kampuchéa*, the French translation for PRK. This stamp is then a reissue of an older postage stamp. This process is identified by Patrick Fung as being known as ‘overlay’ within the philately community. Fung lists what he notes is an incomplete list of 40 stamps so far identified as being issued by the PRK that show this process of overlay.<sup>97</sup> To issue 40 stamps during this 1979-80 period seems a lot for a regime that only controlled parts of territorial Cambodia with low levels of infrastructure. The likely reason for this number of stamps is that these overlay prints were used as they were discovered in an ad-hoc fashion to suit the new regimes needs when opportunity arose, instead of being part of a traditional postal stamp run. Alison Rowley engages with the practice of ‘overlay’s’ identifying how during the “turmoil of the civil war period” in the Soviet Union old stocks of stamps were appropriated by the new regime.<sup>98</sup> The financial practicality of using up existing stamps and overlaying trumped ideologically appropriate images, until the 1920s.<sup>99</sup> This is probably the case with the Apsara RPK stamp where expediency triumphed over political line.

The first official PRK postage stamps were issued in 1980 and presented the image of a liberated Cambodia to the world for the first time. It would be difficult to imagine in 1980 that postage was used inside Cambodia since the situation throughout the country was militarily fluid. Instead of a local audience, the first printing of stamps appears garnered towards the outside world - a fact enforced by the images chosen. Paul Cummings identified the only paths of communication in and out of the PRK during the early 1980s was through the post and a very

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<sup>97</sup> <http://cambodiaphilately.blogspot.com>

<sup>98</sup> Alison Rowley, "Miniature Propaganda: Self-Definition and Soviet Postage Stamps, 1917–41," *Slavonica* 8, no. 2 (2002): 139.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

expensive telex system.<sup>100</sup> Mr. Cummings recalls the availability of stamps in Phnom Penh and received his first acceptance of an entrance visa by post from the PRK foreign office in Phnom Penh in 1983.<sup>101</sup>



Personal Collection  
Figure 3

Fig 3, is a prime example of the Vietnam and the PRK’s early message of liberation. Mistakenly labelled “Soldiers in Front of Pagoda” on Colnect.com the stamp depicts soldiers in front of Phnom Penh’s independence monument. Without being overly pedantic, the misidentification removes a vital element of the stamp’s message. The Soldiers depicted are wearing the bright green uniform of the Vietnamese army and are poised to either attack or defend. By situating soldiers in front of the independence monument, the message presented is Vietnam, as the liberating army, is defending Cambodia’s independence. In terms of Angkorian themes the monument itself is characteristic of post-independence neo-classical Khmer architecture, where Angkor serves as the basic template. The artist takes this early opportunity to introduce the new flag of the PRK with its five golden towers representing Angkor Wat. The second stamp has a more classical socialist style (Fig 4). Fung identifies this stamp as being known as the “National Liberation Stamp”.<sup>102</sup> This stamp shows all the elements within Cambodian society together

<sup>100</sup> Paul Cummings (Personal Interview June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> <http://cambodiaphilately.blogspot.com>

under the new flag. At the fore, one can see that the army, women and the Buddhist sangha are represented, followed by workers and peasants.



Personal Collection  
Figure 4

The early stamps of the PRK match Raento and Brunn's identification of nationalist tropes which they identified on the first post-independence Finnish postage stamps. In the authors' Finnish case study, they note the usage of the common occurrence of the Finnish lion along with a definite emphasis of "patriotic values and strong leadership".<sup>103</sup> In the case of the PRK, there is a complication with this patriotic template. The regime up until 1989 was supported financially and militarily by Vietnam. Any overt nationalist constructed images could be seen as counterproductive and thus, more in line with the Khmer Rouge opposition still occupying large swathes of the Thai border regions of Cambodia. Patriotism during the PRK period always had a local Khmer flavour, and if Vietnam was identified at all, it was as a historical friend along with Laos. Raento and Brunn make the focus of their work postage stamps while the subject for this investigation on the PRK is broader in its subject matter, it is tightly constrained in its timeline. What this means is Raento and Brunn's methodology is transferable to my work but I pose a more focused question to the data and implement a narrower thematic subdivision. What I am asking of the data is not like in the case of Finland where the authors pose a question to show how stamps are the ideal medium for viewing how the: "Finnish state, nation and society has evolved over time along with the changing outlook of the national elite its relationship with ordinary citizens and the countries geopolitical context".<sup>104</sup> Instead of this broad question, I pose

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<sup>103</sup> Pauliina Raento and Stanley D. Brunn, "Visualizing Finland: Postage Stamps as Political Messengers," 151.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

that Angkor and Angkorian themes are a consistent element within the banal nationalism of Cambodian postage stamps, uniquely assisting in the positioning of the PRK as legitimate controllers of Cambodia through Angkorian tropes.

One postage stamp that deserves closer analysis was issued in 1986 and offers the viewer a confusing hybridity in its artistic message (Fig 5).



Personal Collection  
Figure 5

This multidenominational stamp shows more realistic looking Angkor Wat removed from the typical idyllic setting of moat, reflection and perfectly formed towers and galleries. Instead, the artist has attempted an almost photographic image confusingly off centred. The central Gopura that one ascends into as one enters the temple is off to the side of the image. This *Trompe-l'œil* allows a more complete view of Angkor Wat as all five of the towers become visible. The text on the stamp is in Khmer and French, a language that was reduced to only occasionally making an appearance during the PRK. The stamp does include the text “*Poste Aérienne*” denoting airmail, but that shouldn’t take away from the confusing elements especially with the airplane in the image. The angle of the image of Angkor on this stamp could be explained by the PRK wishing to show the five towers matching the image on the PRK flag. More interesting is the inclusion of what appears to be a passenger airplane soaring upwards over the towers. This stamp stands alone as bonding the past of Angkor to modernity, symbolized by the airplane, which Fung

identifies as a Soviet Ilyushin Il-62.<sup>105</sup> What makes the image of the airplane and Angkor fascinating is that the modernity hinted at in the artwork is fictional and should only be viewed as a potentiality rather than as accuracy. No commercial flights between any city and Siem Reap existed in 1986. Paul Cummings confirms that to fly into Cambodia was somewhat convoluted for tourists, who would fly to Bangkok to take a once a week flight to Ho Chi Minh City, and then on to Phnom Penh for a three day visit to the PRK.<sup>106</sup> To visit Angkor, Mr. Cummings would charter a plane, piloted by Russian pilot for a one day trip to the temples.<sup>107</sup> The livery on the tail of the Ilyushin Il-62 is blurred but appears to be the flag of the PRK, which again is not accurate as no official livery was used in 1986. What this stamp attempts to normalize is the PRK in the eyes of the world. Airmail stamps are not aimed at a local audience as they are by default for international communication. One understands that a deep analysis of this postage stamp would have been rare at the time of circulation. What is more important is not the fanciful image with its errors, but the attempt of the regime to put forward a message of contemporary modernity and balance with the single most internationally recognizable element of Cambodia culture Angkor Wat. A secondary message can be read that the PRK are in full control of both Cambodia and Angkor Wat. By depicting passenger airplanes, the regime is hinting at tourism, travel and thus stability, something that in 1986 was still problematic for the Phnom Penh government.

The most complete repository of PRK stamps can be found through the Colnect website. Patrick Fung's site is missing many stamps as the majority offer little in terms of points of discussion. For Fung, what drives his website is unique and collectable stamps. Colnect provide the most comprehensive collection available online and provides Michel catalogue numbers, the most respected cataloging system, to ensure each stamp can be verified as legitimate. In total, 653 stamps are available through Colnect to view, and each is briefly described and dated. For a quantitative analysis using the methodology of Raento and Brunn, I decided on dividing this collection into years produced, and utilized the following thematic subdivisions; one, Angkorian, this includes images of the temples, *Apsara* but not the flag, although I accept this is technically an image of Angkor just in a stylized form; two, political, this ranges from obvious depictions of

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<sup>105</sup> <http://cambodiaphilately.blogspot.com>

<sup>106</sup> Paul Cummings (Personal Interview June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018)

<sup>107</sup> Paul Cummings (Personal Interview June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018)

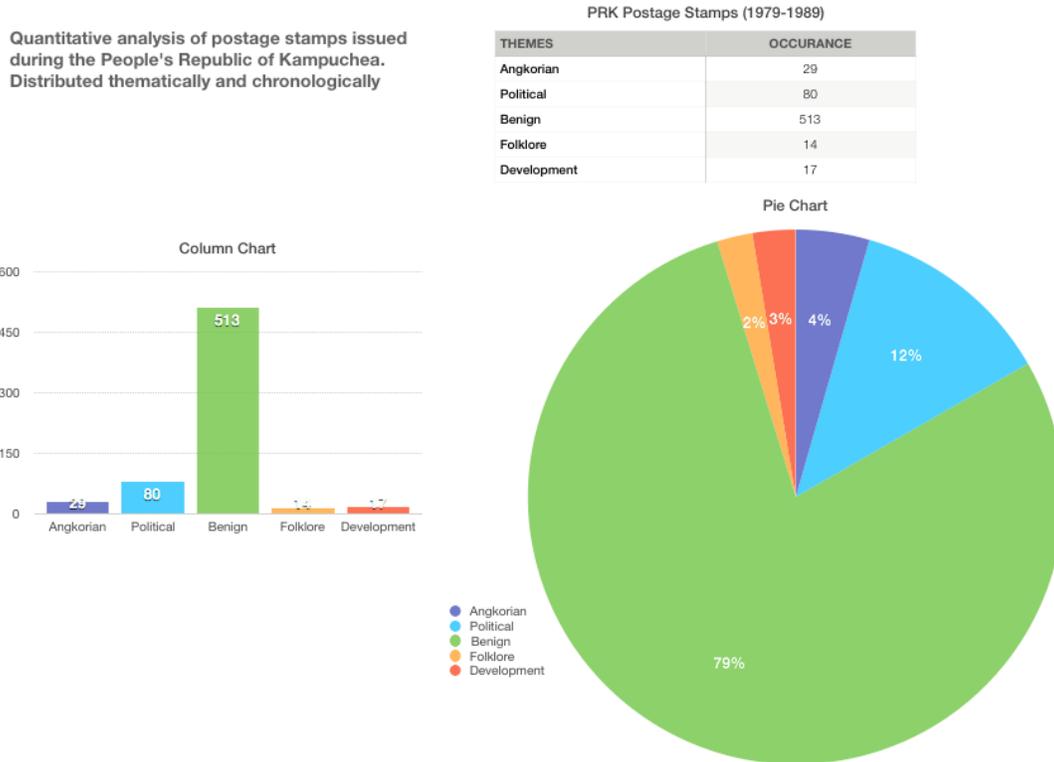
the PRK coat of arms and communist artwork to the more common depictions of Soviet heroes and the Soviet space program (an unusually common theme). I include the flag within this thematic subdivision. Thirdly, Benign; this division is broadest as it includes stamps that essentially do not overtly reflect the state or Khmer history. The most common images are flora and fauna (not always that of Cambodia) Olympics, World Cups and world events. The fourth is folklore; here I placed stamps that show Cambodian instruments, dancing (not *Apsara*) and craftwork. Five is development which is for stamps that identify bridges, dams or roadworks or images of the rebuilding of Cambodia by the PRK.

PRK POSTAGE STAMPS DATA DISTRIBUTION

Year	1980	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Angkorian		7	4	3	11			4
Political	4	6	15	13	17	14	7	4
Benign		66	68	77	78	67	69	88
Folklore		4				4	3	3
Development		1	7				3	6

What I expected to find when I began viewing the 653 stamps was an uneven distribution over the period; benign should be the majority as it is both the broadest and the most common type of stamp one would see on envelopes in Canada and the UK (my major points of reference). In terms of Angkor, I expected to see a representation for each year and for this theme to be one of the most common depictions. One glaring element that has no explanation either through official channels or the philately community is the lack of postage stamps issued in 1981 and 1982. One explanation could be the lack of structural organization in Phnom Penh during this initial period of the PRK. If one views the 1980 postage stamps as symbolic of an introduction to both Cambodians and an international audience of elements such as liberation (Fig 3) and national unity (Fig 4), then these first four stamps could have legitimately had a longer run in usage. This would make some sense, as Patrick Fung has shown during the 1979-1980 period “overlay” was common allowing for stamps to be reused without the cost of creating and printing original material. It is then safe to assume the first three years of the PRK did not place

postage stamp creation as a primary importance, but the regime did understand both the symbolic prominence of banal nationalism and the status such art could provide for a revolutionary movement.



The data that can be extrapolated from this analysis is that the PRK utilized Angkorian themes in their postage stamps consistently throughout the period. Angkor is not the most common theme, but it is consistent enough to support the thesis of the temples being a primary singular thematic mode of conveying unity and Cambodian rebirth through the lens of the PRK regime. If one removes the benign images of dinosaurs and sports that are the most commonly occurring images, then overtly political and Angkorian images become the majority. Extrapolating further, I propose that the use of Angkor fits within the political myth making of the PRK identifying postage stamps as a primary tool in the state's attempt to construct a strand of nationalism that is wholly Khmer without becoming chauvinistic.

## VIETNAMESE POSTAGE STAMPS

A worthwhile parallel to the study of postage stamps in the PRK is reflecting on what Vietnam produced during the 1980s. Vietnam being both the sponsor and guarantor of the PRK, one might expect Cambodia to be present within any government printed art emanating from Hanoi. As with studies on the PRK, actual historical investigation into government printed media that was distributed in Vietnam during the 1980s is scarce. Once again, one can turn to the world of philately community for evidence and examples that shed light on how Cambodia was imagined by Vietnam's leaders. The Vietnamese government has a website where one can both purchase stamps and view those from previous years.<sup>108</sup> This official website is a vital lens into the process of looking for evidence of Cambodia and, more broadly, trends in the depiction of culture in Vietnam. As with the PRK, Colnect.com is also ideal for viewing stamps along with their relevant reference material and release periods.



Source: <https://colnect.com/en/stamps/list/count>

Figure 6

The first appearance of the PRK on a Vietnamese postage stamp is in 1984 to commemorate the first Vietnam, Kampuchea, Laos “friendship summit” (Fig 6). This stamp has basic imagery where the three communist nations’ flags merge into a central clover and a white dove representing peace circles above. Each flag is equally sized with Laos central. This point is worth considering as Vietnam was both the dominant power and sponsor to both the Laotian and Kampuchean regimes. The reason for the centrality of the Laotian flag is perhaps due to the

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<sup>108</sup> <http://vietnamstamp.com.vn/en>

summit being held in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. When one utilises Colnect.com and other philately archives to cross reference this stamp with those of the same date circulated in Cambodia and Laos, it appears that neither the government of Phnom Penh or Vientiane thought the summit worthy of a dedicated stamp. This leads one to view Hanoi as constructing a fraternal tripartite relationship domestically where perhaps the truth was less secure.

During 1984, a second run of stamps was issued in Vietnam depicting Cambodia. Unlike the first stamps commemorating a political “summit”, this second run placed culture at the fore. Released in September 1984, three stamps were released commemorating the fifth anniversary of the Friendship and Cooperation Treaty between Vietnam and Cambodia, and it was layered with Angkorian imagery and socialist artistic rhetoric. Two of the stamps share an image just the denomination changes. This stamp shows a complex stratified image of history and modernity attempting to strike a balance that the stamps of the PRK rarely attempted (Fig 7).



Source: <https://colnect.com/en/stamps/list/country/8150-Vietnam/year/1984/page/11>

Figure 7

In this stamp one can see the flags of the two nations tied together by a rosette, hanging in a way that frames the central artwork, emphasizing the binding nature of the summit treaty. Cambodia is represented by the image of one of the many stone heads of the Bayon temple. The peaceful almost serene gaze of the statue is a pictorial stand-in for Cambodia sharing an ability with Angkor Wat as a representative shorthand for the nation. Depicted in equal size alongside the Bayon sculpture is an image of the Quan Chuong city gate in Hanoi. The bottom half of the stamp depicts a paddy field being mechanically cultivated and a factory with smoking chimneys. A depiction of a male and female stand in the foreground, both holding books, and one can safely presume they represent a new modern intellectual socialist generation of the two countries.

The female is Khmer identified through the wearing of the *Krama* a ubiquitous chequered scarf, here worn about the head. What the artist is attempting to convey with this stamp is the foregrounding of modernity still aware of the feudal past with its Indian Hindu/ Buddhist influences for Cambodia and Chinese for Vietnam, but moving into a new mechanized socialist future.<sup>109</sup>



Source: <https://colnect.com/en/stamps/list/country/8150-Vietnam/year/1984/page/12>

Figure 8

The second image from the 1984 stamps commemorating the Friendship and Cooperation Treaty constructs a more obvious message of historical fraternal alliance (Fig 8). The entwined flags are identical to figure 7, but the backdrop is a simple repetitive series of hash marks, more filler than artistic statement. The central images are of equally sized depictions of females wearing costumes that link them to Cambodia, the *Apsara* crown and robes, and Vietnam with the *Ao Dai* tunic and trousers. The figures are separate yet the artists have attempted to entwine the figures under the (drawn together), two flags. Both figures smile and have bodies showing movement and curvature. There is an unmistakable sensuality and, more curiously, clichéd overtones of the western ideal of Southeast Asian women in this artwork. Laurel B. Kennedy and Mary Rose Williams identify an emergence of a “Western ideal of obeisant Asian beauty” within

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<sup>109</sup> The architecture of the five gateways in Hanoi are of imperial Chinese influence.

the depiction of Vietnamese women during the mid 1980s, which they attribute to the beginning of a tourist industry in Vietnam. While neither figure is overtly deferential, one can see elements of Kennedy and Williams' identification of western constructed Asian gender roles in the stamp art. The problem with the image is that it was for a domestic audience and was released during a period where Vietnam was relatively closed to those outside the Soviet bloc. The image of the two dancers is more a shorthand for culture, the *Apsara* is unmistakably Khmer, the conical hat and *Ao Dai* equally identifiable throughout Southeast Asia as Vietnamese. That the artwork has elements of an occidental heritage appears unimportant in this stamp, instead perhaps, the message is a balance between unity or sisterhood and (for the Vietnamese audience) equality of Vietnamese beauty with the Khmer *Apsara*.

Broadening the investigation of Vietnamese postage stamps to look at overall patterns, one can see many of the same tropes already encountered in the study of PRK stamps. Flora and Fauna, dinosaurs, sports and infrastructure development are primary sources of artwork. Looking at Vietnamese stamps in relation to some key events in Cambodia turns up some interesting observations. During November 1978, Vietnamese postage stamps depicted a series of military themed artistic offerings. This series includes stamps commemorating medals given to soldiers injured in combat, then individual stamps showing tanks, the navy and air forces. When taken in context with the situation on the border between DK and Vietnam, these militaristic stamps show how the Vietnamese government utilized “banal nationalism” to promote strength and unity for the invasion of Cambodia that began in December 1978.



Source: <https://colnect.com/en/stamps/list/country/8150-Vietnam/year/1989>

Figure 9

Another key date in the relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam is September 1989, when the Vietnamese troops and “advisors” began to withdraw *en masse*. In January of 1989, Vietnam released a postage stamp devoid of any Vietnamese imagery. Instead, to begin the year

of military withdrawal from ‘Vietnam’s *Vietnam*’, a completely Khmer centric piece of art was commissioned (Fig 9). This stamp is rich in imagery and is titled 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Cambodia’s National Day. The imposed “National Day” had very little to do with Cambodia as it celebrates the invasion/liberation by Vietnam. This stamp speaks directly to a local Vietnamese audience to enhance the belief that Cambodians were not only grateful but actively celebrated the arrival of Vietnamese forces in 1979. By using only recognizably Khmer images this postage stamp infers that after 10 years of war and occupation, Cambodia can now stand alone - gone are the Vietnamese standing side by side, gone are the joined flags. The Cambodian forces are now uniformed, armed, inclusive of women and guarding the workers picking the harvest. There are undeniable elements of modernity and progression in how Cambodia is being depicted in this 1989 stamp. Angkor is present but distant, on the horizon almost fading. Angkor had served a purpose in the banal nationalism of stamps and banknotes during the 1980s. As a symbol, Vietnam had used Angkor to bind what remained of Khmer culture.

Unlike Alison Rowley’s identification of postage stamps being used in a drive to encourage literacy in the newly formed Soviet Union, there is no data to link the PRK’s postage stamps to any broader educational impetus. What is more intriguing when looking at Cambodia is how Rowley identifies the international spread of stamps and how “pro-Communist propaganda” that should have fell outside the boundaries of acceptability beyond the Soviet Union passed un restricted simply because it was on a stamp. When one takes a broad view of the stamps created by the PRK, Laos and Vietnam one can see obvious parallels with the Soviet Union, where stamps rich in socialist propaganda, offer a medium to promote the legitimacy and vibrancy of communism in Southeast Asia. As the postage system inside Cambodia during the 1980s barely functioned one should see the PRK government understanding postage stamps as an unfiltered channel to disseminate political messages to the outside world. Where the PRK in particular deviated from the promotion of communist ideological images was the use of Angkorian heritage. Rowley’s investigation of Soviet Stamps from 1917-1941 makes no mention of promoting Russia or any of the Soviet regions distant past. Instead Rowley binds the Soviet states choice of images with a desire to promote Russian culture and modernity as being “part of an overall civilizing mission” relegating other parts of the Soviet Union as backwards.<sup>110</sup> Both

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 143.

the PRK and Vietnam had no such issue with promoting a distant pre-revolutionary past, but did ensure the message was tempered by modernity and the correct political line.

## THE ART OF BANKNOTES UNDER THE PRK

An obvious next avenue of enquiry into how the PRK state utilized Angkorian artistic themes within its 'banal nationalism' is currency. Banknotes and coinage do not change as frequently as postage stamps, thus one has a smaller pool of data from which to extract an analysis. Once again it appears currency has slipped under the academic radar in terms of scholarly inquiry in the field of Cambodian studies. The Khmer Rouge famously eradicated currency from DK and blew up the national bank in Phnom Penh during their chaotic expulsion of people and symbolic anchors to the past in April 1975. One of the many small details that show how unplanned DK was is the fact that the regime had currency printed and ready for circulation prior to April 1975 only for these banknotes to remain unused as policy changed. This DK currency is still visible online and occasionally rears its head in both original (rare) and copied (common) forms at the Russian Market as a curio for tourists to purchase. In the case of the PRK, the communist regime was forced to implement elements of capitalism to begin the process of state reconstruction alongside more traditional Marxist concepts. Part of this reconstruction was banking and developing a monetary system. According to Jean-Michel Filippi of the Phnom Penh post, the newly created Riel currency was printed in Moscow and introduced on the 20<sup>th</sup> of march 1980.<sup>111</sup> The period between January 1979 and March of 1980 according to Filippi, was bridged by the use of the Vietnamese Dong and Thai Bhat.<sup>112</sup> Paul Cummings notes how during his visits to Cambodia starting in 1983 "nobody wanted the Vietnamese Dong" he and his clients used US dollars.<sup>113</sup> This is common today, most countries with an unstable currency accept the US dollar but during this period where Cambodia was under the yoke of Vietnam and the Soviet Union the use of the dollar is surprising and rarely discussed in the historiography. Research on banknotes is greatly helped by The National Bank of Cambodia who have added a gallery of past bank

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<sup>111</sup> Jean-Michel Filippi, "The Strange Adventure of the Cambodian Currency," *The Phnom Penh Post*, March 16, 2012.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Paul Cummings (Personal Interview June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018).

notes to their website.<sup>114</sup> In a similar way to postage stamps, a visit to the Russian Market can also turn up actual banknotes (Fig 5).



Source: Personal Photograph Phnom Penh November 2017.

Figure 5

According to The National Bank of Cambodia, the PRK only issued new banknotes on two occasions, 1980 and 1987. Though curiously, the 1980 banknotes show 1979 as their date of issue which is perhaps an attempt to show a continuity with the establishment of the PRK government beginning in 1979 (Fig 6). More people come into daily contact with currency than postage stamps. This makes the national art chosen for currency vital in understanding how a



Source: Personal Collection

Figure 6

regime views itself and its national project more broadly. Reading the art of the banknotes of the PRK shows a clear and consistent use of Angkorian themes. The 0.2 Riel note (Fig 7) is an example of Angkorian themes being used by the PRK but not necessarily the temples themselves. This bank note, part of the initial 1980 issue, shows a central image of the PRK coat

<sup>114</sup> [https://www.nbc.org.kh/english/about\\_the\\_bank/previously\\_used\\_banknotes.php](https://www.nbc.org.kh/english/about_the_bank/previously_used_banknotes.php)

of arms radiating outwards. What is more interesting in terms of Angkorian art is the use of the Naga balustrades that bookend the central image. The seven-headed cobra or Naga as it is known in Hindu mythology appears time and again at Angkor. The long central causeway to Angkor Wat has a Naga balustrade as do many of the Angkorian temples (Fig 8). Along with protection and fertility, the Naga in Hindu mythology also represent rebirth. This rebirth element to the mythology adds to the symbolism of using the Naga for the PRK who positioned themselves as forging the rebirth of Cambodia after the destructive DK period.



Source: Personal Collection  
Figure 7



Source: Personal Photograph Angkor Wat 2017  
Figure 8

The Naga balustrade returns on the 0.5 Riel note, this time more subtly crowning the top of the image, underlining the Khmer script (Fig 9). The 0.5 Riel note has a parallel with the postage stamp from 1986 showing the Bayon and the Soviet airplane (Fig 5). The awkward marriage of modernity and heritage is indicated on the 0.5 Riel note through an image of progress and industrialization. This banknote forgoes the common thematic approach chosen for many of the

PRK banknotes, scenes of Angkor or pastoral vistas of traditional Cambodian life. Instead, the artistic choice is of rather optimistic mechanized progress. The banknote visible in figure 9 shows what appears to be a passenger train moving through lush fields past electricity pylons. In 1979, and the early part of the 1980s the train service in Cambodia was, at the most optimistic interpretation of the word, functional. The Khmer Rouge hierarchy used the train to flee the Vietnamese invasion in January 1979, taking a train from Phnom Penh to Battambang. Reports of the trains during the 1980s are scarce and, like most of the infrastructure, was at best suffering from neglect. The image on the banknote from 1979 suggests a train service fit for comfortable passenger travel. The depiction of electricity pylons is also problematic if one attempts to mesh the image with actual events. Even in contemporary Cambodia the sight of a row of electricity pylons in the rural heartland of Cambodia is quite rare. In 1979 and throughout the 1980s electricity in Phnom Penh was extremely erratic. One can safely assume that electrification in the countryside was not as complete as this image appears to show.



Source: Personal Collection  
Figure 9

The inclusion of an image of a train and the electricity pylons should be viewed as a message that the PRK intended to bring peace, order and modernity to Cambodia. In a similar way to showing an airplane soaring over Angkor, these artistic choices by the PRK show the understanding of ‘banal nationalism’. Everyday art and the art of the fledgling bureaucratic system are useful tools in imagining the nation, or in the case of the PRK, the potential of the nation.



Source: Personal Collection  
Figure 10

The 5 Riel note has a mixed message in its artistic statements that show both the striving for modernity and a subtle use of image manipulation on the part of the regime (Fig 10). The front of the 5 Riel note shows a typical communist image, constructed with a thin veneer of local Khmer sensibilities. The artist is attempting to depict Cambodian socialist society, where a member of the armed forces (crucially in a uniform, to differentiate from the Khmer Rouge black pajama's) stands alongside a factory worker, a female agricultural worker laden with bushels of rice, and what could be a teacher. This image appears highly influenced by Soviet art, as there is no member of the Buddhist Sangha. As Jean-Michel Filippi traced the origins of the PRK banknotes to Moscow, it's interesting to see how religion is not present in any of the banknotes issued by the regime, yet at the fore of the initial postage stamps. The image of the four members of the PRK society would not look out of place in any communist regimes art and so appears to have a Soviet origin both literally and artistically. The fact that the figures stand in front of towering smoke stacks and factories again hints at the hypothetical elements of the PRK program rather than realistically, especially in 1979. Angkorian imagery makes an appearance in this image through the usage of the borders where typical Angkorian volute scrolls adorn either side of the image. These artistic elements frame the central image offering the viewer the chance to glimpse socialist modernity through a window of Angkorian architecture, further linking the regime to the past and offering a vision of the future. The reverse of the 5 Riel note shows Phnom Penh's Independence Monument as the central image. Once again, the frame of the image is Angkorian but on this side, the artists have expanded the volutes to incorporate columns. This type of decorated supporting column is common to many of the Angkorian temples, and would be instantly recognizable as Khmer to a local audience.

Any investigation into the thematic choices of the PRK banknotes cannot ignore the 10 Riel note. This denomination contains a highly amusing and almost cartoon interpretation of the seven headed Naga (Fig 12).



Source: Personal Collection  
Figure 11

The central image is classically Cambodian; workers picking pepper from a Kampot pepper tree. There is a serenity to the image, a notion of normalcy. This is not an image that projects modernity, like electricity or the railway, rather it simply reminds Cambodians of life prior to DK and announces a return to such a simpler, peaceful way of life under the PRK. The intriguing Angkorian element is the Naga that frames the central image (Fig 12).



Source: Personal Collection  
Figure 12

This 1987 representation of the seven-headed mythical cobra appears to have been interpreted by the artist as more cartoon-like than the usual image of a fearsome guardian spirit. One can clearly view the large eyes and soft lines of this Naga. The most striking detail is how the Naga appears to be scared of something, it is in the process of rearing back but not aggressively.

The highest denomination of monetary bill under the PRK was a 50 Riel banknote. This banknote has the most Angkorian images of any banknote issued by the PRK (Fig 13).



Source: Personal Collection

Figure 13

One side of the 50 Riel note depicts Angkor Wat in a curiously three-quarter profile, which allows the artists the ability to include details rarely seen in artistic depictions of the temple. The inner courtyard's staircases and outer galleries can all be seen. The stonework is more realistically weatherworn giving an appearance of realism and decay. The artist depicts the temple from above, hinting that the image was based off an aerial photograph. A single Naga frames one side of the central image resting on a robust column. The reverse image shows a depiction of one of the many serene faces of the Bayon temple. Once again, the artist has depicted the stonework in a realistic decayed form where one ear is clearly absent. Both images on this 50 Riel note have the appearance of being based on photographs perhaps supplied to the Soviet Union.

Banknotes, unlike postage stamps, are designed, used and should be understood primarily through a local lens. Postage stamps are created with the purpose of travel, either domestically or internationally. As the local postal service during the PRK was erratic due to war, underfunding and a chronic lack of infrastructure inherent within every aspect of the regime, postage stamps were utilized to appeal to an international audience. This audience can be understood as either Soviet Bloc friendly states, where diplomats utilized the postal service, or as the vast network of philatelists who sought out stamps at fairs and exhibitions. At first one is understandably wary of thinking the PRK postal service was able to exhibit stamps to the philately community, but collection sheets were made available for this exact purpose. Regarding banknotes, every issued note had Khmer script, the coat of arms of the PRK, some degree of pastoral life, and Angkorian art. The archives do not identify who designed these banknotes, or the process of choosing the images. The viewer is left to interpret the art as just that government art. This allows a greater

fluidity in interpretation; one is forced to grasp the message on a more conceptual level than traditional archival documentation. This does not diminish the importance of state constructed, artistic “banal nationalism” during the PRK period, rather it enforces how a repetitive message of stability and normality became framed through a lens of Angkorian heritage throughout the life of the regime.

## **BANAL NATIONALISM DURING THE CAMBODIAN REVOLUTION 1975-1989**

The understanding of a regime’s “banal nationalism” can act as a conduit for investigating ‘bottom up’ and ‘top down’ history. In the case of the PRK postage stamps and banknotes were introduced at such an early stage that they demand closer attention. As the regime ripened during the mid to late 1980s and the population moved back into urban areas, public art became more overtly propagandist and on a larger scale. These posters and billboards are now largely lost to historians but we do have smaller aspects such as stamps and banknotes of the regime’s attempt to recast Cambodia post DK. Donald M. Reid makes a passionate appeal for postage stamps to be viewed as valuable source material for historians claiming stamps are “bearers of symbols as part of a system of communications”.<sup>115</sup> This is a vital point as symbols allows the literate and illiterate equal powers of association and recognition. Post DK levels of literacy are not as low as one might imagine. One consistently hears the general discussions around the Khmer Rouge and the authoritative government guides around Teol Sleng museum in Phnom Penh, about how Pol Pots’ clique abolished all aspects of modernity including children’s welfare and education. This is simply not true. Alongside the hundreds of official biographies and reports still visible at Teol Sleng, “The Parties Four-Year Plan to Build Socialism in all Fields” released in 1976 illuminates how DK viewed education.<sup>116</sup> This document is one of the most valuable pieces of evidence on how DK saw its future goals and where its priorities were. Part 3 point 2 discusses education in

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<sup>115</sup> Donald M. Reid, "The Symbolism of Postage Stamps: A Source for the Historian," *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 2 (1984): 225.

<sup>116</sup> David Chandler, Ben Kiernan, Chanthou Boua, and Yale Center for International and Area Studies. *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976-1977*. 36.

detail and lays out the how DK looked to achieve greater levels of literacy; it is worth viewing in full.

- Primary education—general subjects – three years
  - Secondary education
    - i. General subjects – three years
    - ii. Technical subjects – three years
- Tertiary education in technical subjects – three years
  - A. Daily Education Methods
    - Half study, half work for material production
- In primary education, it is important to give attention to abolishing illiteracy among the population.
  - Set Plan for the Educational System
    - Primary education: from 1977, onwards
- Secondary education especially in the technical part, must simultaneously begin to some extent from 1977.

In our education system, there are no examinations and no certificates; it is a system of learning through the collective and in the concrete movement of the socialist revolution and the building of socialism in specific bases, especially in the co-operatives, factories, and military units.<sup>117</sup>

Without dwelling on the DK period, it is important to address how the regime placed value on education, though revolutionary party-based education; but the eradication of illiteracy was still considered important enough to be part of the initial four-year plan put forward by the Khmer Rouge leadership. The success of the plan in terms of literacy gains is hard to gauge, but it is safe to assume like all the aspects of the four-year plan, such as increased rice yields, that the optimism of 1976 quickly gave way to the stark reality of internal strife, food shortages and conflict. By looking at the Khmer rouge plan for education, it allows one to gain a better understanding of why propaganda in the post-DK years was primarily image based.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid 113.

Margaret Slocomb devotes considerable space to unpacking the ways in which the PRK promoted education and their relative success.<sup>118</sup> What becomes clear through the work of Slocomb is the often-heavy handed forcing of Socialism into the classroom and collective rural gatherings. The Campaign to Eradicate Illiteracy began the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, 1980, with the help of the Bulgarian government.<sup>119</sup> Slocomb identifies how the campaign to end illiteracy by the PRK matched a general policy within the socialist world that placed “education and literacy in particular” as a “high priority”.<sup>120</sup> The relative success of the PRK’s drive to end illiteracy is tricky to determine; Slocomb notes, with a disappointing tone, how ten years after the end of the PRK period, adult literacy in Cambodia was at 68.7 percent. Where the PRK differed from DK in terms of messages radiating from the centre is the skillful use of imagery to convey a message. The PRK leadership knew an image could permeate through the boundaries of illiteracy. The regime utilized “banal nationalism” to hammer home key messages through poster campaigns, public address systems, newspapers, cartoons and postage stamps and banknotes. The most powerful and transcendent image was that of Angkor and Angkorian heritage. Angkor supplied an instantly recognizable Khmer identity narrative that the PRK mined throughout the life of the regime.

## CLASSICAL CAMBODIAN DANCE, A TOOL OF REVOLUTION?

A common Angkorian image used on the postage stamps of the PRK is the *Apsara* the mythical nymph like dancers depicted on temple walls and statuary and used to form the imagery for classical Khmer dance. Using an *Apsara* is a handy shortcut to depict Khmerness. Today the *Apsara* is used by airlines, tourist companies, restaurants and sits alongside Angkor as a ubiquitous symbol of Khmer culture and pride. Without dwelling too long on the gendered politics of the *Apsara* images in modern Cambodia there is an unmistakable air of orientalism around the continued appropriation of the gently swaying dancers aimed at entertaining western audiences. Panivong Norindr’s work on the sexualised framing of the *Apsara* through the lens of

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<sup>118</sup> Slocomb, 166.

<sup>119</sup> Slocomb, 168.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

a western constructed image of Cambodia's Angkorian past, is a valuable insight into this process of orientalizing the Khmer female.<sup>121</sup>

It was Sihanouk who first saw the attraction the *Apsara* dancers had to western visitors. Sihanouk enlarged the royal ballet and ensured guests would always view a performance either at the palace or Angkor. The royal ballet became a vital tool in the promotion of Cambodia as a peaceful exotic and ancient kingdom post-independence. The dancers of the royal ballet are promoted as living *bas-reliefs* especially when performing at Angkor, offering a tangible link between modern Cambodia and historical Angkor. As problematic as Angkor was to Cambodia's revolutionary timeline the *Apsara* and royal ballet are equally difficult. The obvious exoticism, sensuality and promotion of the monarchy makes the ballet a difficult appropriation for the PRK, so it's fascinating to see how ballet formed a vital cog in the construction of Kampuchean identity during the 1980s.

It was Auguste Rodin who famously stated after viewing the Royal Cambodian Ballet accompanying King Sisowath to the Colonial Exhibition in Marseille in 1906: "The friezes of Angkor were coming to life before my very eyes".<sup>122</sup> Rodin's raptured and, frankly, worrying remarks about the "tiny" and "seductive" royal dancers existed within an orientalist colonial moment, where the Royal Ballet was beginning to become symbolically bonded to the carvings of *Apsara* at Angkor. "Dance is animated architecture," Rodin wrote after one of the Ballet's performances perfectly captured the intended impact desired by the exhibition's curators.<sup>123</sup> Penny Edwards' work on *Cambodge* traces the "performing" of Angkor to King Sisowath's reign and the Colonial Exhibition of 1906 where French desire for the exotic brought Sisowath's dancers to the *metropole*. The hybridity of the Royal Ballet is encapsulated by their patron Thiounn, a Cambodian court administrator who, according to Edwards was prone to extolling the merits of the protectorate and put forth a program that included the arts to guarantee French interest and favour.<sup>124</sup> Viewing the *Apsara* dancers during the 1920's both in Phnom Penh and at Angkor, the ever literary Robert J. Casey added to Rodin's insistence that a lineage existed

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<sup>121</sup> Panivong Norindr "The Fascination for Angkor Wat and the Ideology of the Visible" in Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier, and Tim Winter Eds. *Expressions of Cambodia* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>122</sup> "Rodin and Dance." *Asian Art*, October 31, 2016. <http://asianartnewspaper.com/?p=1907>.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Edwards, 39.

between the 13<sup>th</sup> century carvings and King Sisowaths's contemporary Royal Ballet.<sup>125</sup> Replacing the grace and undulating curvature of Rodin's eroticized drawings, Casey integrated photographs into his narrative of lost cities and "wraiths" of a forgotten people.<sup>126</sup> Casey devotes a chapter to the performance of dance in Cambodia and is keeping with the general narrative of over-substantiated history claiming that "the modern actresses are then the descendants of the temple girls".<sup>127</sup> Casey utilizes photography to add weight to his belief that the Royal Ballet is part of a lineage linking modern Cambodians with the "lost" creators of Angkor, captioning a photograph of three dancers standing beside *Apsara* carvings at Angkor with the following: "Little ladies trip down the terraces restoring life to the cold nymphs of the bas-reliefs...". Casey concludes his eclectic discussion on the *Apsara* by comparing modern Cambodians with temple art stating, "The girls of Siem Reap and the vestals of the temples are sisters...And only the negligible calendar lies between them".<sup>128</sup>

Both Rodin and Casey fell under the hypnotic spell of their own preconceived orientalist interpretations of the Khmer dancers. Both wanted to see Angkor come alive and become the embodiment of the history placed upon it by the French protectorate administration. Casey's photograph of the three dancers awkwardly posing in front of Angkor's carved *Apsara* is part of the foundation of what Panivong Norindr identifies as haunting and fixing modern Cambodian arts into a mythological construct of royal Angkor.<sup>129</sup> Dance and performance are perhaps even more challenging for the historian than the artwork of banknotes or stamps. So much of dance performance is subjective and begs a multitude of interpretations. The space inhabited by classical Khmer dance, a term itself fraught with ambiguity, exists at the convergence of history, folklore, culture and art. As Christine Su has discussed, the *Apsara* of Angkor has become a lodestone for broad discussions on gender and Khmer culture.<sup>130</sup> Su's use of "Khmerness" allows a wide space into which dance, art and folklore can exist in a symbiotic state and offers a useful hook onto which the PRK's understanding and creation of culture can be presented. One of the

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<sup>125</sup> Robert J. Casey, *Four Faces of Siva: With Illustrations from Photographs* (Delhi: Seema Publications, 1979).155.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>129</sup> Norindr "The Fascination for Angkor Wat and the Ideology of the Visible". 64

<sup>130</sup> Christine Su "Becoming Cambodian: Ethnicity and the Vietnamese in Kampuchea" in Paul, R. Spickard, *Race, and Nation: Ethnic Systems in the Modern World*. (New York: Routledge, 2004).

few times Ben Kiernan directly investigated the PRK at length was in 1982 in the article “Kampuchea 1979-1981: National Rehabilitation in the Eye of an International Storm”.<sup>131</sup> In this article Kiernan attempts to “review developments in Kampuchea since the PRK’s foundation” based on personal and secondary sources.<sup>132</sup> Kiernan rarely addresses Angkor in any of his works on Cambodia, and this article doesn’t change this pattern, but culture is discussed and it is in this discussion where Kiernan makes the following observation:

Traditional Khmer culture, theatre and dance were suppressed and largely destroyed during the Pol Pot period, and one of the most striking features of Kampuchea in 1980-81 was their revival and increasingly wide diffusion with state backing.<sup>133</sup>

For a “striking” element of the PRK’s attempts at national rebuilding, it is thus hard to understand why so few scholars have looked beyond the obvious awkward infusion of Communist dogma and thematic intrusions in dance, both classical and folk, along with theatre. Scholars that have engaged with the PRK period, such as Slocomb and Gottesman, rarely discuss culture or the arts. Perhaps it is due to the difficulty in adapting artistic performance to the *lingua franca* of academic history, or perhaps the void is representative of a wider dismissal of performance over traditional document-based investigations.

The Royal Ballet of Cambodia that traditionally incorporates the *Apsara* dances into its cannon did not simply fade from national consciousness during DK - it was eliminated. Interviewed for the PBS television network in 2015, a classical Khmer dancer and survivor of the killing fields Charya Burt claimed that 90% of Cambodia’s artists were killed during DK.<sup>134</sup> The Royal Ballet’s most famous performer, Sihanouk’s eldest daughter Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, is often the basis for artistic interpretations of Khmer classical dance and by default what Su notes as the modern understanding of Khmer chaste beauty. Buppha Devi left Phnom Penh in 1973 and only returned with her father in 1991. Prior to leaving Cambodia, Buppha Devi was the culmination of what began under her grandfather King Sisawath and the first patron of the ballet, Queen Kossamak. This process merged the Angkorian relief carvings with occidental ballet

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<sup>131</sup> Ben Kiernan, "Kampuchea 1979–81: National Rehabilitation in the Eye of an International Storm," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 1982.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 182.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>134</sup> Charya Burt, interviewed for The Public Broadcast Station April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgkTs\\_NlY5E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgkTs_NlY5E)

forms to create a stylized performance art. Sihanouk understood the appeal of the constructed image of the *Apsara* and his own daughter to those looking for a certain ‘exotic’ image of Cambodia. This led to the princess becoming a part of any diplomatic visit or grand social occasion in Cambodia or alongside her father on state visits. Although not present in Cambodia during the PRK period, Buppha Devi did join Sihanouk briefly on the Thai border in one of the many refugee camps and began teaching dance.<sup>135</sup>

The *Apsara* images presented a challenge to the PRK regime. In terms of gender depiction, the regime tended to present a more neutral appearance for its revolutionary artwork. As befitting Soviet inspired public art, women depicted in government artwork of the PRK were constructive members of society, often shown as factory workers, teachers or farmers - never simply passive or decorative, or more significantly, royal. The banknotes and postage stamps created by the PRK are testaments to this placing of women in roles where they are not secondary or subservient to men but instead equals. Wendy Z. Goldman describes the process of depicting women in the Soviet Union in the 1930s as an attempt to “regender” traditional roles within Soviet society.<sup>136</sup> The PRK did not attempt to “regender” Cambodian society but did attempt a slightly more neutral gender policy towards traditional occupations and depictions in art. Article seven of the 1981 Constitution of the Popular Republic of Kampuchea states the desire for gender equality: “Men and women are equal in marriage and family”.<sup>137</sup> One would struggle to initially visualize how *Apsara* fit within a more gender-neutral society, but the PRK put both the carvings and interpretive dancers toward the fore of their cultural policies.

As early as 1980, the PRK began the process of establishing how many artists had survived DK and how best to situate classical dance into the national agenda. Radio broadcasts urged surviving artists to come to Phnom Penh so the government could establish where to begin the process of re-instigating arts into the fabric of society.<sup>138</sup> According to Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, who was part of the first wave of post-DK dancers, the PRK government organized a national

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<sup>135</sup> Lucretia Stewart “*Dance of the Gods*” interview with Princess Buppha Devi (October 20<sup>th</sup> 2010). <http://www.devata.org/dance-of-the-gods-interview-with-cambodian-princess-buppha-devi/#.WhG7PsYZORs>

<sup>136</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin’s Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). 3

<sup>137</sup> Constitution of the Popular Republic of Kampuchea. 1981.

<sup>138</sup> *Rehabilitation of Cambodian Performing Arts : Final Project Report, Preservation and Promotion of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Cambodia* (UNESCO Phnom Penh, 2002). <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001492/149285eo.pdf>

arts festival in 1980 held in Phnom Penh's Bassac Theatre primarily to help determine how many artists were alive in Cambodia.<sup>139</sup> Tracking down information on this festival is difficult. The period 1979-1980 is generally known as a time of flux where the PRK struggled to gain control militarily and economically; documentation and source materials are rare from this period unless they were part of a broader propaganda campaign. An arts festival, however important, appears to have little surviving source materials for the historian. The National archives of Cambodia have one document translated into English that is an indicator of how quickly the regime looked to re-instigate traditional Khmer arts titled "Programs of the First Festival of All Over the Country".<sup>140</sup> The use of English on a Cambodian government document is historically unusual. One might imagine French being an ideal tool for Vietnamese and Khmer to communicate and anecdotally one hears it was a convenient bridge between the PRK and the Vietnamese "advisers", but English with its wider range of understanding especially within the Soviet bloc was increasingly common during the PRK period. This document contains proof of the importance the PRK placed upon Angkorian culture and heritage during the period of national reconstruction.

The document begins with a single sentence all in capitals separated from the bulk of the text. When compared to the Khmer text of the same document (on the reverse) the same sentence is equally lifted above the rest of the text. This would indicate the importance of this sentence. The sentence reads "Angkor is the shining period of Kampuchea".<sup>141</sup> The document proceeds to note how "More than one year ago, after the liberation, The Ministry of Information, Press and Culture has reconstructed in the cultural and the domain as the word the art and culture are the national soul". The English version of the document is of course translated by the PRK and so the English lacks some normative linguistic element's. What is important is that this document was circulated in 1980 during the often turbulent first twelve months of the regime, with the aim of bringing together artists from all over Cambodia. The widespread call to artists can be viewed in the text as provinces are denoted with a time of presentation in the overall running order of the festival. For instance, Takeo province and Kratie are allotted the afternoon of 6/5/80 from

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<sup>139</sup> Rashaan Meneses, "The Near Extinction of Cambodian Classical Dance," UCLA Center for Southeast Asian Studies, May 7, 2004, , May 7, 2004, <http://www.international.ucla.edu/cseas/article/10982>.

<sup>140</sup> The Peoples Republic of Kampuchea, Programs of the First Festival of All Over the Country, 5th May 1980, C-375, National Archives of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Kingdom of Cambodia.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

14.00pm to 17.00pm.<sup>142</sup> The fact that the provinces such as Preah Vihear are sending representation indicates a belief that the central authority maintained a certain level of security over the distant territories close to the Thai border. During the entire period of the PRK, this was a fallacy. The Khmer Rouge operated inside Preah Vihear province right up until the mid-nineties. The festival sets out to “show the essential duty of Kampuchean people in reconstructing” and calls on Kampucheans to “diffuse the Kampuchean art, culture and civilization”.<sup>143</sup>

The image chosen as an artistic accompaniment to the text or perhaps a seal of legitimacy is a scroll with some very faded Khmer script. Unusually for the PRK, especially during this formative moment, the document does not show the coat of arms of the regime or the national flag. Both were established by 1980 and were clearly used on all postage stamps and banknotes. More curiously, the image or seal only appears on the English version of the document. The Khmer version is just script. The seal has a decorative rosette on the upper part that forms the most striking image on the document. The image chosen to purvey both legitimacy and (borrowing terminology from Christine Su) *Khmerness* is an *Apsara*. The version of *Apsara* chosen appears to be the Bayon type (Fig 2) and closely matches a singular version of the ‘overlay’ stamp from 1979 (Fig 1). The difference is the *Apsara* within the rosette is encircled by a radiating border, not the typical curved temple lintel that is usually associated with surrounding the carved Bayon *Apsara* and their artistic interpretations. The reason for including an *Apsara* on this festival program is, one would imagine, to inspire memories of culture and Angkorian heritage. The *Apsara* should also be part of the PRK constructing a narrative of guardianship of Angkor. At this early stage of the regime, few outside of Phnom Penh would have known or understood the flag or coat of arms of the PRK, but due to the position of Angkorian art within Cambodia, the use of an *Apsara* had a recognizable and distinctly Khmer message to counter the anti-Vietnamese propaganda emanating from the remnants of the Khmer Rouge. The artists chosen to create the rosette could have chosen Angkor Wat for the central image, but by choosing an *Apsara*, a further level of message is revealed. By settling on an *Apsara*, the regime is directly appealing for dancers to begin the process of rebuilding the Angkorian art form. It was

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

this document, or one similar, that brought Sophiline Cheam Shapiro back to Phnom Penh and back to The School of Fine Arts.

The PRK emphasis on reconstructing the arts is something rarely mentioned in Cambodian scholarship. Both Gottesman and Slocomb make passing references but largely leave this area quiet. This lack of academic focus on the arts does a serious disservice to the many individuals who worked tirelessly during the 1980s under harsh conditions to re-establish what they and the PRK government believed was vital to any future Cambodian nation. The end of speeches and policy addresses during both the DK and the PRK period created a moment or space into which the regimes would hammer home key slogans about their revolution and stance. The festival document does not disappoint and contains two slogans in particular that show just how vital the PRK culture and Angkorian heritage was: “Kampuchean culture last for ever and so does Kampuchean soul” and “Long–live Kampuchean culture and Kampuchean soul”.<sup>144</sup> These two slogans complete a text that began by extolling the “glorious civilization of Kampuchean people in Angkor time” that had “fallen down in the sea of blood and tears by Pol Pot clique”.<sup>145</sup> The message in this early public document issued by the PRK is clear; Angkorian culture is the wellspring of the Cambodian national identity and, crucially, it is the PRK who are the sole custodians of Angkor, and it is uniquely within their power to return this culture back to the people.

Individuals such as Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, Cheay Samy, Chheng Phon and Proeung Chhieng all figure largely in the resurrection of Cambodian classical dance during the PRK period. Cheay Samy’s story is particularly poignant and characterizes the confusion of the early 1980s in Cambodia. Cheay Samy grew up in and around the royal palace learning the classical *Apsara* dances under the tutelage of Princess Sisawath Soumphady who had danced for Rodin in France.<sup>146</sup> Cheay Samy stated in 1993 that of her generation of dancers only three survived the cultural iconoclastic purges of DK.<sup>147</sup> In a seemingly bizarre twist to Cheay Samy’s biography, she is the sister-in-law of Pol Pot, a fact she only discovered working in a Khmer Rouge labour

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 1998). 6

<sup>147</sup> Judith Coburn, "Dancing Back: Decimated by the Khmer Rouge, Bruised by Political Chaos and Threatened by a Frenzy of Modern Materialism, Will the Soul of an Ancient Culture Survive?" *The Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 1993, [http://articles.latimes.com/1993-09-26/magazine/tm-39064\\_1\\_khmer-rouge/9.2](http://articles.latimes.com/1993-09-26/magazine/tm-39064_1_khmer-rouge/9.2)

camp in 1978 when a cadre displayed a photograph of brother number one.<sup>148</sup> In 1980, Cheay Samy joined the PRK's Ministry of Culture and began travelling Cambodia looking for dancers and artists to begin the slow process of rebuilding a dance troupe.

Chheng Phon was one of the first artists to arrive back in Phnom Penh in 1979 entering the school of dance to find structural ruins and ancient, intricate costumes and instruments destroyed or stolen by the Khmer Rouge.<sup>149</sup> As early as 1981 when Chheng Phon became Minister of Information and Culture for the PRK government, the standing council of the regime decided Communist revolutionary slogans could be woven into the traditional songs that accompanied both classical and folk dances.<sup>150</sup> This decision to incorporate PRK revolutionary slogans into folk and mythological narratives partially satisfied the few living dancers and singers, offering a chance to at least perform and teach. Robert Turnbull recounts the often fractious relationship between Chheng Phon's ministry and other departments of the PRK.<sup>151</sup> Turnbull interviewed Em Tiay, a dancer during the PRK, and noted how unnamed Cambodian officials sought to ban classical dancing due to its "royal origins" even pushing to stop barefoot dancing as it was deemed "unhygienic".<sup>152</sup> According to Turnbull, it was Chheng Phon who wove revolutionary lyrics into the performances arguing classical dance could be compatible with the regime's Marxist-Leninist line, and a vital tool in "national reconciliation".<sup>153</sup> An example of the sometimes clumsy shoehorning politics into Angkorian heritage is recounted by Chheng Phon who remembers changing the opening lines of the *Apsara* dance to reflect the political stance of the PRK adding the line "7<sup>th</sup> of January liberation day".<sup>154</sup>

Interviewed in 2009 as part of the Khmer Dance Project a digitized series of interviews stored as The New York Public Library, dancer and choreographer, Proeung Chhieng details the PRK period along with his own individual journey post DK.<sup>155</sup> Proeung Chhieng was friends with Chheng Phon since before 1975 and, considering the massive depletion in the artistic community

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid,7.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Robert Turnbull "A Burned Out Theatre: The State of Cambodia's Performing Arts" in Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier, and Tim Winter Eds. *Expressions of Cambodia* 134.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Proeung Chhieng "*Khmer Dance Project*." The Centre for Khmer Studies, Co-Produced by Anne Hendricks and Jerome Robbins The New York Public Library, New York, USA.  
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/53cc0780-3451-0131-246e-3c075448cc4b>

by 1979, he was a logical choice for the role of vice principal of Phnom Penh's School of Dance. The hardship of the early 1980s is recounted by Chheng Phon who identifies not only the lack of costumes and performers but during 1979, he was "paid only in rice or some soya sauce".<sup>156</sup> One of the reasons, aside from personal relationships, Proeung Chhieng was chosen by Chheng Phon was his broad knowledge of both classical dance and folk dance; this gave the newly established school the ability to offer the PRK both artistic disciplines through Proeung Chhieng's work. During the 2009 interview conducted in Phnom Penh, Proeung Chhieng identifies the difficulty with teaching classical dance during the 1980s. The insular courtly atmosphere of the Phnom Penh Royal Ballet during Sihanouk's reign created such a divide between the performers and the general lay public that interest in classical dance was slow to ignite during the 1980s. Unlike folk dances that had survived in the memory of the people, emphasizing everyday occurrences such as fishing and planting the *Apsara* court dances were, according to Proeung Chhieng "unknown to ordinary people".<sup>157</sup> The folkloric narratives of peasants struggling with the everyday events, love affairs and community were tropes more open to political adaptation than gentle intricate hand gestures of the royal ballet. This point of ease in which folk dance and theatre adapted to the parameters of the new regime is touched upon by Robert Turnbull who interviewed choreographer Pich Tum Kravel – the director responsible for *La Marche Nationale*, a "hybrid piece of political theatre glorifying the new regime".<sup>158</sup> *La Marche Nationale* successfully frames a traditional narrative with both anti-colonialism and fraternal friendship with Vietnam and Laos.<sup>159</sup> Classical *Apsara* dances allowed for little in terms of political statements, their mythologized foundation was as entertainment for the god-kings of Angkor. This did not stop the PRK attempting to politicize classical dance routines; Cheay Samy interviewed in 1989 recalled the adaptability of classical ballet with contemporary issues and political doctrine: "there were some songs about congratulation to communism" the former royal dancer exclaimed, "Dancers have always danced to encourage soldiers".<sup>160</sup> For Cheay Samy what was crucial was not the words of the songs, or the trappings dancers were forced to associate with, for Cheay Samy

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Turnbull, 134.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Judith Coburn, "Dancing Back: Decimated by the Khmer Rouge, Bruised by Political Chaos and Threatened by a Frenzy of Modern Materialism, Will the Soul of an Ancient Culture Survive?" *The Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 1993,

dancers had always entertained regardless of the political environment, it was the timeless movements and hand gestures that held the real legacy of the *Apsara*.

Proeung Chhieng utilized his personal knowledge of pre-DK Cambodia to begin the process of re-situating classical Angkorian dance within the PRK. He believed the way to integrate classical dance back into the national consciousness was by attracting a foreign audience who would, in turn, inspire Cambodians to learn the intricacies of the art form.<sup>161</sup> The process of Cambodia structuring its arts around orientalist preconditioned expectations echoes Sihanouk's use of his daughter Buppha Devi. Where Sihanouk, prior to 1970, used classical dance to hypnotize foreign dignitaries and legitimize his claims to the throne of Angkor, Prong Chhieng and Chheng Phon infused socialist markers to appeal to their Soviet bloc audience. East German footage of a classical dance performance at The School of Fine Arts during the early 1980s clearly shows the merging of classical antiquity and political agenda; the dancers carry fans with the flag of the PRK and the only two performers in elaborate costume stand at the rear in front of a stoic flag-bearing cadre.<sup>162</sup> This early footage appears to have replaced the usual elaborate painted backdrop of Angkor common in much of the pre-1970s performances with national flags. This change in backdrop could have been for financial reasons, such as a lack of artists to create scenery, but it also allowed the performers space to blend politics with art. By 1984, the performance of classical dance had, at least on special occasions, moved back to its pre-revolutionary stage of the royal palace. A candid photograph taken by Prashant Panjiar shows two dancers practicing a pose inside the royal palace (Fig 14).<sup>163</sup> The dancers appear natural and unaware of the camera as they share a moment. What one can see is the return of elaborate Angkorian themed scenery behind the dancers without a hint of politics. Visually unpacking this photograph, one can ascertain a loosening of restraints on the dancers. The photograph has an intimacy free from the rigidity usually found with classical Cambodian dance; Panjiar obviously enjoyed some freedom with his lens. Likewise, the setting of the royal palace returns the ballet to an environment Buppha Devi would have been familiar with. Paul Cummings proudly remembers sponsoring a night of classical dance performance at the Basaac Theatre for both his

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<sup>161</sup> Proeung Chhieng “*Khmer Dance Project*.” The Centre for Khmer Studies, Co-Produced by Anne Hendricks and Jerome Robbins The New York Public Library, New York, USA.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/53cc0780-3451-0131-246e-3c075448cc4b>

<sup>162</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbqD3KDG1Rc>

<sup>163</sup> Prashant Panjiar and Arindam Sen Gupta, *The Survivors, Kampuchea, 1984* (New Delhi: Published by Patriot Publishers, on Behalf of Indian Centre for Studies on Indo-China, 1984).

tourists and locals who came to watch the show.<sup>164</sup> Not only does this show what was available for tourists it also shows a certain degree of local entrepreneurial spirit, an aspect often left out of the historiography. Mr. Cummings notes how some degree of capitalism was noticeable in the PRK, markets were open, small food vendors were operating and things could be bought and sold. When compared to how strict the communist line was in Vietnam Mr. Cummings recalls feeling more freedom in the streets of Phnom Penh than in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City.

## A PALACE FIT FOR A REVOLUTION

The royal palace in Phnom Penh posed political and symbolic questions to the PRK government. Whereas during DK the palace was turned into a gilded cage for Sihanouk, where select guests could be taken to meet the most internationally recognized symbol of the revolution, the god-king turned cadre. During the PRK period, there was no king to inhabit the largest building in Phnom Penh.<sup>165</sup> In the 1980s the palace became a mere backdrop. The PRK used the many rooms and halls for political prestige. By situating ballet back in its natural environs ministers could promote the new Cambodia, where the present Marxist regime allowed for an interpretive version of the distant past. In 1987 Helen Jarvis observed how the Department of Conservation of Monuments had an office inside the palace grounds, and the world famous murals around the silver pagoda were in the process of restoration.<sup>166</sup> Paul Cummings states how the palace was on the guided tour of Phnom Penh, where it was introduced as “the former royal palace” negating any immediate association with Sihanouk.<sup>167</sup> By 1987 skills in architecture, archeology and art restoration had begun to re-appear through training programs with teams from India, Poland and the Soviet Union. What barely gets any recognition is if any Vietnamese scholars helped in this process. This is a strange anomaly as the country was awash with “advisors” at every level. In terms of the preservation of cultural heritage it appears

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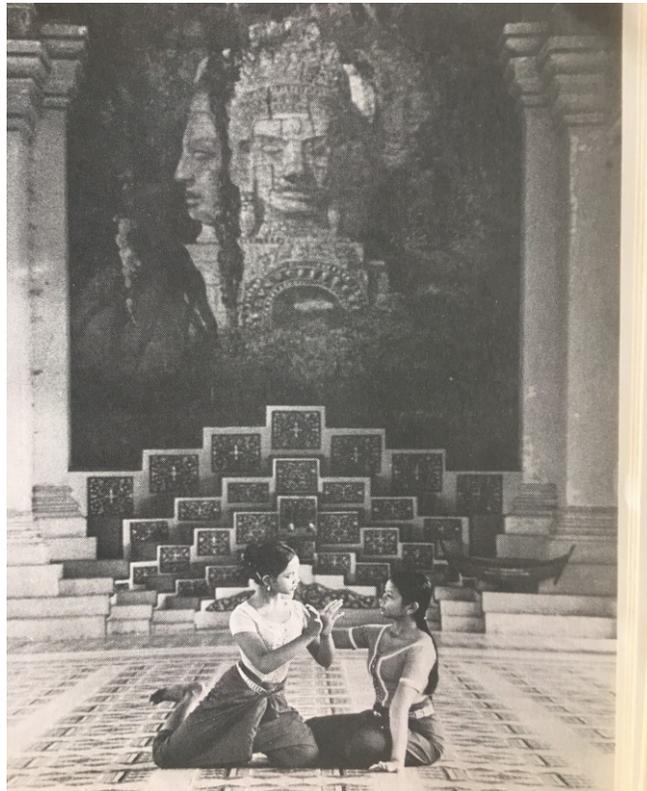
<sup>164</sup> Paul Cummings (Personal Interview June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018)

<sup>165</sup> It must be noted the PRK had flirted with enticing Sihanouk to become a symbolic head of the new state. There was a rescue plan for liberating Sihanouk from Phnom Penh during the invasion, which only failed because the DK leadership flew the king out of the capitol as the Vietnamese approached. It is interesting to consider how the PRK might have evolved if Sihanouk had remained and worked with the regime.

<sup>166</sup> Helen Jarvis, "Report on a Visit to Kampuchea in 1987," *International Library Review* 21, no. 3 (1989): 390.

<sup>167</sup> Paul Cummings (Personal Interview June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018)

Vietnam relied on outside assistance. Helen Jarvis included a report on classical dance in her report on the state of the national library in 1987. Jarvis met with Chheng Phon and watched a classical dance performance at the University of Fine Arts where she observed and listened to music “from the Angkor period”.<sup>168</sup> What is not mentioned by Jarvis is any semblance of political propaganda or communist line woven into the dance performance. Jarvis’s account of the classical dance recital matches with how Paul Cummings remembers such performances. Mr. Cummings did not see any overt political messages in the dance performances he witnessed, perhaps he notes there was some anti-Khmer Rouge sentiment but nothing directly political.<sup>169</sup> On the whole, Mr. Cummings believes the PRK government “downplayed” politics to make tourists feel more welcome.<sup>170</sup>



Students of the fine arts school practice at the Royal Palace Phnom Penh 1984

<http://www.livewireimages.com/SV/cambodia/index.html>

© prashant panjiar

Figure 14

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<sup>168</sup> Helen Jarvis, "Report on a Visit to Kampuchea in 1987, 391.

<sup>169</sup> Paul Cummings (Personal Interview June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018)

<sup>170</sup> Paul Cummings (Personal Interview June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018)

The traditional marriage of classical dance and the royal palace, so long a symbol of the kings' courtly life to the outside world, was beginning to frequently reappear during the mid-1980s. By 1986, even dance performances away from the palace showed a progression and easing of political doctrine. A public performance at Phnom Penh's University of Fine Arts filmed by the PRK during 1986 showing an *Apsara* dance, includes a painting and realistic three-dimensional backdrop of one of the carved galleries of Angkor Wat.<sup>171</sup> The dancers thus appear animated bas-reliefs stepping from the past onto the stage. The performance is timeless, the costumes match those one can see today in similar performances. What is not visible is any reference to politics; by 1986, largely through the tireless work of individuals such as Proeung Chhieng and Chea Samy, the *Apsara* dance was visually back to the appearance of Buppha Devi's 1960s levels of artistry. The footage from 1986 matches what Jarvis observed in 1987, where the dance performances seemed no longer to require an ideological underpinning, at least for tourists.

The process of establishing the *Apsara* dancers as symbols linking the PRK to a lineage that incorporates Angkor can be seen in the profusion of *Apsara* visible in literature, art and performance. A photograph included within Jacques Bekaert's *Cambodian Diaries* shows the PRK Politburo of Heng Samrin, Hun Sen, Chea Sim and Hor Nam Hong receiving Eastern European delegates at the royal palace on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PRK.<sup>172</sup> The image shows the smiling faces of the Khmer leaders sitting at a table laden with fruit and bottles; what catches the eye is the room's decoration where wooden panels of carved *Apsara* line the back wall behind the Cambodian politicians.<sup>173</sup> This cannot be an accident, the room was chosen to represent strength, unity and heritage to their guests. The royal palace with its king now a high-profile *émigré* encamped between Beijing, Pyongyang and the Thai border provided a symbolic heart for the PRK regime to utilize, echoing its feudal foundation but now redressed as a symbol of how modernity, communism and heritage could all coexist in the PRK.

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<sup>171</sup>Uncredited "Apsara Dance" University of Fine arts Phnom Penh 1986.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDh5FLffho>

<sup>172</sup> Jacques Bekaert, *Cambodian Diary a Long Road to Peace 1987-1993* (Thailand: White Lotus, 1998). 36.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

Antonín Kubeš' book *Kampuchea* is typical of the supportive PRK books published inside the Soviet Bloc.<sup>174</sup> Kubeš, a Czech writer produced a glowing endorsement of the PRK that manages to include a plethora of Apsara images. *Kampuchea* does not just contain photographs the author chooses an artistic interpretation of an *Apsara* as a stamp at the end of each chapter. As much as this repetition is perhaps overkill and often out of context with the paragraph or subject of the chapter, what it does is symbolically remind his readers of Cambodian heritage and of a linear historical relationship with the PRK. Kubeš concludes his work with a chapter titled "Life Prevails", complete with a photograph of *Apsara* lintel carvings from Banteay Srei temple, and the *Apsara* stamp ends the chapter.<sup>175</sup> *Kampuchea*, by design, promotes the PRK regime as a savior and guarantor of Cambodia stating in crystal clear language, "Kampuchea is indeed returning to normal". What isn't discussed is what the author means by "normal".<sup>176</sup> Fitting with the PRK's confused message about Angkorian heritage and its place within the regime, Kubeš labels the royal family as part of an "outdated" and "backward" system, while *Kampuchea* paradoxically promotes that most royal of art forms, classical dance.<sup>177</sup>

For Pol Pot, Angkor rarely seemed to fit within DK, he spoke about the temples' royal and feudal origins; that the temples existed and were symbolic of Khmer culture was enough for DK, any deeper understanding appears to have been cast aside. The PRK had a similar issue but decided Angkorian heritage would become an ideal tool for reconciliation, promotion and adaptation. Interviewed by Stephanie Burrige and Fred Frumberg, dance teacher Koy Sina reflects back on her time at Phnom Penh's school of fine arts recounting how for the first time she understood the links between dance and Angkor:

Once we had a study tour of Angkor Wat temple and we witnessed the bas-reliefs of the dancers, who are almost naked I saw the dancing movements on the bas reliefs and noticed the identical aspects of the dance that they did thousands of years ago and what we are doing today.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Antonín Kubeš, *Kampuchea* (Prague: Orbis Press Agency, 1982).

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>178</sup> Stephanie Burrige and Fred Frumberg, *Beyond the Apsara: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia* (London: Routledge, 2015).169.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ANGKOR ON THE NATIONAL FLAG

Flags form a central theme of Michael Billig's banal nationalism theory. Billig believes flag recognition enforced through repetitive media projections is "integral to the modern conscience of nationalism".<sup>179</sup> One common element visible in every incarnation of the state of Cambodia is the use of Angkor Wat on its flag. Few nations place a monument or building on their flag, but such is the importance of Angkor to the identity of Cambodia - it has remained a constant element whether the government is French, Royal, Republican, Communist or Capitalist. The image of Angkor has always been stylized with elements such as the towers or stepped crepidoma changing with each variation. Establishing a flag was so important to national identity that during the initial declaration of the existence of the Kampuchean National Front for Salvation, known by its French abbreviation (FUNSK) on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1978, Heng Samrin spoke in front of what would become the flag of the PRK.<sup>180</sup> This was not a quickly designed flag, where haste and practicality governed design. The flag that fluttered on that day in 1978 and throughout the PRK period was symbolically linked to two essential elements of the PRK's mythology, revolution and Angkor Wat. The flag chosen depicts five golden towers sitting upon a simple two-step crepidoma (Fig 16). The base colour of the flag is red and the towers are depicted without any details apart from each tower coming to a point. The flag is outlined in rather basic terms in the 1981 Constitution of the Popular Republic of Kampuchea article 88: "The national flag is rectangular in shape with a red background and in the middle the temple of Angkor Wat with five golden towers".<sup>181</sup> This flag differs from the DK flag that depicted three towers. Neither flag is particularly accurate in its depiction of Angkor, but that is not the point. The use of Angkor on the flag solidifies the regime with symbolic ownership of the Angkorian legacy.

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<sup>179</sup> Billig, 86.

<sup>180</sup> Slocomb, 45.

<sup>181</sup> Constitution of the Popular Republic of Kampuchea. 1981.466.



Figure 16

The revolutionary aspect to the flag hints as to how this design appeared so quickly, it had been used before. The flag chosen by Heng Samrin and other members of the Salvation Front was the same flag that had begun the anti-colonial revolution during the 1940s. The Khmer Issarak movement, to which the five-towered flag belonged, was the wellspring of the revolution of 1975. The anti-colonial Khmer Issarak uprising existed within a movement that echoed in Laos and had its roots in Vietnam.<sup>182</sup> Considering this solidarity with Laos and Vietnam, it is hardly surprising this flag would be chosen. It would be Vietnamese troops that would drive the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh and it would be Hanoi that financially and militarily maintained the PRK throughout its existence in international isolation. Vietnam played a similar paternal hold over Laos during the same period. The use of this flag could then legitimize the PRK as saviors of a revolution that had been corrupted in April 1975 by the “Pol Pot clique”.

It is difficult if not impossible to know how the flag penetrated into the national consciousness of 1980s Cambodia. What one can ascertain is the regime thought the new flag important enough to promote its existence on postage stamps, government buildings, dance recitals and monuments. The reverse of the 10 Riel note from 1987, aside from the cartoon Naga (Fig 10,11) shows students standing to attention as the flag is, one would presume, raised (Fig 17). As Billig has identified a flag is an essential tool of a state’s “banal nationalism” but with the PRK, nationalism was tempered to ensure Vietnam was not presented as a threat or

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<sup>182</sup> For more on the Khmer Issarak movement see Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

occupying force. By choosing a flag already steeped in revolutionary credentials and crucially, fraternal alliances with Vietnam and Laos dating back to the 1940s, the PRK were able to place tight constraints around nationalism during the 1980s.



Source: Personal Collection  
Figure 17

The first international appearance outside of Southeast Asia of the PRK regime was the People's Revolutionary Tribunal. This gathering in Phnom Penh in front of selected members of the world's media was responsible for the trial (in absentia) of the Khmer Rouge leadership on charges of genocide. The tribunal sat between August 15<sup>th</sup> and August the 19<sup>th</sup>, 1979 and unsurprisingly found Pol Pot and Ieng Sary guilty and sentenced the leaders of DK to death. A photograph reproduced on the website of the still ongoing United Nations trial of the Khmer Rouge leadership shows the 1979 trial, and the prominence of the flag with its golden towers.<sup>183</sup> An even earlier depiction of the flag, aimed at a domestic Cambodian audience, is reproduced by Antonín Kubeš in *Kampuchea*. Kubeš includes a copy of the front page of the first issue of the PRK newspaper also titled *Kampuchea* released in January 1979, less than one month after the fall of Phnom Penh.<sup>184</sup> On the front page of the newspaper are photographs introducing Heng Samrin and Pen Sovann and the words and music of the new national anthem. The most striking image dominating this first issue is the flag, one would presume to formerly introduce the five-towered flag to Cambodians. Kubeš' book has photographs rarely reproduced and so rarely discussed by academics. The Czech author's camera captured unique moments making this book

<sup>183</sup> <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/articles/pre-trial-chamber-finds-1979-trial-absentia-and-royal-amnesty-do-not-bar-prosecution-against>

<sup>184</sup> Kubeš, 143.

a vital insight into the lives of Cambodians during the 1980s. The author concludes the book with a chapter devoid of significant contextual text leaving the images to paint the picture of “Kampuchea Today”. One unique photograph offers the clearest message of how the PRK bound Angkor and the flag together to form a foundational legacy for the regime. This photograph shows the central tower of Angkor Wat in close focus with the camera pointing upward, clearly showing the tower with the PRK flag mounted.<sup>185</sup> This is the only image I have encountered of a flag installed on the central tower of Angkor Wat and, arguably, should be read as a message of both symbolic and literal ownership of the temple complex during a time of significant challenges during early part of the PRK.

## MYTHOLOGY AND THE COMPLEXITY OF READING SYMBOLS

An official tribute book to the life of the PRK’s first leader Heng Samrin called, *Heng Samrin Man of the People* includes images of banknotes and postage stamps forming a rather strange artistic backdrop, to the ruling Cambodian People’s Party, an organization which Samrin still officially represents.<sup>186</sup> This book has little in terms of academic interest, rather, it is more a curious edition to the bookshelves of those interested in Cambodia and Southeast Asian communism. What *Heng Samrin Man of the People* does contain are rare photographs of the former PRK leader and a version of his revolutionary biography and timeline. Where photographs appear required but non-existent, the author has instead used postage stamps and banknotes as artistic snapshots of the period. The banknotes were so important, it seems, that the launching of the Riel on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1980, has a chapter dedicated to it.<sup>187</sup> Chea Chanto, former head of the Municipal Bank of Phnom Penh, is quoted giving the new Riel an almost mythical quality: “People were curious. They wanted to see and touch the new currency, to believe in it” he states.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>186</sup> Peter Starr, ed *Heng Samrin: Man of the People* (General Secretariat, National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia, 2011).

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

One image is contained within Heng Samrin *Man of the People*; is a metal plaque now lost that had the state emblem of the United Front for the National Reconstruction and Defence of Kampuchea.<sup>189</sup> Heng Samrin was the leader of this organization that replaced the United Front for the National Salvation of Kampuchea, the military front that had formed in 1978 on the border close to the Cambodian village of Snoul, indicating perhaps that salvation had given way to reconstruction as a state priority. The plaque is typical of the artistic output of the PRK where a soldiers, workers, teachers and women all stand together ready to defend and rebuild within socialist parameters. The imagery matches stamps (Fig 4) banknotes (Fig 10) and the Cambodian Vietnamese Friendship monument stylistically (Fig 18).

Where the plaque diverges is the symbol of Angkor Wat that radiates from the upper part of the relief. It is not strange to see Angkor in this position because, as this study has shown, one would expect such an image of the temple to be prominent. What is unique about this version is that it has three rounded towers. The PRK depiction of Angkor on its flag and state produced artwork had five-golden pointed towers. The flag of DK had three golden rounded towers. This can only mean that the plaque meant to commemorate the conclusion of the PRK's salvation period is either an artistic mistake, which seems unlikely as the PRK depiction of a five-towered Angkor was so prominent within the regimes ethos and output, or it could be a metallic version of a philatelic "overlay". Two elements work against the theory that the plaque could have been a discovered DK image simply re-configured. Firstly, the date is 1978, the year of the initial invasion stamped on a large gear wheel, an image directly lifted from the PRK state emblem. Secondly the image of a monk shows one of the key differences between the revolution of 1975 and that of 1979. The PRK promoted their tolerance and acceptance of religion so long as it worked within a Marxist-Leninist understanding. The Khmer Rouge were staunchly atheist and produced no single work of art depicting a member of the Buddhist sangha. This image of the three-towered Angkor radiating downwards illuminating and guiding the population appears to

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<sup>189</sup> The United Front for the National Reconstruction and Defence of Kampuchea was one in a long line of organizational names for the Communist Party of Kampuchea, the ideological underpinnings for both the anti-colonial Khmer Issarak, the Khmer Rouge, Democratic Kampuchea and the Peoples Republic of Kampuchea. Heng Samrin was a member of all these organizations. A good point of reference for understanding Cambodian communism is Ben Kiernan's *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

be either an error, or perhaps more surreptitiously a hidden message by the artist not understood or recognized by the regime.

When examining postage stamps and government artwork created during the PRK, both for Cambodian audiences, international and Vietnamese, it seems an ideal moment to consider Roland Barthes' work on mythologies. and, more acutely, how photographs and the seemingly banal images one views daily, reveal a complex mythmaking apparatus when given historical context. Barthes wrote essays on detergent, wrestling, and Citroen cars, all of which he skillfully peels away the obvious to reveal elements of repetitive human tropes such as good versus evil, and identify fractures within modern society.<sup>190</sup> When Barthes turns his attention to a touring exhibition of photography "The Great Family of Man", his work can be used as a lens for Angkor's repetitive use within the political framework of Cambodia during the 1980s. Barthes' call is initially a simple one; photographs or images require context, remove the context and the viewer is left with a pretty, but meaningless object. Barthes is blunt informing the reader that, in terms of The Great Family of Man photographs, if one "removes History from them (the images) there is nothing more to be said about them".<sup>191</sup> Taking up the gauntlet from Barthes, I have proposed that the PRK and their Vietnamese sponsors and advisors understood that key artistic elements act as a trigger to stimulate feelings of identity. This observation based on a detailed review of government constructed art during the PRK shows how the use of Angkorian themes insert context on two levels; firstly, the superficial understanding that Angkor, or Apsaras, identify with the local and external viewer as intrinsically Khmer. Second is a more complex understanding that links the new regime with control, security, and progression, where Angkor stands as a timeless anchor of Cambodian uniqueness and strength, which, in turn, positively reflects on the PRK.

As Barthes maintains, history requires context, and images alone require explanation or they say very little. Equally true is that the skilled historian can, through an image, tell a multitude of stories. Government art such as postage stamps and banknotes may be banal, but benign they are not. Angkorian imagery allowed the PRK to leap backwards over complex issues such as the Khmer Rouge or Sihanouk in its public art, relieving the burden of what Barthes identifies as

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<sup>190</sup> Roland, Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Lavers and Annette Lavers. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

“the determining weight of History”.<sup>192</sup> In its government-produced artistic output, the PRK chose positivity and progression manipulating the truth and whitewashing the factual problematic nature of a regime that rarely controlled the entirety of territorial Cambodia during its existence. At this point it is interesting to reflect on Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition” and how accurately his identification of the malleability of history developed in Cambodia during the 1980s.<sup>193</sup> For Hobsbawm, governments look to invoke and ‘invent’ traditions that fulfill a particular requirement using a “suitable historical past”. Angkor and images associated with Angkorian heritage formed an essential shorthand for one such “suitable historic past” that edited out Sihanouk, reduced the feudal aspects of the temples construction in favour of collective endeavours and superimposed a legacy of fraternity between Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese. Utilizing Hobsbawm’s concept of historical suitability, it would have been as easy to imagine Angkor as a symbol of dominance over the people of Southeast Asia. The carvings and statuary both celebrate military victories and conquests by displaying rows of foreign prisoners shackled, tortured and killed. Rulers are considered divine, and worshiped by the multitude. This Angkorian constructed history is perhaps more valid than the one presented by the PRK, but it does not suit the requirement that demanded resilience, fortitude and tacit acceptance of Vietnamese occupation and place within the Hanoi constructed sphere of influence.

The PRK rarely seemed comfortable with a deterministic approach to Cambodian history. The extreme deviation in the revolution that brought Pol Pot to power complicated the linear aspect to a popular revolutionary narrative. Further complications arose from the genuine belief that Sihanouk’s *ancienne regime* was a golden period for the nation and it was the last god-king himself who had called for the peasants to rise and join the revolution in 1970. Angkor in its broadest sense was simultaneously adaptable allowing for a whole series of messages to be imbedded within its image, and rigid enough to be a bedrock of what *Khmerness* could be constructed upon.

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Eric John Hobsbawm, and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).1.

## MONUMENTALITY AND THE PRK

Communist regimes are often thought of as monument building regimes. When one visits Vietnam today, one can clearly see the abundance of statues and monuments reflecting the mythmaking apparatus of the regime. Cambodia is, in this regard, somewhat of an oddity. The Khmer Rouge were not builders, they adapted/adopted what was already present and closed what was not required. When Vietnam entered Phnom Penh some buildings were destroyed, but what is more obvious from the photographs of this period is the general decay and neglect rather than destruction. Few rockets landed inside the city, the Khmer Rouge did not attempt to hold Phnom Penh in 1978. In many ways, Cambodia's capitol looked almost the same as it had in 1975. While Vietnam saw the political capitol in a building program in creating a national narrative post-war, the PRK relegated such programs to the periphery. This was perhaps due to the PRK struggling with more immediate concerns during the period, such as low food supply and fighting a persistent guerilla war with the Khmer Rouge. There are few, if any, monumental reminders that either the PRK existed or that Vietnam controlled Cambodia for a decade.



Source: Personal Collection  
Figure 18

The one single remaining monument to the PRK period in Phnom Penh is the Cambodia Vietnam Friendship Monument (Fig 18) located in Wat Botum Park close to the Independence Monument and in the heart of the embassy district of Phnom Penh. The figures in the monument are in the style of Socialist Realism and thus instantly recognizable as Soviet in artistic style. The monument itself shows a Vietnamese soldier alongside a Khmer soldier both protecting a smaller Khmer girl with a child. Tying in with the PRK's usage of "traditional" Khmer architectural stylistic treatments, the monument speaks to local sensibilities. As Penny Edwards has explained in her investigation into the constructed nature of *Cambodge*, the elongated antefixes and pediments common with Khmer buildings and visible in the Vietnamese Cambodia Friendship monument should be seen as "traditional" only through the lens of colonial conceptions of Khmer design. Ewa Ochman's work on Soviet war memorials in Poland identifies a remarkably similar friendship monument in Legnica where Polish and Soviet soldiers hold a small Polish child.<sup>194</sup> As with the monument in Phnom Penh the message is clear, that the local people, in this case Poles, owe a debt of gratitude. Unlike Poland, where Ochman details a period of post-Soviet iconoclasm, as the PRK constructed so little and the regime morphed into the Cambodian People's Party, still in power today, there was no sudden schism with the socialist past of the 1980s. This then situates the Cambodian Vietnamese Friendship monument as an anarchic totem to a past few seem to care to remember.

Although it seems most contemporary Cambodians care little for the monument or even consider it on a daily basis past being a busy traffic island, the monument has briefly become contentious after the end of the PRK period. During the fractious dual Prime Minister period (1993-1997) where Sihanouk's son Prince Norodom Ranariddh attempted to share power with Hun Sen, an attack on a smaller Vietnamese friendship monument in Sihanoukville in 1997 brought unresolved issues to the fore vis-à-vis Vietnam and Cambodia during the 1980s. For the prince it was clear the monument represented Vietnamese dominance when he stated publicly "The biggest memorial near parliament has stood for a long time and it's time to stop them from standing any longer".<sup>195</sup> The issue would lay dormant until in 2015 a Cambodian "think tank"

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<sup>194</sup> Ewa Ochman, "Soviet War Memorials and the Re-construction of National and Local Identities in Post-communist Poland," *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 4 (2010): 522.

<sup>195</sup> Reuters and Post Staff. "PM Sheds No Tears Over Statue Attack." *The Phnom Penh Post*, June 13, 1997. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/pm-sheds-no-tears-over-statue-attack>.

described the monuments as “occupation memorials that continue to divide Cambodia”.<sup>196</sup> Although built to represent loss and signify a brighter fraternal future, Cambodia’s limited socialist architectural statements have on the whole not generated the hatred they have in Eastern Europe or parts of Africa. Perhaps the way the few remaining visible identifiers of the PRK have lost their emotive power is indicative of the 1980s as a whole. As I have mentioned few Cambodians appear to want to talk about the period or reflect with any particular passion. Instead the Khmer Rouge period dominates the historical local and broader academic discourse even in 2018.

Jacques Bekaert’s diary, “*A Long Road to Peace 1987-1993*”, contains many photographs of PRK public art now lost to historians.<sup>197</sup> One photograph shows a now lost PRK statue that uniquely blends Angkorian heritage with the repetitive nature of Communist artistic ideology. The four figures echo PRK posters, banknotes (Fig 10), and postage stamps (Fig 4) where a student a soldier, factory worker and peasant stand looking towards the future. The statue that, according to Bekaert stood in a garden outside a jute factory in Battambang Cambodia’s second largest city is in three dimensions. The un-credited artist placed the figures back to back gazing outwards.<sup>198</sup> In the context of Cambodia, four faces gazing outwards reminds one of the multitude of such four faced heads of the Bayon, or the Victory Gate, that leads to Angkor Thom. One can view a local interpretation of socialist realism in the figures, they are stoic and focused, looking outwards towards the future with optimism. The use of four figures harkens to a more local message where images of the Hindu god Brahma are almost always shown with four outwardly gazing heads. Statues of Brahma are common in Cambodia, although largely as tribute to Angkorian temple architecture than symbols of religious devotion. Pol Pot used the concept of being able to view in a multitude of directions in a far more threatening way stating that “Angkar had the eyes of the pineapple”.

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<sup>196</sup> Brent Crane, "To Unify the Country, Destroy the Statues, Says Think Tank," *The Phnom Penh Post*, November 14, 2015, November 14, 2015, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/unify-country-destroy-statues-says-think-tank>.

<sup>197</sup> Jacques Bekaert, *Cambodian Diary a Long Road to Peace 1987-1993*.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, 166.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE TO COMMUNIST REGIMES

The predominant avenue of scholarship on cultural heritage within Communist regimes tends to foreground post-Soviet iconoclasm where statues and monuments underwent a geographical and urban morphological re-evaluation. Writers such as Ewa Ochman conduct thorough investigations on how newly democratic regimes come to terms with the physical legacy of Soviet art while Svetlana Boyn unpacks the Soviet nostalgia that complicates Russian modernity. It thus seems strange that so few academics have worked in the field of how communist regimes utilized existing pre-revolutionary heritage into their new national narrative. One book that strangely fails to register in bibliographies on cultural heritage is Eleazar Aleksandrovic Baller's *Communism and Cultural Heritage*.<sup>199</sup> This book was released in English in 1984 but was written in Russian in 1966; it is perhaps the most relevant exploration of how a nation's cultural heritage could be worked into a socialist national agenda. Baller's work during the height of the Cold War and from inside the Soviet Union heavily leans on the dialectic conversation between Marxist-Leninism and capitalism which is not a seamless argument in Cambodia. Angkor was not built during a capitalist epoch, it stands instead as a testament to feudalism. That being the said, Baller's work is still highly relevant to investigating the PRK and how they viewed the legacy of Angkor.

In his introduction, Baller asks a question that, in light of Angkor, crystalizes the problem of situating the temples within a Communist government structure. He asks, "the question arises as to what has to be inherited from the treasury of world culture, and in what way the people may use the cultural values created in the far and near historical past and produced by capitalist society".<sup>200</sup> Baller thus appears locked within the communist versus capitalist paradigm, but the question is highly relevant if this final part is re-imagined as 'feudal society'. In one of the few reviews of Baller's work, Pablo Alonso Gonzalez identifies Baller as being part of a 1960s-70s Russian academia who were allowed philosophical and historical debates due in large part to

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<sup>199</sup> Eleazar Baller and I. Karpikov, *Communism and Cultural Heritage* (Moscow: Progress, 1984).

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

Khrushchev's "thaw" in strict interpretation of doctrine.<sup>201</sup> Baller insists the Communist "break from the past" was never as clearly defined as revolutionaries demanded. Thus, the PRK should be viewed in terms of a late developing communist state where continuity with the international struggle was tempered with tangible echoes of miss-directed revolutions and genocidal nationalism. Baller situates himself alongside Lenin believing cultural heritage should adopt material elements of the past if they could fit within a revolutionary framework. He states:

Material monuments of culture created by the people over centuries are not only historical values but an integral part of the cultural wealth of a socialist society, more they will be inherited by a future, communist world. Those who tear the future and the past from the present thus impoverish the future.<sup>202</sup>

This statement positions Baller within a framework of historical continuity, where the past is tangible and pliable, primed for potential appropriation. Baller calls for socialist modernity in all its artistic, cultural and architectural forms to reflect the human endeavor of past societies. It is this overall thesis that enables one to begin the process of understanding how Angkor and, more broadly, Angkorian civilization could become a foundation of the Cambodian revolution in 1979.<sup>203</sup>

In Baller's explanation of mid-1960s Soviet thought, there appears a parallel with the PRK in the realm of casting a previous epoch as a transgression of a just revolution, and guilty of irreparable damage to Russian pre-revolutionary cultural heritage. In Baller's Soviet Union, the guilty party was "the cult of Stalin" to which "transgressions" such as the demolition of Bove's Triumphal Gate in Moscow is said to have also inflicted moral damage on the Soviet people.<sup>204</sup> The link between cultural heritage, be it language, art or architecture, and the essence of what the humanistic side of the Soviet project intended to create is repeated *ad nauseum* in Baller's book.

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<sup>201</sup> Pablo Alonso González, "Communism and Cultural Heritage: The Quest for Continuity," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 22, no. 9 (2016): 654.

<sup>202</sup> Eleazar Baller and I. Karpikov, *Communism and Cultural Heritage*. 187.

<sup>203</sup> I use 1979 with the understanding that the PRK leadership viewed their particular historical moment as a continuation of a struggle that began during the 1950's and had led to the revolution of 1979. What I am clarifying by using 1979 as a revolutionary moment is my commitment to Margaret Slocomb's belief that 1979 was a second revolution, deserving of its own understanding and exploration.

<sup>204</sup> Baller and Karpikov, 186.

For Baller's interpretation of post-Stalin, Soviet doctrine, all are welcome under the banner of the party, regardless of cultural background or religion. However true, propagandist, or misguided this concept of cultural inclusion was during the Soviet Union, it is beyond the scope of this work. What is important about Baller's work is it defines the historical importance of cultural heritage regardless of its pre-revolutionary origins to Marxist-Leninist thought. It dispels iconoclasm as an inherent component of the building of socialist heritage. The PRK did not really have grounds to show actual destruction of Angkor during the DK period, but there was a concerted effort to show that other elements of Cambodia's cultural past had been targeted for destruction. Linking the policies of Pol Pot to Mao's destructive cultural revolution, Heng Samrin addressed The World Peace Council in Phnom Penh on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, 1980, and made reference to the cultural destructive practices of DK stating how "schools and institutes of culture were turned into pigsties, henhouses, religious temples desecrated and used as depots or places of torture or massacre".<sup>205</sup> This is a direct reference to the national archive which, as Mam Chhean confirmed, was used as a pigsty and Tuol Sleng, the former *lycee*, was turned in to prison.<sup>206</sup>

In the article "Contentious Heritage: The Preservation of Churches and Temples in Communist and Post-Communist Russia and China", S.A. Smith fails to engage with Baller, who one would think would have been at least mentioned when investigating Soviet cultural heritage.<sup>207</sup> Smith utilizes Russian and Chinese primary sources to show how even during the iconoclastic Stalin period and the Cultural Revolution in China, central policy often failed to disseminate downwards without numerous caveats. Smith concurs with Baller's central theme that Lenin looked to work Russia's pre-revolutionary culture into the building of the Soviet Union, while identifying how Mao picked at China's vast history in a more haphazard fashion. Where both Communist leaders converged was the feeling that cultural heritage (in its many forms) could and should be used for national identity.<sup>208</sup> For Smith, both the Soviet Union and communist China "oscillated between an 'exclusivist class or proletarian pole and a more

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<sup>205</sup> World Peace Council "Recognize Now: Peoples Republic of Kampuchea (Information Centre of the World Peace Council, 1980) 8.

<sup>206</sup> For further reading on Tuol Sleng see David P. Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press 2000).

<sup>207</sup> S. A. Smith, "Contentious Heritage: The Preservation of Churches and Temples in Communist and Post-Communist Russia and China," *Past & Present* 226, no. 10 (2015).

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid*, 180.

inclusivist national pole”<sup>209</sup> Smith’s supports Baller’s blaming of “The cult of Stalin” for heritage indifference and destruction by quoting *Pravda* where on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1936, the official Soviet newspaper seemingly extolled the importance of pre-revolutionary cultural heritage during the 1930s

Great artists of the past belong to the laboring people who have inherited all the cultural values of the preceding class’s; it is not in our interests to keep these values under a bushel, to disperse them or transform them into historical rag, as vulgar sociologists seek to do.<sup>210</sup>

This statement resonates with both of Cambodia’s revolutionary moments: Pol Pot stated in 1977 that “Angkor was built in an era of slavery...slaves like us built Angkor under the exploitation of the exploiting classes. If our people can make Angkor they can make anything”.<sup>211</sup> Heng Samrin, speaking at an event to commemorate five years of the PRK, was even more barbed in his views about Angkor stating

The architectural works of Angkor, while brilliant proof of the matchless skills and creativeness of the Kampuchean working people, intellectuals and artists has cost the people untold misery and countless lives in forced labour and caused exhaustion and decline of the country for centuries.<sup>212</sup>

Both Pol Pot and Heng Samrin appeared to struggle with Angkor’s feudal legacy, but were willing to embed the temples into a more socialist modern narrative of their regimes constructed historical timeline. One key difference between how DK utilized Angkor and how the PRK used the temples was down to access. Where during DK only a handful of foreign journalists were allowed into Cambodia, all of which were taken to Angkor, during the 1980s access was less

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>211</sup> David P. Chandler. “Seeing Red: Perceptions of Cambodian History in Democratic Kampuchea” in David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Anthony Barnett. *Revolution and Its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays*. 1983. 44

<sup>212</sup> Quoted in Michael Richardson “Letter From Angkor Wat” *Far Eastern Economic Review* April 19<sup>th</sup> 1984. 94.

restricted. From the early 1980s, Angkor was utilized by the PRK to promote stability and paint the regime as worthy and legitimate custodians of the temples and Angkorian heritage.

Any investigation into the actual temples requires a slight backtrack to the final days of Pol Pot's regime. American journalist Elizabeth Becker was one of the few westerners to visit DK, arriving as the clouds of war began to form in late 1978. Becker's observations on Angkor are thus vital in understanding the condition of the temples after the Vietnamese invasion just days after her departure. Becker noted how Angkor Wat was largely untouched by the Khmer Rouge which had caused visible issues with the stonework.<sup>213</sup> Becker identified how the regime were guilty of a distinct "lack of care" regarding the temples, where they had been "left to deteriorate" in the tropical climate.<sup>214</sup> Angkor requires constant up keeping and preservation even today. The climate and proximity to the jungle has endowed the temples with a mythical aura. The same sense of remoteness and discovery causes constant problems as the jungle is responsible for foundational issues, coupled with the constant incursion of roots and branches pushing against the walls and lifting statues. Even today Angkor is in a constant state of peril, so after five years of "lack of care" the PRK can be forgiven in being daunted by the burden of ownership and repair.

## ANGKOR DURING THE PRK

The first account of Angkor after the invasion comes from the official mouthpiece of the PRK, *Sarapordarmean Kampuchea* (SPK) and relayed through Bangkok to the world's media.<sup>215</sup> Picking up the story on January 13<sup>th</sup> 1979, the *Chicago Tribune* ran with a headline "Cambodian Rebels Claim Last Two Cities, Temple Shrine Falls".<sup>216</sup> The article identifies the importance of Angkor to the invading Vietnamese army along with local anti-Khmer Rouge soldiers. The SPK bulletin incorporated in the article states how the Vietnamese authorities "immediately sent cadres into the Angkor area where they discussed steps to safeguard the historical reminders of the ancient culture of Cambodia".<sup>217</sup> Building on the official SPK bulletins the *Chicago Tribune*

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<sup>213</sup> Becker, 417.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Yale library holdings info <https://guides.library.yale.edu/c.php?g=295977&p=1976025>

<sup>216</sup> "Cambodian Rebels Claim Last Two Cities, Temple Shrine Falls" *Chicago Tribune* January 13<sup>th</sup> 1979.2.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

article also claims through an unnamed source that “the Vietnamese did not occupy the fabled 12th century temple complex” but “slowed their juggernaut to enable their rebel Cambodian allies to catch up with them and that the Vietnamese likely would allow the Cambodians to enter and take the actual temples because of their highly symbolic significance to the Cambodian people”.<sup>218</sup> This article is hard to substantiate as there is so little data archived about Siem Reap during the invasion. Phnom Penh understandably dominates the material and imagery created during the final moments of DK. What one can deduct from the Chicago Tribune story is that the official SPK line matches the unnamed source in promoting a deferential Khmer, cultural understanding of Angkor by the invading armies of Vietnam and returning aligned Khmer soldiers.

It was Henri Mouhot who first attempted to describe Angkor Wat to a western audience in 1860 claiming “One of these temples—a rival to that of Soloman, and erected by some ancient Micheal Angelo [sic]—might take an honourable place beside our most beautiful buildings. It is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome”.<sup>219</sup> Since these words were first spread through the French and English world, the temples of Angkor have remained a subject that grips the imagination. In 1979 those that had viewed Angkor prior to the war grasped the chance to re-engage with the temples. It is this longing to return to Angkor that drove Wilbur E. Garret to bring National Geographic to the site in 1982. Garret’s article solidifies Becker’s casual observation about “lack of care” by juxtaposing the pre-1970s pictures, with those taken in 1982. The dominance of Angkor Wat in any consideration of Cambodia’s cultural heritage does a disservice to the broader understanding of Angkor as a civilization of monumental builders. Khmer Rouge leaders forced visitors such as Becker to view Angkor Wat and the Bayon, two of the largest temples, yet not any of the other lesser known temples. This allowed the Khmer Rouge to show some semblance of maintenance. The PRK chose a different tactic in their public viewings of Angkor, allowing journalists such as Garret to view outlying temples where the neglect was more obvious. This tactic had a twofold effect; firstly, it gained some semblance of sympathy for the newly installed regime - the sheer scale of the work required to return the temples to their pre-1975 levels was as daunting as it was unfeasible without international aid.

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Henri, Mouhot. *Travels in Siam, Cambodia, Laos, and Annam. Vol. 2, Vol. 2.* (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press, 2009) 281.

Secondly, it helped with the othering process where the remnants of the Khmer Rouge could be blamed for the PRK's domestic struggles including the destruction of the symbolic core of Cambodia's national identity.

Although Garret's article appeared in *National Geographic* in 1982 he was not the first to visit Angkor post-DK. The Bophana Centre in Phnom Penh is a unique audio-visual archive curated under the guidance of film director Rithy Panh. This archive focuses primarily on DK material but does house the most extensive visual records of the PRK period. At the Bophana Centre, one can view videos shot by French, Australian, British and Soviet Bloc documentarians. What becomes increasingly clear through browsing the archives is Angkor was at least included in most of the films, although rarely the singular focus. French Journalist Lor Edouard reported on the situation in Cambodia during 1979, predominantly on the rebuilding and aid programs set up by the Red Cross for the French television show *Antenne 2*.<sup>220</sup> Edouard's short 8-minute report titled "*Cambodge*" contains images and a brief discussion on Angkor, where he is part of a group of what he describes as "international journalists" taken to view Angkor Wat.<sup>221</sup> The nationality of the other journalists is not known, and the viewer is shown Angkor Wat, looking resplendent and serene. Edouard comments that the group were taken to Angkor Wat "to prove Vietnam have not touched the symbol of Khmer civilization".<sup>222</sup> The idea behind this brief glimpse of Angkor in 1979 is to reassure the "foreign" audience that Angkor is both secure and in no danger from Vietnam or the Khmer Rouge.

Vietnam was broadly protectionist towards its cultural heritage and worked within the guidelines identified by Baller in the 1960s. After 1976, the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam bore little signs of iconoclastic fervor. Instead, it operated within the boundaries of Marxists-Leninist appropriation identified within by Baller in *Communism and Cultural Heritage*. In 1957, the government of Ho Chi Minh wrote into government the Decree on the Management, Classification and Methods to Organize the Protection and Restoration of the Historical and Cultural Monuments.<sup>223</sup> Although this decree covered only North Vietnam, its

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<sup>220</sup> "Cambodge" *Antenne 2*. 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1979. INA\_VI\_000116. The Bophana Centre, Phnom Penh, The Kingdom of Cambodia.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> John H. Stubbs, *Architectural Conservation in Asia: National Experiences and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2017). 254.

validity lasted through the unification period and partly into the 1980s.<sup>224</sup> In 1984, Vietnam solidified its internal position regarding Vietnamese cultural heritage with the Ordinance on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Relics and Scenic Sites”.<sup>225</sup> The emphasis on protection of Vietnamese cultural heritage, such as the royal complex at Hue and Ha Long Bay during the post-war years shows Vietnam’s government following the Marxist-Leninist tract of working the past into the modern socialist state. This process of appropriation in Vietnam stands starkly against the situation in China where cultural heritage has been viewed as both a challenge and, at times, in opposition to communist state doctrine.<sup>226</sup> It is in his light that journalists were taken to Angkor early within the life of the PRK regime. Vietnam decided to assure the world’s media that any damage to the temples was because of Pol Pot, either directly or in terms of neglect. The informal ‘look and see’ tactic promoted by the PRK enabled the regime to utilize the temples for much needed public relations. France, the US, Australia and Great Britain may not have acknowledged the PRK as the legitimate government of Cambodia, but journalists did show an appetite to listen to state propaganda for the chance to visit Angkor.

The difficulty with looking at the PRK government and official policy is the lack of solid archival documentation. Few laws and treaties were passed and ratified the official basis for the protection of Angkor - it exists within a legal void. This does not mean Angkor wasn’t a primary element within the legal structure of the PRK. This investigation has shown the many ways in which Angkor was used as a shorthand for Khmer national identity and nation building, but in terms of concrete PRK documents on Angkor, the cupboard is quite bare. Cambodia has been a member of UNESCO since 1951, but the war years of the 1970s and the UN’s position of allowing the exiled DK leadership to legally speak for Cambodia internationally, curtailed any formal relationship between outside cultural protection agencies and Angkor.

Two early official documents circulated outside the Soviet Bloc attempted to contemporize Angkorian heritage into Cambodia. The first internationally distributed document emanating from Phnom Penh after the invasion was the conclusion of the People’s Revolutionary Tribunal.

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid

<sup>226</sup> A good source for understanding the changing concepts of Chinese cultural heritage from a legal standpoint is Stefan Gruber’s “Protecting China’s Cultural Heritage Sites in Times of Rapid Change: Current Developments, Practice and Law.” *Asia Pacific Journal of Environmental*, Vol 10, 3-4 2007.2.

This tribunal was a trial in absentia of the DK leadership.<sup>227</sup> The released collated articles and statements are constructed to blame Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, divorcing the leaders of DK from the revolution itself and socialism for numerous crimes including genocide and cultural destruction. In terms of heritage and Angkor, the tribunal states that “Cambodians have always been great artists, descendants of the builders of Angkor temples”.<sup>228</sup> At this early moment in the life of the PRK, one can see Angkor being placed within the boundaries of the regime as a totem of continuity and historical strength. With this inclusion of cultural heritage as being a definition for what constitutes being Cambodian, it sets up an easy chance to construct DK as a traitor to both the revolution and Cambodia’s Angkorian legacy. The tribunal offers a typically blunt assessment of DK attitude to cultural heritage without any detailed analysis: “Pol Pot Ieng Sary clique hated our national cultural heritage and the genuine representatives of this national culture”.<sup>229</sup> The authors of the tribunal forward a narrative that, under the control of China, Pol Pot and his “clique” carried out a Maoist Cultural Revolution and iconoclastic policy towards Cambodian cultural heritage. Unlike the crimes against the people which are diligently documented at the tribunal, cultural heritage damage is identified but without tangible proof. For instance, the statement about DK that “50% of the 1255 famous ancient architectural works and monuments were destroyed. Angkor Thom and Angkor Vat were also damaged” is not really supported by the evidence of those visiting Cambodia in 1979.<sup>230</sup>

The second official document released through the PRK is the constitution of 1981. This foundational document places Angkor as part of the nation building process and as a wellspring of Cambodia’s historical fight for independence stating

For thousands of years the people of Kampuchea have fought in order to build and defend their country, and the civilization of Angkor is both their witness and their pride. However, the people of Kampuchea have been denied the rewards of their work, and prevented from developing

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<sup>227</sup> For a detailed analysis of this tribunal and its conclusions see Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Howard J. De Nike, John B. Quigley, and Kenneth J. Robinson. *Genocide in Cambodia Documents from the Trial of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

<sup>228</sup> People’s Revolutionary Tribunal 1979 Document 2.4.08 Reprinted in Howard J. De. Nike, John Quigley, and Kenneth J. Robinson, *Genocide in Cambodia: Documents from the Trial of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). 354.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, 335.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 473.

their traditions or a worthy national culture or their humanitarian and peaceable character by oppressive systems of slavery, feudalism, colonialism and imperialism.<sup>231</sup>

Milton Takei has worked on the collective memory of Cambodians, and although not advocating a singular wellspring of ethnic, Takei does believe the Khmer have a strong national identity that is as socially constructed as it is reinforced through a collective conversation with history.<sup>232</sup> The two elements Takei views as cornerstones of Khmer “collective memory” are grandeur and subsequent decline, and fear over Vietnamese expansion.<sup>233</sup> In light of Takei’s work, the 1981 PRK constitution and the Vietnamese apparatus that allowed and enabled its construction, attempts to allay these deep feelings placing Vietnam along with Laos as equal partners in the Socialist struggle for Southeast Asia. Instead of the fear of Vietnamese hegemony, new fears are defined and old ones regurgitated: colonialism, imperialism, China, Pol Pot and the USA. Decline is mentioned but outside actors are blamed releasing modern Cambodians from the guilt of cultural and national dependence. This is the singular most important reason for the use of Angkor by the PRK: it guaranteed the regime would have a Khmer sense of identity. Those close to the inner workings of the regime noted the amount of Vietnamese “advisors”, likewise security was guaranteed by thousands of Vietnamese troops so Khmer identity needed supporting. The majority of Cambodians attempting to pick up the pieces of their lives needed symbols of Khmer identity to prove the Cambodia they knew existed. Takei’s “conversation with history” involves nodes of cultural vectors that stimulate ideas of belonging and identity. Taken further, nationalism is the logical outcome of such a conversation but, during the 1980’s, the political and cultural climate of Cambodia was too contested and clouded for nationalism to emerge.

The 1981 constitution is steeped in the language of revolution, equal blame is given to America, China, individuals such as Pol Pot, reactionaries, imperialists and woe be those who attempt to “destroy the revolution”.<sup>234</sup> The glaring paradox is how “slavery, feudalism, colonialism and imperialism” are blamed for Cambodians not reaping the “rewards” of the

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<sup>231</sup> Constitution of the Popular Republic of Kampuchea 1981.454.

<sup>232</sup> Takei, 60.

<sup>233</sup> Takei, 61.

<sup>234</sup> Constitution of the Popular Republic of Kampuchea 1981.455.

Angkorian civilization.<sup>235</sup> As both Pol Pot and Heng Samrin, whose government constructed the 1981 constitution, stated at different times, Angkor Wat is a symbol of feudalism - it was built by slave labour to celebrate an oppressive monarchy. The famous *bas reliefs* of the Bayon and Angkor Wat depict Angkorian battles, invasions and tributes paid by rulers under the yoke of kings such as Jayavaraman VII. The deeply carved stone is testament to how the Angkorian god-kings colonized parts of modern Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. This paradox of how to situate Angkor within a revolutionary Cambodian history was a work in progress that neither DK or the PRK satisfactorily figured out.

Article 24 of the 1981 constitution references cultural heritage directly, defining the aspirations of the regime for preserving Angkor

The state shall organize the conservation of historic monuments and ancient art objects, shall reorganize the ancient sites, develop the tourist sector to serve the people within the country and develop cultural relations with foreign countries.<sup>236</sup>

As K. M. Srivastava observed early in the life of the PRK, the regime set up Pich Keo as the “Curator of the Angkor Monuments” and Chheng Phon as the Minister of Culture.<sup>237</sup> The constitution theoretically establishes a formula for the preservation of Angkor and hints that outside assistance would be welcome. Unlike organizing a national arts festival or sewing costumes for *Apsara* performances, the conservation of temples and statues required what the PRK didn’t have in the early 1980s, money and expertise. Srivastava’s book *Angkor Wat and the Cultural Ties to India* exemplifies the small scale foreign assistance available within the nations who recognized the PRK’s legitimacy. Srivastava identifies a lack of electrical power and materials at Angkor, making the work of rescue archaeology challenging at best. For any genuine attempt to live up to Article 24 of their constitution, the PRK would have to broaden their gaze to nations with a more problematic legacy in Southeast Asia. This drive for foreign expertise, sympathy and funding began with journalists such as Edouard and Garret being given relatively unrestrictive access to Angkor.

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 454.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.,458.

<sup>237</sup> Srivastava, 3.

International assistance and the development of legitimacy around the ownership of Angkor was not limited to western journalists to discuss. Articles in *The Straits Times*, *The Bangkok Post* and Singapore's *Business Times* are rarely discussed by academics, but bear testament to the concerted effort to promote the PRK through Angkor and to garner local and Southeast Asian sympathy and aid. Regular contributor to work on Cambodia Tom Fawthrop visited Angkor in 1981 with Pich Keo as a guide. Fawthrop reports the usual concern over neglect, but Pich Keo introduces a new issue to the narrative of Angkor during the PRK - that statues were being looted and taken across the Thai border.<sup>238</sup> By locating the exit point for the looting out of Cambodia, the PRK government, through Pich Keo, are blaming the Khmer Rouge who during the 1980s controlled broad swathes of the Thai/Cambodian border. Pich Keo informed Fawthrop that those responsible for the looting "come from the Thai border" and that "they know that anything robbed from the Bayon and Angkor temples will fetch a handsome price in Bangkok" Pich Keo does not define who "they" are but again one can confidently assume he means the Khmer Rouge.<sup>239</sup> Fawthrop notes a lack of international aid and international recognition of the PRK government has directly lead to the "tragic looting of Kampuchean heritage".<sup>240</sup> Matching the documentary films of the early 1980s, journalists such as Fawthrop were utilized to highlight how UNESCO and western leaders were putting politics ahead of heritage preservation.

## GEOPOLITICAL WINDS OF CHANGE

Geopolitical events outside Southeast Asia would determine the source of assistance and funding for the PRK during the final years of the decade. Speaking in Vladivostok on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1986, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev inadvertently sowed the seeds for the end of the PRK as a communist government. In this speech, Gorbachev delivered a broad explanation of the global reach of *Glasnost*. It was Asia and Southeast Asia that came under the Soviet leader's microscope for special attention. Gorbachev reached across the great divide that had grown between the Soviet Union and China and noted how the two nations shared a border, and that this border should now

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<sup>238</sup> Tom Fawthrop, "Monumental Task at Angkor" *Business Times* (Singapore), October 10, 1981.7.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

be viewed as a link rather than a divide.<sup>241</sup> The Sino-Soviet *rapprochement*, promised by Gorbachev in Vladivostok, necessitated the Soviet Union pulling away their funding for former Soviet satellites in Asia and ultimately forced Vietnam to finally conclude its Kampuchea project.<sup>242</sup> The precarious economies of Vietnam and the PRK relied heavily on currency and skills from the Soviet bloc; Glasnost forever changed the course of Socialist Southeast Asia, prompting the opening of markets and borders which in turn led to tourism being viewed as a requirement and necessary tool to obtaining currency.

## TOURISM DURING THE PRK

Tim Winter, who has written extensively and with detailed compassionate analysis on tourism and heritage in Cambodia, falls into a similar pattern of largely ignoring the 1980s. In *Post-Conflict Heritage, Post Colonial Tourism* for instance, many of the chapters begin with “since 1990”, “Post 1990” or “Since the early 1990s”. One short mention of a 1980s “military stalemate” is used as a prelude to the UN period of growth and relative peace. This academic ‘writing off’ of the 1980s is as typical as it is neglectful. What quickly becomes abundantly clear is that no accurate data exists to show the number of foreign tourists visiting Angkor during the 1980s. This does not negate the usefulness of looking at tourism, as the early visitors to Angkor at the start of the PRK period identify the regime fully understood the draw of the temples on the Western imagination.

One sidebar to Angkor’s use as a tourist destination and international draw is a more local understanding of the temples’ position within the Cambodian national narrative. Figures for local internal travel during the PRK period are even more difficult to ascertain than for international visitors. No accurate records appear in the archives and this period was pre-APSARA-ticketing apparatus for Angkor Park.<sup>243</sup> References to Cambodians visiting the temples are both anecdotal

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<sup>241</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev “International Affairs: Asia and the Pacific Region,” *Vital Speeches of the Day*, Volume LII No.23 September 15, 1986. 709.

<sup>242</sup> For an overview of the Soviet Union’s interactions with Southeast Asia see Muthiah Alagappa, "Soviet Policy in Southeast Asia: Towards Constructive Engagement," *Pacific Affairs* 63, no. 3 (1990).

<sup>243</sup> The Authority for the Protection of the Site and the Management of the Region of Angkor or APSARA was created in 1995 as a requirement for Angkor to be included on UNESCO’s world Heritage List. The APSARA Authority control and collect revenue from ticket sales for entry into the Angkor Park.

and illuminating when they are discovered in the literature. Winter's fieldwork on 1990s Cambodia is a good reference as it contains echoes of the previous decade. Winter investigates the re-emergence of the Khmer New Year celebrations at Angkor and through interviews, unpacks the layers of meaning embedded within the national holiday.<sup>244</sup> It is in the personal reflections of the Khmer visitors interviewed by Winter that a picture emerges of Angkor's position within the local Khmer perception of Cambodian heritage and identity. One interviewee identified as Meng notes how life is returning to the temples after the Pol Pot years, "if there is no-one selling things and no life it is like the dark years of Pol Pot".<sup>245</sup> Meng recalls the 1980s as a period where Cambodians travelling to Angkor for Khmer New Year "really began".<sup>246</sup> Winters interview with Hawan, a shop keeper from Battambang, identifies a shift in who attended Khmer New Year's during the 1980s

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.<sup>247</sup>

One further interview with a local of the Siem Reap province that includes both the town of Siem Reap and Angkor, named Sok, is succinct in linking the fate of the Cambodian state with Angkor Wat "People in the country are so poor and for them to see the glories of the temples restored, to see Cambodia's glory restored once again yes it makes people very happy."<sup>248</sup>

During the period sandwiched by independence in 1955 and the military coup in 1970, known as the Sangkum period, Cambodia was a popular destination for international travelers and tourists.<sup>249</sup> Due to the relative stability of 1960s Cambodia, tourist records were logged and show between 50,000 and 70,000 visitors arrived in the kingdom annually.<sup>250</sup> It is impossible to know

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<sup>244</sup> Tim Winter, *Post-conflict Heritage, Postcolonial Tourism: Tourism, Politics and Development at Angkor* (London: Routledge, 2011). 138.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>249</sup> Sangkum is the name Sihanouk gave to his own political party and ideology that became a shorthand for both the period spanning 1955 to 1970 and Sihanouk's own philosophy of governance. For further reading on Sihanouk and Sangkum see Milton, E. Osborne *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

<sup>250</sup> C. Michael Hall and Greg Ringer "Tourism in Cambodia Laos and Myanmar: From Terrorism to Tourism" in C. Michael Hall and Stephen Page *Tourism in South and Southeast Asia: Issues and Cases*, (New York: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000).179.

if the tourists visiting Cambodia during the 1960s visited the temples, but one can safely deduce that the majority did so. The next time data is available on tourist numbers visiting Cambodia is 1993 where the Ministry of Tourism states 118,183 people visited Cambodia.<sup>251</sup> This number is complicated by the arrival of United Nations personnel and international Non-Governmental Agencies who dominated the Cambodian political landscape in the 1990s.<sup>252</sup> The lack of data and archive material inhibit academic exploration of tourism during the 1980s, but when one views how vital to the economy tourism was prior to the 1970s, and how rapidly tourism grew into the engine that drove the post-conflict for Cambodian economy, it would be folly to simply discard, even low level, tourism's impact during the 1980s. Perhaps then instead of impact, one should concentrate more of the striving for tourism during the PRK as this has more solid archival foundations. Chheang Vannarith, former Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, stated that "tourism used to be one of the political tools of the Heng Samrin regime..."<sup>253</sup> For Vannarith, tourism was utilized by the PRK regime to "promote its political legitimacy and international recognition".<sup>254</sup> Vannarith's article like so many others, discusses the 1980s with such brevity it fails to significantly add to any literature on the period.

The most insightful source to understand the role of tourism during the PRK is Paul Cummings. Mr. Cummings tour groups were not bombarded by political doctrine, guides were "vanilla" in their description of the temples and not overtly party loyalists. In fact, once the groups had arrived in Cambodia one gets the impression every effort was made to accommodate tourists. According to Mr. Cummings the majority of tourists came from Europe a few from the US and Australia, there were no visa restrictions based on nationality or occupation, unlike in Vietnam. Only three-day visas were available to tourists during the 1980s and a trip to Siem Reap was a single day excursion. Mr. Cummings notes how his tourist groups enjoyed Phnom Penh, but everyone wanted to see Angkor.<sup>255</sup> The temples had lost nothing of magnetic draw that had peaked in the 1960s, the years of disappearing off the tourists maps of Southeast Asia had

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<sup>251</sup> Vannarith Chheang, "The Political Economy of Tourism in Cambodia," *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* 13, no. 3 (2008): 292.

<sup>252</sup> For more on the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) during the 1990's see Benny Widyono, *Dancing in Shadows: Sihanouk, the Khmer Rouge, and the United Nations in Cambodia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

<sup>253</sup> Vannarith Chheang, "The Political Economy of Tourism in Cambodia". 287.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Paul Cummings (Personal Interview June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018).

perhaps increased the desire to revisit. According to Mr. Cummings guides were provided who offered formulaic information on the temples, older men who had perhaps worked at Angkor prior to DK. What was key for Mr. Cummings to stress was how it was Khmer who handled organization, security and permits not Vietnamese. The agenda for a daytrip to Angkor remained the same throughout the 1980s, a charter flight from Phnom Penh, morning at Angkor, lunch at the ruined Grand Hotel, back to Angkor and a charter plane back to Phnom Penh in the evening. When quizzed on how many temples were open for tourism Mr. Cummings stated Angkor Wat, possibly the Bayon, Angkor Thom complex but that was it. The rest of the temples were officially “off limits”. This shows the PRK viewed tourists differently than they did journalists. The *National Geographic* writers and photographers were shown Preah Khan temple, Ta Prohm and others. The Duality in access identifies the target message the regime wanted to share, tourists viewed the two major temples that had been cleared and cleaned. For journalists, the PRK wanted to show aid was urgently required and so other less cleared temples were allowed to be viewed.

The economic impact of tourism is a vital component to understanding how Angkor was used by the PRK. Article 24 of the 1981 constitution clearly states the PRK’s dedication to “develop the tourist sector”.<sup>256</sup> The same article states the governments dedication to heritage protection but the unique Angkorian legacy bequeathed to the regime, undoubtable offered more mercantile benefits. Gorbachev’s direct message to the Soviet bloc in the Vladivostok speech, that the flow of financial aid and military support was coming to a swift end, launched both Vietnam and Cambodia’s journey towards their own version of *Glasnost*. For Vietnam, it meant the reforms of *Doi Moi*, where the road to a more open economical market would see their economy surge. For Cambodia, the effects of Gorbechev’s speech were doubly problematic. The Heng Samrin government was forced to ease their reliance on Soviet aid, and begin to accept gradual Vietnamese troop withdrawals. What the PRK did have was Angkor, once an internationally understood shorthand for orientalist exoticism and adventure.

Legitimacy through international tourism seems an interesting angle for how Angkor was utilized by the PRK during the 1980s. How Maurizio Peleggi describes the Thai government of the 1980s, viewing tourism as moving into the process of nation building and identity, seems and

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<sup>256</sup> Constitution of the Popular Republic of Kampuchea 1981. 458.

appropriate parallel for how the PRK viewed Angkor and tourism.<sup>257</sup> Peleggi views Thai heritage as a “negotiable” conversation between tourist and the official state historical narrative.<sup>258</sup> The PRK’s quest for legitimacy that began in 1979 involved a similar ‘negotiation’ around Angkor. Early visitors such as Wilbur E. Garret and Lor Edouard expected to see a certain pre-conceived Angkor. Like a long cherished but forgotten attic heirloom, Angkor was viewed as being re-discovered during the early 1980s. This explains the propensity for pre-1970s photographs alongside the same temple now overgrown in articles. For the PRK leadership, the temples provided a chance for legitimacy and sympathy in equal measures. Prior to 1986, the process of negotiation between how Angkor was perceived by an Orientalized western gaze and official adaptation of Angkor into a Marxist historical narrative was ever-present. Publications such as *Cambodia—Victory by a Pure Revolution* used by Falser, formed a theoretical ideological underpinning to Angkor that accepted a feudal past but emphasized the collective endeavour of the temples’ construction.<sup>259</sup> This uneasy marriage of politics and an imagined past ran through every aspect of Angkor’s use during the early part of the 1980s. The *Apsara* performances, as have been discussed, often clumsily shoehorned political messages into the songs and dance routines while reports and films shot at Angkor were equally transparent in their state directives.

## **COMMUNISM IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER, FILMING ANGKOR DURING THE PRK**

Awkward political symbolism and narratives were not just put forth by the PRK politburo, travelling film crews from the Soviet Union also showed an equal taste for creating a socialist legacy for modern Cambodia. A film released through a Soviet-Lithuanian production company on the cusp of the changes in Soviet policy towards Southeast Asia in 1987, titled *Angkor Emergent Rescue in the Forest*, is a prime example of an imposed socialist heritage.<sup>260</sup> One

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<sup>257</sup> Maurizio Peleggi, "National Heritage and Global Tourism in Thailand," *Annals of Tourism Research* 23, no. 2 (1996).

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid*, 445.

<sup>259</sup> Michael S. Falser "Representing Heritage without Territory—The Khmer Rouge at the UNESCO in Paris During the 1980s and Their Political Strategy for Angkor" in *Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission: From Decay to Recovery*. Falser, 554.

<sup>260</sup> “Angkor Emergent Rescue in the Forest” Studio Cinematographique de Lithuanie, Sovinfil, SPK Kampuchea. Mao Ayuth, Pinelis Kestutis 1987. DDC\_VI\_000605. The Bophana Centre, Phnom Penh, The Kingdom of Cambodia.

consistent artistic representation is found at numerous temples and reliefs in Cambodia, the Hindu creation story commonly referred to as the churning of the milk. Angkor Wat's southern gallery has a fine relief carving of this story (Fig 19). This myth is explained eloquently by Micheal D. Coe "The *Devas* (gods) and the *Asuras* (demons) churned the ocean under the aegis of Vishnu to produce the divine elixir of immortality".<sup>261</sup> Coe defines this south gallery relief as a "masterpiece of Khmer art", which one struggles to argue against; it's also one of the best-preserved *bas-reliefs* at Angkor. The churning of the milk" story appears to have been singled out as representative of a collective past by the Soviet producers of *Angkor Emergent Rescue in the Forest*. The film opens with a long drawn out panning shot of the entire relief and explanation how the collective pulling of the Naga created the elixir and life. The religious aspect to the myth is not explained, instead the film foregrounds collective effort. It important to sidebar the drive to evoke socialist symbols into the Angkorian past with the apparent schism between how communist nations such as the Soviet Union and East Germany and Czechoslovakia portrayed the temples and classical dance performances and those who visited from the west. Eastern Bloc countries wove a political narrative emphasising the collective effort and constructing socialist underpinnings of Cambodia's Angkorian past, while Paul Cummings and Helen Jarvis viewed similar performances and guided tours of the temples without the overt push of political doctrine.



Source: Personal Collection  
Figure 19

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<sup>261</sup> Michael D. Coe, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*. 118.

*Angkor Emergent Rescue in the Forest* takes another, even more stretched take on Cambodian history and myth. with a discussion on the hundreds of smiling Bodhisattvas heads that form the towers of the Bayon. The narrator explains how the divine Lokeshvara “refuses this supreme serenity until everyone approaches nirvana.”<sup>262</sup> However divergent this interpretation of Buddhist text is, falls outside the parameters of this work, but what is clear is this of all the potential Buddhist theological narratives is singled out and given a patina of socialist lacquer. The film moves on to depict the Angkorian King Jayavaraman VII who is understood to have commissioned the 13<sup>th</sup> century Bayon complex as a ruler of compassion and peace. The narrator explains how Jayavaraman VII constructed roads and hospitals, but fails to mention war, invasion, or the god-kings of Angkor being the Earthly incarnation of Vishnu. In an obvious attempt at a modern parallel, the film cuts to an image of Vietnamese troops smiling and guarding the temples, interestingly a sight Paul Cummings cannot remember ever seeing. The message is clear that Cambodia’s Angkorian heritage is relevant to the contemporary socialist moment, but requires Vietnamese assistance and guidance. This Soviet film makes one final jump in the historical timeline showing Phnom Penh bustling with life and a propaganda poster with the Vietnamese and Khmer depicted arm in arm as the narrator states, “they cannot revive the story of their ruins alone”<sup>263</sup>. The film thus ends with an appeal, directly towards a Soviet audience. The writer and director could not have known just two years after the film’s release the PRK and Cambodian communism would have been discarded. Angkor would become the prize and burden of the new capitalist State of Cambodia and during the 1990s the UN.

*Angkor Emergent Rescue in the Forest* should be seen in the context of the temples, once again becoming adaptable to fit a foreign imposed political narrative. It was Penny Edwards whose ground-breaking book *Cambodge* introduced how Angkor as we now know it had been largely a French cultural construct.<sup>264</sup> Through the work of the *École Française d’Extrême-Orient*, a narrative of lost civilization was perpetuated, removing those that lived around the temples and worshiped within their walls from any historical ownership or agency. As Edwards notes prior to the Protectorate period, few Khmer had ever seen the temples, even fewer saw

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<sup>262</sup> “Angkor Emergent Rescue in the Forest” Studio Cinematographique de Lithuanie, Sovinfil, SPK Kampuchea. Mao Ayuth, Pinelis Kestutis.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Penny Edwards *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*.

them as anything else but religious sites of worship.<sup>265</sup> Post-independence the temples became the playground of mainly European tourists and Sihanouk, who rarely shied away from an imagined Angkorian family heritage. The image of Sihanouk and British diplomat Malcom MacDonald jet-skiing on the Angkorian Western Baray is indicative of his perceived ownership of Angkor and the French constructed links between the Cambodian monarchy and Angkor however tenuous.<sup>266</sup> The 1980s should be viewed as a noble attempt to return Angkor back to the Khmer people. For all the attempts of political appropriation, for all the flimsy arguments that Angkorian heritage had a socialist lineage there is something local about the PRK's use of Angkor. With Sihanouk gone and the French archeological teams gone, the 1980s offered an opportunity to re-cast the temples as symbols of Cambodia's strength. As Angkor had survived war, the jungle and foreign ownership so had the Khmer people survived DK.

## GOODBYE VIETNAM, HELLO WORLD

September 26<sup>th</sup> 1989 saw the last 26,000 Vietnamese troops leave Cambodia having lost an estimated 55,300 troops during the occupation.<sup>267</sup> To put this figure into context there are US 57,939 American names inscribed on the Vietnam memorial in Washington D.C. These figures side by side support the image of the Kampuchean invasion being Vietnam's Vietnam. The 10-year involvement in Cambodia was financially ruinous and physiologically damaging to the Hanoi regime and culminated in a withdrawal that looked far from a victory. The geopolitical changes that began in Vladivostok cost the PRK an estimated \$144 million dollars in Soviet credit, not counting exports.<sup>268</sup> Technicians, educators, advisors and business leaders form the eastern bloc left Cambodia with the Vietnamese withdrawal. For the first time since 1979 Cambodia was alone and politicians such as Hun Sen quickly discarded the trappings of communism, ending the protracted revolution that had begun during the 1950s. Cambodian communism had begun as an offshoot of the Vietnamese modal, now as Vietnam would

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>266</sup> Malcom MacDonald and Loke Wan Tho, *Angkor* (Jonathan Cape London, 1960).

<sup>267</sup> Paul Vrieze and Neou Vannarin, "Remembering the Vietnamese," *The Cambodia Daily* (Phnom Penh), September 2, 2009, <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/stories-of-the-month/remembering-the-vietnamese-330/>.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

reconfigure its own interpretation of Marx and Lenin, Cambodia looked towards the west with dreams of escaping poverty

The Peoples Republic of Kampuchea became The State of Cambodia in April 1989, preempting the Vietnamese withdrawal. The 1979 constitution was amended in 1989, showing some signs of reform i.e. private ownership of property and land, yet the most telling indicator of change is the language, gone is any mention of revolution, or Marxism. The State of Cambodia no longer tied itself to Laos or Vietnam and Buddhism was officially installed as the state religion. One key section opened the door for a symbolic “head of state” few doubted this was the first official olive branch to Sihanouk. The PRK flag was changed to appear less revolutionary a blue band was added to the red splitting the image in half, Angkor was present centrally and more detailed stylistically matching Sihanouks, post-independence design. After 1989 Angkorian heritage no longer had to reflect socialism, the temples had weathered revolution, neglect and warfare remaining largely intact, no more forced slogans extolling revolutionary dogma punctuated ballet performances and Angkorian heritage was ready for another appropriation. It can be convincingly argued that following the end of the PRK, Angkor would suffer more at the hands of commercial development and looting than it had during any point of the revolutionary period.<sup>269</sup>

The dissolution of the PRK in favour of a more open free market approach to the economy, in turn opened up Angkor to UNESCO and The World Monuments Fund two organizations that would shape Angkorian heritage for the next decade. Michael Falser identifies the explicit moment Angkor became part of a worldwide agenda reprinting the first call to emanate from Phnom Penh directed at the West. A period of bad weather had caused extensive damage to the temples in September 1989, Falser quotes in full: “The Ministry of Culture of the State of Cambodia and the Cambodian National Commission for UNESCO welcome all kind of assistance, cooperation and suggestions aimed at preserving this common cultural heritage for future generations.”<sup>270</sup> Here then was a change, an appeal stripped of revolutionary language embedded with the potential to speak to a broader audience. One common thread when looking at politics in Cambodia is how situational labels ideas and names have been. Overnight the

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<sup>269</sup> For more on the post 1980stemple looting issues see Masha Lafont, *Pillaging Cambodia: The Illicit Traffic in Khmer Art* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004).

<sup>270</sup> Falser, 801.

Khmer Rouge leadership abandoned communism to broaden their appeal, Sihanouk abdicated to become Prime Minister, then took the title prince, before begrudgingly supporting the Khmer Rouge. In light of these changes it is then not surprising how easily the PRK shook off their revolutionary ideals in favor of capitalism. This liberated Angkor from the uneasy burden of fitting into a socialist framework to once again draw tourists, scholars and the media all willing to construct their own personal understanding of the temples.

## CONCLUSION

The 1980s although rarely the focus of academic investigation or even informal reflection nevertheless shaped contemporary Cambodia. The process of Using Angkor as a shorthand for the nation and its self-identity began during the first few years of the PRK. The Vietnamese and Khmer troops that entered DK in 1978 found a nation without any recognizable modern infrastructure, its people scattered to work camps with towns largely abandoned. Early on Heng Samrin and his inner circle promoted a communist line while simultaneously understanding the problem such discourse presented in light of the previous 4 years. Although I acknowledge the PRK period was far from contemporary Cambodia, where one cannot walk a city block or even enter the country without being subjected to images of Angkor, the 1980s did use the temples and broader Angkorian culture in a repetitive dialogue with an imagined past. The mere fact Angkorian culture was so important and triumphed over any ideologically imposed art forms with such ease identifies the position it holds within Cambodian identity.

A PRK propaganda billboard in Phnom Penh, viewed by Sam Ang stated “Culture is the soul of a nation. Without the culture, there is no nation”.<sup>271</sup> Hobsbawm’s repetitive invented tradition model walks hand in hand with Billig’s “banal nationalism” to enforce a constructed idea or conceptualization, a means to an end. This investigation of Angkor during the 1980s identifies the temples and culture that has been attached to the stones, offered a multi-faceted totem of identity that was initially identifiable on a local Khmer level, then segue outwards to present regime legitimacy, stability and finally a tool to pull at the world’s cultural psyche for aid.

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<sup>271</sup> Sam, Ang “Preserving a Cultural Tradition: Ten Years After the Khmer Rouge” in *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 14-3, Cambodia, September (1990).

Scholars such as Marie Alexandrine Martin are on safe ground labelling the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia during the 1980s an “occupation” but then over extends by consistently referencing the process of “Vietnamization” of Cambodia.<sup>272</sup> The re-establishment of Cambodian fine arts and cultural performance alongside the promotion of the Khmer language stands testament the weakness of this argument. Individuals such as Chheng Phon institutionalized classical Khmer culture, understanding the importance of cultural heritage and accepting a spoon of ideological Hanoi medicine would guarantee its funding and preservation. Sam Ang notes the spread of culture during the PRK period identifying that by 1990 there were 354 theatres in 10 provinces, Phnom Penh alone increased from 3 theatres in 1970 to 15 in 1990.<sup>273</sup> One should note this is promotion of the type of high culture Panivong Norindr warns about, the use of Angkor without contextual criticism or explanation.<sup>274</sup> This concern with presenting Angkor as a short-cut to alleviate the complexity of cultural analysis works alongside Barthes’s warning about the malleability of art without structural context. That being said there is a stronger argument that although Angkor and Angkorian culture celebrates a hierarchical society the PRK made a valiant and largely successful attempt to engage a broader swathe of the population into this moment of cultural inclusion.

For too long the 1980s has been viewed as a period of comparative stasis bookended by more compelling and fertile periods of investigation. As this work has shown, nothing could be further from the truth. The 1980s was a vibrant decade, where the arts and cultural heritage helped bind the nation and offer a clearly identifiable notion of *Khmerness*. The PRK expertly used banal nationalism to promote the regime in visual media. My research has shown Angkorian themes were the shorthand for delivering a message of cultural and national survival. Postage stamps, where admittedly benign images numerically outweigh those of Angkor, still support this thesis as Angkor appears 29 times in the decade. Currency, to which Heng Samrin was so proud of relaunching consistently used Angkorian themes. Dignitaries, tourists and Cambodians came to national and local dance recitals, revelling in the Angkorian pageantry. As Paul Cummings states for tourists, it was and is “always about Angkor,” this saying was well understood by the regime

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<sup>272</sup> Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Cambodia, a Shattered Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>273</sup> Sam Ang “Preserving a Cultural Tradition: Ten Years After the Khmer Rouge.”

<sup>274</sup> Panivong Norindr “The Fascination for Angkor Wat and the Ideology of the Visible” in Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier, and Tim Winter Eds. *Expressions of Cambodia* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

from its embryonic stages in 1979.<sup>275</sup> Pol Pot had sealed the temples murdered artists and destroyed centuries of culture. It was not just a noble attempt by the PRK to redevelop Cambodia's Angkorian culture heritage, nor was it part of one of Svetlana Boym's "outbreaks of nostalgia" it was a paramount, pragmatic and coordinated concern from day one. When one considers cultural heritage today in Cambodia, it is criminally negligent to not at least recognize the work of the PRK and the individuals who I have identified accomplished by 1989. In 1979, the lack of trained artists, sculptors, painters, architects and archeologists opened up fields of opportunity previously closed or were part of Cambodia's omnipresent pre-revolutionary patronage system. Angkor provided the foundation about which the PRK could begin the process of re-structure and national survival.

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<sup>275</sup> Paul Cummings (Personal Interview June 1<sup>st</sup> 2018).

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