

ICOA1550: CONNECTING THE PAST TO THE FUTURE: A VISION FOR RECONCILIATION IN ANLONG VENG, CAMBODIA

Subtheme 02: The Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation

Session 1: Heritage as Peace Builder, Tying and Benefitting Community

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Abstract: With the Khmer Rouge Tribunal now drawing to a close, the need for healing Cambodia's old wounds and exacting social justice has shifted from large "outreach programs" designed to educate locals about the past, to smaller scaled activities where reconciliation is attempted within the context of "workshops" and guided "walks through history". The long-term goals of this approach runs parallel to heritage conservation and sustainable development in tandem with emerging heritage management practices. In reaching these goals, respect and mutual understanding between and across communities calls for a collaborative effort where the desired outcomes of healing and reconciliation can be best achieved.

With specific reference to the Anlong Veng Peace Centre, an initiative developed by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam), this paper addresses a means of remembrance and reconciliation driven by a pedagogical perspective, in which preserving 'perpetrator sites' to heal the past is considered controversially the way forward. As the final stronghold of the Khmer Rouge regime, Anlong Veng remains 'home' to many ex-KR soldiers, civilian followers of the movement and their descendants (approximately 85% of the population)¹, who to this day, experience isolation, polarisation and marginalisation because of their complicity in Cambodia's brutal past. Thus finding innovative ways to appropriately remember a traumatic history, while simultaneously encouraging better social cohesion among the people of Anlong Veng, is the main objective behind this controversial project.

Although it is too early to assess its success in terms of its impact on the wider community, the Anlong Veng Peace Centre, since its formation in May 2016, has shown itself to be an inspiring case study, offering us a glimpse into how we may facilitate heritage management and reconciliation in other post-conflict societies still reeling from the aftermath of war, civil unrest and uneasy peace agreements.

Key words: *Community, Tourism, Sustainable development, Reconciliation*

¹Dy, K. & Dearing, C. (2014), pg. 28

Significance of Anlong Veng

During the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime, which ruled from 17 April 1975 to 7 January 1979, more than 2 million people, a quarter of the country's population estimated at the time, perished as a result of overwork, starvation, disease or execution. The Choeung Ek "Killing Fields" and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh are the two most frequently visited memorials dedicated to this period. As in-situ sites, they specifically connect the regime to Cambodia's darkest page in history; national memorials which commemorate the victims, while also giving the impression the regime came to an abrupt end. It did not. Following the Democratic Kampuchea regime, a twenty-year long civil-guerrilla war was waged between the Khmer Rouge and, first by the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PKR) from 1979, then the State of Cambodia in 1989 and finally from the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1993, with the last Khmer Rouge military leader Ta Mok waging armed resistance until his capture in 1999 at Anlong Veng.

Protected by the natural border of the Dangrek Mountain range, the Anlong Veng area bordering Thailand served as a military hub for the Khmer Rouge combatants to regroup, rearm and resume offensive guerrilla operations in effort to retrieve the country from what they claimed to be "the Vietnamese puppets" or "the Vietnamese enemy"². With the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989, Anlong Veng gained further prominence. The Khmer Rouge reclaimed the plateau, with senior military commander Ta Mok initiating a building program in the early 1990s, which included a school, a hospital, a dam and a bridge. For many local villagers, Anlong Veng is still revered as 'Ta Mok's Country'. Ta Mok, who died in 2006 before he could be brought to trial, is still widely remembered as the benevolent leader who brought much-needed improvements to the lives of his followers; a sharp contrast to his ruthless reputation as "The Butcher" arising from when he directed several purges prior to and during the DK era. For international visitors - of which there are reportedly fewer than half a dozen a day - Anlong Veng registers mostly as the place where Pol Pot was denounced by his comrades in a 'show trial' after he ordered the execution of a senior KR official Son Sen and several family members, as well as his own death less than a year later and cremation on a makeshift pyre of old tyres and rubbish.

The events leading up to the demise of the Khmer Rouge is what the Ministry of Tourism had attempted to capitalise on under the guise of 'education'. A circular ordered by Prime Minister Hun Sen in 2001 declared the Anlong Veng region of "historic importance in the final stage of the political life of the leaders and military organisation of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge". The area was subsequently earmarked "to become a historical museum for national and international tourists"³. But turning Anlong Veng into a tourist destination sparked outrage. Critics referred to the government's plans of profiting from the country's legacy of atrocity, as a future "Pol Pot theme park" or a "Disneyland of death"⁴. Apart from a pyramid-shaped 'peace' memorial which still eclipses most other buildings in Anlong Veng and a few dilapidated signs indicating mostly ruined sites of 'historical significance', little else attests to the government's original commitment toward bringing tourism to the area, that is, until now.

Researcher Dylan Wood has argued that the delays in tourist development were largely due to the Ministry of Tourism wanting to control the interpretation of the sites⁵. Colin Long and Keir Reeves go further to suggest that the general lack of interpretation, and consequently the lack of control as to how information was conveyed at the sites, pointed to the government abandoning 'the search for the truth' in favour of protecting ex-Khmer Rouge members who occupy positions in the current

²Dy, K. & Dearing, C. (2014), pg. 57, 107

³Circular (2001), https://www.eccc.gov.kh/sites/default/files/legal-documents/Circular_on_remains.pdf

⁴Baker, M. (2003) and Fatby, P. (2003)

⁵Wood, D. (2009), pg. 252.

government regime⁶. As with Wood, both Long and Reeves conducted their research just as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal was getting underway, a time when the history of Khmer Rouge regime had yet to be incorporated into the public school curriculum. It therefore remains unclear as to whether the public education programs which now accompany the Tribunal, or the widely distributed textbook *A History of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1979*, or the recently installed information labels at Ta Mok's House about the DK period and the Tribunal, would have changed their perceptions of a 'perpetrator site' not worthy of preserving. By interpreting Anlong Veng as a 'perpetrator site' in the same breath as Hitler's bunker, Saddam Hussein's palaces and Stalin's summer home, Long and Reeves maintain the idea that cultural heritage preservation is about remembering aspects of the past worthy of remembrance. Anlong Veng, as they saw it in a mostly interpretation-free state at the time, was quite simply undeserving of any attention.

But can such places further the understanding and the commemoration of painful, tragic pasts? Is there a way to interpret, preserve and display a difficult past without commercialising suffering? Some answers to these questions have been recently provided by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, who have worked 'on and off'⁷ with the Ministry of Tourism in relation to their 2001 decree to develop Anlong Veng as a place of significance.



Fig - Information stands at Ta Mok's House Museum 2016

⁶Long, C. & K, Reeves. (2009). pg. 77-78

⁷Little, H. & Muong, V. 2015

Development of the Anlong Veng: value and measures

Delays in developing Anlong Veng as a tourist destination can be typically attributed to lack of funds, but more critically to underdeveloped heritage conservation practices where tourism is interpreted as a panacea for the country's economic woes. For DC-Cam, who have long strived to forge the understanding that peace and reconciliation can only be built and sustained with discussions about the past, such delays would prove advantageous in getting a meaningful dialogue started about the educational value and long-term benefit of the sites.

When the Khmer Rouge surrendered to government forces in 1998, the local population of Anlong Veng who had either voluntarily joined or were coerced into joining the KR movement, were officially reintegrated into Cambodian society in February, 1999. Following disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, it is of little surprise that the locals were perceived as 'perpetrators'; a label not so easily shrugged off, even today, where being on the 'right side' of moral history is often reinforced by the polarising terms of 'perpetrator' and 'victim'. A more sensitive approach in dealing with past was required, one in which the nuanced understandings conflict in general could be more fully explored with the goal of peace and reconciliation in mind, one in which the very definitions of 'perpetrator' and 'victim' could merge perhaps with the more neutral term of "survivor". By incorporating the history of Anlong Veng into DC-Cam's Genocide Education Program, the history of the area can now be better connected to the present challenges endured by the villagers as a way to advocate positive change and critical sustainable development.

The purpose of the Centre is to: preserve and develop Anlong Veng's fourteen historical sites; host researchers from Cambodia and abroad; organize study tours of the Anlong Veng community; train professional tour guides for the community; develop a master plan for the Anlong Veng community; document the history of each of Anlong Veng's 68 villages and promote reconciliation and development in Cambodia by raising awareness of the Anlong Veng community⁸. Ta Mok's meeting house atop the Dangrek Mountain has been restored to the Anlong Veng Peace Centre, the project's headquarters which functions as a memorial, a classroom and as a public library of materials relating to the Cambodian genocide.

Since February 2016, 200 tours have been conducted, involving 200 students from Phnom Penh and Anlong Veng. Conducted over four days, students from Phnom Penh's universities and colleges, and seniors from Anlong Veng High School formerly Ta Mok's School, are invited take part in a dialogue about their country's traumatic past, while being offered a window into the daily lives of the ex-Khmer Rouge followers and their families residing in the area. The urgency to involve the younger generation in the healing process, can also be best illustrated by Youk Chhang, Executive Director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, who argues that the culture of forgetting is akin to denial:

With the future of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal limited to a small number of high profile leaders, and a modern Cambodian population of which some 70% of the population was born after the worst of the Khmer Rouge genocide, Cambodia is facing a turning point. On the one hand, Cambodians run a real risk of losing a firm grip on understanding, memorializing and ultimately accepting a difficult past. On the other hand, a rapidly globalizing Cambodia must take on new challenges of sustainable growth, democratic integrity and human rights.⁹

The study tour boldly encourages students to rethink the polarizing terms of 'perpetrator' and 'victim', blurring them out altogether to allow for more balanced views to emerge and take the shape of genuine healing and reconciliation. This is facilitated through a number of activities which includes: seminar-style discussions on the history of Democratic Kampuchea period and the

⁸Anlong Veng Poster, Genocide Education Project. The Sleuk Rith Institute (Sri) and The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), March 2017

⁹Chhang, Y. in Dy, K. & Dearing, C (2016), pg. 2.

significance of the Anlong Veng district post-1979; interviewing local villagers who have remained in the area following the demobilisation of the Khmer Rouge in 1999; tours around key places such as the former homes and the cremation or burial sites of senior KR leaders, as well as community-based tasks such as tree-planting, visiting local schools and erecting much-needed new signage for sites of significance.



Fig.2– Anlong Veng Peace Centre and Study Group.

For participants joining the tour from Phnom Penh the opportunity to interview an ex-Khmer Rouge villager, as part of the wider cultural mapping project of documenting the 68 villages, is the highlight of the journey. Rather understandably some feel apprehensive, if not a little frightened, by the prospect of coming face-to-face with those whose lives are inextricably linked to the brutal regime; whereas others feel intergenerational anger, seeking out answers to match the stories they have heard through their families.

One consistent response of the tour, is that the students are often surprised by the welcoming nature of the villagers, who often display excitement in having a visitor, as if to break up the monotony of their difficult daily existence. Although it has been frequently reported that the actual interviewing process can be frustrating due to interviewees being either elusive or evasive about their past, the overall impression is one of warmth and friendliness, which enables students to potentially empathise with their subject's reasons for becoming part of the Khmer Rouge movement and their present struggle. Many students in fact feel compelled to seek sustainable solutions for a prosperous future, with some of them incorporated in a master plan for the region.

Site issues, complications and solutions

The Anlong Veng Peace Centre and Study Tours takes on a grassroots approach which seeks to transform the visitor's experience. In this context, the tourist is reconceptualised as a 'visitor' who is inquisitive about the past but is also invested in the future of the country. Reconceptualising Anlong

Veng as a place of healing and commemoration - as opposed to the commercial “roast chicken, fried bananas, blue tents”¹⁰ children-selling-wristbands approach to historical tourism - has taken considerable readjustment in thinking. Cambodians -domestic travellers and particularly the locals - need to be at the heart of any masterplan, not the international tourists for whom the place is little more than a passing curiosity.

Building upon DC-Cam’s work in the area, London-based architect firm DaeWha Kang Design has reconceptualised Anlong Veng as a ‘city of Peace, Regeneration, and Prosperity’¹¹. Underpinning this vision proposed in June 2017, is the philosophy healing the landscape, healing society’ which takes a holistic view of a 50-km long stretch of Anlong Veng district. It attempts to combine large scale infrastructure (national monument and museum, vocational training centre, manufacturing and eco-urban residential zones) with sustainable development (sustainable forestry and agricultural practices).

Most impressive and inspiring is the concept of transforming sites either associated or deeply connected with past trauma and violence into ‘sites of regeneration’. The area where a warehouse once stood for the manufacturing and storing of landmines, for example, is reconceptualised as the site where crutches, wheelchairs and bicycles are to be manufactured. Given that a quarter of the Anlong Veng’s population are reportedly suffering from physical disabilities as a result of landmines and other injuries sustained in a prolonged guerrilla war, transforming the sites into a place that enhances mobility and provides jobs, places the community at the centre of healing and reconciliation. The site where senior KR official Son Sen, his wife and children were executed, and where it is also believed that two of his daughters were raped prior to their murders, is planned as a “Women’s Centre”, offering counselling and support for women suffering from gender-based violence.



Fig.2– Students approaching a villager for an interview

¹⁰Fatby, P. (2003)

¹¹DaeWha Kang Design (2017)

In this masterplan, the visitor is also envisaged as an active participant in rehabilitating Anlong Veng's landscape, where mass-deforestation has triggered severe environmental impacts. Starting at Anlong Veng Lake (formerly Ta Mok's Lake), each visitor receives a map and a seedling to plant at a designated point. Rather than a quick-stop over, a visit to Anlong Veng is proposed as a three-day journey on foot through the rejuvenated landscape formerly characterised by violence. For visitors unable to pursue the journey by foot, eco-friendly, locally-made bicycle rickshaws will be available. Though there are many practicalities to take into consideration regarding the amount of time visitors have available, what this proposal reveals, is a commitment toward securing a new future through interaction with, and a broadened understanding, of Anlong Veng's history.

Conclusion

Bringing this initiative to reality will undoubtedly be fraught with the same challenges that other plans to develop Anlong Veng have met in the past. The important difference, however, is that it places the Anlong Veng community at its heart, in distinct contrast to previous proposals that have emphasised commercialism or have dismissed the place as a 'perpetrator site' not worthy of remembrance. Anlong Veng will forever remain a place associated with violence and trauma. But it need not be repressed by its past nor should people be chained to that past. Through knowledge, understanding and acceptance of what happened in the past, Anlong Veng may be able to move beyond the burden of its history into a better future for the next generations. This is not something that can be achieved tomorrow, or even the day after, but there is hope in the ideas we see today.

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