The meaning of the Angkor heritage in the Khmer Rouge utopia

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For all regimes since independence, Angkor has crystallised a Cambodian nationalism (or often chauvinism rather) that has been indirectly responsible for some of the hubris and delusions of grandeur on the part of political leaders - paradoxically combined with the fear that the country could disappear.

"Through rapid development, our country must surpass the Angkor era\textsuperscript{1}\textsuperscript{1}, that was one version of the way the Khmer Rouge expressed how they wanted to surpass not only the Angkor era, but also Mao's Great Leap Forward that became "The Super Great Leap Forward, the Prodigious Great Leap forward". Angkar (the Party Organisation) will endlessly repeat that message: "Just as Angkor Vat is a stupendous marvel, so is the KR revolution". If our people could build Angkor Vat, they can do anything, Pol Pot proclaimed in his famous speech of 27\textsuperscript{th} September 1977. That axiom permeated all Khmer Rouge thinking. In particular their massive irrigation projects could have been inspired by Bernard-Philippe Groslier's concept of "The Hydraulic City";

Paradoxically, the Khmer Rouge utopia looked to the past as well as to the future. Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and Son Sen spoke of having had a revelation about what was primitive communism when they hid in the forest, in the late Nineteen Sixties, close to the Jaraïs and other Tampouns villages, in the Bokeo district of Ratanakiri. In his version of L'Internationale, Pol Pot translated "Le monde va changer de base", that points to the future, into: "Tomorrow our new regime will be restored" (thnay sa'aêk robop thmey phong yeung ban vinh). Was their revolution to be a combination of the return to a pure primitive communism combined with the affluence and glory of Angkorean days?

To celebrate the first anniversary of their victory, Khieu Samphân, Democratic Kampuchea's newly appointed head of State, proclaimed on 16\textsuperscript{th} April 1976:

"The great victory day of 17\textsuperscript{th} April 1975 is the day of the greatest and most splendid victory in more than 2,000 years of Cambodian history. This great victory is even more brilliant than the Angkor era, which was truly a splendid era. Even today mankind admits that the Angkor temple is a splendid masterpiece of our labourers' ancestors. However, the victory that our people, workers and peasants of this era have scored over the most ferocious and most inhumane U.S. imperialist is even more brilliant and splendid that the Angkor temple" he trumpeted on the Democratic Kampuchea radio on 16\textsuperscript{th} April 1976 (FBIS, H3)

The Khmer Rouge even put Angkor on their flag and in their national anthem:

Long live the dazzling victory of 17\textsuperscript{th} April 1975! 
More grandiose (glorious), more meaningful than the Angkor era!

\textsuperscript{1} Pol Pot's Little Red Book, HL, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai 2004, slogan 40
Such fascination for Angkor was also partly at the origin of the massive irrigation projects that were achieved in the very few years of their regime. The key to the Super Great Leap Forward was the mass production of rice (their new hard currency) and, as they believed had happened in Angkor days; nature needed to be harnessed and hydraulic people's communes had to be established, with massive human labour, as in the olden days and in the shortest possible time.

That megalomania and chauvinism convinced them that "The world is looking at us. [...] Our revolutionary movement is a new experience, and an important one in the whole world, because we don't perform like others", proclaimed The Party's Four-Year plan to build Socialism in all fields" (David Chandler et al., Pol Pot Plans the Future, 1988, p. 49).

Apart from the urge to reproduce and outshine what they perceived as a far-reaching Angkorean irrigation system the paper will examine some aspects of that special reverence for Angkor: the sequence of events in Siemreap on 17th April 1975, with the Angkor Vat victory celebration and the special treatment of the Conservation staff and their families; the visitors to Angkor under Democratic Kampuchea and a plan to develop a new kind of political tourism, illustrated by the tour of he Swedish delegation, led by Jan Myrdal in August 1978 and the Anglo-American group around Elizabeth Becker in December 1978. That will lead us to assess how far we can say that fascination with Angkor could very partly and indirectly contribute to our understanding of Khmer Rouge atrocities.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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1939, birth in Lyon
1961: Licence d'Anglais
1962: M.A.
1965-67 : English teacher at the Lycée Descartes, Phnom Penh. .
October 1967-2000: Lecturer at the University Lumière-Lyon 2 on British modern History and civilisation in the English Department and at The Institute Political Studies.,
1969-70: Florey European Scholarship at The Queen's College, Oxford.
- July-August 1989: Seminar on Human Rights at the University of Phnom Penh to first cohort of students in French language.
- August 1993 - September 1994: Sabbatical year in Cambodia: lecturing in the History department at RUPP and field research on Democratic Kampuchea.
- July-September 1995: 'Visiting Fellow', Department of Political Sciences, at the Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra
- 2002-2005: Pilot M.A. in Cultural Studies at the Buddhist Institute & RUPP to train researchers in social sciences for the ‘Customs & Mores Commission’.  
- 2005-2011: Visiting lecturer in the History Department at the Royal University of Phnom Penh on Cambodian Colonial History and Cambodia since Independence. Ongoing research on Democratic Kampuchea: in particular, Khmer Rouge prisons and working with French educated Suong Sikoeun, ex-Khmer Rouge apparatchik and ex-husband of Laurence Picq, to complete his full autobiography to be published shortly by Éditions du Cerf under the title of "Intinéraire d'un intellectuel khmer rouge: les bonnes intentions de l'enfer", under the editorship of Stéphane Courtois.

Main publications:

Articles:

2 – Organizer and contributor in the Phnom Penh, with ADHOC, on 25-26th January 2007 of a Forum on "Khmer Rouge History From Stalin to Pol Pot – towards a Description of the Khmer Rouge Regime". Editor of the publication of the minutes in Communisme, No 95/96, l'Âge d'Homme, Paris 2008 under the title: "Kampuchea démocratique : Stade ultime du communisme ?"
3 - 7-8 Siksacakr, Journal of the Center for Khmer Studies, Cambodia No. 8-9 Special issue on Buddhism, Achar Hem Chieu (1898-1943), the 'Umbrella Demonstration of 20th July 1942 and the Vichy regime'.
4 - No. 10 Siksacakr (2008), "Siemreap-Angkor During the War (1970-1975) and Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979): from Violence to Totalitarianism"

Books:


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