

# Siem Reap–Angkor During the War (1970–1975) and Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979): From Violence to Totalitarianism

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THIS PAPER RELATES THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF ANGKOR and the city of Siem Reap in the years of the civil war (1970–1975) and the self-styled Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime (1975–1979). The French *Conservation* was able to continue with some renovation at Angkor during the early 1970s. While under DK the inhabitants of the site had been relocated further to the north to make room for the visits of foreign—mainly Chinese—delegations. The revolutionaries overran Siem Reap city also on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1975. They did not expel the population straight away as in Phnom Penh, for they were busy celebrating their victory at a big meeting, among scores of monks within the first walls of Angkor Wat temple. Most other temples of the archaeological site were to be abandoned under DK, some only to be cleared of surrounding villagers in 1978, when the Khmer Rouge (KR) planned to open the site to a few foreign tourists. None of the Siem Reap pagodas were destroyed, but put to mainly military use, while all monks were disrobed. The lives of most members of the Conservation (*Aphireak*) team and their families were spared. They had been taken to small village collectives in the Roluos–Bakong area, as the *Angkar* probably had been planning to make use of them at some later stage. The Siem Reap old colonial prison was packed with detainees to meet the same fate as at S-21 and Chœung Aek. For the KR, Angkor was both a symbol of so-called hated ‘feudalism,’ and, at the same time of great pride, as it showed for them that the Khmers were capable of achieving anything. Most of the information detailed in this paper has been collected from interviews of local people from 1991 to 2004.

## I – The violence unleashed during the war years, 1970–1975

### 1 – The nature of the war

The immediate result of the loss of power by Prince Norodom Sihanouk on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1970 was to “free Vietnamese forces from the constraints” of their sanctuaries on the border “and to pull all of Cambodia into the Indochina war.”<sup>1</sup> The Vietnamese arrived at Angkor all wearing a badge of Sihanouk, just a few weeks after and the Republican army was never to regain the symbolic site. The front line remained some one kilometre north of the *Grand Hôtel d’Angkor* throughout the period, and just north of what used to be Siem Reap’s Jayavarman II High School, turned now into the provincial Teachers’ Training College.<sup>2</sup> So, the city remained throughout the period under the control of Phnom Penh, while the entire archaeological site was controlled by the revolutionaries.

1. David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, Yale, Yale University Press, 1991, p. 201.

2. Reigned from about A.D. 770 to after 830 and installed the Khmer capital in the Angkor region in 802. He is also said to have established the ‘Devarāja’ cult.

That stalemate was typical of the military situation in the course of those five fatal years. Throughout the country, the revolutionaries soon held the sparsely populated countryside and outlying areas, but were unable to control the provincial capitals except in the north-east. Besides, according to his unpublished memoirs, General Sosthène Fernandez who led the Republican army, the Phnom Penh troops had been fighting a classical war of invasion during the first three years. The Vietnamese, followed by the first Khmer Rouge revolutionaries, trained village youths to join the revolution, after assassinating local chiefs in villages and communes they conquered. It was only after the January 1973 Paris agreement, that was to pave the way for the American withdrawal from Indochina, that Fernandez' troops were confronted by their compatriots. As the war in South Vietnam became 'Vietnamized' and most of the Vietnamese troops went home, the conflict in Cambodia grew into a bitter civil war. Armed confrontation would regularly take place along that front line, and there were victims on both sides until their final victory in April 1975, the stench of the dead soldiers' bodies at the time was unbearable.<sup>3</sup>

2 – *The competition to enrol youths on both sides*

Those were the years when young men, and even very young adolescents, were forced to take sides and enrol either with Lon Nol or the mysterious *Angkar*. For instance, the majority (some 60%) of the 1,000 workers, who had extended the Siem Reap airfield in the late Sixties under Chinese auspices, joined the Revolution. They had been subjected to intense Maoist propaganda until 1969. For instance, Svay Savœun,<sup>4</sup> who had been a workman at the airport in 1969, was given four Mao medals. Workers were taught Chinese revolutionary songs like "The sun rises in the East;" all that exists in the world is thanks to Mao's work. He has given people everything.

The workers were shown Maoist documentary films. One showed a big hole being dug, 10 to 20 metres deep. Half way down, people dug other horizontal tunnels so that children, adolescents and old people could go down into it to be protected from American and French bombardments—or so it was claimed. Another hole was dug for ventilation. Imperialists launched bombs into the big holes and believed everyone had died. In reality no one had. In actual fact many holes have been dug with tunnels that converged at a centre. It was a place to hide from imperialists and colonialists alike. There were many narrow galleries in which all families could take refuge. When there were threats of bombardments, Chinese spies went on bicycles from village to village to warn people. Svay Savœun was not convinced by this propaganda, because his father was a policeman. Yet, the Chinese experts had given each worker khaki military clothes, shoes and a flask. Similarly, in those years too many novices in the Siem Reap pagodas left the monkhood and joined one camp. For instance, at Wat Késararam that was the pagoda of the Thoammayutt sect, out of some fifty saffron-robed men, only three elder monks remained by the fall of the city. It could have been to the revolutionary or the Republican sides.

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3. According to Aem Saroeun, born in 1957, interviewed on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2001 at Banteay Srey.

4. Born in 1950, interviewed 18<sup>th</sup> July 1991.

### 3 – *The Conservation during the war*

At the Conservation worksite of Baphuon temple, that Bernard-Philippe Groslier had dismantled to rebuild on more stable foundations, the Vietnamese allowed the team to continue the arduous task thanks to the Frenchman's diplomacy. The work resumed from June 1970, and Groslier would still cycle back and forth from Siem Reap throughout the whole of 1971. But everything was halted for good from 20<sup>th</sup> January 1972. Much of the heavy machinery was confiscated by the revolutionaries, while some labourers were forcefully enrolled into the revolution. Groslier, no longer allowed to visit the archaeological site, opened new renovation projects at Preah Enkosei, close to the city and later at Watt Athvea along the river, on the way to the Great Lake. He was determined to continue business as usual and provide a regular income for the numerous families who could only survive from their labour at the Conservation.<sup>5</sup> But in early January 1974, after having been wounded by a thief in Phnom Penh, Bernard-Philippe Groslier had to leave Cambodia for good. He handed over to his young deputy Pich Keo. An official document from the Ministry of Culture nominated him as Groslier's successor and gave him all the keys of the Conservation at Siem Reap.

## II – The 17<sup>th</sup> April 1975 in Siem Reap

What happened at the time of the arrival of the guerrillas in Siem Reap city was much the same as in other provincial capitals—but with a couple of major differences. First, the KR must have insisted on seizing the city, the old capital, on the same day as Phnom Penh, the modern capital. But they arrived a few hours later and not at dawn, as in Phnom Penh. They were first concerned with disarming the population and rounding up leaders of the previous regime, and left the population a few days to evacuate the provincial capital. While the KR leadership did engineer criminal policies, they were also introducing some rationality in the chaos they created. As seen through the eyes of witnesses and three individuals in particular (an archaeologist, Pich Keo and two monks, Rev. Put Ponn and Rev. Tep Vong), that fatal day and those that followed were marked by mainly three events, apart from expelling the entire population, as everywhere else in the country.

### 1 – *The massacre of the old elites*

The old Sangkum and Republican elite—civilian and military—were put into lorries and driven into the modern Buddhist temple next to Prasat Lolei in the Roluos area, east of the city. The temple served to keep the prisoners while they were they were tied up and their identities checked. They were interrogated some 500 metres to the north of the pagoda. Then they were taken some one kilometre further to the north-east to be exterminated. The burial ground consisted of long communal pits dug with one of the excavators from the *Conservation*. There were probably several hundred victims even as many as a thousand.<sup>6</sup> After the fall of the DK regime, just a few bones

5. Interview of Pich Keo, born in 1944, on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2004.

6 According to witnesses Yiey May, born in 1950, interviewed on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2001; and her husband Koy Chaem, born in 1947, interviewed on 24<sup>th</sup> January, 2001.

were left sticking out of the site that was never fully excavated. Only in 1979, people searched for gold. A few bones and skulls were used for the 20<sup>th</sup> May, the Day of Hatred. Inside the precincts of the renowned early Angkorean towers of Prasat Lolei there are the remains of a small People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) memorial that served as a focus point for the 20<sup>th</sup> May Day of Hatred celebrations. The day was chosen because the 20<sup>th</sup> May 1976 was the day DK was supposed to have instituted a sweeping collectivization throughout the country. In actual fact, in some of the areas already controlled by the revolutionaries, the collectives had already been in official existence for three years since 20<sup>th</sup> May 1973.

2 – *The fate of the monkhood and the Angkor Wat celebrations*

The Buddhist monks do not seem to have been among those elites marked for immediate execution at Lolei. Quite the opposite, according to Revd Put Ponn head monk of Wat Késaram, ex-Thoammayutt, before 1975.<sup>7</sup> He had become a novice at the age of twelve at Wat Than, or Nun Moniram in Phnom Penh, and took the robe at sixteen. He was sent to Siem Reap in 1974. He came with two other monks. By the time Siem Reap fell to the KR, all the novices had left and gone back to their villages. When the KR entered the city on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1975, they came to the pagoda and he was asked where he came from. He replied from Wat Than in Phnom Penh. The head KR came from Chbar Ampeou, just south of Phnom Penh, and not far from Wat Than. A revolutionary committee was formed at Wat Damnak. The next day he and the two other monks were taken by *moto-remorque* to within the first walls of Angkor Wat to attend a big celebration in honour of the victory. There were many people present and a platform had been built in front of Angkor Wat temple for officials, among whom there was just one monk he did not know. Put Ponn was placed where some fifty to sixty monks had been assembled. The victory was announced with great fanfare, to the sound of traditional music heard in pagodas. Speeches celebrated the greatest victory in thousands and thousands of years. Slogans were shouted, revolutionary songs were sung and playlets that described the revolutionary saga were performed.

The monks were required to say the *chéakyoantao (jayanto)*, the traditional prayer celebrating victory. The prayer can also be chanted for the inauguration of a Buddha statue. So the Communist Party of Kampuchea and its local representatives were celebrating the dawn of a new age, personified almost as a new god, the hidden and abstract entity that was the *Angkar padevoat*, the Revolutionary Organization. Then on, it would rule the world. I say the world, because the KR leaders, and before Angkor Wat in particular, they were convinced the Kampuchean revolution, not only would rule Cambodia for 10,000 years, as Nuon Chea proclaimed, but it would serve as a beacon of light for the rest of impoverished humanity, the victims “of the terrible plots of colonialists, imperialists and capitalists of all stripes.” This is what the ceremony proclaimed—except that it was secret and went unrecorded. There were also speeches from the representatives of the ‘democratic monks’ and from various other groups. This lasted till about 10 P.M. that night.

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7. Born in 1923, interviewed in Siem Reap on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1994.

After their return to Wat Késararam, the population had not yet been expelled from the city. This was to take place only on the next day. As Put Ponn's pagoda is situated to the west of the centre, he was sent, with his two companions, along national Road No. 6 to the west, in their saffron robes. The three went as far as Krâlanh district, then down south to Wat Sampeouv Loun, five kilometres on the road to Sambour commune along the Stœng Sreng river. He had met a KR leader who knew him and protected him throughout the regime, as he was head of the collective. The population of Krâlanh had been relocated to the north. The population was later asked to build the road down south to the Sangkè river. Rev. Tep Vong,<sup>8</sup> now head of the Buddhist Saṅgha in Cambodia, was at the time deputy abbot of Wat Bô. He confirmed the statements of Rev. Put Ponn, except that the Angkor Wat celebrations did not last one evening but three days.

He was born in Pralay village, just south of Siem Reap city, along the Siem Reap river. He entered the monkhood in 1952, at the time of the movement for independence. He was at the ancient Wat Bô in Sangkum days when there were eighty to one hundred monks and under the Republic sixty to seventy. They were sixty on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1975 when the KR entered Siem Reap on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1975, in the afternoon. Wat Bô was the largest pagoda in the city. For the next three days, he was required to walk to Angkor Wat temple and take part in a vast meeting to celebrate the great victory, with no less than 5,000 people attending. There were also two groups of monks who did not merge at all: one group of thirty, like himself, from Siem Reap city, another larger one of one hundred from the "liberated" zones. A group of some one hundred ordinary people only came from the Republican zone of Siem Reap. The "revolutionary monks" were near the southern pagoda of Angkor perimeter; they never mixed with the Siem Reap ones.

There were speeches, music, drama, revolutionary songs. *"The capitalists-imperialists have eaten the flesh, drunk the blood and made people chew dogs for more than 2,000 years. Now they have been defeated, rooted out."* Kae Pauk presided triumphantly over these grand ceremonies. Pointing out to the five towers of Angkor Wat behind him, he could rant: *"Hurrah! This is the greatest victory of the people of Kampuchea, greater even than the towers of Angkor."* The revolutionary playlets consisted in mimicking the heroic actions of messengers or combatants, preparing bamboo traps, or, in the new collectives to be developed, mass transplanting of paddy shoots, etc. Tep Vong was on the causeway for three days, had brought his own rice with the other monks. After coming back to Siem Reap, he was relocated on foot, still wearing his robe, with other monks, to the village of Kbal Domrey, Pongrô Lœu commune, 15–18 km. to the north of Kompong Kdey in Chi Kraèng district. He was only ordered to disrobe in November of the same year and "do hard labour," like the ordinary people. He was then transferred, on 14<sup>th</sup> November to his native village of Pralay. Rev. Tep Vong did not mention mass extermination of monks in his interview, but just disrobing.<sup>9</sup>

8. Born in 1932, interviewed at Watt Langka in Phnom Penh on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2004.

9. See *Buddhism Under Pol Pot* by Ian Harris, Phnom Penh, Documentation Center of Cambodia No. 13, 2007, in which Tep Vong spoke of 57 monks being executed. He did not mention those murders to this author.

There is no mention of this Angkor Wat celebration in the voluminous published literature about DK, but this fits with a similar celebration that took place in Phnom Penh at the Olympic stadium, but some two weeks after the victory. The KR would have had the time to prepare celebrations for 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> April 1975 since they had been controlling the area for the past 5 years. Besides, in the first National anthem, Buddhist monks *are* present among the populace as representatives of the people:

Glittering red blood blankets the earth,  
Sacrificial blood to liberate the people:  
Blood of workers, peasants and intellectuals,  
Blood of young men, Buddhist monks and young women.  
Blood that swirls away and takes flight, twirling on high into the sky,  
Turning into the red, revolutionary flag!  
Let us wipe out all enemies of Kampuchea!  
Let us grasp the Victory! The Victory! The Victory!

It appears that KR entering Siem Reap did not single out any of the remaining Buddhist monks for immediate massacres—far from it. They used them to add glamour to their grandiose celebrations of a victory that had been greater than anything that had happened in Cambodian history for more than 2,000 years. As to the Siem Reap pagodas, and beautiful Wat Bô in particular, none of them have been destroyed by the regime. We can listen to Revd Tep Vong once again, also testifying in the August 1979 ‘genocide’ trial:

All the nine pagodas of the Siem Reap capital have been transformed into premises for the regional security service because of their proximity to the old prison (it was the case of the Thoammayutt pagoda), or into arm depots and school for officers’ training (this being the case of Preah Prum Roth pagoda), or into military vehicle repair workshops such as the case of the Svay pagoda; as for the pagodas of Monisovan, Por [Bô], Enkosa and Enkosey, they were abandoned to the growth of wild grass. The aforesaid nine pagodas have been used or adapted by the local rulers according to their own whims.<sup>10</sup>

To go back to Revd Put Ponn and the two other monks, once they had arrived at the new collective, they were disrobed and black clothes were presented to them coming from the other side of the river Sreng, then Battambang province. They were made to look mainly after ducks, but also poultry and pigs. The food was sufficient, as they were themselves in the food production. The local temple along the Stoeung Sreng river was left untouched, but all the Buddha statues were destroyed. One can still see today the beautifully carved wooden triangular frontage or pediment.

Put Ponn had even composed a little ditty for the children with whom he was guarding the ducks:

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10. See *People’s Revolutionary Tribunal held in Phnom Penh for the Trial of the Genocidal Crime of Pol Pot – Ieng Sary Clique, “Witnesses’ Testimony,”* a group of lawyers of Cambodia, 1980, pp. 77–78.

<i>Komar khviel tie mien pram neak</i>	The children who mind the ducks are five
<i>Mean Ta Ponn mnéak chea neak deuk noam</i>	They have one leader called Grandfather
<i>Kontum! bohé! bohé! bohay!</i>	<i>Kontum! bohé! bohé! bohay!</i> [Ponn
<i>Luh dol vélie thnay noam knie thvœu ka.</i>	When the sun rises, he guides them to work.

At the end of the DK regime, Put Ponn returned to Wat Késararam and was re-ordained, as Buddhism demands. He saw that the temple had been transformed into a prison after the near-by Siem Reap's colonial prison was chock-full. There was an interrogation room where the victims had been hung by the feet. Bodies had been buried around the pagoda grounds—about 100. They were unearthened and put in a memorial. Every the 20<sup>th</sup> May Hate Day ceremony is performed in their memory. The memorial is a mere small wooden shack in a bad state of repair, with very few bones left. There are today about fifty monks in this pagoda.

On the other hand, there is a much larger memorial at nearby Wat Atthésmosan, newly-built with funding from the ex-Khmer Rouge *kammaphibal*, Mr. Tea Banh, now Minister of Defence. The new pagoda was built on the grounds of the quite large office block built, in the mid-Sixties, by the Chinese to be used for the technical advisors that were working for the extension of the Siem Reap airfield. It was there that Cultural Revolution propaganda was distilled to the Khmer workers. Under DK, this area had become the Chœung Aèk of Siem Reap, that is where those sentenced to death by *Angkar* at the old colonial prison were brought to be executed. Hence the numerous pits found there. The memorial has the form of a stupa, with glass windowpanes on the four sides, so that tourists can gloat at the horrors of the DK regime.

One can read on a concrete slab:

The collection of bones that you see in this stupa were bones collected from the near-by fields. Those were from innocent people who died at the hands of the savage Pol Pot regime in 1975–1979.

We do not have enough money to build a dignified and proper memorial to honour these innocent people the world once stood by and let another dement dictator murder 1,000,000 in four years. Now we can help provide comfort to the dear departed souls with donation.

Thank you.

### 3 – *The special treatment for Conservation team*

Just as the *Conservation* was allowed to continue its work at Baphuon until 20<sup>th</sup> January 1972, just as François Bizot's life had been spared by Angkar and Duch at Christmas 1971 and he was released, the rehabilitation team recruited by the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* was given special treatment from the very first day of the revolutionary victory. According to Pich Keo,<sup>11</sup> the last Frenchman employed by the EFEO was Marcel Lucien who was in charge of machinery and crane operation. He left Siem Reap in January 1975. Pich Keo, like most of his compatriots, was happy to see

11. Born in 1944, interviewed on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2004.

the end of the war and was looking forward to seeing Angkor again, which he had not seen since June 1970. The revolutionaries entered the city at midday. Pich Keo stayed at home. In the night of 17<sup>th</sup> April 1975, just before midnight, a group KR came inside the Conservation. There was no electricity. They tied Pich Keo and his guards with *kramas*.<sup>12</sup> Then, by a moonless night, Pich Keo was taken to Siem Reap's Jayavarman II High School, along the Siem Reap river that used to be a Lon Nol military camp. All weapons were collected and until 4 A.M. in the morning, Pich Keo's colleagues helped to gather them. At 4:30, Pich Keo was allowed to return home. The Conservation had been searched everywhere by a second and then a third group of soldiers. They only took torch lights.

On the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup>, all the department heads were summoned at the *Sala Khet* (municipality). This is where the anonymous *Angkar* showed its face, but remained nameless. Everyone was required to leave their houses for a certain time to contribute to national production. The military officers were first assembled and then evacuated.

Pich Keo was asked where the '*Baraing thom*' ('the big Frenchman') was. He said Groslier was in France and that he was now in charge. He had a great deal of keys to the vast amount of sculptures stored there. Curiously enough, *Angkar* ordered Pich Keo and all his staff, along with their families, some 750 people in all, to remain at the *Conservation* personnel in their buildings for about two weeks. They were not allowed to go out and survived on stocks of *prahok*, dry fish and various foods the best they could. Then, in early May, some trucks shuttled back and forth and took them all to near Lolei in the Roluos area. People were taken to Wat Thmey at Roluos where everyone's identity was checked, from simple workmen to team leaders, engine drivers, typographers, secretaries ... Then everyone was allocated a plot of land to clear and build a hut. Young twelve-year-old KR soldiers were more ferocious than rabid dogs.

Soon, the situation of displaced Conservation families improved: treated like Base People, they were relocated to some half a dozen villages that remained just small village collectives and did not grow to become large commune collectives as throughout the revolutionary country. This helped them to make it through the terrible years of 1976, 1977 and 1978.

The local population of Roluos-Prasat Bakong area had been temporarily relocated to the north and later brought back. These *ex-Conservation* families were scattered into a number of *sahakor phum* (or village collectives) in the surrounding villages. According to both Pich Keo and Koy Chaêm, his assistant, all heads of the families survived, a few children having perhaps died during the DK years. They were sent to the villages of Daun Teav, to the south-west of Road No. 6, Ta Prak, not far from Roluos market, south of Road No. 6, Daun Num, also some 3-4 km. south of No. 6, Banteay Russey, close by, Kompong Thkou, just south of this village, all situated in Meanchey commune, except Kompong Phluk, situated almost 10 km. south, on the Tonle Sap lake, a different commune itself. But this guaranteed supply of fish to all the *Conservation* people during DK days. This was a very well defined area, 2 to 5 km. south of national Road No. 6. All the '17 April' from Phnom Penh and other cities were

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12. A Cambodian multi-purpose checkered scarf that serves mainly to protect from the sun.

sent north of Angkroung (5 km. north-east of Road No. 6), which means that there were no 'Seventeenth April People'<sup>13</sup> among the *Conservation* people.

In those *sahakor-phum*, the privileged ex-personnel of the *Conservation* did not suffer from hunger. When they needed rice they asked for a pass to go and fetch it elsewhere. For instance, they went to Banteay Srey district where they gave fish from Kompong Phluk on the Tonlé Sap in exchange for rice. This was a situation that was very different from other *sahakor*. The average size of the collectives was about ten to thirty families who ate in common. Besides, as was confirmed by Pich Keo, Koy Chaem and Tchay Sot who was a stone sculptor,<sup>14</sup> they were treated like Old or Base People. In the vicinity they could receive almost normal medical treatment for, some 4 kilometres south of national Road No. 6 and Roluos market, there was a so-called Central Committee model hospital for the training of revolutionary health workers. *Conservation* families had access to that hospital for treatment or childbirths. There were real beds brought from the ex-Siem Reap hospital. The trainers had been doctors from the old regime who had been settled there. Medicines used were all traditional Khmer. There were ten beds per room and patients could bring their mat and mosquito net. Food was more copious than in the collectives and rice or thick rice soup (*bâbâr khap*) was distributed to patients.<sup>15</sup>

There was some form of formal education, as the children were taught part time to read and write. But of course they also had to learn evolutionary songs and devote many hours in the day in making compost, as everywhere throughout Cambodia. Still, with all this special treatment, the KR leadership was not yet ready, by the start of the dry season 1978 to bring any of these people back to Siem Reap and the archaeological site to resume work at the temples. Logical and sensible measures could not be expected by this demented regime whose priority was to chase down real or imagined enemies (*khmang*).

### III – The archaeological site and foreign visitors under Democratic Kampuchea

Being a totalitarian State, the mysterious *Angkar* wished to control every aspect of social and private lives of individuals; but this was an absolute impossibility. Therefore that society was full of contradictions and deceptions. For instance, while more and more numerous foreign visitors were shown the beauties of the temples, the delegations were driven via national Road No. 6, from the west and Sisophon, along which, in the deep of the night thousands of victims of the fury of *Angkar* were silently buried in communal pits. Ambassadors and foreign brotherly Party representatives were treated lavishly (by the revolutionary standards at least) at the *Grand Hôtel d'Angkor*, while thousands of detainees were packed a couple of hundred metres further south in the ex-colonial prison that had become the main detention centre of the entire northern region.

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13. Relocated city people.

14. Born in 1944, interviewed on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2002. His entire family of seven children has survived.

15. Information supplied by Koy Chaem on 24 January 2001 and confirmed by Pich Keo on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2004.

Angkor archaeological site was spared exterminations, except for the village of Preah Dak near Prè Rup temple, in Banteay Srey district.

According to Toch Chhun,<sup>16</sup> Preah Dak commune chief in 1991, there were four detention centres in the district:

Prison No. 1 – Preah Dak;

Prison No. 2 – Khun Prum village, in Khun Riem commune It was in an old school in the forest at 19 km. from Preah Dak and 4 km. to the north of Banteay Srey temple;

Prison No. 3 – Watt Prey, (6–7 km. north) Khnar Sanday commune;

Prison No. 4 – Watt Tbaèng (8–9 km. from here, north-east). It was only a place of execution and prisoners were not kept in the pagoda for more than a couple of days.

There are pits near Prè Rup Angkorean temple where victims have been executed and buried. The prisoners were brought from Siem Reap. They were first ‘stored’ in Preah Dak village, then executed near Prè Rup. One can find witnesses in the village that can testify to this.

Prison No. 1, Wat Preah Dak, was just a commune prison, east of Prè Rup temple, on the road to Banteay Srey and Phnom Kulen. According to the ex-Khmer Rouge *kammaphibal* Mœun Raœn,<sup>17</sup> an ex-KR collective leader, the KR arrived at Preah Dak in 1973 and relocated there the population from Sras Srang village that was living a little further to the south and within the archaeological zone. Mœun Raœn claimed that the executioner was his neighbour Ta Bot. He executed one to three families each day. He had run away. There are some twenty pits near Prè Rup. The skulls have been collected by villagers who organised a funeral ceremony. In 1980–1981 the population was looking for relatives and gold. There were many tall trees and forest. A funeral ceremony has been organised for all of them, north of Prè Rup temple.

According to Yeuœn Yeuœm,<sup>18</sup> the commune secretary the village pagoda was a prison from 1975 to 1978. The sanctuary was used as a prison. In 1978, the pagoda and the dining-hall were destroyed and an ordinary old house was used as a prison. It has now been destroyed. At the site of the present Wat Preah Dak, we were told again that the imposing original pagoda was levelled to the ground in 1978 with a bulldozer. It had ancient paintings like those of Wat Bô in Siem Reap. Only the foundation stones of the pagoda remain. Buddhas were buried. A few wooden Buddhas remain. When the pagoda was a prison, there were two to three hundred inmates tied with ropes. Those were mostly ‘17<sup>th</sup> April’ from Siem Reap, Battambang and many people from Phnom Penh.

No visitor was ever taken further than Bayon temple. Throughout the regime’s short life, visiting Angkor Wat Temple for the numerous Chinese delegations was a must and all wanted to be photographed before the famous shrine. The difficulty was

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16. Born in 1931, interviewed at Preah Dak, on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1991.

17. Born in 1947, interviewed on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1991.

18. Born in 1956, interviewed on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1991.

to reach the site from Phnom Penh. Roads had not really been repaired since the war and the Siem Reap airport was not operating until the end of 1978. But, thanks to significant Chinese aid and expertise, the two railway lines had been totally renovated and the tons of paddy could be ferried south to Kompong Som extended harbour and run west to Sisophon, at the heart of the rice producing Cambodia. DK's 'distinguished' guests (usually Party apparatchik from communist countries or representative of minuscule Maoist parties from the democratic West) were put in the trains to Sisophon going at snail's pace, but from which visitors were kept from any contact with the miserable citizenry. From there, the last log of the journey was done by car and this is where the usually ideologically blind visitors could catch a glimpse of the real world.

As early as 29 February 1976, in order to warn international public opinion against the so-called aggressive and criminal policy of the United States, ambassadors from Sweden, Zambia, Egypt, Tunisia, Afghanistan and Palestine were brought from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap "in order to see a crater from a so-called American bomb recently launched by an enemy power." In actual fact, it was a crater left over from the American bombing before August 1973.

On September 1976, for the first time since the beginning of the war in March 1970, Ambassadors from Senegal, West African Guinea and Egypt were taken for a trip around some temples.<sup>19</sup>

Chen Yong-kuei, a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China, made a two weeks' tour throughout Kampuchea with Pol Pot himself that took him to Siem Reap, during the first fortnight of December 1977. He showered compliments on all he saw in the country.

The Rumanian head of State, Nicolae Ceausescu, who was the second head of State after Ne Win from Burma to visit DK, insisted on climbing, with his spouse Elena, up to the upper platform at Angkor Wat, in spite of the rain having made the narrow and steep steps very slippery, during their visit on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1978.

In 1978, the country began to open to foreign journalists and delegations of worldwide Maoist parties. This is, for instance, a short description of the journey of two 'representatives' from the Hong Kong newspapers:

The two newspapers men left Phnom Penh on September 4 (1978) by train for Sisophon and then continued the trip to the town of Siem Reap by car. While in Siem Reap, the guests visited the Støeng Siem Reap dam and the western Baray water reservoir, the Bayon temple, the Angkor Wat temple, the defense line of the Angkor area of the heroic Kampuchean Revolutionary Army during the national liberation war, and the bomb craters, evidence of the U.S. imperialists' criminal acts against Democratic Kampuchea.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, a few days later, a "*Norwegian Marxist-Leninist Workers' Communist Party delegation led by party president Pal Steigan on 24 September (1978) visited the Siem*

19. See Sacha Sher "Le Parallèle éminemment douteux entre l'Angkor révolutionnaire et Angkor" in *Aséanie*, Sciences humaines en Asie du Sud-Est, Bangkok, juin 2003, p. 25; and *Le Monde*, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1976.

20. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), 26<sup>th</sup> September 1978, H1.

*Reap–Angkor sector via the north-western region. The friendly guests left Phnom Penh and travelled to Sisophon by train and then proceeded to Siem Reap town by car. In the Siem Reap–Angkor sector, the friendly guests visited the western Baray reservoir and the Ta keo, Bayon and Angkor Wat temples.”*<sup>21</sup>

The aim of those visits is to impress the foreign visitors with “*the work enthusiasm displayed by the Kampuchean people who have a time-honoured glorious tradition of industriousness and a great creative genius brilliantly symbolised by the Angkor temples.*”<sup>22</sup> Even better, the purpose of those propaganda tours, in the last year of the regime, was to silence rumours abroad of massive crimes against humanity committed by the revolutionary *Angkar*. And that succeeded, it seems, from the reports from the visit of the French delegation led by ‘Comrade’ Jacques Jurquet, the Secretary general of the microscopic Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of France:

The guests were also impressed by the artistic ingenuity of the Kampuchean artists in building the Angkor temples. After viewing the Angkor temples, artistic pieces, inscription stones and various sculptures, the delegation of the Marxist-Leninist Party of France remarked that the Kampuchean people are people who have performed sacred feats which completely disprove the slanderous propaganda of imperialism, old and new colonialism and the international expansionists.<sup>23</sup>

Were the French Maoists really that stupid to develop such inane sophistry? As if visitors to Nazi Germany had claimed the splendour of the gothic cathedrals proved the concentration camps could not have existed.

Finally, as early as November 1975, diplomatic relations were established with Thailand by Chatichai Choonhavan who will later be Minister of Health before becoming, in 1978, Minister of Foreign Affairs. He first came to Phnom Penh piloting his own twin-engined plane. These good neighbourly relationships that lasted throughout the revolutionary régime were crowned with the establishment of a weekly commercial air link between Bangkok and Siem Reap from 17<sup>th</sup> November 1978.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV – Endgame in Siem Reap

By late 1978, was there any evidence that such an outright totalitarian regime established by *Angkar* could have long survived? There were signs that the ruthless communist society was growing fragile.

In the last part of 1978, it began to dawn on *Angkar* that a threat of Vietnamese invasion was real. The leadership begged their Chinese friends to send not only weapons, but also soldiers. The weapons were duly sent, but the Chinese sensibly refused to send troops, as policies were changing in Peking with the return to favour of Deng Xiaoping. The Khmer Rouge started to open the country and looked for new

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21. FBIS 4<sup>th</sup> October 1978, H5.

22. Ibid.

23. FBIS, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1978, H5.

24. The information in the last three paragraphs is taken from Suong Sikœun’s forthcoming memoirs, *Itinéraire d’un intellectuel khmer rouge*, chapter 13, Paris, Éditions du Cerf.

friends abroad and supporters at home. They changed the regime of the intellectual returnees they had put in re-education camps and massacred in their hundreds and tried to win them over to serve the Kampuchean revolution. Ieng Sary was now all smiles at Bœng Trabek, the area in south Phnom Penh where they had been regrouped. They also transformed Siem Reap into a special zone to welcome more friendly foreign delegations as we saw, but even the first tourists.

By the last term of 1978, some dramatic changes occurred in Siem Reap city. The man in charge of the clean up was Y Chhean, an ex-bodyguard of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary in the early days of the revolutionary fight in Ratanakiri and now governor of Pailin municipality, with Ieng Vuth as his deputy. The transformation of Siem Reap city in late 1978 was meant to make it acceptable to selected and strictly controlled foreign visitors. Long Norin,<sup>25</sup> a faithful aid of Ieng Sary, who had long been in charge of Sihanouk's security in his Palace, was sent to Siem Reap to prepare the town too. This was in October–November 1978 specifically to welcome a Japanese delegation. There was also the opening of airport while 600 children were sent by Ta Mok to sweep the temples. But the most dramatic change was to close down the prison, together with the release of some prisoners. Did that signal the end of the totalitarian State?

Elizabeth Becker, and her two companions, Malcolm Caldwell and Richard Dudman, were among those who benefited from the largesse of their hosts and were led through a guided tour of more than 1,000 kilometres across the country. Unfortunately for the *Angkar*, Elizabeth Becker had no ideological blinkers and could write.<sup>26</sup> She was to produce one of the most perceptive and well-documented book on the disastrous situation of DK in December 1978. Her description of the Angkor is short but revealing. She was not too impressed by the cleaning of those poor urchins and would have preferred the revolutionary regime to make use of the competent and willing contribution of the *Conservation* experts and workers whose life had been spared so far. She learnt that from Thiounn Prasith, her guide, that their lives had been spared but their expertise not yet put to good use. For once he had been speaking the truth. In spite of sweeping “the temples had been left to deteriorate,” like the Phnom Penh Museum, she noted wistfully.

While Meas Thun Chey,<sup>27</sup> who had been released from the colonial prison when it closed, was repairing the radios, he heard one day Pol Pot being reviled, insulted and his crimes detailed ‘the Pol Pot clique.’ The next day, there was a big meeting and it was announced that they could be attacked by the Vietnamese enemy. Volunteers were required to fight. Very few only agreed; the others abstained. The KR regrouped in one place to distribute weapons, they became afraid of the people. The next day, all the KR *Kammaphibal* escaped with oxcarts, at 2 P.M. It was on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1979.

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25. Born in 1938, interviewed on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1998 and 24<sup>th</sup> January 2001.

26. *When the War Was Over: The Voices of Cambodia's Revolution and Its People*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1986.

27. Born in 1948, interviewed on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1994, in DK was a radio repairer, and in 1994, the local representative of ADHOC (Association des Droits de l'Homme au Cambodge).

## V – The meaning of Angkor for the CPK

Paradoxically, as a symbol of a civilisation those Marxists abhorred, the KR were obsessed by Angkor. The monument crystallised their delusions of grandeur, *la folies des grands* or megalomania. The leadership around Mr. Saloth Sar insisted the towers (the numbers matter little as this is merely a question of perspective) be on the revolutionary flag instead of the hammer and the sickle. It did not represent the proletariat—*kammakor-kasekor* (workers-peasants)—but the hard labour work of the innumerable human ants who had cut those enormous blocks of sandstone, dragged them from the slopes of Phnom Kulen and fitted them together for the glorification of their kings and princes. It symbolized too the titanic worksites of the dry season for water conservation projects, the most spectacular achievements of the Cambodian people under DK. But at what human cost?

Elizabeth Becker was surprised to note “*in revolutionary Cambodia, paintings of Angkor Wat hung at the official buildings and guest houses we visited, not photographs of Pol Pot or other Cambodian leaders, and not pictures of Karl Marx, Lenin or Joseph Stalin as in Vietnam. Only Angkor was safe enough to become the symbol for revolutionary Cambodia.*”<sup>28</sup> I was surprised to see the same pompous picture in Ta Mok’s house on the Dangrek slopes at Anlong Veng, when I visited it in 2001.

Thiounn Mumm one of the main theoreticians of Pol-Potism (if such a doctrine really exists), who had been a school friend of Bernard-Philippe Groslier at Norodom Primary school in Phnom Penh, gave me an article by his school mate, when I visited him in Rouen. It was entitled “*La Cité hydraulique angkoriennne: exploitation ou surexploitation du sol ?*”<sup>29</sup> This path breaking article contributed to shift the attention of historians from the temples, princes and kings to the way life was organised for ordinary people. Groslier insisted that such systems could only have been “*conceived by the community*” and “*excluded any individual or family appropriation.*” On the other hand, “*the megalomania of Khmer Kings always urged them to build larger and more beautiful shrines. Such constructions demanded a powerful central power.*” Such sentences must have been honeyed words to the Angkar. It is paradoxical that the research of a man who defended the temples with such courage in front of the Vietminh invaders and their Khmer Rouge followers could be used to justify some of the criminal policies under DK.

Reading David Chandler’s *Facing the Cambodian Past*<sup>30</sup> can be also somewhat upsetting or even depressing. In the final essays, “The Tragedy of Cambodian History,” 1979 and “The Tragedy of Cambodian History Revisited,” 1994, he noted:

The essence of the leadership in traditional Cambodia was exploitation rather than service, patronage rather than cooperation. The word to “govern” [...] was the same

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28. *When the War Was Over, the Voices of Cambodia’s Revolution and its People*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1986, p. 423.

29. *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient*, LXVI, 1979, pp. 161–202.

30. *Facing the Cambodian Past, Selected Essays*, Chiang Mai, Silksworm Books, 1996–1998.

as the word “to eat” [1979]. When I returned to Siemreap in 1992, I was struck not only with how much beauty the monuments conveyed, but also how so many of them, and Angkor Wat in particular, could be read as expressions of unchecked power and control. Angkor Wat, in this reading, was a statement made in the 12th c. A.D. by and for a single man, King Suryavarman II, whose tomb the temple was to be. This was not only the largest monument in the world: it was the world’s largest individual tomb [1994].

The revolutionaries made constant references to Angkor in their slogans, in their speeches on their very national flag. To illustrate the dominant theme of The Super Great Leap Forward, one of the often repeated slogans on official occasions was: “*If our people could build Angkor, they are capable of doing anything*”<sup>31</sup> Pol Pot proclaimed in his five hour speech of 27<sup>th</sup> September 1977 in which he confessed the *Angkar* was the Communist Party of Kampuchea. For instance, one slogan proclaimed: “*Through rapid development, our country must surpass the Angkor period.*” This was illustrated by Kae Pauk’s speech before Angkor Wat. It illustrates the unbounded ambitions of the revolutionaries’ total unconcern for the realities of economic development and the cost in human life and suffering.<sup>32</sup>

Not fearing to contradict themselves, the CPK both presented Angkor as a model to be followed and a counter-model to be dismissed. They praised their ancestors’ ability to raise monuments of pharaonic proportion and to manage a sophisticated irrigation network to illustrate their watchword of the Super Great Leap Forward. At the same time, they dismissed Angkor as a model since “*for more than 2,000 years, our people have lived in complete destitution and deepest despair.*”<sup>33</sup>

After all, this massive Angkor Wat was a shrine that was forbidden for the populace to enter, except through he first walls, like all the cities ruled by the KR. In Angkor days there was no currency too: everything was the object of barter, even human beings, called slaves or servants. Pol Pot and the brain of *Angkar* was both the Devarāja<sup>34</sup> within the State shrine or the Chinese emperor in his forbidden city and the latter day Mao Ze-dong in his deserted capital, forbidden to all but his bodyguards and sycophants.

## Conclusion

Angkor Wat has indeed become the symbol of Cambodia’s past glory since the days of French colonisation. Under DK, it became the symbol of *Angkar*’s delusions of grandeur: the more “enemies of the people” were sacrificed on the altar of Revolution, the purer the Kampuchean experiment in total revolution would become; the more the small backward country would become not only a model for the south-east region, but also a beacon to the world of the oppressed. That demented world view was concocted

31. FBIS, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1977, H 26.

32. See Henri Locard, *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book, or the Sayings of Angkar*, Chiang Mai, Silworm Books, 2004, p. 75.

33. *Ibid.*, H 25.

34. Bruno Dagens, *Les Khmers*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2003, p. 88.

by this little brains trust around mainly Pol Pot, Nuon Chea and Son Sen who master-minded all these never-ending and accelerating massacres.

In the context of this paper, this mental frame is vividly illustrated by the ranting Kae Pauk, pointing to the towers of Angkor Wat, before a crowd of 5,000 devotees and scores of saffron-robed Buddhist monks, as he claimed this was the greatest day in Cambodian history for the past 2,000 years. The Khmer Rouge had insisted they would march triumphantly into Siem Reap on the same day as Phnom Penh, and not three days later as into Kompong Thom, for instance. Besides, in the Angkorean temples precincts, they must have laid down preparations for the coming days of that ‘stupendous’ victory. They organized three days of celebration, as is the use in Cambodian feasts. In actual fact, DK as seen in Siem Reap represented a great leap backward. Angkor was inspiration for the glorification of titanic works with only human labour and the rejection of modern machinery. “If our ancestors could achieve this, we too!” Such seemed to have been the underlying ideology.

The regime was always shaky. Otherwise it would not have established such a reign of violence and terror. To silence the opponents it needed to kill ever more and more. The magnitude of the hunt for enemies was, also in their rhetoric, to match the magnitude of Angkor Wat itself—however obscene such a comparison might sound. Yet those two realities of pharaonic proportions or, as Alain Forest puts it, “those two formidable phenomena, irremediably distort perspectives”<sup>35</sup> around Cambodian history.

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35. *Cambodge contemporain*, Bangkok, IRASEC & Les Indes savantes, 2008, p. 17.