

Preah Vihear in Limbo: The Fate of an Ancient Flower

‘A soul is crying out from afar, pleading for a blessed sprinkling of water. Wild flowers are growing together on the top of a tall mountain. The destiny of a flower at the border is to endure the scorching heat and struggle to survive. She is wilted, yet her fragrance still fills the air.’ (Author’s translation from Khmer)

So opens the 2008 hit song in Cambodia, ‘Aoh Klen Pka Preah Vihear’ (‘Oh, Fragrant Flower Preah Vihear’), sung by Chorn Sovanreach and Sokun Nisa (*Rasmey Hang Meas Audio CD Vol. 360; RHM Karaoke Vol. 101*). The song and its cinematic karaoke video offer a fascinating glimpse into popular Cambodian sentiment towards Preah Vihear, a sacred Khmer site that was originally built as a Hindu temple from the late 9th to the 12th century. Perched on a 500-metre-high cliff in the Dangrek Mountains, Preah Vihear stands at the centre of an ongoing border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia.

Although the roots of the problem date back to the first decade of the 20th century, disagreement over ownership of the temple first emerged quietly in the 1930s and came to a head in 1962 with an International Court of Justice (ICJ) judgment

in favour of Cambodia. Since October 2008 – three months after Cambodia’s successful yet controversial inscription of Preah Vihear on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites – intermittent armed conflict between Thai and Cambodian forces has severely disrupted life along the border and exacted dozens of deaths; among the casualties are soldiers on both sides and civilians. As regularly reported by the Cambodian government and confirmed by a team of UNESCO International Coordinating Committee observers in December 2011, the violence has been claiming another victim: the temple itself. There have been numerous reports of significant damage to Preah Vihear, including bullet holes and structural collapses caused by artillery rounds. The question of culpability swirls amid accusations: who fired first, and has the destruction been caused by stray shells, intentional maliciousness, or damage due to soldiers taking up positions among the temple ruins? Both Thai and Khmer media have also confirmed the damage through photographs and videos.

In the ‘Aoh Klen Pka Preah Vihear’ karaoke video, the pop stars stand in front of a backdrop depicting the temple beneath

Aerial view of
Preah Vihear
(Photography by
Nhean Tharath)



stormy skies, an obvious reference to this tempestuous military standoff. The message is one of nostalgia, longing, hope and renewal. While the lyrics compare the temple to a suffering but exquisitely beautiful flower, the video narrative mixes in the metaphor of a bedraggled young woman transformed into a beautiful dancer in sumptuous regalia patterned after the *apsaras* (celestial maidens) famously depicted in the bas-reliefs of the temple of Angkor Wat. Scenes of the woman's rescue from within a ruined temple, her affectionate 'make-over' by a group of old Khmer women, and her resplendent dance are interspersed with shots of a cross-section of contemporary Cambodian society. Urban professionals, a policeman, a street-sweeper, monks and schoolchildren all lift their faces towards the sky. The entire country senses the rebirth of Preah Vihear as an *apsara*, and with her the Khmer nation.

Another potentially intoxicating display of national pride and solidarity can be observed in a Cambodia Beer (Khmer Brewery Ltd.) television commercial released in November 2011. It depicts hundreds of Cambodians pouring out of schools, offices, shops and construction sites. Thundering across mountain landscapes and rice paddies to the beat of a rousing patriotic soundtrack, the stampede is joined by peasant farmers until this broad spectrum of Cambodian society forms a human wall emulating the façade of one of Preah Vihear's gateways. This iconic image not only appears as a logo on Cambodia Beer bottles, it is also a 'logo of nation' and is ubiquitous on billboards and banknotes. In similar fashion, visitors to Preah Vihear are greeted by signs that pronounce: 'Preah Vihear Temple is the Khmer's Soul', 'I have pride to be born as Khmer', and 'We unite to protect the Khmer Sovereignty'. As a national symbol, Preah Vihear is now perhaps second only

to the 12th century temple of Angkor Wat, *the* quintessential symbol of Cambodia.

Contemporary Cambodian popular visual culture would indeed seem to provide a textbook example of an 'imagined community'. The Cambodian national community is anchored by shared attachment to the monumental heritage of the kingdom of Angkor (*c.* 9th-15 century), which extended sporadically into parts of neighbouring Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. The 'Golden Age' of Angkor has often been perceived as preceding a long slide into oblivion at the hands of rising Thai and Vietnamese power, a diminishment only arrested by French colonization of Cambodia in the 1860s. While most contemporary historians would not accept such a simplistic view of history, the powerful lure of Angkor coupled with the fear of a 'vanishing' Khmer race and nation have remained strong in Cambodia. These already powerful emotions were given renewed force by the tragic events of the 1970s and 1980s, including the 'Killing Fields' of the Khmer Rouge period and the subsequent occupation of Cambodia by Vietnam.

The French colonial intervention played a pivotal role in transforming Angkor from a sacred centre to an 'historical site' and a staging ground for colonial and nationalistic fantasies. Angkor Wat, for example, was repeatedly featured in international colonial expositions, and the legacy of Angkor is embedded in the lyrics of the Cambodian national anthem. The colonial period also introduced modern mapping into the area and initiated the still ongoing process of border delineation between Cambodia and Thailand. Throughout mainland Southeast Asia, the formation of the 'geo-body' of nations entailed the creation of territorial boundaries that had never previously existed. With the accompanying construction of

acutely sensitive national identities arose spasms of irredentism that plague the region to this day. All of these issues lie at the very heart of the conflict over Preah Vihear, a conflict that is specifically driven by competing maps of the border region and problems stemming from early 20th century treaties between France and Siam, as Thailand was then known.

There are those in Thailand who feel a profound sense of loss when it comes to Preah Vihear (Th. Phra Viharn or Wihan). It came as a shock to the Thai public when the ICJ ruled that the temple 'is situated in territory under the sovereignty of Cambodia' (*Case Concerning the Temple of Preah Vihear [Cambodia v. Thailand]*, Merits, Judgment of 15 June 1962). While the Thai government accepted the decision, withdrew its troops and flag from the temple, and turned the temple over to Cambodia, many Thais to this day reject the court's decision or have only begrudgingly accepted it. The ongoing crisis hinges on competing claims of sovereignty over 4.6 square kilometres of land surrounding the temple and not, at least officially, to claims over the temple itself. Preah Vihear has, consequently, come to symbolize territorial losses that Siam incurred as a result of French machinations and gunboat diplomacy around the turn of the 20th century.

Nostalgia for Preah Vihear has manifested itself in Thai visual culture in the form of scaled-down replicas of the temple. The most famous example is at Muang Boran ('Ancient City'), a theme park in suburban Bangkok that opened in 1963, a year after the ICJ decision. A much smaller open-air model was recently erected at a Thai military base in Kantharalak district not far from the border with Cambodia and the contested land. Both replicas portray a temple in pristine condition with a completely intact central sanctuary. A plaque in front of the Kantharalak miniature memorializes the loss of Preah Vihear by claiming to portray the site as it appeared at 11.59am on 15 June, 1962 (author's translation from Thai). This is pure fantasy and propaganda designed to imply that all ruination of the monument has occurred since Preah Vihear came officially under control of Cambodia. In fact, as both French and Thai documentation show, the central tower had been reduced to rubble long before 1962; the ruined state of much of the temple complex was observed by the first French visitors to site in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It is a sad fact that the recent damage to the temple has frequently been used in both countries to score political points against the other, when in fact neither is behaving responsibly towards the site. Armed conflict involving the temple is completely antithetical to the principles of the *UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and National Heritage* (1972) that both governments profess to endorse in recognition of Preah Vihear's 'outstanding universal value'. The entire issue has proven, however, to be a surprisingly effective and convenient tool prone to political exploitation from both sides. The military conflict has long been fuelled by a war of words between national leaders, a recent low point coming in February 2009, when Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen used a public speaking event to put a death curse on Abhisit Vejjajiva, then Prime Minister of Thailand. A new dimension of the tension over shared heritage emerged

in August 2011, when the Thai Culture Minister declared it a national priority to reclaim ownership of the *jeeb*, a traditional gesture common to both Thai and Khmer dance. Claims to exclusivity are so often at the heart of nationalism. The Thai announcement was a response to the fact that Cambodia had in 2008 registered the *jeeb* on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage as part of the 'Royal Ballet of Cambodia', and it is this form of dance that is performed by the female personification of Preah Vihear in the climax of the pop video.

From a broad international perspective, there may now be some cause for the cautious optimism expressed in 'Aoh Klen Pka Preah Vihear' though not perhaps for the triumphalism of the Cambodia Beer television commercial. The Pheu Thai party and Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, following the lead of her brother, ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, have demonstrated a more conciliatory attitude toward Cambodia than Abhisit Vejjajiva and the Democrat Party. Can her government negotiate a settlement with Cambodia without committing political suicide at home and instigating renewed violence on the border?

Currently, the fate of Preah Vihear hangs in limbo. Both countries are dragging their feet over how to comply with the July 2011 ICJ order to 'immediately' withdraw all military personnel from a 'provisional demilitarized zone' so that ASEAN observers may visit the site (*Request for interpretation of the Judgment of 15 June 1962 in the case concerning the Temple of Preah Vihear [Cambodia v. Thailand]*, Summary of the Order of 18 July 2011). The reluctance of both sides to pull out their troops has long-delayed a plan for Indonesian military observers to be stationed along the contested border. In February 2012, the Thai-Cambodian Joint Boundary Commission agreed to proceed with the demarcation of their 798-kilometre shared border according to 'degree of difficulty'. What this means for Preah Vihear is that the demarcation of the disputed border at the site will be deferred for the time being. With some of the pressure off, this could give both parties some breathing room and the ICJ the time to weigh in on Cambodia's April 2011 request for clarification of the 1962 judgment. However, given Preah Vihear's recent tumultuous history, the likelihood that the ICJ and international law can effectively provide a sustainable solution is slight. If the controversy over Preah Vihear is to be resolved, violence curtailed, and further damage to the temple prevented, the people of Thailand and Cambodia will have to commit to a political solution that benefits stakeholders on both sides of the border. Only then will the 'outstanding universal value' of this unique but wilting 'flower' truly be realized for all.

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