Cross-Cultural Interpretation Applied to World Cultural Heritage: A Study Of Cultural Complexity at Angkor (Cambodia) At A Time of Globalization

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CROSS-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION APPLIED TO WORLD CULTURAL HERITAGE: A STUDY OF CULTURAL COMPLEXITY AT ANGKOR (CAMBODIA) AT A TIME OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract: The notion of "culture" intrinsically carries with it complexity. The interpretation of such a complex notion has the difficulty dividing it up into well-organised and well-structured values in order to develop cultural messages to be transmitted to their respective audiences. Cross-cultural interpretation as an adapted point of view, depending on the transmitter (institution) and receivers (audience) could be part of a better understanding regarding the notion of culture for interpreting *in situ* heritage (natural, tangible, intangible). Management of a world heritage site in a developing country, such as Angkor (Cambodia), belongs to the process of local cultural policy strategy, depending on public institutions (Ministries) with a view to designing a sustainable development plan in a designated territory with the support of the international co-operation entities, such as UNESCO or EU financial support.

Key words: interpretation, cross-cultural translation, UNESCO, Angkor, audience.

Resumen: El concepto de «cultura» conlleva el de complejidad. La interpretación de un concepto tan complejo comporta la dificultad de dividirlo en valores bien organizados y bien estructurados, con el fin de producir mensajes culturales para que lleguen a sus respectivos públicos. La interpretación intercultural se presenta como un punto de vista adaptado, que depende del transmisor (institución) y del receptor (público), y podría ayudar a mejorar la comprensión del concepto de cultura e interpretar in situ el patrimonio (natural, material e inmaterial). La gestión del sitio patrimonio mundial en un país en desarrollo, como es el caso de Angkor (Camboya), se integra en la estrategia de la política cultural local y depende de las instituciones públicas (ministerios) para el diseño de un plan de desarrollo sostenible para un territorio definido con el apoyo financiero y diplomático de instituciones de la cooperación internacional, tales como la UNESCO o la UE.

Palabras clave: interpretación, traducción intercultural, UNESCO, Angkor, público.

Tema:
La generación de desarrollo a partir del patrimonio

>> ANGKOR: A WORLD HERITAGE SITE IN A POST-CONFLICT COUNTRY

Angkor Archaeological Park was classified on the Endangered World Heritage List in 1992 during the 16th session of the World Heritage Committee meeting which took place in Santa Fé (USA). The designated site covers an area of 401 km² on Siem Reap province including forested areas, monuments and villages. Since 2000, the site has experienced constant growth in tourism, with over 1,1 million tickets sold in 2007, which generates undeniable socio-economic resources for the small and expanding city of Siem Reap and its region. However, this classification has negative impacts on areas such as the urban development of Siem Reap city, the superficial reading of Khmer cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible), the marginalization of local populations, environmental protection, land speculation and property legacy for future generations concerning local communities living in the park. The political decision to "Save Angkor" began in the early 90's, following the solemn call made by his Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk to the international community, and materialized on 13 October 1993 by the Tokyo Declaration as the first Intergovernmental Conference for Safeguarding and Development of the Angkor Site. This decision is therefore built into a geopolitical context of reconstruction led by the United Nations since the Paris Accords (1991), after the dark years initiated by the authoritarian government led by General Lon Nol (1970-1975), the trauma of the totalitarian Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) and the decade under pro-Vietnamese governance managed by Heng Samrin (1978-1991). The process towards reconstruction and development was launched with the rescue of Angkor temples, as a political, economic and diplomatic dynamics after twenty years of civil war.

However, twenty years of armed conflict had a direct impact on cultural heritage from looting to the wilful destruction of artistic works made from fragile materials, such as wood (for fuel). The illicit traffic of cultural property was intense during the Nineties and the Eighties aided by well-organized networks at local and international levels. After the Khmer Rouge genocide that killed 1,7 million people, e.g. the extermination of a quarter of the Cambodian population, it is the turn of the tangible cultural heritage as the guarantor of the Khmer cultural identity, to be attacked by these mafias. Although, Cambodia ratified, in 1962, the "Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its first Protocol, and then, in 1972, the Convention of 1970 concerning the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property", the country is overwhelmed by the extent of illegal traffic in its territory. Furthermore, the international context at the time was not favourable, due to the Cold War period that froze some political actions regarding heritage protection. At the beginning of the 1990s, thanks to the inscription of Angkor area on the World Heritage List a number of royal decrees were issued which established a special police force in the park, the ratification of the UNIDROIT Convention (2002) and the collaboration with international organizations (ICOM and INTERPOL) to control borders and customs that slowed down this illegal trade. The legal and political vacuum which existed until 1990 concerning the protection of cultural property has contributed to the cultural degradation affecting the whole Khmer population. The great UNESCO project helping to safeguard Angkor temples marks the end of this memory lapse. Fill this legal vacuum regarding the proper management of cultural properties in Cambodia, the APSARA National Authority (ANA) was created by royal decree on 19 February 1995. Its principal mission is to ensure the protection, conservation and development of the region of Siem Reap/Angkor. A first decree confers it status of a governmental institution granting it a legal personality as well as administrative and financial autonomy, based on the Western model of the French public institution of Versailles. This status reflects a real political will on behalf of the Cambodian authorities to show this governmental institution as a partner on the international stage. Although, the headquarters of the ANA is based in the capital (Phnom Penh), it has regional offices in Siem Reap including the "Conservation of Angkor" created in 1908 by the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO). The ANA has the immense task of implementing a Safeguarding Master Plan in its territory, already damaged by the war and infested by anti-personnel mines. A specialized unit in mine clearance was created in 1993, financed by the EU and attached to the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) in order to clear the archaeological park of Angkor. Between 1993 and 2003, more than 25,000 mines were neutralized, including 3,000 in the park, and more than 80,000 explosive ammunitions were destroyed, including 5,000 in the park. The rainy season floods the soil with a large quantity of water which can move to the surface some forgotten explosives. It is not

uncommon even today, to find some mines in the vicinity of temples whish are supposed to be cleared of mines. According to the experts of the CMAC and the COFRAS (Compagnie Française d'Assistance Spécialisée), Siem Reap province had in 1995 more than 5,550 km² of mined-area, e.g. approximately 238 mine fields spread over the territory. The Paris Accords' signing (23 October 1991) mark the beginning of a new political area for Cambodia, after more than twenty years of civil war. This legal agreement opens the doors of the international co-operation towards the protection of the archaeological and historical site of Angkor, following the UNESCO rescue campaigns of the Sixties and the Seventies concerning exceptional situations. This was the case regarding the rescue of the Nubian temples (1960), the city of Venice (1966) as well as the sites of Borobudur (1972) and Carthage (1972). The World Heritage Committee underlines the exceptional procedure concerning the registration of the Angkor site, indeed "this action was not to be taken as setting a precedent for the inscription procedure, but was in response to an exceptional situation" (UNESCO 2003).

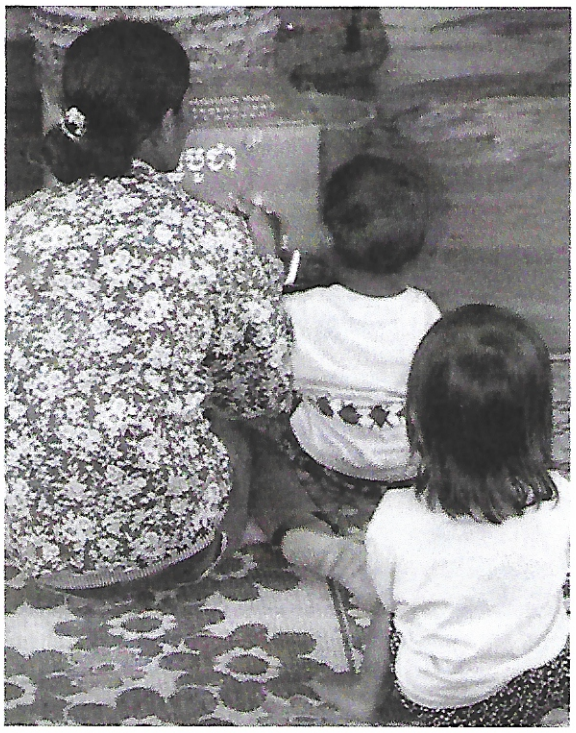
The rescue of the temples of Angkor is therefore built into the continuity of the international mobilization through the establishment of diplomatic co-operation, supported by two nations with historical and cultural interests in the Khmer region: France and Japan. Thus, due to the Tokyo Declaration (13 October 1993) which recognizes "that the Angkor monuments are one of the world's most valuable cultural heritages in Asia as well as the national symbol of Cambodia and its people, and that international co-operation for the safeguarding and development of the Angkor region, including the Angkor monuments, is of particular importance for national reconstruction" (UNESCO 2003), an International Co-ordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor (ICC) was created. Governmental bodies met together for the first time in December 1993, three months after the Intergovernmental Conference in Tokyo and just one year after the nomination of Angkor on the World Heritage List. The ICC is placed under the diplomatic co-chair led by France and Japan, and has a permanent secretariat provided by UNESCO in Paris and holds two annual meetings (Technical Committee and Plenary Session) in Siem Reap. Its main mission is to ensure the coherence of the projects as well as technical and financial standards under the general scientific monitoring of the former archaeologist and UN staff member, Azédine Beschaouch.

The classified area is immense (a surface area of 401 km²), from the vast alluvial plain extending from Phnom Kulen mountains to Tonle Sap lake, which encompasses a plurality of ancient heritage (monuments, villages, forests, rice paddy fields, rivers, etc.) forming a coherent cultural and a territorial complex. The exceptional nature of the site has direct impact on the zoning of the archaeological area. The first mapping of the preserved area was initiated in 1925 by the École Française d'Extrême-Orient on a surface estimated at around 90 km². In 1991, during the preparation of the inscription of Angkor on the World Heritage List, experts discussed the integration of the whole of the Siem Reap province (e.g. 10,000 km²) in order to make the administrative procedures easier (Tertrais 2008). Finally, the site includes 90 listed monuments, but ICOMOS imposes measures with a zoning area management plan. On 28 May 1994, the royal decree on the zoning of Siem Reap/Angkor region was adopted, dividing the preserved area into five distinct areas:

1. "Zone 1: Monument sites
2. Zone 2: Protected archaeological reserves (or buffer zone)
3. Zone 3: Protected cultural landscapes
4. Zone 4: Sites of archaeological, anthropological or historical interest
5. Zone 5: Socio-economic and cultural development perimeter of the Siem Reap/Angkor region" (UNESCO 2003)

These five zones were defined through the "Zoning and Environmental Management Plan", called ZEMP, as a reference document regarding the planning of Angkor region. Zones 1 and 2 represent around 351 km² of the protected area, including the greatest temples of Angkor (Angkor Wat, the city of Angkor Thom, Ta Prohm, Banteay Srei, etc.), as well as natural areas and villages. The regulation of these five areas is strict, its management and monitoring depending on the APSARA National Authority. Nevertheless, the ZEMP presents strong property constraints for part of the village population in particular those that live close to the

Angkor Wat temple. Vishnu statue with *neak ta* called "Ta Reach" (Photography by I. Brianso)



Angkor Wat temple. Woman with her children in front of *neak ta* "Ta Reach". Regular offering celebration in Angkor temples as a living heritage place (Photography by I. Brianso)

temples, especially for those who have settled in areas 1 and 2 before the inscription of Angkor on the World Heritage List. Although, the tourist godsend equalizes part of the land pressure, it is important to note that: all economic product prices have increased significantly in Siem Reap city and province in the last decade (2000-2010). In addition, since 1992 land speculation has been rife in Siem Reap province. There are still strong socio-economic imbalances despite recent development, most notable in low standards of living (Khmer wage: $ 30 per month on average), an index of human poverty which is still high at (39.3%) and a high corruption level in the whole Khmer society. The recommendations and conclusions of the ZEMP were useful regarding the design of an interdisciplinary Master Plan for Angkor Park as a living cultural site. This Master Plan recognizes the classified area by UNESCO as:

1. An important cultural site containing some forty principal monuments and hundreds of archaeological sites
2. An exceptional natural space of 40,000 hectares including rivers, forests and rice fields
3. A living site, home to tens of thousands of people in the many villages scattered throughout it. (UNESCO 2003)

The general management of this Master Plan for the region of Siem Reap/ Angkor is structured around eight axis of development based on an international approach (education, tourism, territory, monuments, people, etc.) in order to plan the development and to anticipate its negative consequences. However, the arrangement of the park remains complex, not only regarding its financial and technical management concerning the valuation of the territory and the international standards, but also concerning the communication process between public administrations and local populations. Finally, the site population has strongly increased in the last decade (+400%: from 25,000 to 100,000 inhabitants) making dialogue with public authorities (APSARA) more difficult, while input coming from the international tourism industry is booming.

>> INTERPRETING ANGKOR: A COMPLEX APPROACH FROM A CO-OPERATION PERSPECTIVE

Angkor Archaeological Park presents a cultural complexity spanning time and space in a living, cultural and natural environment composed of forests, villages and monuments (Miura 2004 and Thibault 1998). The temples of Angkor are not only the tangible mark of the greatest Builder Kings, between the 9th and 14th century, but also a place of pilgrimage, tradition-transmission, and customs in adherence to the ancestor worship in a natural landscape. For local communities, the temples of Angkor are more than simple places of religious devotion to Hindu or Buddhist statues. They act as home to spirits which greet the spirits of the ancestors and protecting spirits: "bang bât and neak ta" (Miura 2004). The Angkor Wat temple comes from Sanskrit language, "nagara", meaning "pagoda city" with several "neak" *ta* within its domains. The most famous "neak"*ta* of Angkor Wat temple is called "Ta Reach" by local communities and it is lives in the monumental statue of Vishnu (goddess of the Hindu Pantheon).

Daily ceremonies and offerings are made to the statue in order to honour the protecting spirits living within its stone. Pilgrims make offerings according to local Buddhist practices (Theravada) developed in "Srok Khmer" (Cambodia) from the 13th century: barefoot pilgrims sitting on a straw mat mark the bor-

der of the sacred space, expressing their devotion and their wishes with some sticks of incense and by joining hands.

The "neak" *ta* cult is still alive in Cambodia, particularly in the countryside. This is an animist religion in permanent contact with nature and the human being, which can be defined as "a spirit who lives in trees, in the mountains or in the various locations of nature." (Thibault 1998 and Toan 2009).

The translation services support mediums (dispositif de médiation in French) regarding the historic site, comes are channelled through a linguistic exchange linked to "Others" in order to provide well-structured and easily understandable knowledge transfers from one language to another. The interpretative theories provide a more complex approach to the simple process of translation because they involve the human being in the heart of this communication process. (Durieux, 2009 and Tardieu, 1987) The choice and the number of languages provided by the service and then diffused to the audience, mainly depends on the internal communication policy of the organisation, as well as, the number of foreign visitors that come. English, as the recognized international language, is widely used in co-operation projects by cultural institutions regarding translation, whatever the interpretation medium used: the media, paper, film, or interactive. Thus, cultural content requiring an English translation are not always done within the framework of an interpretative point of view according to the logic of the interpretative theories (sense). Indeed, cultural institutions, in connection with international co-operation, proceed regularly with a linear translation, producing a quality of translation that varies. Non English-speaking audiences have, not only to face the cultural complexity regarding history, religion or chronological data for example, but they also have to produce an additional cognitive effort regarding the understanding of a foreign language, which is not their mother tongue, carrying the difficulties of vocabulary, syntax and meaning.

UNESCO recognizes 6,700 languages spoken in the world. According to the latest edition (2009) of the "Atlas of the World's" Endangered Languages, half will be endangered by the end of the 21st century. This fragile linguistic and cultural diversity requires awareness concerning the meaning of the words conveyed by the languages. Particular attention should be given to the translation of the meaning in cultural contexts, which are presented to the audience. Cultural institutions are free to choose their languages of translation as applied to their interpretation mediums based on criteria, such as: the number of foreign visitors, the geographical location of their institutions or internal cultural policy being opened as part of an international visitor strategy. With the development of mass tourism, World Heritage sites have experienced an increase in foreign visitors. The international co-operation helps developing countries to present cultural heritage sites to visitors through different media. Textual media produced by a co-operation process (bilingual or multilingual) are designed and exhibited to the audience in order to facilitate the dialogue between a cultural institution (transmitter) and the audience (receiver). This bilingual textual communication process (panels) could be substituted by another multilingual media tool, e.g.: audio-guides. An audio-guide is an interpretation tool designed by Western specialists that can be extended or reduced depending on the time of the visit. The technical maintenance of this tool includes: renewal of equipment, changing the multilingual contents, theft, loss and miscellaneous technical problems. These technological and logistical aspects have to be taken into account regarding interpretation medium when they go through a co-operation process and request financial support. In this context, the use of a simple bilingual text (English-Khmer) is often identified as the best choice by local authorities and co-operation institutions in order to reduce technical problems and to successfully carry out the presentation *in situ* of cultural properties.

In conclusion, regarding Western supposedly effective Interpretation tools: are they really efficient when they are applied to a complex cultural site such as Angkor? Furthermore, the interpretation of local culture by communication tools coming from a co-operation process, such as the *in situ* implementation of a bilingual (English-Khmer) "Interpretation Centre", raises the following questions: are they really efficient in exhibiting local complexity? Are they well-adapted to local reception? Or on the other hand are they a political and cultural response coming from the co-operation in which translation is the tangible part of a so-called intercultural dialogue with local communities?

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