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## **Southeast Asian Identities: the Case of Cambodia**

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This paper is one of a series of studies on cultural identity and world civilizations. The focus of most of these studies has been on the civilizations of India, China and the West. These civilizations are arguably the dominant cultural foci in the world, the centers of cultural gravity. Adjacent to these dominant or “core” civilizations are cultures such as the Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese which orbit the Chinese core, and the cultures of Southeast Asia, such as those of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Indonesia, which orbit the Indian core. The rough pattern in both cases is of the peripheral cultures being swept up in the expansion of a powerful set of narratives out of the core and into previously unoccupied narrative space. In this paper I focus on Cambodian identity and explore how the cultural interaction between core and periphery functions to produce the Khmer cultural identities that waxed and waned in Cambodia over the centuries.

The concept of identity used in this paper is not essentialist. Studies of identity are not quests for essences. They are exercises in the narrative organization of facts about the thing identified. These facts may not present a consistent or even single identity. Identities are constructed retroactively, narrated into existence. As I have shown elsewhere, identities are like “narrative centers of gravity,” a term I borrowed from Daniel Dennett. Dennett applied the concept to the self, but it is equally applicable to various kinds of identities, historical biography, nations and civilizations.

Cambodian identity sits in a cultural space between China and India, which constitute cultural centers of gravity pulling Cambodia into their cultural orbits and their identities. China and India are two culture generating goliaths that overwhelmed nearby cultures, especially if those cultures had not already advanced far beyond shamanism and animism into narrative myth. This was the case with Southeast Asia. Before Southeast Asia had a chance to develop its own set of narratives, Indian narratives stepped into the void and were never dislodged once there. As Southeast Asia grew out of Shamanism and animism and began “narrativising” their worldview, they found a world already narrativised nearby in India. With such a complex and complete set of narratives at hand, Southeast Asia simply adopted the Indian narratives of Hinduism and Buddhism.

This was true of the Khmer people of Cambodia. Indic culture connected Cambodia to the Vedic worldview and thus to the Indo-European mythic complex. This influence indicates that Cambodia has a set of narratives in common with not only India, but also with the Mediterranean and European cultural worlds. In spite of the exoticism, from a Western point of view, of the wondrous artistic achievement of the civilization of Angkor, the mentality of Cambodia has very deep connections with large parts of the rest of the world.

Cambodian identity has several layers. It consists of an ancient shamanism, animism and ancestor worship. Cambodian culture was about to move to the stage of narrative myth but was stopped short by the introduction of Indic ideas. Instead of indigenous ideas developing a cultural narrative of their own telos, they are instead merged into externally introduced narratives. Burial mounds become Buddhist stupas, “and the tree spirits, blithely integrated into Buddhist observance, turned into *Sotapan*, followers of the Buddhist teaching who were set on to the path of salvation.” These Indic ideas with the remnants of earlier animism tagging along provide the foundation for Southeast Asian thinking.

The Cambodian civilization of Angkor, then, has deep connections in mythic history because of its adoption of Indic culture. But a civilization like the Cambodian is more than a simple extension of Indic culture. It borrows Indian narratives, to be sure, but they are instantiated into the Cambodian context in a unique fashion. Cambodian identity comes partly from the specific area of Angkor, around contemporary Siem Reap, where the rhythms of the Tonle Sap river produce an enormous bounty. This bounty produced the economic surplus to finance the building of the monuments of Angkor. The economy of the Mekong not only enables monument and state building, daily life follows the rhythms of the Mekong river with contributions from the larger Indian ocean context of monsoon-structured world trade.

There is also the larger geographic identity of connectedness with all of the Mekong River regions, Viet Nam, Laos, Thailand, Burma. At this level, cultural exchange between core and periphery can piggy-back on the river trade of the Mekong. The next level of connectedness and therefore identity, comes from a larger framework that includes Indonesia, the Indian Ocean trade and cultural network, which overlaps with the area one would call “Indic,” but one which had economic and cultural intercourse with Islam, which was an important presence in the Indian Ocean.

We will therefore proceed with a conception of Cambodian identity that is multi-layered and historical. We will conceive of Cambodian identity as connected to

- 1) Its shamanistic and animistic pre-history,
- 2) Its borrowing of Indic culture, which connects Vedic, Hindu and Buddhist (and therefore Vedic) myth and religion with the previous animism and structures narrative framework as indelibly Indic,
- 3) The rhythms of the Mekong River as provided by the periodic reversal of the flow of the Mekong tributary, the Tonle Sap river, into the Tonle Sap Lake,
- 4) The economic rhythms of Indian Ocean trade and its monsoons that bring from all over the world.

- 5) A political identity marked by early conflict with its local neighbors, the Chams and especially the “Tiger and the Crocodile,” Siam (Thailand) and Vietnam respectively, and, more recently, with distant but internationally active European powers, particularly France and the United States,
- 6) Maoist philosophy and its descent into the political terror of the Khmer Rouge,
- 7) Chinese influence, and lastly,
- 8) Key personalities: Suryavarman, Jayavarman, Sihanouk and Pol Pot.

This paper will focus more on the dominant Indic aspect of Cambodia and its connection to its geographic reality, but China has played a significant role in Southeast Asia as well. J.D. Legge writes: “That influence was felt directly through almost a thousand years of Chinese rule in Viet Nam, but its effect was felt beyond that. Chinese trade was carried on throughout the region as a whole, and Chinese political dealings with Southeast Asian kingdoms extended as far afield as the Indonesian archipelago.” China has also played an important role in the recollection of Cambodian cultural memory, since many of the written sources come from China. The most important account is probably that of Zhou Daguan, with his *Record of Cambodia: The Land and its People*.

All this is not to underestimate all the small things that make up Cambodian identity, which may be, collectively, as influential on daily life as those listed above. One cannot, for example, travel to Southeast Asia without being impressed with the abundance and quality of fruit. Henri Mouhot, the first European to see Angkor Wat, wrote in his diary that,

“The fruit here is exquisite, particularly the mango, the mangusteen, the pineapple, so fragrant and melting in the mouth, and what is superior to anything I ever imagined or tasted, the famous ‘durian,’ which justly merits the title of king of fruits. But to enjoy it thoroughly one must have time to overcome the disgust at first inspired by its smell, which is so strong that I could not stay in the same place with it.”

These layers constitute the identity of Cambodia, from the lived reality of the taste of local fruits to geographic location, to socio-economic reality, to folk tales, to borrowed and altered Indic high culture to important personalities. Civilizations are constructed retroactively in an act of narration. Civilizational identities are therefore simply interpretations of a set of facts about the civilization for one purpose or another. These groups of facts can be organized in many ways, depending upon one’s purpose. The purpose of the organization given above is to produce a provisional characterization of Cambodian identity. The usefulness of this conception is that it enables us to compare it with other civilizational identities, which, in turn, helps us understand both human mentality in general and the differences between sets of cultural mentalities.

When one surveys Cambodian history, one is inevitably drawn to its high point, the civilization of Angkor. But Cambodian identity from a civilizational perspective is not exhausted by a discussion of Angkor. I will also put this past civilization into perspective with the history of Cambodia up to the present, with a particular emphasis on the relatively recent (by historical standards) horror of the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge. In broad outline we speak of Pre-Angkor Civilization, Angkor Civilization, Post-Angkor Cambodia, the French Protectorate, the Sihanouk era, the Khmer Rouge Era and the Post-Communist era to the present.

Pre-Angkorian society was rice-based, but not yet the centralized hydraulic society with a large work force and bureaucracy that Angkor was to become. The two kings most responsible for Cambodia's cultural greatness in the Angkor period were Suryavarman II (1113-1150), who built Angkor Wat, and Jayavarman VII (1181-1218), who built the Bayon of Angkor Thom, although there were several who contributed to the artistic heritage of Angkor to a lesser degree.

Angkorian civilization did not last long after Jayavarman VII, so the effort to produce these monuments may have exhausted the civilization, although it may have been just a matter of relative weakness with regard to the invaders, the Chams and later, the Thais, who conquered Angkor. Angkor did not officially end until Ponha Yat abandoned Angkor and moved the capital to Phnom Penh, but the empire was never the same after Jayavarman VII, the last king to build grand monuments.

When Angkor declined, it meant the loss of the hydraulic, bureaucratic and monumental society that Angkor had been. Post-Angkor society had a different form than Angkor society. John Tully writes, "it seems that a different kind of social and economic system had supplanted the old model." The capital was moved from Angkor to the Quatre Bras region, the monument building ceased and the state-directed public works fell into decline. By the mid-17th century, Angkor Thom was deserted and the jungle overgrew most of the monuments of the Angkor era. This era is also characterized by the loss of land to the Thais, including Siem Reap itself, and Cambodia was buffeted on all sides by stronger rivals.

It is in the 1850s that the French explorer Henri Mouhot becomes the first European to see Angkor Wat. Local rivals of the Khmers eventually give way to the European encroachment into Cambodia, and France establishes a Protectorate in 1867, which lasts until 1946. Cambodia is granted independence in 1953, at which time it becomes a kingdom under King Norodom Sihanouk. The Khmer Rouge government rules from 1975-9, and nearly destroys the country with a murderousness borne of ideological fervor. The Khmer Rouge gives way to a conquering Vietnamese army in 1979 and in 1993 elections bring a Cambodian government to power.

The subsequent history of Cambodia is marked by misrule and corruption with most of the perpetrators of the killing fields left unpunished. This history of early greatness followed by weakness and then horror marks the trajectory of Cambodian history. Given the amount of time between greatness and horror, there is little connection between the two societies, which were completely different.

Angkor was animated by the culture of India, Hinduism and Buddhism, while the Khmer Rouge was the perverse result of a country caught between superpowers, with a history of colonialism, and in the grip of a strict application of the ideology of Marx, Lenin and Mao, which was learned in France by some advanced students from Cambodia. So there was no causal connection between the greatness and the horror, simply a connection in place and memory. But this connection in place and especially memory allows us to consider them together, to narrate, as the Cambodians themselves have done, a connection between Angkor and the present.

Finally, there are the personalities. Suryavarman II, Jayavarman VII, Sihanouk and Pol Pot are by a wide consensus the most important personalities in Cambodian history. Suryavarman was the leader who built Angkor Wat, a Hindu temple dedicated to Vishnu. Jayavarman had the Bayon built. Those accomplishments alone would establish their importance in Cambodian history, but they did much more, not only culturally but militarily.

Sihanouk is a larger than life figure in Cambodian politics after the French Protectorate. Whatever one thinks of Sihanouk and his political maneuvering, there is no doubt that he was the central figure between the Protectorate and the Khmer Rouge era. And then there is Pol Pot, a man who will go down in history as the leader of one of the worst regimes in world history.

Angkor civilization left an artistic legacy that counts as one of the greatest achievements in world history, an achievement any people would wish to claim as their own. The fall of such a civilization can only be termed a tragedy in such a people's understanding. Cambodia never again reached the level of cultural accomplishment or social stability, and this long-term instability made it open to the cataclysm of the Khmer Rouge. Cambodian history thus leaves us with two tragedies. The fall of Angkor was the first tragedy, but it was destined to be outdone by the second, the tragedy of the killing fields.

The characterization of Cambodian history as tragic is not new. David Chandler gave his account of Cambodian history since 1945 the title, "The Tragedy of Cambodian History." Another way to think of Cambodian history is that it enters world history twice, once in greatness, once in destruction. Cambodian history has a Janus face. It presents both artistic genius and maniacal evil. Neither, of course, is true of Cambodia

today, which merely wallows in a permanent state of corruption and need for international assistance.

Cambodian identity is thus a narrated composite of historical memory and socio-economic and geographical influence. But why look at Cambodia this way? What does it gain for us? Comparative Civilizationists see the world differently than area specialists. For area specialists the goal is to arrive at a picture of their particular area in all its diversity and uniqueness. For comparativists, any picture of a given area must be drawn in terms of how it fits with the rest of the world and over the course of its history. We incorporate into our comparison the historical dimension, changes in the world's civilizations over time. The trick is, of course, doing this without losing the accuracy and sophistication of area studies.

The two approaches give us different kinds of methodology, and ultimately, different ontologies. Certain properties of civilization emerge only in comparative context. The specialist is most attuned to the diversity of an identity, while the comparativist is more interested in the balance of similarities and differences between a civilization and all other civilizations. This description of this balance gives us a set of properties that is beyond the purview of the specialist. These are the properties that concern the comparative civilizationist.

The first thing to note is that area specialists often disagree. When this happens, the comparativists learn the arguments of both sides and decide for themselves which is more convincing. Even better, however, is keeping as many of the various perspectives in play as possible, especially since comparativists should temper their adjudications of arguments in proportion to their own mastery of the given area. But how does one carry on such a balancing act? A civilizationist cannot paper over the differences among area specialists. When we appropriate the work of area specialists for our purposes it is important for us to carefully represent the dialectics of disagreement. Interestingly, this dialectic often proves more valuable than a monolithic account anyway.

From the historical perspective, Angkor looms as the most important of the societies that have inhabited the area of Cambodia. What is Angkorian identity in the context of Cambodian civilization? Angkorian identity is ultimately the collection of true statements one can make about the civilization of Angkor. What do we know about Angkorian civilization? Quite a lot, really, but there is much that we “know” that is contested, and what is contested lies right at the heart of what is meant by Angkorian Civilization.

The first question that arose in the early literature on Southeast Asia relevant to comparativists was the extent of indigenous and external contributions to the culture of the area. George Coedès' early work set the stage for this argument with his claim that

the Angkor Civilization of Cambodia was an extension of a larger “Indic” civilization centered in India. He downplayed the indigenous contribution.

The second question concerns the proper division of study. Should we speak of Angkorian Civilization? Cambodian Civilization? Mekong Civilization? Southeast Asian Civilization? Indic Civilization? This question is related to the first. My answer to this question is to combine these influences into an overall historical identity. Which part of this identity we refer to will depend on the questions we ask of it.

Charles Higham, taking issue with Coedès on the first question, argues that the answer to the second should be Angkor Civilization, thus asserting the uniqueness of Angkor Civilization not only as part of Asia or Southeast Asia, but within the Mekong Valley. Discussing the tendency to ignore the indigenous Cambodian contribution to the monuments of Angkor, Higham writes, “Many uninformed guesses were subsequently offered as to the nature of the monuments and their origins, virtually none of which gave credit to the Cambodian people.”

Higham is an archaeologist who is less interested in the art and religion than in an accurate description of the archaeological evidence, which he does rather well. It is not surprising that these artifacts give a more unique picture of Angkor than we get from an analysis of its art and religion. Higham makes a point of emphasizing rice cultivation as key to Angkor civilization. He is convincing in arguing that rice production governed the everyday forms of life in large parts of Cambodia. But the parameters of rice production and consumption are dependent on the Mekong’s ecological geography, which makes rice production so significant.

Many parts of India were equally dependent on rice, however, so the comparativist is less interested in this aspect of Cambodian life. Higham is opposed to the idea that Angkor, the civilization of Cambodia responsible for the temple complexes in Siem Reap, is best characterized as an Indic civilization or part of a larger Indic civilization. He wishes to understand Southeast Asia on its own terms rather than in terms of its relation to the culture of India. This is a reasonable position in its own context, but it is less useful for determining Angkor’s and later, Cambodia’s identity.

Higham is surely correct that Angkor is unique in many ways, but he misses much of what there is to say about Angkorian Civilization at the level of comparative civilization because he resists what he regards as an “outsider” perspective. And this is as befits an archaeologist. For comparative purposes, however, Higham spends too little time on the stories portrayed on the walls of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom for the comparativist because this is where we see the importance of Indic mythology.

It is the stories on the walls of the Angkor monuments, particularly Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, that account for the deep connection between India and Angkor.

Angkorian culture reached a pinnacle of greatness rarely matched before the modern era, but the essence of that greatness was more “Cambodian” to Higham than it was to that great interpreter of Southeast Asia, George Coedès, who emphasized the Indianization of Southeast Asia.

In support of Coedès’ interpretation, the stories of the *Ramayana* and other Indian texts we find on the walls of Angkor Wat tell us a great deal about Angkor. Notice that every god, demon, bodhisattva or monster mentioned or portrayed on the walls of the various Angkorian temples is Hindu or Buddhist. A large percentage of the inscriptions are in Sanskrit. While they do exist, there are very few artifacts that indicate a purely pre-Hindu/Buddhist narrative, idea or image. There is thus ample evidence for the Indic interpretation of Angkor.

Narratives that have been rationalized over the centuries tend to be more appealing than non-rationalized narratives, and so this put native narratives at a competitive disadvantage with Indic narratives. The abstraction achieved by the rationalization of language is equally important. If we consider the linguistic character of Mon-Khmer, but also Tai and Cham, we find a paucity of abstract terminology. “Khmer is a remarkably concrete and down-to-earth language, and thus poor in abstract terms, which it has been constrained to borrow from Indian languages.”

The import of Indian abstract terms into Khmer brought with it Indian myth, philosophy, art and religion at the cultural moment when Southeast Asia moved beyond shamanism into myth and religion. Once these abstract terms were incorporated, Southeast Asia could borrow the mythic narratives of India, and we see these Indic narratives on the walls of Angkor Wat. A quick glance at the stories displayed on the walls of Angkor Wat, which I have inspected personally, makes a strong case. Here is a list of the stories on the walls of Angkor Wat:

- The Battle of Kurukshetra (Mahabarata)
- The Battle of Lanka (Ramayana)
- Army of King Suryavarman II
- Judgment of Yama
- Churning of the Ocean Milk
- Victory of Vishnu over the Demons
- Victory of Krishna over Bana
- Battle of Gods and Demons
- Two scenes from the Ramayana

All these narratives are Hindu except those portraying the army of Suryavarman, which was just a glorification of the king. This exception to the thoroughly Indic nature of the temples, the descriptions or portrayals of battles of Angkorian kings, particularly against the Chams and Thais, is hardly a clear exception. These inscriptions and pictorials are

sometimes right next to Indic narratives; I believe in an attempt to ennoble them and provide connectivity between Cambodian and Indian religious and mythic culture.

We also know that Angkorian crowning rituals were a centerpiece of an Indic legitimization process for the kingly order. Further, the Chams and Thais were themselves carriers of Indic civilization, so the variation in the rule of the particular groups did not change the mythico-religious background. Critics of the Indic thesis, such as Higham, argue that Indic culture was brought in by elites for their own purposes rather than being a society-wide adoption of Indic culture. While this may have been true in the beginning, Indic culture eventually becomes the dominant narrative set of Cambodian culture among all social classes, a dominance that remains to this day in spite of the near civilization-ending actions of the Khmer Rouge. To summarize just how much influence India had upon the civilization of Cambodia, let's consider Michael D. Coe's list of what Indianization brought to the region:

- The Hindu religion, its mythology and cosmology, its ritual and the cults of Shiva and Vishnu
- The Sanskrit language
- Buddhism
- The Indic (Brahmi) writing system, stone inscriptions and palm-leaf books
- The Hindu Temple Complex, and an architectural tradition of brick and/or stone based upon Gupta prototypes
- Statuary representing gods, kings and the Buddha
- Cremation burial
- Rectilinear town and city plans
- Artificial water systems, including rectangular reservoirs and canal systems
- Wheel-made pottery

This is a not-insignificant list. In fact, it is testament to the profound influence of India on Cambodia. Every single god, goddess, demon, bodhisattva and so on that we see on the walls of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom is a Hindu or Buddhist character. The architectural styles are Indic. We also see it in the worldly practices such as water systems and town plans. Even non-cultural practices were borrowed, such as water control, writing and burial.

The same is true of the ruins of Burma, Laos, Thailand and, to a lesser extent, Viet Nam, with its closer proximity to the other narrative behemoth, China. As we saw above, the only other people portrayed at Angkor Wat or Angkor Thom were the king and soldiers fighting battles. So not only were the architectural and sculptural styles derived from Indian predecessors, so were many secular practices.

While we have emphasized Cambodia's cultural connection to India, we should not think that these religions develop unchanged in the Southeast Asian context. The Hinduisms and Buddhisms that took hold in Southeast Asia are genetically related to the Hinduism and Buddhism of India, but there are doctrinal, social and artistic differences between Angkorian and Indian culture.

The pre-Angkor adoption of the Hindu religion seems to have acquired Hindu myth more than Hindu social arrangements. Nor did it adopt the Indian practice of coinage—Cambodia remained a barter economy until the coming of the French. So although Angkor absorbed the myth of India, its social structure and its economy were its own. Although it is far too simple, it is tempting to say that Southeast Asia is India without caste. “A kind of Brahmanism without India's strict rules of caste and society, flourished in some of the Indian colonies, and Hindu deities supply the iconography for a good deal of Southeast Asian art.”

The caste system, so central to Hinduism in India, was a non-factor in Southeast Asia. Yes, the Brahmins claimed and received special status; indeed, the origin story of Angkor concerns a Brahmin from India marrying a Khmer princess. But Khmer society was not organized into the four castes. One can argue without too much exaggeration that Hinduism without caste is quite a different Hinduism.

On the other hand, it is testament to the power of Indian religious and cultural ideas that they were so influential in spite of being separated from their connection to caste. The reason caste did not move out of India is that caste in India was certainly more a result of contingent historical events -- like the Indo-European conquest of the Indian subcontinent and the attempt to maintain status distinctions after assimilation -- than it was a result of a theological rejection of Indian social practices. Indic culture entered Southeast Asia through elites borrowing Indic culture for the legitimization of elite rule rather than as a result of colonization or mass religious conversion.

Mary Somers Heidhues writes, “This reception of Indian influences is all the more remarkable when it is realized that there was no known colonization of the area.” And De Casparis and Mabbett write, “it is now generally thought that the influence of Indian civilization, including religion, should mainly be attributed to endeavors by some Southeast Asian elites to assimilate important elements of Indian culture.” This Hinduism without caste brought in by elites is distinctive of Southeast Asia and thus an important component of Cambodian identity.

It is important to note that Khmer appropriation of Hindu mythology was selective. The Churning of the Ocean Milk plays a prominent role in Angkorian myth, and several stories from the Ramayana are featured. This subset of Hindu stories gives Cambodian mythology much of its content. Given this overlap in narrative content, one could argue

that we should jettison our concept of India altogether when we study the culture of South and Southeast Asia.

The borders of “Indica” are much wider than any political border that characterized any Indian state. Khmer temple styles, although unique in important ways, are continuous with Hindu and Buddhist temples in India and elsewhere in the Indic world. If we compare temples from India, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia, we see overwhelming similarities. All are based on the myth of Mount Meru. All have the shapes that ultimately derive from the Buddhist stupa or the Hindu temple or a combination of the two.

This is not surprising since the same artists sometimes worked on both Hindu and Buddhist temples. All have many stylistic similarities linked to deeper meanings of the architecture. This creates difficulties in accurately identifying the referents of temple sculpture. Specialists sometimes determine whether a temple is dedicated to a particular god by the direction the temple faces. Facing east, for example, may indicate the prime god of worship at a given temple. But there are many exceptions, so other evidence is used. The results are often inconclusive as we see even in the case of the famous Bayon.

The Bayon has many interpretations and these vary to such an extent that specialists often just accept a certain Hindu/Buddhist indeterminacy regarding the face towers of Bayon. But this ambiguity, Coedès argues, is actually reflective of the syncretic nature of Angkor myth. The faces on the Bayon towers, so utterly iconic, are not representationally singular; they are available equally to the Buddhist, Mahayana or Theravada; Hindu; Vaishnavite; or Shiite.

It is probably true that the builders did have just one interpretation in mind, but as the years have gone by and the faces were embraced by several sects with their own substitute referent for the image, the faces themselves lost anything like a definite referent. But this indeterminacy of interpretation gives us yet another hint of the character of Angkor. Angkorian culture is syncretic. When Hinduism and Buddhism enter Southeast Asia the two religions are not always kept separate. A monument like the Bayon of Angkor Thom has relief sculpture from both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. It also mixes the Hindu sects, at one point even worshipping the combined Shiva and Vishnu as a different god, Harihara.

This combining of different sects even extends to the borrowing of sculptural techniques. The bronzes of Angkor include one of the Buddhist Maitreya with extra arms, like a Hindu god. There is no Indian scriptural basis for the extra arms; it is an artistic innovation by Cambodian artists who probably worked on bronzes of both religions. Angkor civilization’s synthesizing nature combined notions from both

religions to cross their representation. Cambodia also let Chinese culture influence their bronzes.

“There should be no hesitation in making the case, for instance, that the shift in Cambodia (and Thailand) from Buddhist images in which only the right hand performs a significant gesture to those in which the two hands have equal importance was directly due to Chinese influence.” Cambodia and Southeast Asia generally was subject to a Buddhist “pincer movement” as one strain, typically Theravada, arrived from India via Sri Lanka and Burma, as well as a southern maritime route via Indonesia, and another, primarily Mahayana, arrived via China, which, in turn received its Buddhism via the Silk Road, where it picked up Greek and Persian influence among other influences. “Thus the two jaws of a giant pincer meet in this area (Southeast Asia).”

A civilization is more, however, than the sum of its cultural narratives and symbols. It is also reflective of the geography it inhabits, which constitutes the third layer of identity listed above. The Mekong river is so productive that it would be surprising if it did not produce some significant high culture. Civilizations require a rather significant surplus, and the Mekong and the Tonle Sap provide it.

The Tonle Sap Lake is the most productive lake in the world, even out-producing the North Sea. It was probably inevitable that some monarch would turn to monumental architecture with such a surplus available to those who could gain control of it; it was just a matter of which Mekong river kings would spend his riches on doing so. This is not to say that there is no variation in Southeast Asian climate and ecology. Higham’s account in his magisterial *Early Cultures of Mainland Southeast Asia* makes it clear that there was significant variation across Southeast Asia. This variation, however, does not undermine the claim that the Mekong and especially the Tonle Sap Lake area yielded a surplus that could be had by whoever was the strongest at any given moment in Southeast Asia.

Higham widens the focus a bit when he focuses on three rivers, the Mekong, the Red River, and Chao Phraya instead of the single river, the Mekong, which is at the core of my thesis. By including the two other rivers Higham takes in a wider area, Southeast Asia as a whole rather than just Cambodia, and there is surely value in conceiving of the three rivers as a set. However, Cambodia’s Tonle Sap Lake and its regular and predictable annual flooding make its surplus greater than that produced by the other two rivers, and thus Cambodia was most likely to end up with the greatest monumental architecture.

My perspective toward Angkor Civilization is that it is best seen as the highpoint of the Indic civilization of the people living around the Mekong River, but with wider connections to the Indian ocean and its monsoon rhythms. Mekong Civilization is culturally Indic, which means the most of its governing narratives are borrowed from

India. While Mekong Civilization has its own economic, political and social logic, a result of the ecological conditions along the Mekong, its religion, art and architecture are Indic.

The Mekong River provides the daily rhythm of life in Cambodia while India provides the cultural superstructure. It is the combination of this daily rhythm with Indic culture that produces what we now call the civilization of Angkor. The Mekong river was the central organizing principle of Southeast Asia the way the Tigris-Euphrates was in the Middle East, the Yangtze and Yellow rivers in China, and the Ganges and Indus rivers were in India. Several groups at different points in history dominated the area fed (literally) by the river and the Tonle Sap lake.

Looking at the civilization of Angkor as a stage in Mekong Civilization is the same sort of geographical approach Braudel used so well on the Mediterranean and that many scholars have used on the Atlantic Ocean and the Silk Road. Trade routes and especially rivers are particularly good organizers of civilizations. The Mekong River provides the local geography of Southeast Asian culture, but it is the yet wider context of Indian Ocean trade that is the broadest context relevant to understanding Cambodian identity. Mekong culture only becomes complete with reference to the larger geographical context of the Indian Ocean. The Mekong “pulse” is, of course, related to the interaction between the Mekong River and the Indian Ocean, primarily through the rhythm of the monsoon.

Because of this wider framework, we can get a better sense of the cultural identity of Indic civilization by looking at Borobudur/Prabanam, Ayutthaya, Bagan and Angkor Wat/Angkor Thom temple complexes. These four temple complexes are testament to the viability of the concept of an “Indic” civilization stretching from India proper to Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, southern Viet Nam and Indonesia. Interestingly, Indian culture traveled as much, if not more, by sea than it did by land. It is most likely that Indic culture followed the paths created by the Indian Ocean traders. In fact, the Indonesian complex containing Borobudur and Prabanam in Indonesia, which of necessity came by sea, was actually 300 years earlier than the Angkor complex.

A key aspect of Indic civilization in Cambodia is the (sometimes not-so-peaceful) co-existence of Hindu and Buddhist artistic and religious traditions. Hindu and Buddhist temples were often being built in the same area and around the same time. Borobudur, a Buddhist temple complex and Prabanam, a Hindu complex were both built within a few miles of each other in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Prabanam being a Hindu response to the Buddhist Borobudur. The same is true of the Cambodian complexes of Angkor Wat, a Hindu temple complex, and Angkor Thom, a Buddhist work, although they were a bit further apart in time.

The locations of Borobudur, Ayutthaya, Bagan and Angkor Wat give us a larger geographical framework, the Indian Ocean trade network, within which to understand Angkorian civilization. Once we see Indic civilization layered over four different cultures we become clearer about what it means to be Indic. It also enables us to see how the variations between the four locations reflect the range of Indic expression. The fact that Angkor was one of several states over a large area that had Indic (Hindu or Buddhist) artistic traditions is probably the most important fact about it for the comparative civilizationist.

So should we speak of Angkorian Civilization? Cambodian Civilization? Mekong Civilization? Southeast Asian Civilization? Indic Civilization? Do any of these have more reality than others? When it comes to this sort of question, it is best to go with operationalism. We use the term that is most useful for us given the questions we are asking. If we are looking at Angkor in all its uniqueness, then Angkorian Civilization works best. If we are interested in the breadth of artistic styles and religious motifs, then Indic Civilization would be better. If we take a larger geographical view, a compelling perspective is the one that organizes Southeast Asia around the Mekong River and the Indian Ocean.

If we add in the various political groups that dominated the Mekong area at one time or another, we get a picture of a single contested and very productive land. The Khmer, Thais, Laotians, Chams and Vietnamese all had turns dominating the region. The fall and disappearance of Angkor civilization came with the rise of its rivals, the Thais, Chams and Vietnamese. From this perspective Angkor Civilization becomes one phase of a series of phases of emergent high civilization. Angkor is generally considered to be the greatest of the various political entities to dominate the Mekong, but it was not the only one.

Throughout Southeast Asian history the Mekong River is the primary engine of trade and commerce for Cambodia, Viet Nam, Laos and Thailand. The Mekong's source is in China, which makes great use of the river. As far back as the pre-Angkor period we see that the Mekong Delta facilitated the trade between the interior of Southeast Asia and Indonesia (Java) and South Asia, thus connecting Angkor to the whole of world trade. The Mekong is the economic beating heart of Southeast Asia.

But civilizations exist in time, and Cambodia goes through significant changes in the modern era. It is with this fact in mind that I consider the meaning of Angkor, the Mekong and Indian ocean trade in the context of later Cambodian history as well as the tragedy of Cambodia's Year Zero. With the fall of Angkor we have a period of disunity and subordination to the other Mekong regional powers until the French arrive. The colonial period, in turn, gave way to the Kingdom and eventually the cataclysm of the Year Zero, the rule of the Khmer Rouge that issued in the killing fields.

The question of the connection of the Khmer Rouge to the earlier history of Cambodia is one of cultural rejection and civilizational suicide. The cultural losses of the Year Zero were profound. The Cambodian version of the Chinese cultural revolution was just as, if not more, horrific than the original Chinese version. Cambodia lost a significant percentage of its population while attempting to rid the country of its “decadent” prior culture, which meant the loss of most of its elites and intellectuals. Ideologically, the rise of the Khmer Rouge marks the introduction of Chinese communist ideas that, in turn, originate in the Marxist thought of the West. One can say without exaggeration that this borrowing was a disaster. While the earlier incorporation of Indic culture gave rise to great cultural accomplishments, the introduction of Western ideas in the form of Marxism proved horrific. This is not to elevate India or denigrate the West. It is simply to note that Cambodia ended up with one of the more pernicious Western ideologies and that the result was terrible.

For contemporary Khmers, the overwhelming historical fact was the rule of the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge is responsible for two million deaths. The Khmer Rouge came into power five years after the 1970 coup that deposed Sihanouk. Lon Nol, the leader who took over after Sihanouk, never stabilized the country and faced a determined Khmer Rouge insurgency. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge take Phnom Penh and begin the systematic destruction of the country in the name of Maoist re-education. Decimating the educated and moneyed classes, forced emptying of the cities for the sake of an ideal rural purity, wrecking the economy by, among other things, eliminating money and wrecking agriculture with reckless disregard of agricultural science, the country is quickly reduced to a shell of its former self.

Pol Pot also suppressed religion, particularly Buddhism and Catholicism, and engaged in ethnic cleansing. Rarely in human history has a culture tried to remake itself so quickly and with such disregard for the pain and suffering caused. Countless books and films have addressed the horrors of that time, and the rule of the Khmer Rouge ranks as one of the worst periods of governance in world history. Nearly every single Cambodian knows of family members and friends killed, tortured or starved by the Khmer Rouge. Such collective memories make a permanent mark on the psyche of a nation.

The theme of Cambodian civilization can then be summed up with two words: Greatness and Horror. It is a compelling irony that the same area of the world can reach the heights of civilization and at a different time, descend into a horrific episode of genocidal destruction followed by endemic corruption. Cambodia was not the first country to descend from the heights of civilization to the depths of genocide--Germany is just one example that this has happened more than once, but we can hope it is the last.

The combination of Cambodia's geographical predicament with the cultural connections it entails along with its history of greatness and tragedy gives Cambodia a very unique identity. It is Angkor Wat and Hinduism. It is Angkor Thom and Buddhism. But it is Tuol Sleng and stacks of skulls too. Cambodia is an Indic culture that picks and chooses what parts of Indian culture it will adopt, but it is mostly Indian culture that it adopts. Cambodia is subject to the monsoons of the Indian Ocean and the annual reversal of the flow of the Mekong. Cambodian economics are the economics of the Tonle Sap lake, the Mekong River and the Indian Ocean. This is Cambodia big and small, beautiful and horrific with a greatness that was sullied by the killing fields, but never eliminated. The temples of Angkor remain the biggest attraction in Cambodia, as they should, but the suffering and death that took place in that beautiful realm will always tarnish the story of Cambodian civilization.

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