

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GDN-38
Cambodia:
Of Angkor and Rancor

Hse 1, 2660 Galvez Ave
Pasay City
The Philippines
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Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

Superficially it was like taking my family into the lion's den. However, the lion - little more than a kitten anyway - had taken French leave and the excursion was far less dangerous than it might seem. It was thus with less trepidation than equanimity that the five Nesses landed in Cambodia for a short visit late last month.

Over the issue of U.S.-backed Vietnamese attacks on Cambodian villages along the ill-marked border (in pursuit of Viet Cong guerillas, we maintain), Prince Sihanouk has broken relations with the U.S. and proclaimed us national enemy number one. Hurling vilifications and insults has recently become the Prince's favorite means of pulling Uncle Sam's beard. In a fit of righteous indignation, he told us to stop our imperialistic aid, which has amounted to US\$251 million in economic assistance from 1946 to 1962. We obliged and incurred the Prince's further wrath for being so precipitous. A "spontaneous" popular demonstration filled the streets of Phom Penh with anti-US Cambodians, who delighted in wrecking our embassy. (Smashed doors and windows and walls covered with hasty drawings of imperialists with admonitions to "go home" still bear silent witness to this "popular indignation".) Cambodians are now forbidden to receive or extend social invitations to Americans, and our embassy personnel in Phom Penh live the lives of near social outcasts. Superficially, Cambodia does resemble a lion's den for Americans.

May, however, was a propitious month for a Cambodian visit. The Prince was away in Paris, making it highly unlikely that there would be any "spontaneous" demonstrations against us enemies. Beneath the official stand against the enemy, there remains a good deal of apathy or popular friendship toward the Americans. Our embassy personnel are not without friends and are able to keep abreast of local developments with information supplied by, of all people, local French businessmen. Finally, the foreign exchange situation is such (official rate: 35 riels to the dollar, unofficial rate: 80 riels to the dollar) that many Cambodians are more than happy to assist Americans in shedding the burden of their dollars.

On the whole our visit was pleasant and profitable. I obtained sufficient information in Phom Penh to satisfy my insoluable (I've tried to drown it) Protestant Ethic. To the glory of French colonialism the cuisine was excellent; a paradise after three years of the culinary disaster wrought by British colonialism. The national tourist association, perhaps overlooking my status as official enemy because Jeannine is French, was courteous and efficient in arranging our visit to Angkor. And Phom Penh will long be remembered in our family as the city with the best children's playground in the world.

It was, however, our trip to Angkor that provided the most striking experience in our Cambodian interlude. In two days we saw the sharp contrasts of ancient and timeless jungle-clad ruins of a once great civilization, and the rancor of the little prince trying to establish a secure place for his little country in the big modern world.

The 180 mile drive northeast to Seam Reap, headquarters for visits to Angkor, was pleasantly monotonous (especially with the children subdued by dramamine). Outside of Phom Penh the countryside is flat rice land. Small villages, towns and peasant houses are strung along the roadside almost over the entire distance. The fields are large, reflecting the statistics that tell us there is little pressure on the land in Cambodia. Other, less happy, statistics are reflected in the view from the roadside. Cambodian peasants are poor and rice yields are low. The dilapidated condition of peasant houses, the tattered clothing worn by adults and school children, and the meagre range of simple goods offered in town and village shops all reflect the statistics of poverty, and compare unfavorably with these same indicators in Thailand or Malaysia. Poverty notwithstanding, the Prince is a popular ruler. Small household shrines along the roadside bear his image, set among flowers and occasionally incense. We know the Prince travels widely in his country, giving his personal stamp to government, and even playing the old God-king by casting from his helicopter textiles and other largesse to his loyal subjects. Apparently it works.

The monotony was broken by grim signs of mobilization. We had seen information department pictures in Phom Penh and elsewhere that showed the violations of Cambodian borders, to which we official enemies were linked. Now we saw young peasants, boys and girls, with wooden dummy rifles lining up on the roadside and going through close-order drill (with about as much military precision as could be expected). The rifles bore marks of their individual creator-owners, showing the variety that reflects differences in commitment that would normally be expected in such a program. At first the ranks of peasant soldiers were disturbing. Sullen faces, in which I probably mistook boredom and apathy for suspicion, brought that hollow feeling to the pit of my stomach. (I thought of the irony of ending three trouble-free years being baked alive in an auto set afire by frenzied peasants.) I told our boys to look out of the windows and to wave at the nice people, which they willingly did. It worked - thank God for blond children in this part of the world. Sullen faces lit up in broad grins; happy shouts and waving arms came back to us ranks of the defenders. Still, a few remaining sullen faces made me happy that the rifles were only dummy rather than real and loaded. Then I found comfort in the thought that probably even the prince himself prefers this to the more dangerous state of readiness.

Angkor was the capital of the great Khmer civilization that dominated this part of the world roughly from the 9th to the 14th centuries. The key to the civilization's greatness lay in a strong central government that regulated the waters and provided an immense irrigation network, making the fields yield large quantities of grain. From the 9th through the 12th centuries the Khmers gave expression to their high

civilization in the construction of magnificent stone temples. Now the civilization is gone. Under pressure from Siamese invasions the Khmers abandoned their capital in 1431. The irrigation system fell into disrepair causing the soil to lose its productivity. The wood of the city structures soon fell prey to the hunger of the climate and vegetation. The temples remain alone as wondrous but silent tombstones, marking what was once greatness.

Angkor is now jungle-clad. We wandered down paths from which the sun is excluded by heavy green foliage overhead. The jungle is alive with buzzing insects, singing birds, and occasionally the throaty hoot of a gibbon - sounds that accent rather than break the stillness. Then the faint note of a bamboo flute would announce the presence of one of the descendants of the great Khmers, a brown peasant who supplements his rice-growing by selling hand-made trinkets to the tourists. He sits on a stone ledge before a great gate that is struggling against the power of roots and green plants. Atop the gate is carved a large stone face, lips twisted slightly upward in the faint hint of a smile. The face is twisted about with the powerful roots of a great rain tree that curve tortuously down through the gate and into the ground, supporting and destroying the structure at the same time

An extensive network of roads winds through the old capital, leading to the most important ruins and skirting long artificial lakes whose waters have gone with the Khmers. The main temple, Angkor Wat, has been completely cleared



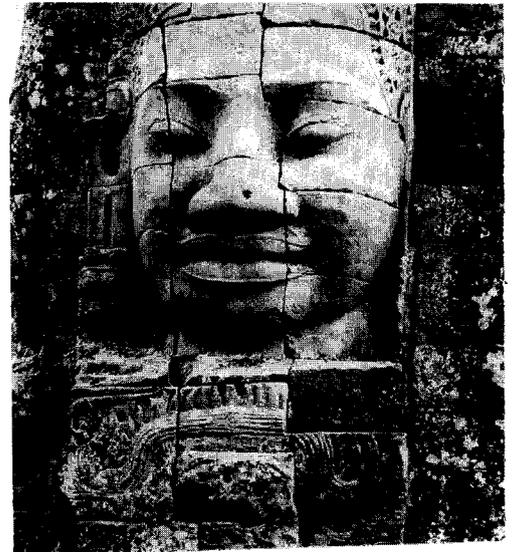
Angkor...jungle clad ruins

of the encroaching jungle and partly restored (by the renowned French Ecole D'Extreme-Orient). It is an expanse of cool passageways and steep steps leading to higher sanctuaries. The wat is surrounded by a moat where elephants blow water about themselves in the evening shade. Neither wild nor working, the elephants are for tourists to ride. Also for tourists, the Cambodian classical ballet performs Khmer classical dances on the broad stone walkways of the temple two evenings a week, brilliantly illuminated by modern floodlights.

Angkor Wat is the most renowned of the temples, but my preference is for a smaller temple known as Bayon. Here is another monotonous structure, a square pyramid of bricks covered with heavy stone, struggling to attain a modest height to glorify its builder, King Jayavarman VII (1181-c.1219), the last great king of the Khmers, who arrested for a short while the civilization's decline. Crowning the temple are 200 stone faces, carved with all skill to achieve exact likeness. Here is the face of Angkor, eyes half closed and the trace of a light smile on the lips. It is the beatific face of all-knowing serenity, smiling, I like to think, both at man's folly and self-importance and at the infinite knowledge of all things.

I could not help comparing these ruins with the great gothic cathedrals of the west, approximately of the same age. There is nothing in Angkor to match the architectural achievement of the gothic arch. In sculpture, too, the restraints of Khmer religion on the artist resulted in the monotonous repetition of like forms. It is, however, in the face of Angkor that I found the greatest contrast with western religious art. Where the western cathedral art depicts passion and sorrow and Christ's earthly trials, the beatific face of Angkor reflects an art of worldly renunciation.

More than any other impression, it was this face that I took away with me from Angkor. It descended with me back into the jungle and along the road to Phom Penh. I saw it reflected in the sly stoicism of the marching peasants and I saw it contrasted in the rancorous face of the little prince.



The Face of Angkor

Sincerely,

Gayl D. Ness
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