Foreword

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This publication is the result of three years of research carried out as part of the Göttingen interdisciplinary DFG-research group on “The constitution of ‘cultural property’; actors, discourses, contexts, and rules” (FOR 772) in Cambodia between 2008 and 2011. The title of the project was “Processes of constituting a ‘World Heritage’ and its meanings by the example of Angkor, Cambodia”. The research took the transformation of culture that takes place when it is turned into property, and especially into “heritage”, as a starting point (see, for example, Brown 2003, 2004). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, as one of the pioneers of heritage studies, convincingly showed already in 1998 that heritage

is a new mode of cultural production in the present that takes recourse to the past. Heritage is a value-added industry. Heritage produces the local for export […] Heritage tests the alienability of inalienable possessions.

(Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:149)
Thus, the “heritage industry” produces something new that still may be, in the material sense, the same as before, but it receives a number of new aspects and meanings – and new owners, namely – in the case of World Heritage Sites – the state and, in a metaphorical way, “humanity”. Such processes touch a delicate field when they are applied to sacred sites, such as temples with their statues, and places of worship of which local people (particularly ritual specialists) had been previously in charge. Such a site becomes transformed into a public space visited by (paying) tourists from all over the world in a similar way to a museum. Thus, the sacredness of the space which determined its former use becomes superseded by a profanity that underlines the economical dimension of such newly created “cultural products”. The same counts for living cultural practices if they are reproduced by state parties in the process of making them intangible heritage – a concept that is afflicted with Western standards and principles – to make them ready for tourist consumption on the basis of the state’s norms and ideals.

The relationship between local people, the new owners (the state) and the international tourism business and their corresponding practices and goals becomes a hierarchical relationship which puts the local population at the bottom of this power relationship (see, for example, Miura 2004; Hitchcock, King and Parnwell 2010; Winter 2010; Starr 2010).

As is well known, Angkor, which has been listed as a World Heritage Site since 1992, was the capital of the legendary Khmer empire (9th – 15th centuries), and many sites throughout Cambodia and Thailand are related (though probably to different degrees and during different periods) to this one. One of these faraway temples related to Angkor in style and also socially and politically during a particular period is Preah Vihear, situated on the Cambodian/Thai border. Preah Vihear was listed as a World Heritage Site in 2008.

Angkor has been a symbol of national identity for a long time and the temple of Angkor Wat is the emblem of the Kingdom of Cambodia. The inscription of Angkor – today called Angkor Park – on UNESCO’s prestigious list of World Heritage has highlighted and consolidated the association of today’s nation state with the glorious past of the Khmer 1000 years ago. Thus, the importance of the issue of national unity – though based on a rather mono-ethnic notion of the “ancient Khmer” – cannot be underestimated in a state that was shattered by the terror regime of the Khmer Rouge only a few decades ago.

Angkor had suffered from Cambodia’s indirect involvement in the Vietnam War and subsequently from the Khmer Rouge civil war. Cambodia’s restoration project was much more than just conserving the material aspects, that is, the monuments. It also became an encompassing project of national restoration. The listing of Angkor as World Heritage in Danger in 1992 was accompanied by UNESCO’s appeal to the world community to save Angkor. This appeal stirred a worldwide sympathy and aid for these monuments.

Since then, the situation of Angkor as an ensemble of monuments has substantially improved and this World Heritage Site is no longer listed as in danger.
We – a whole team of researchers consisting of Aditya Eggert (Göttingen), Keiko Miura (Tokyo), Baromey Neth (Phnom Penh) and myself – were interested to learn in what ways a monument or an ensemble of monuments, such as Angkor or the temple of Preah Vihear, and with it their particular geographic and socio-cultural setting, are subject to change when they become inscribed as World Heritage on UNESCO’s famous list. We wanted to know what happens when the regulations set up by UNESCO are implemented: For example, the whole area of a site which becomes inscribed as World Heritage needs to be organized according to zones in order to protect the archaeological and architectural locations. A World Heritage Site becomes very quickly attractive for international tourism. Hotels and restaurants usually spring up immediately and, if there are no regulations, everywhere, and they are preferably built as close to the monuments as possible. Thus the zoning regulates the protection and use of the monuments for the sake of sustainability. As a consequence, Angkor became transformed into Angkor Park.

Another set of questions we had were related not only to the people who had been living in the area for generations, but also to those who had recently moved in. What implications has the zoning on their everyday life which previously was not organized according to the newly established “zones”, but according to practices they had been carrying out probably for a long time? Furthermore, a World Heritage Site is incompatible with private ownership since it becomes a “heritage of humanity”. The state in which it is located acts as trustee – and as its formal owner; a World Heritage Site becomes state property. What happens in this respect to the local inhabitants of Angkor Park, which covers 400km², to their “property” and their claims of ownership of land, trees, sacred sites, and statues? What rights – human rights – are left to them and how do they cope with the new situation? Moreover, the establishment of World Heritage Sites by UNESCO was also conceived as a means to stimulate economic development and prosperity. UNESCO’s ideals are rooted in notions of democracy, equality of a state’s citizens and also equal economic chances for all, including education and the improvement of the situation of the poor. A further question, therefore, related to the issue of development, especially tourism, which is generally seen as a motor and means of development. What chances does tourism, the setting up of its infrastructure, its supply and its maintenance offer to those who are in desperate need of development? Siem Reap Province was (and still is) one of the poorest provinces in the country. How does this correspond to the fact that the income from tourism is one of the most important sources of state income?

Another part of the project touched the further development of living cultural practices that are believed to originate in the Angkor Period and have received the status of Intangible Heritage from UNESCO. What hierarchies and dynamics arise from the listing with which the state becomes the custodian of the cultural practices in question? What are the agencies of actors involved and the possibilities of the artists to further shape their art forms? The issue that arises is what happens with a living art form if it is appropriated and politicised by state actors on the basis of its elitist norms and values? (These questions will be dealt with in more detail in a later publication.)
These were the major research questions. Nevertheless, we were aware that our study did not begin “from scratch”, that is, from an Angkor and Preah Vihear “untouched” by an “outside world” or the monuments after the Khmer Rouge regime.

The story of Angkor’s and also Preah Vihear’s transformation as induced by actors from far away started much earlier.

The transformation began at the onset of colonial times in the mid-19th century. The history of “saving” Angkor, first and foremost the architectural aspects of the temple complex of Angkor Wat and the former Khmer capital, Angkor Thom, started in the 1860s when Mouhot’s travelogue (1864) of his journey to Cambodia and his “discovery” of Angkor made this site famous. Western efforts to free the ruins from the overgrowth began immediately and French scholars began to document and investigate these impressive traces of Khmer civilization (in which Preah Vihear became a cornerstone for territorial reasons). However, this project went far beyond academic endeavours and became a French colonial enterprise for its own goals (Singaravelou 1999; Clémentin-Ojha and Manguin 2001; Edwards 2007; Winter 2007).

To investigate the results of the developments after Angkor and Preah Vihear had become World Heritage Sites, therefore, implied considering their history, too; we limited the depth of our time perspective to the epoch of “French Indochina”, though we were predominantly interested in the past 20 years.

The book contains three parts corresponding to our major research questions. The first section, ”Nominations”, deals with the historical and political circumstances under which Angkor and Preah Vihear were nominated as World Heritage Sites and finally became inscribed on UNESCO’s prestigious list (chapters by Keiko Miura and Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin). Political considerations played an important role in both cases. The circumstances of the Angkor nomination have already been briefly mentioned: The damage Angkor had suffered and the all-encompassing project of restoration that started immediately afterwards have to be set against the background of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, the Khmer Rouge regime. The circumstances of the nomination of Preah Vihear are different, though politics were certainly one of the motives for its nomination. The temple of Preah Vihear has been a bone of contention between Cambodia and Siam/Thailand for almost one hundred years. The old border conflict broke out again immediately after Preah Vihear’s listing. The listing, therefore, needs to be set against this old struggle, and the International Court of Justice’s (ICJ) decree in 1962 and the re-appeal to the ICJ in 2011 (chapter by Sven Mölling).

Behind a nomination stands a process during which powerful national actors, those who are in charge of nominations – be it tangible or intangible heritage –, select cultural elements out of a shifting and difficult to define cultural continuum. The selection process is guided by a specific concept of “culture” the major actors have. The final chapter of “Nominations” consists of a contribution by Aditya Eggert. She explores the cultural concepts of the actors who intend to nominate an intangible heritage – fine arts – to UNESCO.
In the second part, “Implementation and Implications”, Keiko Miura discusses the issue of competing notions of ownership and heritage as applied by different actors on a local, national and international level, and how they interact with each other and with what consequences.

The policy of the implementation of Angkor as World Heritage Site and its management has changed over time according to the experiences made, to changes in the administration of the national management agency (APSARA) and to new ideas and visions of decision makers (chapter by Keiko Miura).

The third part, “Development”, raises the issue of development as an anticipated outcome of a World Heritage nomination. Baromey Neth explores the structure and the accommodation sector and its investors, the employment policies and the opportunities local people have to make a living out of it. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin examines development projects, particularly of the GIZ/GTZ, explicitly addressed to the poor and their economic empowerment in the rural areas of Siem Reap province.

The study is indebted to many institutions and people, first and foremost the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, which sponsored our project, and to the members of the research team: Aditya Eggert, Keiko Miura and Baromey Neth. I am also grateful to the members of the research group for the many lively and fruitful discussions we had on the topics presented in this book, and especially to Regina Bendix, speaker of the research group who supported the project in many ways. We are grateful to all the institutions in Cambodia, especially to the Royal University of Phnom Penh with which we were able to establish a Memorandum of Understanding for the duration of this project. We are thankful to many more institutions in Cambodia and beyond, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, APSARA Authority (in charge of the management of Angkor Park), the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), UNESCO in Phnom Penh and Paris, the Centre for Khmer Studies in Phnom Penh/Siem Reap, the GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, and all other institutions and individuals for their assistance and to those who at least did not bar our investigations.

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