Mapping Living Heritage at the Phanom Rung Historical Park: Identifying and Safeguarding the Local Meanings of a National Heritage Site

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Over the past two decades, a growing number of international heritage instruments and guidelines have drawn attention to the importance of safeguarding the intangible meanings and values associated with cultural landscapes, archaeological sites and monumental heritage. Acknowledging the inherent incompatibility of earlier modernist heritage principles deriving mainly from Europe, which privilege rationalist narratives and scientific approaches to conservation, the authors of these recent frameworks have called for an approach to heritage management that respects the living spiritual and religious values of heritage sites and recognizes the rights of cultural communities to maintain their role as stewards of their own heritage.

In the Asian context, this new approach to heritage management was first expressed in the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994), which stated that: "Responsibility for cultural heritage and the management of it belongs, in the first place, to the cultural community that has generated it, and subsequently to that which cares for it," and which further proposes that the conservation of cultural heritage is "rooted in the values attributed to [it]" (Nara Document Article 8 and 9). Since then, the core principles of the Nara Document have been reiterated and bolstered by a host of international instruments and initiatives focused on the intangible, including the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (UNESCO 2001), the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2003), the *Yamato Declaration on Integrated Approaches for Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2004), the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (UNESCO 2005), and *The Hoi An Protocols for Best Conservation Practice in Asia* (2009).

In Thailand, policy and legislation indicates that there has been movement towards the recognition of cultural rights and a more community-based, participatory approach in the heritage sector. This can be seen in the 2007 Constitution, where the rights of communities to manage their own cultural and natural resources are stipulated in Section 65. This is echoed in Section 5 of the 2011 Thailand Charter on

Culture Heritage Management drafted by the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) Thailand, which focuses on community participation in the management of heritage, and explicitly refers to the rights and responsibilities of local communities as well as the value of cultural diversity. In practical terms, however, there are still very few examples of the successful implementation of these participatory principles by the Thai heritage authorities – the Fine Arts Department (FAD).[1]

Drawing on field research at the Phanom Rung Historical Park in Buriram Province between October 2010 and March 2012, this article aims to shed light on some of the conceptual and practical challenges involved in making this shift from the tangible to the intangible in heritage management. The first part of this article will trace the history of Phanom Rung's incorporation into Thailand's national heritage — a process which valorized archaeological and nationalist interpretations of the Angkorean era sanctuary and led to the marginalization of local beliefs and values inscribed in the landscape. As we shall see from this account, over the course of the 20th century, the Phanom Rung sanctuary was transformed from a locally sacred site of Buddhist pilgrimage and worship of tutelary spirits into a national symbol of Thailand's Khmer heritage.

With this background in place, the article turns to the practical question of how to initiate community involvement in the management and interpretation of the sanctuary, particularly given its national significance. Toward this end, this section will focus on a discussion of the process and findings from a stakeholder forum on *Community Participation in Safeguarding the Intangible Meanings and Values of the Khmer Sanctuaries in Phanom Rung Historical Park* organized by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (Public Organization) in February 2012. Herein, the aim is to demonstrate how qualitative research tools such as cultural mapping and focus group discussions can generate rich data and insights into the intangible significance of heritage sites, which can, in turn, serve as the basis for participatory heritage safeguarding efforts.

The Phanom Rung Historical Park: Appropriating local cultural landscapes in the making of national heritage

Located in Buriram province, the Prasat Hin Phanom Rung sanctuary is dramatically situated at the summit of an extinct volcano 400 meters above sea level. Built of laterite and sandstone during the tenth through thirteenth centuries CE, the Hindu shrine was constructed in dedication to the deity Siva, and symbolizes his heavenly abode, Mount Kailash. Surrounded by ancient water reservoirs (*barai*), temples (*prasat*), hospitals (*arokayasala*) and rest houses (*dharmasala*), the

[1] One example of a project focusing on an integrated, community-based approach to heritage is the SEAMEO-SPAFA "Living Heritage" project in Phrae Province, which is discussed by Patcharawee (2009).

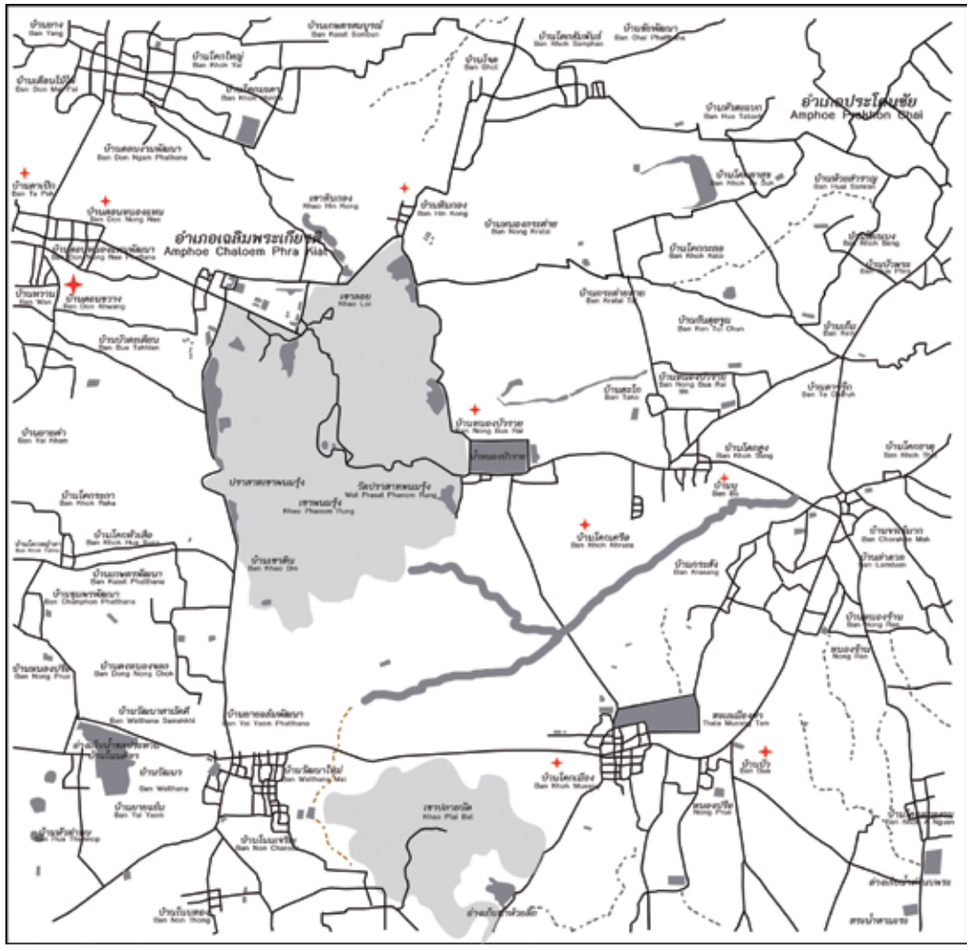

Figure 1. Phanom Rung Map with surrounding villages. Stars indicate villages where interviews were conducted.

Phanom Rung sanctuary and its environs were once linked to the Khmer capital at Angkor by a "royal road" that stretched to Prasat Hin Phimai in Nakhon Ratchasima Province.

Like most temples built during the Angkorean era (802–c.1431), Phanom Rung functioned as a ritual space for the cult of the devaraja,[2] a highly ritualized mode of statecraft that centered on the construction of monumental temples symbolizing the Hindu cosmos wherein the king was the divine universal ruler and living manifestation of the Hindu god Siva (Chandler 2000; Mabbett and Chandler 1995; Nidhi 1976). With the collapse of Angkor in the fifteenth century, the Khmer temples in the northeast of Thailand lost their original function and meaning as sites for the ritual legitimation of a ruler's divine power. Nevertheless, while construction of new

[2] Devaraja is alternatively translated as "god-king" or "king of the gods." See Mabbett and Chandler 1995, 88-90.

temples and associated buildings ceased after the fall of Angkor, these structures were never completely abandoned. As the Thai historian Srisakra Vallibhotama (1995) has argued, local populations in the northeast – including the indigenous Khmer and Kui, as well as subsequent settler populations of Lao and Thai – continued to modify, repair, rebuild, and reuse the Khmer structures, which suggests the temples' reincorporation into local beliefs and a continuation of religious practice, albeit not in the context of a state cult.

> We can think of this kind of renovation [kan som saem] as a kind of revival of "dead" religious architecture. However, it was not necessary for this revival to restore the original beliefs and practices associated with the site. Rather, it was the belief systems of the living that would be instilled in the edifice. This is because the people of this region shared the conviction that it was not necessary to destroy ancient religious sanctuaries, as it was possible to transform them. (Srisakra 1995: 396; translation by author)

Similarly, as Byrne (2009), Byrne and Barnes (1995), Edwards (2008), Karlstrröm (2005), and Thompson (1997) have all argued, within the syncretic religious epistemology of popular Buddhism, which represents an integration of Theravada Buddhism with Hindu-Brahminism and animism, the remains of historical religious structures are not regarded as archaeological sites belonging to the past. Rather, they are regarded as sites of potent spiritual power that can be harnessed through propitiation, veneration, and renovation.[3]

From interviews with twenty-two local informants living in the vicinity of Phanom Rung Historical Park in October 2010 and April 2011 (figure 1), I found evidence of this adaptive reincorporation of the ancient Khmer sanctuaries in the Phanom Rung Historical Park into living local beliefs and practices associated with both Buddhism and the tutelary spirits of place. Asked about their historical relationship to Phanom Rung and smaller structures found in the vicinity of the park, villagers – mostly of ethnic Khmer, Lao and Thai Khorat background – explained that the ancient edifices were the sacred abodes of tutelary spirits (*thi yu khong chao thi lae sing saksit*). Regarding the Phanom Rung sanctuary, informants recounted that before the road construction and temple restoration which began in the late 1960s, they would travel to the sanctuary by foot every year. This traditional annual pilgrimage, which took place in April, was called *prapheni duean ha sip ha kham*, or the "festival of the waxing moon during the fifth month of the lunar calendar," and villagers from all around the sanctuary and from as far away as neighboring Surin province would come to participate.

During this annual festival, which reportedly began in 1938 under the leadership

[3] Byrne (2009) refers to this potency as the "magical supernatural."

of a monk from Surin (Phumjit 1986), pilgrims would travel by foot up the mountain to the Phanom Rung sanctuary to pay respects to the tutelary spirits and deities of the sanctuary (*sen wai chao thi lae thepachao*) with flowers and incense, to ask for their benevolent protection, and to ensure sufficient rain and fertility of the soil in the coming year. The sanctuary was a place for asking for good luck and good fortune, and for repaying the spirits who fulfilled one's wishes (*bon lae kae bon*). Villagers also came to make merit at the forest temple located at the top of a hill near the sanctuary, give alms to the monks and put gold leaf on the sanctuary and the Buddha's footprint (phraphuthabat) housed in a small tower called the *prang noi*.[4] Both Thai and colonial records indicate that these syncretic local beliefs and practices date from at least the 1890s, and possibly earlier (Aymonier 1901; Phumjit 1986; Seidenfaden 1932).

Photographic evidence of the spiritual significance and function of Phanom Rung to local communities was captured in 1929 when Prince Damrong Rajanubhab – a prominent statesman and scholar during the early years of Siam's modernization – visited the northeastern provinces of Siam, making his way to the Phanom Rung sanctuary by elephant. In one photograph, we see the small temple tower called *prang noi* (mentioned above) covered with a corrugated iron roof structure, and while there is no clue from the photograph as to the image within, the well-worn path to the entry suggests frequent pedestrian traffic to the site (figure 2).

And yet, the purpose of Prince Damrong's visit was not to document the spiritual meaning of the sanctuary to local communities. Rather, photographs taken during this expedition showed the prince and his official entourage surveying the ruins of the seemingly abandoned ancient Hindu temple in a moment of archaeological "discovery" (figure 3). Viewed within the wider historical context of the expansion of colonial powers in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and their accompanying projects to excavate the historical past in the colonies, what these photographs vividly articulate is the Siamese ruling elite's desire to establish their equality with European colonial powers by proving their own civility, or siwilai (Thongchai 2000). The disciplines of history and archaeology were critical tools in this endeavor, as they were a means for Siam's elite to substantiate their grasp of Western scientific rationalism and harness the past to author the story of the nation-state (Peleggi 2002; Rasmi 2007).

Elaborating this point further, Byrne (2009: 82) argues that Prince Damrong's archaeological surveys and inventories throughout Thailand in the early twentieth century were a means of collecting "local source material to build national history." However, before these "local source materials" could be used for nation-building, they had to be purged of the beliefs that gave them meaning in the local context.

[4] Phumjit (1986) reported that the Buddha's footprint was placed in the prang noi by a Buddhist monk in 1894.

Figure 2. Archival Photo of *prang noi* from Prince Damrong's Visit to Phanom Rung, 1929 (courtesy of National Archives).

Figure 3 Prince Damrong's Visit to Phanom Rung, 1929 (courtesy of National Archives).

> [T]his project of mapping, which helped bring into being a national space, had no interest in the supernatural attributes of the sites. It might indeed be argued that these places could only play their nation-building role once they were freed from the web of magical supernatural power relations that contextualized them within popular culture (Byrne 2009: 84).

Six years after Prince Damrong's first visit, in 1935, Phanom Rung was registered as national heritage in the Government Gazette No. 52, Chapter 75, marking the advent of management by the FAD. This designation had limited impact on the local population until the 1960s, when the FAD launched the restoration of Phanom Rung and Phimai under the supervision of two French UNESCO experts, B. P. Groslier and Pierre Pichard.[5] From 1971 to 1988, the FAD – together with local villagers hired as laborers – restored Phanom Rung using the technique of anastylosis.

During the same period, archaeological studies by prominent Thai scholars, including Manit Walliphodom (1961), M.C. Subhadradis Diskul (1973) and HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn (1978), reconstructed the symbolic meanings as well as the religious and political functions of the Hindu temple. Building upon earlier studies of the Angkorean empire by influential French scholars such as Aymonier (1901), Coèdes (1968), and Lunet de Lajonquière (1907), these Thai scholars offered rationalist, scientific interpretations of the archaeological evidence, including inscriptions, sculptures and bas-reliefs. In the process, these Thai scholars contributed to an "authorized heritage discourse" (Smith 2006)[6] which situated the sanctuary firmly within the Thai national past and severed it from its contemporary meanings to living communities in its vicinity.

In 1988, the restoration was completed, and the following year, the Historical Park was officially opened. The opening of the park coincided with another important national event — the repatriation of the Phra Narai (Vishnu) lintel (figure 4). The carved lintel, which depicts a creation myth featuring the Hindu god Vishnu asleep on the serpent Ananta, was stolen from the Phanom Rung sanctuary in the early 1960s, and eventually made its way to the Art Institute of Chicago. With the imminent opening of the park, the Thai public rallied to demand the return of the lintel. They were joined by the Thai rock band Carabao, which wrote a song featuring the lyrics, "Take back your Michael Jackson, and give us back our Phra Narai!" In December 1988, the lintel was returned to Thailand. This longstanding and ultimately successful

[5] Pichard's UNESCO report (1972) offers a description of the restoration of Phanom Rung, and also mentions the presence of the monastery.

[6] Smith argues that authorized heritage discourses are "reliant on the power/knowledge claims of technical and aesthetic experts, and institutionalized in state cultural agencies and amenity societies. This discourse takes its cue from the grand narratives of nation and class on the one hand, and technical expertise and aesthetic judgement on the other. The authorized heritage discourse privileges monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation-building (2006: 11)."

Figure 4. Narai lintel (the author).

campaign to repatriate a piece of Thailand's Khmer heritage marked a turning point in Thai public awareness about Phanom Rung and the place of Khmer heritage in the national imaginary (Keyes 1991). When the park opened its gates in 1988, it was thronged with visitors, many of whom came to see the famed lintel.

Tracing Thailand's claims on the Khmer past

In order to appreciate the full symbolic significance of Phanom Rung within the Thai national imaginary we must first consider Thailand's extant – albeit ambivalent – claims to Khmer heritage, particularly the legacy of Angkor. In 1991, the prolific Thai studies scholar, Charles F. Keyes, published an essay entitled "The Case of the Purloined Lintel: The Politics of a Khmer Shrine as a Thai National Treasure," in which he put forth a provocative argument regarding the Thai state's official restoration of the Khmer ruins found throughout Thailand's northeastern provinces. Apart from the state's interest in promoting cultural tourism to these stone sanctuaries, which served as religious centers in what were once the northern outposts of the Khmer empire, Keyes suggested that the restoration of these sites also implicitly constituted the Thai state's bid to retain its claim on Angkor symbolically as a site of national origins.

Keyes reminded his readers that prior to the establishment of the French Protectorate of Cambodia in 1863, Siamese monarchs of the Chakri dynasty in Bangkok traced their ancestry to the court of Ayutthaya – a polity established in the mid-fourteenth century whose cultural identity, language, arts, architecture and

modes of statecraft were indelibly shaped by centuries of engagement and warfare with the empire of Angkor. After the collapse of Angkor in the fifteenth century, the rulers of Ayutthaya continued to see themselves as the successors of the Angkorean legacy.[7] Indeed, given the dominance of Khmer language and other cultural forms derived from Angkor at the court of Ayutthaya, some historians have gone so far as to classify the early Ayutthaya period up to the late sixteenth century as Khmer (Vickery 1973, 1977; Wolters 1966).[8] Thailand's overt claims of entitlement to Angkor continued well into the nineteenth century, as is evidenced by King Mongkut's (r. 1851–1868) construction of a replica of Angkor on the grounds of the royal palace in Bangkok, as well as his unrealized plans to transfer a number of Angkorean sanctuaries to Bangkok in 1859 CE (Charnvit 2003).[9]

In the context of the French colonial project to restore Cambodia's national heritage and protect its racial purity, however, the Siamese court's claims to Angkor became an egregious case of irredentism which posed a threat to what was then widely perceived to be the "vanishing Khmer race" (Edwards 2008). Suffice it to say here that when Siam ceded all of its former Khmer territories to France in 1907 – with the single exception of the ethnic Khmer populations and the sanctuaries located in what is now Thailand's northeast – it not only forfeited any future claims to the material wealth of these territories, but was also required to surrender the integral symbolic place of Angkor within the pre-colonial imaginary of the Siamese court.

In keeping with the epistemological turn to purified national origins inaugurated by the colonial encounter, "the father of Thai national history," Prince Damrong, shifted attention away from the hybrid empire of Ayutthaya with its Angkorean connections to a narrative of the "freedom-loving" Tai race. Adopting formalist,

[7] One example of this was King Prasat Thong (r. 1629–1656) of Ayutthaya. Upon ascending the throne, King Prasat Thong led a successful siege against the Cambodian capital of Lovek. To commemorate this victory, he built Khmer-style palaces and religious architecture named after Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. As Vickery (1976: 231) noted, "[I]t is known that both Song Tham and Prasat Thong were frequently preoccupied with Cambodia, attempting to assert suzerainty which the Cambodians denied and were strong enough to resist. Prasat Thong, moreover, seems to have had a deeper interest in his neighbor, for he copied the plan of Angkor Wat, built two temples modeled on it, and at one point planned to give the classical name for Angkor, Yasodhara, to one of his palaces."

[8] Wolters (1966) went as far as to suggest that the Khmer rulers at Angkor may have seen the struggle with Ayutthaya as a civil war rather than one between two independent kingdoms. Vickery (1977: 61) supported this idea, stating that "the 'conquest' of Angkor by Ayutthaya might well have been, as O.W. Wolters (1966) has already suggested, not in the nature of an international war, but a conflict between rival dynasties for control of mutual borderlands, and I would add for control also of what both considered to be their old, traditional capital: nagar hluon for the Thai, *brah nagar* for the Khmer of Cambodia."

[9] A record of King Mongkut's plans to transfer the actual edifices can be found in the Royal Siamese Chronicles of the Fourth Reign of the Chakri Dynasty, written by Phra Chao Thipakorawong and published in 1961. On page 224 of the chronicle, the author states that the king ordered a number of edifices to be transferred to Bangkok as they would bring prestige (*pen kiat yot pai khang na*).

empirical methods from European scholars, Damrong authored the first non-dynastic, rational and linear history of the Siamese nation, which was introduced in 1914 (Charnvit 1979). Drawing on the disciplines of philology and archaeology, Prince Damrong traced the migrations of the Tai from Southern China into mainland Southeast Asia, including Siam, Northern Laos and Vietnam, as well as territories of Assam and the Shan states. In this linear and ostensibly empirical narrative, the Tai who began migrating into the heart of the Chao Phraya Valley around the tenth century were heroic conquistadors of territories and indigenous civilizations. The Tai settlers were initially dominated by the Khmer empire until they united and shook off the yoke of Khmer oppression during the thirteenth century, thereby actuating the etymological connotation of "Thai" which means "free."

In spite of the primacy of this purified narrative of national origins, Thailand's ruling elites have never completely relinquished their claims of succession to Angkor, as we can see from the state's periodic efforts to restore the symbolic place of Khmer heritage within the Thai national imaginary over the decades since 1907. The first of these efforts was the Thai state's temporary reclamation of the "lost" Khmer territories during World War II – a deal brokered in cooperation with the Japanese by Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram, who used the Japanese occupation as leverage against the enfeebled French regime. In an attempt to legitimate these territorial seizures to the Thai public and the international community, Phibun's indispensable propagandist Luang Wichit Wattakaan produced a series of speeches on "Thai-Khmer Race relations" in which he argued that the Thais' absorption of the ancient Khmer was proof that the Thai and the Khmer were actually the same race. As Luang Wichit stated in 1940, "The Cambodians of today are not ancient Khmers, because Thai blood has insinuated into their veins" (Wichit 1940: 4). Following the defeat of the Japanese, the Thais were once again forced to relinquish these "lost" Cambodian territories, and Luang Wichit's claims of the Thais racial absorption of the Khmer were roundly condemned as irredentist rhetoric.

Even so, the importance of Khmer heritage did not entirely dissipate with this territorial forfeiture. Instead, as the national boundaries between Thailand and Cambodia calcified during the Cold War era, the Thai state's attention gradually shifted towards the Khmer heritage within its national borders. In the 1960s, tensions between the Sarit regime in Thailand and the independent government of Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk manifested in a dispute over the Preah Vihear temple complex in Sisaket province, which both regimes adamantly claimed as their national heritage. As Keyes (1991) pointed out, the settlement of the case in favor of Cambodia by the International Court of Justice in 1962 sparked a public outcry in Thailand and mass demonstrations in protest of the ruling, which in turn instigated the Thai government's funneling of funds and French expertise into the Fine Arts Department's restoration of Angkorean-era heritage sites in the northeast, most prominently Phimai in Nakhon Ratchasima Province and Phanom Rung. As I have

argued elsewhere (Denes 2006, 2012), this shift of attention from Angkor and Preah Vihear to the Khmer heritage within the nation-state from the 1960s onwards constituted a form of displacement, wherein the Khmer sanctuaries in Thailand's northeast became a metonymic substitute for the "loss" of Angkor as a site of cultural origins.

I have offered this brief summary of the history of Thailand's claims to Khmer heritage here because it has had direct implications for the interpretation, use and management of the Phanom Rung Historical Park. Firstly, as already mentioned above, scholarly research based on Khmer and Sanskrit inscriptions, bas-reliefs, and statuary laid the foundations for a scientific, officially sanctioned, "authorized heritage discourse" (Smith 2006) of the sanctuaries and their relationship to Angkor. A second implication has to do with how these authorized narratives have become the basis of a corpus of "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) staged at Phanom Rung, including Hindu-Brahmin rites, annual festivals, and cultural performances – all of which represent Thailand's claim to ancient Khmer culture. As we shall see in the next section, this official narrative and its accompanying reinvented traditions of Khmer antiquity have eclipsed the living, dynamic and syncretic local meanings and practices associated with the sites.

Stakeholder forum: Community participation in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage at the Phanom Rung Historical Park

Building on two periods of field research with communities in the Phanom Rung Historical Park (October 2011 and April 2011), in February 2012, a team[10] from the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC) organized a two-day stakeholder forum entitled "Community Participation in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage." The objectives of the forum were threefold. The first aim was to bring together representatives from nine communities located in the vicinity of Phanom Rung Historical Park to share their stories about the local meanings of the sanctuaries and to trace how their relationships to the sites had changed following increased intervention of state authorities. The second objective was to employ participatory cultural mapping to identify the intangible meanings inscribed in the landscape, including sacred sites and pilgrimage routes up to Phanom Rung prior to 1968. The third objective was to formulate recommendations for fostering community participation in the management, use and interpretation of the sanctuaries, and to present these ideas to government stakeholders.

After a brief introduction to the concepts of cultural heritage rights, intangible heritage and participatory heritage management, local residents were invited to share stories about their relationship to the sanctuaries. Phon Lamaisri, a former headman

[10] The stakeholder forum team was comprised of four SAC staff, the author and Ms. Rungsima Kullapat, a PhD candidate in the International Heritage and Tourism Management Program at Silpakorn University.

Figure 5. Phanom Rung Monastery 1974 (courtesy of National Archives).

of Khok Muang village in Chorakhe Mak sub-district, explained that around seventy years ago, the area around the Phanom Rung temple was still a heavily forested landscape with many wild animals, where villagers would take their cattle and buffalo to graze. At that time, villagers had not yet constructed a spirit house, but they worshipped the tutelary spirits (*chao prasat*) at a Bodhi tree near the sanctuary. On Buddhist days of worship, villagers heard traditional mahori music emanating from the temple, and many reported seeing a large red glowing orb floating between Phanom Rung and the Muang Tam sanctuary. The headman further recounted that during the fifth month of the lunar calendar, which falls in April, villagers from as far away as Surin would travel up the mountain by foot to propitiate the tutelary spirits, asking for rain and protection from thieves and bandits. Some time later, after many accidents on the path up the mountain, the spirit house (san chao ton pho) was built. The headman also described the beliefs and practices associated with the Muang Tam sanctuary, where the local guardian spirit (*pho pu* or *ta pu*) of Khok Muang was believed to reside. In years of unusual weather or drought, villagers would consult with the local ritual specialist to perform rituals to appease the angry spirits. Villagers also performed an annual merit making ritual at the Muang Tam sanctuary (*tak bat prasat*) to ensure well-being of the whole community.

Another presenter from Chorakhe Mak sub-district, Ms. Napha Iamsiri, explained that the people who came from Surin to Phanom Rung in the past were the followers of a wandering monk of Luang Puu Duun's lineage named Phra Ophad Thamayaan, who had traveled from Surin to establish a forest monastery

at the ancient temple. In 1938, Phra Ophad initiated the annual pilgrimage to Phanom Rung during the waxing moon of the fifth month (prapheni duean ha sip ha kham), and at this time of year, thousands of residents would travel by foot and oxcart caravans to make merit, propitiate the spirits, and place gold leaf on an image of a Buddha's footprint.

All of the subsequent presenters from local villages offered similar accounts of the significance of the Phanom Rung sanctuary and other ancient sites in the area, thus confirming previous research findings that local populations of ethnic Khmer, Lao and Thai Khorat who came to settle in the region between 100 and 150 years ago had incorporated the sites into their cultural landscape and identity. The important point demonstrated by all these narratives was that the intangible values inscribed in the sanctuaries were not singular and orthodox but rather syncretic and multivalent, representing both animist beliefs about tutelary spirits of place and Buddhist belief and practice.

In the second half of the morning, the discussion turned towards the impact of increased state intervention following the official opening of the Historical Park in 1988. Several participants associated the opening of the park with the forcible relocation of the forest monastery (figure 5) to a plot of land located at the eastern base of the sanctuary – an event which marked the beginning of enduring tensions between local communities and the FAD. Ms. Yem Songkranrod (see figure 6), a seventy five year-old resident of Nong Bua Lai village, described her sense of grief when the authorities came to relocate the monk residing on the grounds of the Phanom Rung sanctuary, saying that "she couldn't stop crying."

Figure 6. Yem Songkranrod (courtesy of Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre).

Another ramification of increased state intervention after 1988 was the transformation of the annual pilgrimage from a local, religious event to a cultural spectacle staged for tourists (figure 7). Many of the forum participants reported that the involvement of the Buriram Provincial Administration and the Tourist Authority in the organization of the annual festival since 1988 had instigated a transformation of the character and purpose of the event. What was once a local ritual to propitiate the spirits, give alms to the forest monks, and pray at the Buddha's footprint had

Figure 7. Cultural pageantry at the Phanom Rung festival in April 2011 (courtesy of Tiamsoon Sirisrisak).

become a cultural extravaganza, with an elaborate pageant and a sound and light show aimed at drawing tourists and generating revenue for the province. Rather than being held on the date of the waxing moon, the festival was organized on a fixed date to accommodate tourists, many of whom also came to witness the sunrise through the portal of the Phanom Rung sanctuary, which was widely promoted as an auspicious event. Villagers wishing to join the state-sponsored festival had to pay the standard park entry fee, and few could afford the expensive tickets for the sound and light performance held in the evening. As a result of these changes, many forum participants said that they no longer joined the event.

There is an important analytical point to be interjected here about the state-sponsored annual Phanom Rung festival after 1988 and how it represented ancient Khmer heritage and its place within the Thai national imaginary.

As I observed during April 2011, the cultural pageantry and iconography on display at this state-sponsored event offered a stylized performance of the imagined past, when Phanom Rung was the center of a powerful local kingdom connected to the Angkorean empire. Through their interpretations of the archaeological evidence – including bas-reliefs and inscriptions – the Provincial Cultural Council[11] and Provincial Administrative Organization had choreographed a reinvention of

[11] Interview with Mr. Jirasak, head of the Buriram Cultural Council.

Figures 8, 9. Brahmin rites at the Phanom Rung festival in April 2011 (courtesy of Tiamsoon Sirisrisak).

Figures 10, 11 Cultural pageantry, soldiers and princesses at the Phanom Rung festival in April 2011 (courtesy of Tiamsoon Sirisrisak).

traditions associated with the Angkorean empire, replacing the syncretic Buddhist and animist beliefs of the local residents with an ostensibly "authentic" procession of the "vehicles of the gods" (*khabuan hae thep phahana*) and Hindu-Brahmin rituals invoking the power and protection of the Hindu deity Siva, thus symbolically and performatively restoring the sanctuary to its original function (figures 8 and 9).

In the procession, Buriram residents were dressed as "Brahmins," "kings" and "queens" in glittering Angkorean-era period costumes and carried on palanquins by "soldiers" in painted tattoos (figures 10 and 11). This reinvention and upgrading of ritual practices from relatively simple rites and offerings to a sumptuous affair featuring highly structured Brahmanic

rites attended by government officials and politicians and geared towards domestic tourists also reflected the changed symbolic status of the site, from a sacred landscape for local populations to a heritage site of national significance that symbolically and temporally referenced the ancient Khmer empire. As forum participants explained, none of these elements of cultural pageantry and Hindu-Brahmin ritual had been part of their traditional pilgrimage. This reinvention had eclipsed the local, living meanings of the site, displacing contemporary beliefs with a re-enactment of Angkorean grandeur.

Yet another consequence of the opening of the park as described by locals was the FAD's stricter adherence to conservation principles in the park's management. So for instance, villagers were now forbidden from using land and water sources within the park that were previously used for cattle grazing, fishing and agriculture. In order to preserve the physical fabric of the sanctuaries, villagers were also prohibited from performing any rituals which could impair the temple structure, as the candle wax, incense, gold leaf, powder and other paraphernalia could damage the site. These restrictions were further tightened in 2008, when the Phanom Rung sanctuary was vandalized.[12]

As a result of the vandalization, the FAD introduced a new system of regulations for requesting permission to use the park areas, requiring the applicant to fill in a form declaring the purpose, materials, and procedures of the event thirty days in advance. These regulations also further restricted the zones within the park where rituals and events could be held. The new regulations prompted many complaints by the local government offices, as well as from local residents who had previously used the sites for a range of events, including propitiation rites (*phithi buang suang*) as well as Children's Day activities and the Loi Kratong festival.

In the afternoon, forum participants split into four groups for a cultural mapping activity. Participants were given large maps of the vicinity and asked to mark the traditional pilgrimage routes up to Phanom Rung from their respective villages, and to identify and name important sacred and ritual sites, such as spirit houses, trees, and the former locations of Buddhist forest monasteries or Buddha images. The mapping process generated much boisterous discussion, as participants debated and consulted with each other to determine the traditional pilgrimage paths taken by foot or oxcart and exact locations of spirit shrines (figures 12 to 17).

The following morning, participants split into four groups again, this time to discuss what they saw as the main obstacles to safeguarding the local intangible values associated with the sites, and to formulate recommendations for further action. Ms. Pan Thitkrathok, the headwoman of Ta Pek village, explained that the primary obstacle was the difference of viewpoints between local communities and

[12] Evidence surfaced that prior to the vandalization, the ethnic Khmer politician and native of Buriram, Newin Chidchob, had been permitted to invite ritual specialists to perform Brahmanic rites at the Phanom Rung sanctuary in order to ward off bad luck and augment the power of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Many speculated that the desecration was the result of black magic rites intended to negate the power of Newin's earlier Brahmanic rites (Pasuk and Baker 2008).

Figures 12-17. Mapping process in Khok Muang Village (courtesy of Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre)

state agencies responsible for managing the sanctuaries. A second obstacle was the lack of understanding among the younger generations, who knew little about the local, spiritual significance of the sanctuaries, and who tended to look down on these beliefs as superstitious (*ngom ngai*). Ms. Pan went on to recommend that local communities should establish a Phanom Rung committee which would have the responsibility of speaking on behalf of local interests and values in terms of the use, access and management of the Historical Park. So for instance, the committee would be invited to participate in the planning of the annual Phanom Rung festival, and would have a say in shaping the park's use and access policies. She also suggested that local knowledge about the sanctuaries should be part of the school curriculum, so that young people would be encouraged to value and carry on the rituals and traditions associated with the sanctuaries. Other participants reiterated their frustration with the strict rules and regulations of the FAD, and asserted that they were the traditional caretakers of the sites and should be recognized as such.

In the afternoon, the participants presented summaries of their cultural maps and recommendations to the government stakeholders in attendance, including an archaeologist from the Phanom Rung Historical Park Office, development and tourism officers from the Phanom Rung Municipality, and representatives from the District Cultural Offices of Chaloem Prakiat and Prakhon Chai and the Buriram Provincial Cultural Office. Responses from the government stakeholders were largely positive, and all acknowledged the inherent value of the beliefs and practices of local communities.

The Director of the Bureau of Religion, Art and Culture at the Buriram Provincial Cultural Office, Mr. Wichai Samaorn, responded at length, noting sympathetically that while the existence of the tutelary spirits could not be scientifically proven, they were nonetheless fundamental to the happiness and well-being of those who believe in them, and thus should be respected. He went on to say that while Phanom Rung had been listed as Thailand's national heritage to bring international recognition to the site, it was nonetheless important to value the local meanings equally alongside the national significance.

Ms. Kannika Premjay, an archaeologist at the Historical Park also responded, stating that it was indeed the right of local communities to use and access the sites according to their beliefs and traditions. However, she went on to say that in some instances, beliefs were also the inadvertent cause of damage to the sites, inasmuch as ritual practices often involved touching the artifacts and using ritual paraphernalia such as candles, incense and other offerings which could cause decay of the physical fabric. It was for this reason that the FAD had to establish rules and restrictions regarding use of the sites, not to forbid local communities, but rather to ensure that they were mitigating the potentially damaging effects of ritual practices.

The stakeholder forum concluded with reflections and a commitment from the SAC team to consolidate all the stories and pilgrimage routes from the cultural mapping exercise into a printed map, complete with a legend in Thai, for distribution

to the participating communities and government offices. This map could be used in schools, as part of the local curriculum, and it could also be used to inform visitors about the local, intangible values of Phanom Rung Historical Park.

Following up: Presenting the cultural map and the film

On 25 June 2012, a team from the SAC[13] returned to Buriram to present the map (figures 18, 19) that we had designed based on the data gathered during the February stakeholder forum and to screen the short film produced by SAC about the mapping and stakeholder process. Our first meeting was with thirteen forum participants from Chorakhe Mak sub-district, including Ms. Napha Iamsiri, the deputy mayor of the Sub-district Administrative Office, and Ms. Jiraporn Pianprakhon, the permanent secretary of the Sub-district Administrative Office. Also in attendance were eleven village headmen.

We explained that our aim for this visit was to review the content and accuracy of the map before printing, garner feedback on the film, and discuss how the map would be used by the local communities. Through their close reading of the text, the local participants identified several errors, and they also noticed that some of the details of stories pertaining to specific sites had not been included. For instance, one participant reiterated his memory of visiting Prasat Phlai Bat many years ago, and seeing hundreds of Buddha images within the sanctuary, which had long since disappeared. This account triggered yet more elaboration about Prasat Phlai Bat and its significance within the legend of Pajit Oraphim. While acknowledging the significance of these narratives, we explained that we were unable to include all the information from the forum due to the map's space limitations. However, we hoped that the map could serve as a catalyst at the community-level for more research and documentation about these intangible meanings and values.

All in all, the participants were happy with how the cultural map had turned out, both in terms of design and content, and said that they would definitely use it for promotional and educational purposes. To begin with, they wanted copies of the map to be available at various cultural centers in the sub-district, in the homestay network, and in the schools.

With regards to the short film, entitled "Community Participation in Safeguarding Intangible Heritage at the Phanom Rung Historical Park",[14] all the participants were excited to see themselves and fellow local residents. In one scene in the film, Napha Iamsiri boldly asserted that community members would perform their rituals even if they did not receive permission from the FAD because they were the rightful caretakers – prompting smiles and nods from the audience.

[13] The team was comprised of the author, Prof. Rungsima Kullapat, and Arithat Srisuwannakij.

[14] The film is accessible at the following website: http://www.sac.or.th/databases/cultureandrights/?page_id=1495

Figure 18. Cultural map of Phanom Rung sanctuary

We concluded the meeting with representatives from Chorakhe Mak by promising to revise the map according to their specifications, and to print copies for distribution to the relevant offices and schools.

The following morning, we went to the Phanom Rung Historical Park office to meet with Chutima Chanthed, the park director, and Kannika Premjay, an archaeologist with the park who had also attended the February 2012 stakeholder forum. We showed them the map, and explained that our objectives were to identify and document the intangible meanings and values of Phanom Rung and associated sanctuaries to the communities living in the vicinity of the park.

Referencing the 2003 *Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, the 1995 *Nara Document on*

Figure 19. Cultural map of Phanom Rung sanctuary (detail)

Authenticity, and the 2009 *Hoi An Protocols*, we explained that our efforts to involve local communities in the identification and safeguarding of the intangible values associated with Phanom Rung sanctuary were part of a larger, global movement within the field of heritage studies and practice, which is grounded in the principle of community-based, participatory heritage management. Chutima responded that in fact, the FAD had also studied the surrounding communities' historical relationship to Phanom Rung, and they were well aware of the traditional annual pilgrimage and other beliefs and practices associated with the sites. However, the director maintained that these aspects of local culture were not part of the FAD's mandate for the Historical Park. Rather, the FAD's primary role was to manage and conserve the sites and to serve as a learning center for the wider public, including tourists. Towards this end, the FAD focused on presenting interpretations of the archaeological evidence about the historical function and meaning of the sanctuaries.

Chutima went on to say that in terms of site management, the Historical Park staff faced many challenges. One particular challenge was dealing with politicians who sought to use the park to stage cultural events such as the annual Phanom Rung Festival, which was co-sponsored by the Provincial Authority and the Tourist Authority of Thailand, who organized the event and also collected revenue from entry tickets. Chutima stated that the annual provincial festival was mired in local politics and special interests, and that the most that the FAD could do was to mitigate damage from the event and ensure that the representations of Phanom Rung were historically accurate. For instance, the provincial organizers were required to submit the script for the sound and light performance to the FAD for review and approval in order to ensure that it was consistent with the historical evidence and accepted archaeological interpretations of the site.

I asked whether it would be possible to include the cultural map of community values associated with the site in the historical park's interpretive materials, for instance, in the Museum and Information Center located at the base of the stairway, before one enters the park. After all, the surrounding communities' annual merit-making pilgrimage to the sanctuary pre-dated the provincially sponsored event by at least fifty years, and community representatives we talked with felt strongly that this historical relationship to the site should be recognized and respected. I suggested that the cultural map would be a first step in acknowledging the local, intangible values inscribed in the landscape and layering of meanings associated with the site, which would also be consistent with the Hoi An Protocols.

The director hesitated, and reiterated the point that while these beliefs and histories of ritual practice were real and meaningful to the communities, they were nonetheless not part of the FAD mandate, which was centered on education. Moreover, these beliefs and practices had no connection to the historical function of the site. I questioned this stance, arguing that in fact, the scientific, archaeological approach to heritage management and interpretation was imported from the West, and was an inappropriate paradigm for Thailand and much of Asia, because it overlooked how religious architecture continued to live and acquire new layers of significance through reuse and reinterpretation.

The discussion was left at something of an impasse. The director agreed to review the map's content and send us comments. In closing, she asked us to change the name of the map, from "Cultural Map of Communities in the Vicinity of the Phanom Rung Historical Park" to "Cultural Map of Communities in the Vicinity of Phanom Rung Sanctuary." This change was necessary, she explained, so as to prevent any misunderstanding that the map was produced or endorsed by the FAD's Historical Park office.

Our last follow-up visit was with six forum participants from Ta Pek Sub-district, whom we met at the home of a village headwoman, Ms. Pan Thitkrathok. As we had done the previous day, we explained that the objectives of our visit were

to review the content of the map and explore how it could be distributed and used by the community. In the case of Ta Pek, participants felt the best use of the map would be in the classroom, to teach about local history and culture. I then asked the group what they thought about the cultural mapping and stakeholder forum process as a whole —had it been beneficial? The participants were enthusiastic in their response, noting that since the forum, the Phanom Rung Historical Park office (commonly referred to as *uthayan*) had been more conscientious than ever before about involving local communities in FAD activities. For instance, the Historical Park office had invited village headmen from Chaloem Prakiat District to join a study tour of Khmer sanctuaries in Buriram province, providing transportation, food and a tour guide. Moreover, they had recently hired more locals for staff and caretaker positions in the park.

We were later informed by the FAD that the timing of the study tour shortly after the stakeholder forum was a coincidence, and was not a result of the SAC's activities. Nevertheless, the eager and positive response from the local residents was a clear indication that they wish to be recognized and valued as equal stakeholders in the management of their heritage by the FAD.

Conclusions

As stated at the outset, over the last several decades the field of heritage management has undergone a significant conceptual shift from the tangible to the intangible. International instruments such as the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994), the *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), and the *Hoi An Protocols for Best Conservation Practices in Asia* (2009) have all called for a reconceptualization of heritage to include the dynamic, living meanings and spiritual values inscribed in heritage sites throughout history by their different communities of users. Towards this goal, the Hoi An Protocols make an explicit appeal for the research and safeguarding of intangible aspects of built heritage to be a central part of the conservation, management and interpretation process.

> The religious activity and/or sacred elements associated with many monuments, buildings and structures contribute to their authenticity. These symbolic aspects may have guided the original design of a monument and be built quite literally into its fabric. The structure may also have acted as a stage or backdrop for a range of sacred activity which changed through history. These associations must be identified through research and reflected in the conservation of the site. (UNESCO 2009:34)

The *Protocols* go on to outline five key principles to guide heritage conservation practice, as follows:

> Principle 1: **Collective mapping of cultural space**, its hierarchies, symbolic language and associations is a prerequisite for appropriate and successful conservation.
>
> Principle 2: Tangible cultural expressions derive their origin, value and continuing **significance from intangible cultural practices**.
>
> Principle 3: **Authenticity**, the defining characteristic of heritage, is a **culturally relative attribute to be found in continuity**, but not necessarily in the continuity of material only.
>
> Principle 4: The conservation process succeeds when histories are revealed, traditions revived and meanings recovered in a **palimpsest of knowledge**.
>
> Principle 5: **Appropriate use of heritage is arrived at through a negotiation** process, resulting in a life-enhancing space. (UNESCO 2009: 48)

And yet, this case study about intangible values at the Phanom Rung Historical Park vividly demonstrates the complexity of actualizing this turn from the tangible to the intangible. Firstly, there is the question of how to deal with the "authorized heritage discourses" which have come to define the place of Phanom Rung within the Thai national imaginary. As shown above, the archaeological excavation and study of Phanom Rung in the early twentieth century was a means for Siam's ruling elites to demonstrate their intellectual equality with the colonial powers, who considered rational, scientific, historical and archaeological knowledge about the nation's heritage as a prerequisite to national sovereignty. As such, the studies of Phanom Rung and its adjacent sanctuaries have focused on revealing their true, original function as well their place within the greater empire of Angkor. I have argued, however, that, in addition to proving the Thai elites' mastery of the past, the restoration of Phanom Rung from 1968 to 1988 and the subsequent reinventions of "ancient" Khmer rituals after the opening of the Historical Park in 1988 constitute symbolic and performative expressions of the Thai elite's longstanding claims of succession to the cultural legacy of Angkor – a legacy which represents not only high culture, but is also associated with forms of supernatural power and magical potency.[15]

In effect, local communities are caught between two groups of elites who are – at times competing – arbiters of the "authorized heritage discourse" at Phanom Rung. On the one hand, there is the Fine Arts Department, who see themselves as the guardians of the rational, scientific interpretations of the national heritage site, and on the other hand, the local politicians, Provincial Administration and Tourist Authority, who seek to harness the symbolic potency of Phanom Rung and its

[15] For an example of the magical potency of Phanom Rung and its use by politicians, see Pasuk and Baker (2008).

associations with Angkor through elaborate rituals and cultural performances which augment their own prestige while simultaneously promoting tourism.

In contrast, field research and the stakeholder meeting with communities living in the vicinity of the sanctuaries showed that the local, intangible values associated with Phanom Rung were not tied temporally to the Angkorean past.[16] Rather, local communities who came to settle in the area some 150 years ago had incorporated the sites into the more proximate, contemporary and syncretic belief systems of ancestral spirit cults and Theravada Buddhism. Returning to the question at hand, can these local, intangible values inscribed in the sites exist alongside these dominant narratives, or do these authorized heritage discourses of Phanom Rung first have to be deconstructed in order to create the space for alternative interpretations of heritage?

I maintain that the challenge that lies ahead is how to raise critical awareness among the different stakeholder groups about the inherently multivalent and contested nature of heritage. As stated in the *Hoi An Protocols*, heritage conservation "succeeds when histories are revealed, traditions revived and meanings recovered in a palimpsest of knowledge" (UNESCO 2009: 48). Our aim, therefore, must be not to determine the historically correct interpretation of Phanom Rung, but rather to create space for dialog, in order to arrive at a conservation plan "**through a negotiation process**, resulting in a life-enhancing space" (UNESCO 2009: 48).

In this spirit, this participatory research project has endeavored to establish a space for dialog between local and state stakeholders about the contested meanings of Phanom Rung Historical Park. Through the stakeholder forum and community-based cultural mapping, the long-neglected intangible meanings of the sanctuaries were rendered visible and tangible. The bigger challenge going forward will be how to encourage a more participatory approach to heritage management which would support the integration of these alternative narratives of heritage into the "authorized heritage discourse" of the Phanom Rung Historical Park.

[16] One exception to this statement is the Pannasa Jataka legend of Thao Pajit and Oraphim, an epic love story featuring the Buddha in a past life that takes place against the backdrop of the Angkorian sanctuaries in the northeast, including Phimai, Phanom Rung and Muang Tam. In the version found in the northeast of Thailand, the protagonist, Thao Phajit, is a virtuous prince related to Khmer royalty, who travelled to Phanom Rung to study with the famous monk, Hiranya. According to the tale, Thao Phajit is responsible for renovating Phanom Rung, as well as constructing the sanctuary of Muang Tam for the birth of his future wife, Oraphim. What is most striking is that events and places in the legend are linked to place names across Buriram and Nakhon Ratchasima, clearly indicating the centrality of this story and the sanctuaries to the identity of the local populace. While this story references the ancient Khmer empire, it is nonetheless within the frame of a Buddhist legend, or Jataka tale, and does not recount historical events. The author is indebted to Rungsima Kullapat for sharing her knowledge about the legend of Pajit Oraphim and its place within the cultural memory of the residents of Nakhon Ratchasima and Buriram provinces. Her forthcoming doctoral dissertation, "Living Heritage through Literature: The Development of a Cultural Route from Phimai to Angkor," features extensive research findings on the Pajit Oraphim legend.

Afterword: Cultural rights and the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre

In closing, I would like to say a few words about cultural rights in the Thai context, and the scope of Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre's role in this emerging social issue. A public organization under the supervision of the Minister of Culture, the SAC's overarching mission is to employ anthropology as a tool for promoting cross-cultural understanding and respect for cultural diversity in Thailand and the ASEAN countries. Within this broad mandate, SAC's projects and activities fall into three main areas: library resources and digital archives; research; and public education, training and outreach. In the Centre's role as a knowledge repository, SAC has developed a range of online resources for researchers and the general public, such as the Ethnic Research Database, the Local Museums in Thailand Database, and the Thailand Anthropological Archives, the latter of which features primary field data such as fieldnotes, photographs and video.

One of the major challenges in developing these online archives has been the question of what role source communities and culture bearers should play in the management of the archives, particularly in terms of public use and access. In countries with a history of settler colonialism such as the United States, Canada and Australia, indigenous and ethnic minority communities have instigated cultural restitution movements calling upon academic, research and cultural institutions (including museums) to recognize their rights in determining how their cultural heritage is managed and represented to a broader public. In some cases, this has resulted in the collaborative, co-curation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, while in other instances, it has led to the repatriation of objects or restriction of access.

Unlike in post-colonial states and settler colonies, where the authority of the state as the sole arbiter of heritage has been contested by local and indigenous communities, in Thailand, critical questions regarding access, ownership and rights to cultural heritage have only just begun to surface, largely as a response to international initiatives rather than as a result of homegrown cultural rights movements. Regarding the SAC's database and research projects, the question has been how to develop methods and protocols for cultural heritage management involving source communities in the absence of a national discourse, legal mechanisms, and broader public awareness of cultural rights. Should the SAC endeavor to foster a sense of cultural custodianship among source communities using the international instruments and vocabulary of cultural rights as a means for strengthening communities? Or, rather, should it identify and build upon local and vernacular conceptions of cultural custodianship?

After repeated encounters with these kinds of complex questions, the SAC realized that it was necessary to frame these issues in a broader conceptual, empirical and comparative context of cultural rights writ large. As Thailand's leading public cultural institution, the SAC has sought to spearhead participatory, rights-based

approaches to heritage research and management, both in terms of tangible cultural resources, such as archives and museum collections, and in terms of intangible resources, such as traditional knowledge and living cultural practices. To strengthen the conceptual framework for this institutional initiative, in 2009, the SAC launched the Culture and Rights in Thailand project, a three-year, interdisciplinary project aimed at developing a more nuanced understanding of cultural rights in the Thai context through nine field-based research projects examining various aspects of community rights, heritage rights and cultural policies. This Phanom Rung research is a part of this project.

As many of the case studies featured in a forthcoming edited volume from the project illustrate, the concept of cultural rights – like its human rights forebear – is regarded as a foreign and unwieldy discourse in the Thai context, and one that is rarely deployed by ethnic groups and communities seeking to assert their identity or claim entitlements to cultural resources. Rather, most of the communities studied preferred more familiar, less overtly contentious idioms to frame their claims to cultural difference, such as the *phumpanya thongthin* (local wisdom) discourse, which accommodates the authority of the state. A second, cross-cutting issue in the volume is how to bridge the gap between the ideals of participation, decentralization and consultation implicit in cultural rights frameworks given the enduring reality of social hierarchies and the power of the state in Thailand. Expressed otherwise, how does the culture *of* rights in Thailand have to change, if cultural rights are to be realized? In addition to the edited volume, which will be published in 2013, a central goal of the Culture and Rights in Thailand project has been to initiate wider dialog and debate about these questions through a series of public stakeholder forums, such as the one organized with communities living around the Phanom Rung Historical Park.

Additional details about the project are available on the SAC website at: www.sac.or.th/databases/cultureandrights.

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