

Becoming a scholar in Cambodia: Struggles and ambitions

Kunthea Chhom

Much of the literature about 'Angkor' has been produced by foreign scholars. Academically well educated, yet some of their analyses may lack a valuable local perspective that could be provided by home-grown scholars. With this article, I aim to draw attention to the position of (aspiring) scholars in Cambodia and invite readers interested in my field of research to contact me.

I am a full-time researcher with the Apsara Authority in Siem Reap (responsible for the protection of the Angkor World Heritage site, Ed), specialised in Cambodian and Southeast Asian Epigraphy. Earlier this year, I spent three months at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) with a grant from the J. Gonda Foundation to work on a chapter of my thesis, focusing on Sanskrit elements in the Old Khmer language. A discussion I had at IIAS with the staff, about what it takes to become a humanities scholar in Cambodia, led to this article. Even I, raised in Phnom Penh in somewhat privileged circumstances, would not have been able to arrive where I am now without the special help that came my way. I share my story, both to draw attention to the position of scholars in Cambodia and to my burgeoning initiative to bring Cambodian and international scholars into contact with each other in an international 'Epigraphy Club of Cambodia'.

Cambodia

Much ink has flowed writing about the Khmer Rouge Regime in Cambodia. Yet, the state of education during its aftermath has gained little attention. The Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) devastated the education system, and the study of Sanskrit and epigraphy, which had only just begun to take shape, was abandoned entirely. It should be noted here that, after the fall of the Angkor Empire in the 14th century, Sanskrit ceased to be used in Cambodian epigraphy, thereby largely obscuring Sanskrit culture, although Sanskrit loanwords have continued to be used in the Khmer language as evidenced from written documents, inscriptions and palm-leave manuscripts. Sanskrit was only offered again as a field of studies from the beginning of the 20th century, mainly to Buddhist monks, to be abandoned again in the 1970s. Sanskrit was re-introduced in the 1980s at Buddhist schools and Sihanoukreach Buddhist University and public universities such as the Royal University of Fine Arts and the Royal University of Phnom Penh. However, without considerable support from the government –giving priority to more 'urgent' fields –for such a highly specialised area (and, more generally speaking, the Humanities) it is often quite impossible for scholars in these areas to succeed.

Some children born in the 1980s were lucky enough to receive education from primary school through to a university bachelor level, but they still had to go abroad for postgraduate training, with only a few master's courses available in Cambodia itself. No doubt, in Cambodia, they were exposed to a relatively poor classroom experience, both materially and intellectually. Recall that many intellectuals had fallen victim to the 1975-1978 genocide; it took an enormous effort, repairing buildings and rewriting textbooks (often 'enriched' with communist ideologies).

I was one of the fortunate children to enjoy the above-mentioned communist-oriented education, while many others, especially those in the Khmer Rouge autonomous zone, hid under their houses instead of going to school. In war-torn Cambodia, I went to school, in the morning

attending class and in the afternoon receiving private lessons. In 1994, I passed the high school entrance exams. That year, the failure rate was extremely high (over 85%) due to anti-corruption (exam) reforms. I took the national baccalaureate exam in 1997, that year delayed due to the 5-6 July 'coup-d'état'. Next, I passed the entrance exams of the French (1997) and English (1999) departments of the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Admission to the Department of English was especially competitive, with only 100 scholarships for 3000 candidates. I was introduced to Sanskrit and epigraphy during my BA in French (majoring in Linguistics). So moved by the language, I asked my teacher, Prof. Sylvain Vogel, to continue to teach me after graduation (in both fields). The informal classes continued right up to my departure to India in 2005, to pursue my graduate studies there.

MA in India, work in Cambodia

In 2004, I took part in a conference organised by the Center for Khmer Study (CKS) in Siem Reap to raise awareness for the urgent need to train a Cambodian generation of Sanskritists. In my talk, I expressed my wish to study in India. CKS Director Philippe Peycam (now IIAS Director) promptly took me on his motorbike, riding along the enclosure wall of Ta Prohm Temple, which he knew was being visited by then Indian Ambassador H.E. Pradeep Kapur, who might help with a scholarship. It worked, and with the intervention of Professor S. Sahai, former Vice-Chancellor of Magadh University in Bodh Gaya, India, I was admitted to the MA in Sanskrit with a scholarship from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR, Government of India).

In Bodh Gaya, I was at the same time amazed and 'shaken' by this 'diversity-in-unity' country. Immediately, I faced two problems. Firstly, my admission was questioned by the acting Head of the Department of Sanskrit; according to regulations, a BA in Sanskrit was required, which I did not have. I was asked to change studies but persisted.

After much discussion, I was eventually admitted, but the teachers remained sceptical. Fortunately enough, classes were very irregular due to frequent strikes, and this opened an unexpected opportunity to study Sanskrit outside the classroom in a most effective way (more below). Secondly, due to the strikes, I couldn't collect my monthly ICCR stipends, which involved three consecutive cheques between different offices (always a time-consuming process –so much time was lost, but so much patience gained). I only survived thanks to the extra CKS grant.

While classes were suspended, I looked for other ways to learn what I had come for. I was again aided by Prof. Sahai, who introduced me to master Chandrashekar Mishra, known widely as 'Guru Ji' in his town Gaya, where he ran a Sanskrit school, called 'Samskrit Vidyapitha' ('Seat of Sanskrit knowledge'). Guru Ji was happy to have a disciple from Cambodia, but he had one condition: "Don't ever ask me to teach according to the syllabus of the university. You are here to learn what is to be learned". Now, I was learning Sanskrit the traditional way, counting to and from one hundred in Sanskrit and Hindi, memorising proverbs and songs. After chanting the whole morning, I copied Sanskrit essays with their Hindi renderings and, after class, participated in the Śrī Durgā Pūjā (Worship of the Goddess Durgā). I also joined an intensive Sanskrit speaking course at a Hindu temple that made us speak and dream in the language, allowing only Sanskrit and body language. To further improve my Hindi, I promptly accepted Binod Babu's generous offer to come live with his family. His wife, a teacher of Hindi, volunteered to answer all my questions and correct my pronunciation.

By the time the university was functional again, I had caught up with my classmates. Aiming to excel, not just for myself but also out of respect for Guru Ji, I worked twice as hard and challenged myself not to cheat in the exams, as so many students did. As a result, I graduated top of my class, making Guru Ji proud, to whom by Guru-śisya relation I was his daughter. He told me to be patient about the 'Gold Medal' I won with this; he had to wait (and ask) 27 years before he got his!

After graduation, I started working in Siem Reap for the Apsara Authority, responsible for the protection of the Angkor World Heritage site. I chose to work in Siem Reap because of the presence in this region of the numerous stone inscriptions from the Khmer empire, more than half of which in Sanskrit.

PhD in Paris, work in Cambodia

My wish to pursue a PhD in Sanskrit epigraphy became a reality in 2009, when Prof. Gerschheimer at the École Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, and in charge of the project 'Corpus des inscriptions khmères' project, accepted me as his PhD student. Unfortunately, health issues prevented him from directly supervising my research for many years. Finally, at my request, my case was transferred to Prof. Dominic Goodall, in charge of the Pondicherry Centre (India) of the École française d'Extrême-Orient. Working together intensively, I was ready for my defence in December 2016.

After my PhD, I returned to Cambodia early 1997, where befell me the great honour of a Royal Audience in Phnom Penh. His Majesty the King congratulated me for my perseverance and expressed His generous support for my life mission of 'Sanskrit study and research'. Today, next to my work with the Apsara Authority, I teach Sanskrit to a group of high school teachers and monks, paying particular attention to Sanskrit loanwords in the Khmer language, both at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh and Wat Reach Bo Buddhist High School in Siem Reap.

Looking into the future

Whenever I am in Phnom Penh, I try to organise meetings between Cambodian epigraphists. It is my further ambition to create an international 'Epigraphy Club of Cambodia' that can link Cambodian and foreign researchers, holding regular meetings between them. Such meetings, I believe, are essential in helping reduce misunderstanding and even antagonism between both groups. The idea of some local researchers that 'foreign scientists lack local knowledge' may be true, but at the same time, some of the same local researchers should also improve their academic skills, and have the means to do so.

When the 'Epigraphy Club' grows and gains recognition on an international level, I intend to organise international seminars and conferences. I hope that my initiative will entice you to contact me and will be met with encouragement from the Royal Government of Cambodia, not only for epigraphic research but also for research, and researchers, in general.

Kunthea Chhom is a researcher with the Apsara Authority (Siem Reap, Cambodia). From 2014-2018 she was also the director of the Preah Norodom Sihanouk-Angkor Museum in Siem Reap. kchhom@yahoo.com; www.iias.asia/profile/kunthea-chhom



Kunthea Chhom and other researchers working on a problematic inscription at the National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.