STORIES IN STONE

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PHOTOGRAPHS by MARC RIBOUD

The ancient Cambodian temple of Angkor Wat is helping to heal the wounds of the killing fields

From the minute I first entered Angkor Wat I found myself awash in stories. I was puzzled by this in the beginning, but now, looking back, several months later, it seems to me that there was something inevitable in it. For Angkor Wat is a monument to the power of the story.

This is true in a perfectly literal sense: with every step a visitor takes in this immense 12th-century Cambodian temple, he finds himself moving counters in a gigantic abacus of storytelling. The device is a vast one – it is said to be the largest single religious edifice in the world – and it provides a setting and a cast of galactic dimensions. The setting is Mount Meru, the sacred mountain of ancient Indian myth, whose seven carefully graded tiers provide the blueprint for the temple's form. The cast is the entire pantheon of gods, deities, sages and prophets with which that cosmos is peopled.

But no story, no matter how loftily cosmic, is ever entirely free of its origins: as with all the best stories, this one too is partly an autobiography. The chief protagonists in this instance are such imperial figures as King Suryavarman II, who was mainly responsible for building Angkor Wat, and Jayavarman VII, the megalomaniacal ruler who ruined his empire in trying to create the nearby complex of Angkor Thom. But the temple stands guard over many other kinds of autobiography as well.

I heard one such from a Cambodian conservation worker called Kong Sarith. One afternoon he was telling ▸

A young saffron-robed Buddhist monk pauses amid the lichen-speckled remains of an 800-year-old temple

Monks eat lunch in an outer gallery. Today the scene is peaceful, but not long ago Khmer Rouge zealots were hacking and beating to death monks who refused to leave the temple

me about some of the legends depicted in Angkor Wat's magnificent bas-reliefs: the primal myth of the churning of the Sea of Milk; the legend of Vishnu in his tortoise avatar; of the doomed Abhimanyu, trapped in a battle formation that he had learnt to enter but not escape; of the death god Yama ruling over his tormented shades. The stories were all familiar to me, of course, as an Indian, some in the misty way of tales told by a grandmother; others in the manner of texts, learned under the threat of a tutor's cane and quickly forgotten. But for Kong Sarith the stories were vividly alive; he told them in the confiding, urgent way in which people describe their neighbours' overheard quarrels.

He was a thin, slight man, in his early forties, with a wispy, incongruously villainous-looking moustache. He spoke fluent English, in a rapid, gravelly voice that sometimes broke into a hacking laugh. His hands were never without a cigarette and while he spoke he seemed to paint the air with its glowing tip, conjuring up visions with curls of blue smoke. Then, talking of the intricate iconography of those sculpted panels, he turned a page, and we were suddenly in an altogether different kind of story.

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If Sarith's story took me by surprise it was because it was so unexpected. For in the time I'd spent in Cambodia, I had made a discovery about Angkor Wat: I had discovered that its place in the world rests upon a kind of paradox. For many people around the globe, Angkor Wat is a uniquely powerful symbol of the romance of lost civilisations – of ancient glory devoured by time. But for Cambodia it serves as a no less vivid symbol of modernity.

Images of Angkor Wat are so common in Cambodia, so inescapable that, after a while, they become an assault upon the visitor's senses; the visual equivalent of radio music played on public loudspeakers. There are so many of them everywhere that at first the images appear to be omnipresent, ubiquitous. But the impression is misleading; the images are *not* ubiquitous – in fact they are never where one expects. Angkor Wat is, for example, indisputably a temple, yet it never figures in anything to do with religion, or indeed in any context that might be called 'traditional' or old fashioned. Its likeness appears instead on certain factory produced commodities, like beer; it is stamped on uniforms, civil and military; it figures on the logos of large corporations, like banks; indeed, the erstwhile Kampuchea Airlines even succeeded in transforming this most earthbound of structures into a symbol of flight, by lending it a pair of wings.

Most of all Angkor Wat belongs on flags – flags of the country and flags of political parties. Cambodia has been torn between factions for decades; yet, although the country's flag has changed with every new regime over the past 40 years, there has always been one constant in its design: it has never ceased to bear an image of Angkor.

Several of the parties which contested the recent United Nations-sponsored elections contrived somehow to work Angkor Wat into their flags: it was as though their claim to govern depended on it. One of the oddest of those flags belonged to a small party founded by an expatriate Cambodian businessman from California. The party was called Republic Democracy Khmer, and its flag looked very much like the Stars and Stripes except that in place of the stars it featured a five-towered image of Angkor Wat.

Flags, uniforms, banks, airlines, beer: it isn't hard to predict as yet unrealised continuations of the series – cigarettes, shaving cream, fertilisers, personal computers, assault rifles and so on. Temples and monasteries do not figure in this series and indeed nothing in Cambodia is more innocent of references to Angkor than the Buddhist Wats, or pagodas, which are the country's most prominent landmarks, in town and village alike. These graceful, richly ornamented shrines, with their sinuous woodwork, are about as different from the massive, obscurely vegetal forms of Angkor Wat as any that could be imagined.

The jungle is inexorably obliterating the remnants of Ta Prohm, the lavish temple built in 1186 by the megalomaniacal ruler King Jayavarman VII

Nowhere is this contrast better illustrated than in Angkor Wat itself. Hidden behind rows of trees, in the temple's first, great courtyard, at a discreet distance from the flagstoned causeway that leads into the inner section of the monument, are two modest little pagodas. Tourists and archaeologists head straight down the causeway towards the temple's colonnaded galleries, armed with their cameras and callipers; local people, pilgrims and religious supplicants veer off towards the Buddhist shrines, bearing offerings and flowers.

One morning, electing to follow the pilgrims for a change, I made my way to one of those pagodas. The shrine, with its brightly coloured, larger-than-life-size image of the Buddha, was tended by an elderly Buddhist monk: a tall, aquiline man whose saffron robes hung upon his skeletal limbs like sheets on a wire fence. Several families were sitting on the scrubbed tile floor of the shrine when I arrived. Some had come in share-taxis and others had bicycled all the way from the town of Siem Reap, several miles away. They were all waiting to be blessed. The monk chanted prayers for each group in turn, and then led them outside and drenched them in holy water. When my turn came, I asked if he would mind talking to me, through an interpreter. He agreed readily, but with the stipulation that the conversation would have to be interrupted for those of his flock who were in a particular hurry.

He was known as the Venerable Luong Chun, he said, and he had lived on the premises of Angkor Wat for most of his life. He had entered the monastery at Angkor Wat in his adolescence, and he remembered a time when the layout of the temple's grounds had been quite different. At that time a pagoda sat directly in front of the colonnaded galleries of the temple (it can be seen clearly in turn-of-the-century photographs – an untidy, thatch-roofed structure flanking the great flagstoned causeway). His grandfather, who had spent some time in the monastery too, had told him the story of how the pagoda came to be moved.

The French archaeologists who were restoring Angkor Wat at the beginning of this century had decided that the pagoda had to go: an actual, functioning shrine had no place in their pristine vision of the temple. They wanted it to be shunted off the premises altogether, but the monks had resisted. There had been a Buddhist monastery within Angkor for centuries and they could not conceive of abandoning the site altogether. Eventually, the most senior monk had led a delegation to the then ruler of Cambodia, King Monivong. At the King's intercession the monks were allowed to remain within Angkor Wat, but in purdah, as it were – on the condition that they moved the pagoda off its old site and rebuilt it at a suitable distance. The Ven. Luong Chun had himself worked for the French archaeologists as a boy. Along with hundreds of others, he had been hired to crush stones from Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, so that roads could be built to connect the monuments to Siem Reap.

He was living in Angkor Wat in April 1975 when the Khmer Rouge seized power. There were about 400 monks in the monastery at the time: several of them were killed, some right on the threshold of the pagoda. The Ven. Luong Chun, along with the others, was taken away to a work camp. He was stripped of his monk's robes, which were cut up and made into trousers, and he spent the three years of the 'Pol Pot time' working in the rice fields. In January 1979, after the Khmer Rouge had been driven from power by the Vietnamese, it was announced at his work camp that Angkor Wat was badly in need of cleaning and people who were familiar with it were welcome to go back. He set off for the temple soon afterwards and for the next two years he and a few other monks tried to clear up the monument as best they could.

In tending the temple during that time the Ven. Luong Chun was doing what monks like him had done for centuries: there is evidence that monks continued to live in Angkor Wat even after the Angkorian period, when the complex fell into general decline. Thus the most powerful of the myths that surround Angkor – the legend of its accidental discovery by the 19th-century French explorer Henri Mouhot – is no more and no less true than ▸

any of the others inscribed upon the temple. For if it is true that Angkor was already well known to the Buddhist Sangha and to the nobility of Cambodia and Thailand – not as a fetish, perhaps, but in the quotidian way in which medieval monuments are usually absorbed into living history – it is also true that Mouhot and the French did indeed make a discovery. They discovered a mirror for themselves; of the imperial state, *l'état*, in all its power and splendour.

The story that the Ven. Luong Chun heard from his grandfather was one version of the reinvention of Angkor in that image. The process began by separating the monument, as far as possible, from the untidy uses of its present-day inhabitants, and went on to 'restore' it by applying the most advanced scientific methods available.

The story is a familiar one, for in this century many other parts of the world have seen their present being technologically and symbolically superseded by the relics of their past. But in Cambodia the process went further. For an entire generation of Cambodians, including politicians as different in ideology as Prince Sihanouk, Son Sann and Pol Pot, Angkor Wat became a symbol of the modernising nation state. It became the opposite of itself: an icon that represented a break with the past – a token of the country's belonging, not within the medieval, but rather the contemporary world. Thus the beer, banks, airlines and, of course, flags.

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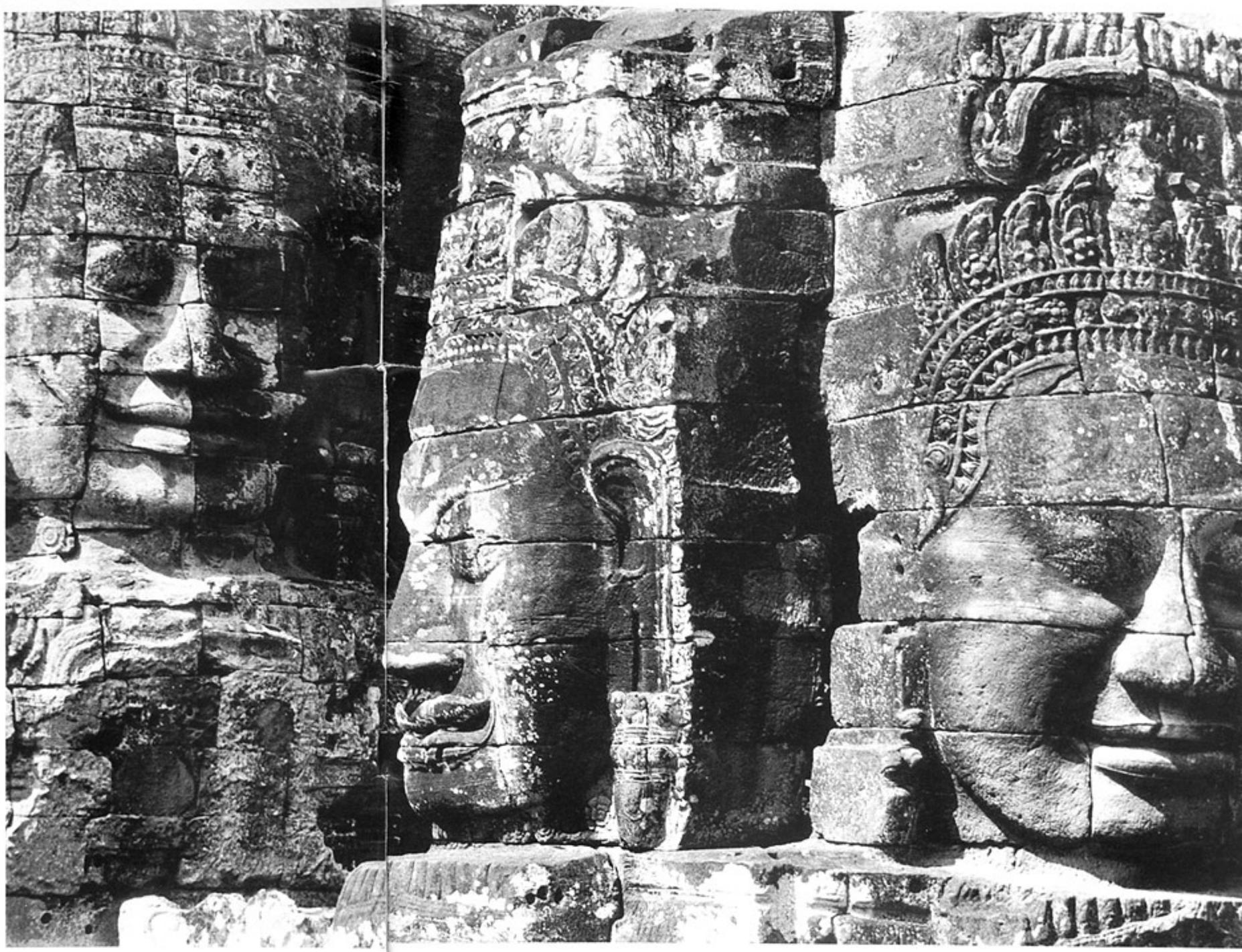
Unlike the Ven. Luong Chun, my new-found acquaintance, the chain-smoking Kong Sarith, had no previous connection with Angkor, although he now had a job there. Sarith spent his childhood at the other end of the country, in a village near Phnom Penh, where his father ran a business. After finishing school he joined the Faculty of Law and Economics at the University of Phnom Penh. He began college in the midst of a civil war, while the city was under fire from the Khmer Rouge and parts of the country were being subjected to saturation bombing by American B-52s.

He was in his second year when the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh and began the forcible evacuation of the city. He was moved out on the second day of the evacuation: first to the city of Battambang, and then on to Sisophon, a small town in the north-west. From there, along with a group of other 'new people', he was marched to a labour camp a few miles away. Soon after they arrived at the camp, Khmer Rouge cadres began to interrogate them about their lives. Unlike some of the other inmates, Sarith realised early on that to tell the truth about a background like his was as good as signing a death warrant. He thought very carefully, and in the end made up a story in which he cast himself as a waiter in a roadside eating place in Phnom Penh.

He spent a lot of time thinking about his story, especially at night. The daytimes were all right; you were so busy in the rice fields you never had a moment to think – you felt relatively safe during the day. It was the nights that were really terrifying: 'the time of the death god Yama'. That was when they came for you; you would lie still inside your mosquito net and listen to their footsteps as they went over to some other bed and led someone away. You wouldn't ask; you wouldn't look; but sometimes, in the morning, you would see a mound of earth where the victim had been buried.

It was just as well Sarith spent a lot of time thinking his story through, for one day, while he was out in the rice fields, the cadres pulled him out and took him to meet a new interrogator – someone who looked vaguely familiar. Sarith told his usual story, but when he finished the interrogator asked: 'All right: which restaurant did you work in then?' Sarith had his answer ready, and he gave it to him, pat: it was the name of an establishment that he had known well, having frequented it as a student. His interrogator started when he heard the name and suddenly Sarith knew why he looked familiar. 'I used to eat there all the time,' he said. 'I knew all the waiters; I don't remember you.' Sarith had to think on his feet. 'Which years did you eat there?' he asked. The man mentioned some dates and Sarith answered immediately: 'At that time I was working inside, in the kitchen. That's why you didn't see me. It was only later that the owner told me to start waiting on the tables.' His interrogator didn't quite buy the story, but he couldn't knock it down either. He said: 'All right, if you really worked in the kitchen there, let's see how hard you can work here.' After that they made him get out of ▸



Serene faces stare out from the terraces of the Bayon temple. In assembling the stone blocks, the builders aligned them more or less symmetrically, rather than staggering them; as a result, huge vertical fissures have appeared

Above: squatting on debris from the Bayon temple, two monks take a break before the next ceremony. Below: bas-reliefs depict the victorious battles of King Jayavarman VII

bed at half past two in the morning to wash dishes in the work camp's kitchen. And somehow he managed to carry it off, as if he had done nothing else all his life, although there were times when he thought he would die of exhaustion.

In 1978, shortly before the regime collapsed, he was forcibly married off, along with seven other couples. His wife was a woman from Phnom Penh whom he had never met before. Marriage was the last thing on his mind at the time and he didn't want to marry her. Yet the marriage lasted and they went on to have four children. 'After suffering through so much together, we could not leave each other.'

On about 3 January 1979, when the Vietnamese army was approaching Sisophon, the people in Sarith's camp were herded together and told that the 'new people' could leave next morning if they wanted to, and that they would be given a little rice to take with them. Two of the inmates made the mistake of cheering: that night they were led out to the cassava fields and clubbed to death. In the morning the rest were set free and handed milk tins filled with rice. Sarith left the camp with his wife and began walking towards Siem Reap, with the intention of going to Phnom Penh to find his family. On the way they fell in with some other people from the camp and they decided to go on together; they slept beside the road at night, and boiled their rice in milk tins over open fires. They walked into the town of Siem Reap on the night of 21 January. The following morning, led by a member of their group – a young woman – Sarith and a few others began walking towards Angkor. The woman who led them had been an inmate in the same camp as Sarith, and in a way they were familiar with each other. But on the way to Angkor Sarith made a discovery that astonished him: the woman revealed herself to be an archaeologist, and said she had once known the temple well. Like Sarith, she had been so successful in disguising her identity at the work camp that he scarcely knew whether to believe her now.

Sarith had never been to Angkor Wat before: he had heard about it of course, and seen pictures, but still, seeing it before his eyes now, he was dumbstruck. The monument was completely overgrown; in the past few years the jungle had marched in, but the luxuriance of the vegetation only served to highlight the majesty of the structure.

They made their way slowly down the flagstoned causeway. Once they got to the colonnaded galleries they were filled with curiosity at the sight of the mossy bas-reliefs. They sat down right there, on the stone floor of the gallery, and asked the woman to tell them about the legends depicted on the panels. 'You must remember,' said Sarith, 'for years we had seen nothing but hunger, death and famine.' Now, they would not let the woman stop; they listened entranced as she recounted those old, old stories. They worked their way around the vast galleries, listening to the stories over and over again. 'By the end of the day,' said Sarith, 'I knew I could not leave; I said: "I will spend the rest of my life here, in Angkor Wat."'

That was in January 1979. He went away for a while in 1981, cycling to Phnom Penh to look for his parents. He found, as he had feared, that they were dead. As soon as he could, he turned and headed back to that great, grey mountain of stone which had absorbed him into its teeming worlds. □

The novelist Amitav Ghosh's most recent book is 'In an Antique Land'