

KHMER TEMPLES OF NORTHEAST THAILAND: A PROPOSED PLAN FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. This research is aimed at studying the Khmer temples of Northeast Thailand in order to propose a plan for tourism development. Seven Khmer temple sites were chosen, located in four provinces in the northeastern area of Thailand. These include Nakhon Ratchasima, Buriram, Surin and Si Sa Ket Provinces; and the temple sites of Prasat Phimai, Prasat Phanom Rung, Prasat Mueang Tam, Prasat Ta Muean Group, Prasat Si Khoraphum, Prasat Sa Kamphaeng Yai and Prasat Phra Wihan.

From this study, the researcher attempted to use the concept of cultural tourism as a key in the conservation of the value and significance of the architectural heritage and cultural landscape of Khmer sites. The cultural tourism approach also attempts to take into account both tangible and intangible values surrounding the sites for sustainable tourism.

The objective of the study is to promote the significance of Thailand's Khmer sites with a view to improving accessibility for visitors. The aim is to provide the local community a well managed interpretation and conservation program for each important site and highlight their unique characteristics in a way that will help preserve them for future generations. A further aim of this study is to better present the Khmer sites of Northeast Thailand as part of a cultural panorama and to create a management plan for cultural tourism and sustainable tourism development. The study also accentuates a program of conservation enlisting local communities and the tourism industry to promote site protection and a better understanding of cultural heritage.

In terms of tourism, the information derived from this research will be used to develop an appropriate management program that is best suitable to visitors, with the purpose of facilitating their ability and opportunity to discover new knowledge about Khmer arts and culture in Thailand. This will help visitors to develop a better understanding and appreciation. Furthermore, this research can also help find solutions to some of the existing problems among visitors to Thailand and the affect they have on local residents by fostering improved cooperation

among all involved stakeholders i.e. local authorities, central government agents, local residents and visitors, in order to manage the local cultural heritage appropriately for its sustainable existence throughout subsequent generations.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Cultural Tourism, Tourism Development

Statements and significance of the problem: The Khmer temples of Northeast Thailand have long been underrated as potential tourism sites. Soon to be recognized as a linked chain of significant monuments for a single nomination to the World Heritage List, these important sites tell the story of a significant ancient civilization -- a civilization that contributed to many of the present cultures of the region. The Khmer temple sites are scattered among some of Thailand's poorest provinces. Known as Isan this largely rural and agricultural area of the country has not experienced the full benefit of Thailand's growing tourism industry. In part, this is because the area has never been properly promoted or examined for its tourism potential. This dissertation aims to examine the foundation for a more extensive tourism development program in the region focused on the Khmer temples sites. It will look extensively at the existing infrastructure, including transportation to and within the region, existing facilities, including hotels and restaurants, as well as on-site interpretive plans. The dissertation will also look realistically at ways that the temples can be linked conceptually and actually, through a network of mutual support and promotion to best actualize their potential as a development tool in the region.

In addition to examining the specific problems of Khmer temple sites in Isan this dissertation stands as a case study in the necessary confluence of conservation and tourism studies. Conservation, known as well as historic preservation and heritage management, focuses on the care and administration of ancient and older sites. The field emphasizes conservation and materials science, engineering, architecture and planning. Primary goals are the consolidation and/or stabilization of monuments and buildings, design of means of visitor access and some level of interpretation. Tourism, on the other hand, is involved with broad issues of infrastructure, capacity building, promotion and management – all of which may focus on heritage sites, but more commonly involves other kinds of both issues and venues as well. This dissertation is an attempt to bridge these two different, but closely related fields and to apply the knowledge of one field - tourism to another knowledge management. It is hoped that this study can serve as an example of ways heritage sites may be better supported by the rational analysis of their tourism potential.

By utilizing methods long utilized in the tourism field, heritage sites and the require of peoples surrounding them, many benefit from a common

goal and approach. What is done here for Khmer temple sites in Northeast Thailand can be applied to other kinds of linked heritage sites and areas both in Thailand and in other countries as well.

Background on Khmer and other sites of Northeast Thailand: Known as Isan or Isarn, Northeast Thailand is in many ways a separate country from the rest of Thailand. Dominated by the expansive Korat Plateau, the Northeast part of the country is one of the poorest regions. The people speak a language, or dialect, which they refer to as “Lao” and which has much in common with language spoken in the country of Laos. In the 11th through 13th centuries this area was dominated by the Khmer empire. And numerous Khmer period shrines, most now managed by the Fine Arts Department, attest to the Khmer presence in the region. The principal two sites are Prasat Hin Phimai, near the larger city of Korat, and Prasat Hin Khao Phanom Rung, in Buriram Province on the Cambodian border. But there are at least 30 other Khmer-period sites in the region, some restored and presented as part of park-like complexes, others still untouched and difficult to access. In addition, the region possesses several important early archaeological sites and some other cultural sites outside of the Khmer time-period.

Prasat Hin Phimai is located at the edge of the small city of Phimai, about 40 km northeast of the regional city of Korat. The exact dates of the remaining features of the sanctuary are still subject to debate. But it appears that the central components were completed during the reign of Suryavarman I or between 1001 and 1049 A.D. Prasat Hin Phimai is situated on a direct line from the Khmer capital of Angkor and faces in a southwesterly direction toward that city. Originally a Hindu shrine dedicated to Siva, the temple was rededicated as a Mahayana Buddhist sanctuary in the 12th century. Its lintels and other sculpture display stories from the Ramayana and also contain Buddhist scenes. The sanctuary is a big, square tower, placed in the crossing of the axes of the temple, high, pretty and built in pink and grey sandstone and of a splendid appearance (Walter, 1999). The site was restored by the Fine Arts Department, with the advice of Bernard - Philippe Groslier, in 1964 – 1969.

Laid out as an enormous rectangular enclosure, the site consists of a central shrine, marked by a tall prang; an inner compound, contained by sandstone walls; an outer compound; two pavilions to the southwest of the central shrine; four *gopura*, or entrance gates; and a long avenue defined by a *naga* balustrade and bridge on the southeast, or principal entrance. The complex shows a strong influence of Angkor Wat and has many similar features. Built of a white-grey sandstone, the central structure includes sculpture relating to Vishnu, Rama and Lakshaman. There are also other

features common to Khmer architecture, including balustraded windows, false-tile roofing and representations of *apsara*.

Prasat Hin Khao Phanom Rung, often called simply Phanom Rung, is located about 100 km southeast of Korat, on a high hill overlooking the Cambodian border to the south. Phanom Rung was also a Hindu temple and dates from around the same period as Phimai. Its high elevation was intended to refer to Siva's residence on Mt Krailasa. The approach emphasizes this symbolism and consists of a long processional way, broken by terraces and defined by long *naga* balustrades and stone bollards. The front of the compound features stone terraces and four ornamental ponds. The central site itself is a walled enclosure, with *gopora* on each of the four sides and three on the southeast elevation. Within the sanctuary is a corncob-shaped prang; a laterite and sandstone shrine located in the southwest corner and an octagonal structure in the northwest.

Close-by Phanom Rung is the Khmer site of Mueang Tam, referred to as the lower city to the sanctuary above. Mueang Tam dates to the 11th century and represents a combination of Khleang (a style after Banteay Srei) and Baphuon styles. The flat, significantly lowland site consists of two enclosures: an inner enclosure with a pedestal supporting five small towers, facing two other shrines; and an outer enclosure, with four elaborate *gopura* entrances. Four L-shaped ponds are located within the outer courtyard. The whole is constructed of sandstone and laterite in keeping with Khmer practice. Nearby are the still discernible remains of a *baray*, or sacral pond.

Michael Freeman in his guide to the Khmer sites of Thailand (1996) divides the Khmer-Thai sites into six areas, four of which are in the northeast part of the country. (One other section refers to Khmer sites in the southwest, which are treated in a separate section below; another covers Khmer sites in the central plain area, which are described above.) The groupings for the northeast are as follows: the Upper Mun Valley, including the temple of Phimai and Phanom Rung; the northeast border temples; the Lower Mun Valley; and the northern part of the region. The Upper Mun Valley includes the Khorat Plateau and the area east of this. Phimai falls at the center; Phanom Rung at the lower edge. Among the significant sites are: Prasat Non Ku, built in the first half of the 10th century in Koh Ker style; Prasat Mueang Khaek, just the north of Non Ku and of the same period; Mueang Gao, in the same area and of the same period; Phanom Wan, a larger, more complex site, also near Phimai, and dating from the 9th through 11th centuries; Prang Ku, sandstone and laterite towers dating to the Bayon period; Ku Suan Taeng, a late Angkor Wat – early *Bayon* period brick temple; Kuti Reussi No.1, a Bayon-period laterite tower about 2.5 km from Phanom Rung; Ban Bu, a Bayon-period laterite base; Kuti Reusi No.2, another scattered, mostly laterite ruin, 8 km from Phanom Rung. The

remains of an important quarry site, called Si Khiu, are also visible near Khorat city. These monuments range from intact, sandstone prang, with surrounding walls and *gopura*, through small, almost scattered sites of laterite debris.

The northeast border temples follow the south border with Cambodia. Some of the sites are within meters of the border itself. Near the town of Aranyaprathet is the single tower of Prasat Khao Noi, a brick temple on a brick and laterite base, dating to the 7th century. Nearby is the little-known site of Sdok Kok Thom, a Baphuon-style temple ruin, including an intact *gopura*, the partial remains of the central tower and perimeter walls. Also along the border are the temple sites of Bai Baek, Ta Muen Thom, Ta Muen Toch, Ta Muen and the quarry and kiln site of Ban Kruat. Most of these temples are in poor condition; most date too to the 11th century, Baphuon period, with the exception of Ta Muen Toch, a hospital chapel dating to the reign of Jayavarman VII (Freeman, 1998a, 1998b).

Another important concentration of Khmer temples is found in the northeast and the northern part of Isan. These are clustered around the towns of Surin and Si Sa Ket, close to the larger city of Ubon Ratchathani, near the border with Laos. These temples are primarily Baphuon and Angkor Wat-period shrines, several of which are preserved as parts of archaeological parks. Prasat Ban Phluang is a carefully restored site, dating from the 11th century. It includes a sandstone prang, supported by a laterite base. Prasat Phum Phon is an earlier brick tower, its origins stretching back to the 7th century. Prasat Yai Ngao, in Surin Province, is also brick, but dating to the Angkor Wat period in the 12th century. Nearby Prasat Si Khoraphum is also Angkor Wat period, and is a platform temple with five remaining brick towers. Prasat Sa Kamphaeng Yai, in Si Sa Ket Province, dates to the Baphuon period, and is a combination of stone and brick. Also in Si Sa Ket is the little-known Bayon-period shrine of Kamphaeng Noi, another hospital chapel, built by Jayavarman VII. A last Khmer archaeological site in the Northeast Thailand is Prasat Narai Jaeng Waeng, dating to the 11th century and in the Baphuon style, Prasat Narai Jaeng Waeng is a small sandstone temple on a high laterite base. It was probably a shrine dedicated to Vishnu. Some of the original sculpture, including a lintel, is still preserved on site. Prasat Narai Jaeng Waeng is remote from most of the other Thai sites, and is closer to sites in nearby Laos. It is located in the district of Sakhon Nakhon near the larger city of Nakhon Phanom.

The northeast includes a number of other historic and archaeological sites of interest, although they do not fall within the scope of sites covered in this project. In the town of Sakhon Nakhon is another Khmer-period prang, incorporated within the more recent complex of Wat Phra That Choeng Chum. Another older temple is incorporated within the much rebuilt

Wat Phra That Phanom in the nearby town of That Phanom; reconstructed as recently as 1977, this monument resembles Laotian-style chedi, across the Mekong River. The Mekong border town of Nong Khai also includes remnants of older buildings within relatively new wat complexes.



Figure 1: Distances and zones of the Khmer temple sites
(Source: Adapted from TAT, 2004)

Conclusion: This study of “Khmer Temples of Northeast Thailand: A Proposed Plan for Tourism Development,” has focused on four provinces and seven temples in the northeastern area of Thailand. These include Nakhon Ratchasima, Buriram, Surin and Si Sa Ket Provinces; Prasat Phimai, Prasat Phanom Rung, Prasat Mueang Tam, Prasat Ta Mueang Group, Prasat Si Khoraphum, Prasat Sa Kamphaeng Yai and Prasat Phra Wihan.

In this study, the researcher attempted to use the concept of cultural tourism as a key to the conservation of the values and significance of the architectural heritage and the cultural landscape of Khmer sites. The cultural tourism approach also attempts to take into account both tangible and intangible values surrounding the sites for sustainable tourism.

The objective of the study is to promote the significance of Thailand’s Khmer sites with the view of giving accessibility to visitors. The aim has been to emphasize the local community as part of a well-managed interpretation and conservation program focused on each important site and to summarize the existing character of each site in the way that will help preserve these resources for future generations. Further aims of this study have been to better present the Khmer sites of Northeast Thailand as part of cultural landscapes and to create a management plan for cultural tourism and sustainable tourism development. The study also emphasizes a program for conservation that enlists local communities and the tourism industry in

order to promote site protection and a better understanding of cultural heritage. From the analysis of Khmer temples' cultural landscape, there are several values that have been altogether shaped the architectural heritage and landscape. Those are historic, social, aesthetic and integrity values. After collecting and calculating the value of each site and site component, it can be classified into three levels of significance as high, moderate or low.

For the evaluation of Khmer temples' architecture and cultural landscape, the researcher proposed summarized points of ten values, divided by the number of values, in this case, ten. The tourism infrastructure for Khmer sites, stresses the need to have the community interface with the sites. Presently, the surrounding areas have been better developed than in the past. In regards to the tourism profile in this study, visitors were divided in two groups, excursionists and tourists. The majority of visitors coming to Northeastern Thailand follow the route to People's Democratic Republic of Laos country and Vietnam. In terms of expenses per day, Thai tourists spent on the average 738.25 baht; foreign tourists spent 1,221.08 baht a day; Thai excursionists spent on the average 551.52 baht; foreign excursionists spent 1,015.05 baht a day. As for accommodation, Thai tourists tended to stay with friends or relatives; foreign tourists usually stayed in hotels, guest houses, bungalows or resorts. As a means of transportation, Thai tourists used usually used private cars, including rentals, or traveled by coach at a rate of 63.08%. Foreign tourists used the same form of transportation at a rate of 51.68%. To understand tourists' satisfaction and needs, the Khmer temples are valued for the qualities of their reception and information services. For educational value, visitors most valued aspects of history in relation to Khmer temples. Secondary concerns were transportation, accommodation and restaurants.

In this proposed plan for tourism development, the researcher postulated management criteria for Khmer temples in order to develop more extensive interpretation plans and strategies for tourism in the architectural heritage location in "Khmer temples of Northeast Thailand." The plan further promotes the idea of local people cooperating in the understanding and realization of the importance of conserving these cultural sites or areas in order to maintain local uniqueness and sustainable tourism. The interpretation center or visitor center suggested in each case would provide direct information regarding the background and special attractions of the heritage site to visitors. The visitor center has been conceived as addressing two areas: interpretation and service. The proposal coincides with the Thai governmental campaign "Amazing Thailand: Unseen Treasures." The timeframe for the programs begins in 2008 and continues until 2010. A heritage site's role in economic development can be conceived as falling under two types of impacts:

- 1) Tourism and recreation benefits relating to economic development
- 2) Educational benefits, tied also to economic development

Strategic management for tourism development, proposed to Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) by using External Factor Analysis Summary (EFAS), Internal Factor Analysis Summary (IFAS) and Strategic Factor Analysis Summary (SFAS) Model for the main resources. For the BCG Growth Share Matrix Model, the TAT's positioning is the star and should use SO strategies in term of marketing mix. For evaluate and control the campaign, researcher proposed Balance Score Card (BSC) and Benchmarking Model.

Several conservation guidelines apply to this project. In addition to principles for Thai heritage formulated by the Fine Arts Department in the Ministry of Culture, there are other applicable principles including the Nara Agreement, the Burra Charter and the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China. Some of these principles can be applied in the Thai context, some cannot. The principles used in this project follow those created for Thai heritage; other principles taken from other charters have been used when applicable. One of the outcomes of this proposal is the creation of a "Khmer Civilization Tourist Information Center in Northeast Thailand." This has been proposed to the Tourism Authority of Thailand. This information center is intended to focus on Khmer civilization and its importance in history, culture and, especially, tourism.

Many agencies have promoted the significance of cultural heritage, arguing that heritage helps support economic and educational initiatives as well as conserving ancient treasures. The proposed Khmer Civilization Tourist Information Center is aimed at meeting part of this need. The scope of the center is to provide basic information on Khmer heritage and to advice both Thai tourists and foreigners interested in the impact of this great civilization on Northeast of Thailand in particular.

This dissertation recommends several itineraries within lower Isan. Cultural routes represent important historic lines of communication, both for peaceful and warlike purposes. The routes proposed here possess a number of shared dimensions that transcend their original functions. The routes offer an exceptional opportunity for the countries of Cambodia, Thailand and Laos to better understand their shared background as well as providing a means of promoting tolerance, respect and appreciation for cultural differences that characterize the communities involved. The proposed cultural routes have been divided into several "packages." One, entitled "the Stone Sanctuaries Tour" is designed for three days two nights. A second tour extends over four days and three nights. And a third, called "Stone Sanctuaries in Southern Isan," extends to six days five nights. Each of these hypothetical tours includes side attractions, including opportunities to

sample local cuisine and participate in local cultural activities and purchase souvenirs. Accommodation and restaurants are also included in the plan for each package.

For the success of this proposal, a heritage director should work directly with the communities involved in the project in order to encourage greater participation. A primary reason for committing to the protection, conservation and management of Khmer temples is to make their significance accessible to local community members and visitors. Cultural heritage is seen as a dynamic reference point for daily life, social growth and change. It is a major source of social capital and is an expression of diversity and community identity. Tourism – if it is to succeed-- must bring benefits to the local community and to various stakeholders. Tourism must also avoid adverse impacts on the social life of local communities as well as such intangible qualities as authenticity. A lack of management or an excessive amount of tourism can have negative effects directly or indirectly on the local communities and thereby on the overall character of the sites.

In recent times, many experts say that the tourism industry itself is changing from “modern tourism”, focusing on mass tourism, to “post-modern tourism”, a kind of tourism that pays more attention to niche markets where a variety of tourism products is promoted and newly branded. Cultural tourism is among the types of “post-modern tourism.” This new development provides a good opportunity for Thailand to be in a leading tourism position due to its rich cultural history and resources awaiting tourists and traveler from all corners of the world to sense and see.

Thai national policy, as embodied in the work of the Ministry of Culture’s Department of Fines Arts follows this trend toward cultural tourism. The Historic Places, Objects, Artistic Objects and National Museums Act 1961 defined “historic place” as a property, which by age or construction or its history is considered useful in artistic, historic or archaeological aspects. In the 1992 version of the law, the definition has been expanded to cover those archaeological or historical sites and their surroundings. Increasingly the local community’s contributions to the development of long term tourism have been recognized as an important aspect of tourism development. Most experts agree that cultural tourism can lead to better incomes and promote the overall quality life of local communities. In turn, those communities can better contribute to the protection and preservation of tourism resources.

Communities safeguarding historic sites need to have effective management planning. These communities are the ones affected by both positive and negative impacts by and responses from visitors. They are the entities responsible for creating the context for the appreciation of historic sites. Communities and especially community leaders need to understand

traditional limitations and constraints within their communities and work together to develop a positive attitude towards change. Both positive and negative outcomes must be addressed through the process of raising public awareness and allowing community members to make their own contributions. Community members need to be responsible for setting up regulations reflective of their own values and lifestyles in order to create a context for sustainable practice.

A well - designed “destination differentialtion” program such as that proposed for the Khmer temples of Northeast Thailand cannot be successfully carried out successfully if Thailand has no functional tourism development and management mechanisms, collaboratively executed by all tourism-related stakeholders. It is necessary for local people to join forces with national policy makers to encourage tourism as laid out in this “Proposed Plan for Tourism Development” before this objective can be realized. This dissertation project has been an attempt to look in depth at a variety of tourism-related issues pertaining to cultural heritage management. The project has attempted to deal realistically with issues of existing tourism infrastructure, including roads and other means of access, and basic services and facilities, such as housing/hotels, restaurants, and other tourism needs.

Overall, the dissertation has tried to show how local communities may be enlisted as part of the tourism effort – to both help preserve and protect historic sites and also to participate in the benefits accruing from what might be considered a “new wave” of cultural tourism that is now dominating much thought on the future of tourism in Thailand.

This examination of Khmer temple sites in Northeast Thailand is an effort to see how tourism and culture can be brought together in a single enterprise. It is intended primarily as a case study, in this instance focusing on archaeological sites of Khmer ancestry. A similar approach could be applied to other kinds of sites, both in Thailand and in other countries, as well as to a vast array of cultural activities and locations. Tourism can be both a “friend” and an “enemy” of culture and conservation. If wisely managed and promoted culture can both serve local communities and the heritage of the greater country. The important first step is that proper research and planning occur ahead of time.

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