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Being Khmer: Angkor's Builders and Heirs

*Dr CHHEM Kieth Rethy **

To speak meaningfully about what it means to be Khmer involves engaging with a deep, continuous civilisational experience. The idea of being Khmer is not easily reduced to an ethnic label, a passport category, or a territorial reference. Rather, it emerges from a long historical consciousness shaped over centuries of cultural formation, religious imagination, political experimentation, and collective memory. Khmer identity has evolved through periods of flourishing creativity as well as severe ruptures, and its endurance testifies to a resilient cultural core that has managed to absorb, reinterpret, and regenerate knowledge across time. This essay revisits key dimensions of Khmer identity, drawing on linguistic, historical, religious, and anthropological scholarship to reaffirm the indigenous foundations of Angkor and the intellectual sovereignty of Khmer civilisation.

Khmer identity begins with memory, individual and collective. Long before written chronicles became widespread, cultural identity was carried through oral traditions, ritual practices, and social customs embedded in everyday life. The Khmer language played a central role in this transmission. It conveyed cosmology, hierarchy, kinship, and ethical values through its layered registers, vocabularies, and conceptual metaphors. Scholars of Khmer linguistics have shown that the ethnonym Khmer appears in pre-Angkorian inscriptions, revealing that self-designation had already taken root in early state formation (Antelme, 1998). The language, therefore, was not merely a communicative tool but an archive of worldview and social organization.

The possible Austro-Asiatic root of the term Khmer has attracted scholarly attention. The proto term *mir*, associated with upland cultivation or swidden fields in several Mon-Khmer languages, has been linked to the early agrarian identity of the Khmer communities. Cognates such as *mir*, *mar*, or *maʔ* appear in related languages to describe *essart* or cleared cultivated land (Diffloth, 1984). While the etymological hypothesis remains open to debate, it is a useful reminder of how intimately identity was grounded in subsistence practices, land management, and relationships with the natural environment. It also suggests that Khmer identity was first noticed as an external label, attributed by neighbouring groups before being adopted internally as an autonym. When the term transitioned from an external designation to a self-chosen identity, it marked a shift in civilisational self-awareness and the early consolidation of cultural sovereignty (Antelme, 1998).

Khmer identity, therefore, was not a passive inheritance but a gradual construction informed by language, territory, and evolving social complexity. The adoption of the term as an autonym reflects the moment when political consciousness, linguistic cohesion, and shared cultural memory converged. It prepared the ground for what would later become the Angkorian state, a sophisticated polity that integrated diverse knowledge systems while maintaining a distinct

* Dr CHHEM Kieth Rethy Distinguished Professor of AI and Humanities Camtech University.

Khmer imprint. It is worth recalling that early state formation in mainland Southeast Asia did not proceed through isolation, but through constant engagement with regional currents of religion, trade, and political ideas. Yet, this engagement was not one of imitation. Khmer civilisations demonstrated a capacity to absorb external influences and reframe them according to local social, religious, and aesthetic logics.

The Angkorian period stands at the centre of Khmer civilisational self-definition. Angkor was not merely a royal capital or a religious complex; it was a cultural project that articulated a distinctive vision of the world. Earlier historiography often framed this development through the lens of Indianisation, a term made influential by Coedès (1975). While his work remains a foundational reference for Southeast Asian studies, later scholarship has urged a more critical reading of such diffusionist theories.

The Khmer case shows that the reception of Brahmanical and Buddhist ideas was highly selective, negotiated, and locally reformulated. Epigraphic and architectural evidence demonstrates not a wholesale borrowing, but an indigenisation process that produced a Khmer civilisational synthesis (Sarkar, 1968, Vickery, 1998). Statecraft, temple symbolism, urban planning, and cosmology were articulated within a Khmer epistemic framework that drew from Indic concepts while transforming them to fit local cosmologies and political realities.

The intellectual hallmark of Angkor lies in this ability to merge external ideas with indigenous knowledge in a manner that neither diluted Khmer identity nor reduced borrowed elements to mere copies of their origins. Local agency becomes visible when one examines temple iconography, inscriptions, royal rituals, and legal codes. The Angkorian worldview was premised on the relationality of the sacred, the political, and the social. Kingship was grounded in cosmological legitimacy, but its endurance relied on an ethical compact between ruler, subjects, and spiritual realms. Buddhist thought, particularly Mahayana influences in later periods, introduced ethical perspectives emphasizing compassion, merit, and moral responsibility. These ideas blended with pre-existing animist and Brahmanical traditions to create what may be called a Khmer spiritual humanism.

This spiritual humanism did not simply reside in textual doctrine; it was embedded in community life. It shaped the ethos of merit making, communal solidarity, moral restraint, and respect for social harmony. Contemporary scholarship has suggested that this ethical foundation continues to inform Khmer cultural attitudes today. For instance, recent writing has explored how Buddhist epistemology may offer a normative orientation for contemporary challenges such as the ethical development of artificial intelligence, where principles of non-harm and human flourishing can be meaningfully applied (Chhem, Cheab, Ros, and Chhem, 2025). The continuity of ethical imagination, from the Angkorian past into current societal debates, shows that being Khmer is also about cultivating an intellectual tradition, one that evolves yet remains grounded in fundamental moral values.

However, Khmer identity has also endured moments of profound rupture. The colonial period, the wars of the twentieth century, and the genocide under Democratic Kampuchea disrupted the transmission of knowledge and damaged the cultural and intellectual infrastructure of Cambodia. The loss was not only material or demographic; it affected the continuity of memory and the self-confidence of cultural narrative. The dismantling of institutions, the destruction of archives, and the decimation of the educated class produced a silence that the post-conflict generations have had to painstakingly confront. Rebuilding identity after such trauma required more than preservation, it demanded reinterpretation and the reanimation of cultural resources.

The recovery of arts, monastic learning, historiography, and cultural scholarship in the decades that followed can be understood as a process of civilisational regeneration. Khmer scholars and cultural practitioners have worked to restore performance traditions, ritual knowledge, visual arts, and historical research. Studies of the Khmer Ramayana, commonly known as the Reamker, illustrate how Cambodia localized the Indic epic into a distinctive narrative that reflected Khmer values and cosmology (Pou, 1992). Examining such texts helps situate Khmer culture not as a derivative of India or China, but as a producer of original cultural forms shaped through adaptive creativity. The revival of cultural production today is therefore not an exercise in nostalgia, but an act of reclaiming interpretive agency over the past.

It is essential to recognise that Khmer identity is not solely defined through monumental history or courtly culture. Anthropology has shown that Khmer cosmology is embedded in everyday life and transmitted through collective practices, beliefs, and rituals. Ang Choulean (1986) has demonstrated how popular religion conceptualises the world as a living moral landscape populated not only by humans, but also by ancestral spirits, territorial guardians, and various protective or ambivalent beings. These entities are not peripheral to Khmer cultural thought, they shape social behaviour, relationships, ethical responsibility, and the coherence of community life. Rituals of reciprocity, gratitude, and interdependence reflect a worldview in which the visible and invisible realms are interconnected. This cosmology complicates any simplistic reading of Khmer religion as merely Buddhist or Hindu, revealing instead a layered spiritual ecology in which multiple knowledge systems coexist.

Understanding this cosmological dimension is central to any reflection on being Khmer. Identity is not simply an inherited status, it is lived and reaffirmed through acts of care toward land, ancestors, and community. The spiritual landscape also mediates the exercise of authority and social order. Respect for elders, deference to teachers, and the symbolic legitimacy of leaders are often framed through cosmological logic as much as through political reasoning. Contemporary discussions about governance, ethics, and social harmony in Cambodia continue to carry traces of this inherited cosmological grammar. To be Khmer, then, involves inhabiting a cultural worldview where morality, social relations, and the sacred are woven into a single fabric of meaning.

A renewed assertion of Khmer intellectual sovereignty requires engaging critically with the historiography that has shaped understandings of Cambodian history. Early twentieth century scholarship, largely produced by Western or colonial scholars, relied on external conceptual frameworks to analyse Khmer civilisation. While their contributions laid groundwork for philology, archaeology, and epigraphy, they tended to interpret Khmer history through diffusionist narratives. Later scholars have questioned these assumptions and expanded the interpretive archive. Vickery (1998), for example, challenged romanticised or civilisationally essentialist portrayals of Angkor by emphasising material evidence, socioeconomic dynamics, and the agency of local actors. His revisionist approach destabilised externally imposed narratives and repositioned Khmer civilisation as internally driven rather than derivative.

Similarly, Sarkar's (1968) examination of literary and linguistic interactions underscored the complexity of regional exchanges, but argued against linear models of influence. More recent scholarship, such as the work of Au Chhieng (2023), has reinterpreted pivotal historical moments, including the French protectorate period, by foregrounding Khmer political reasoning and negotiation rather than depicting Cambodia as a passive recipient of external forces. These scholarly efforts collectively reclaim interpretive autonomy and encourage contemporary readers to approach Khmer history through locally grounded epistemologies.

Language remains a vital component of Khmer identity, not only for its communicative function but also as a repository of cultural memory. The interaction of Khmer with Sanskrit and Pali over centuries shaped the vocabulary of religion, governance, and literature. Yet, this exchange did not result in the subordination of Khmer to Indic languages. Instead, terms were adapted, recontextualised, and infused with local meaning. Chhom (2018) notes that while Sanskrit contributed significantly to Khmer intellectual and literary development, it underwent semantic shifts within local usage, demonstrating a process of cultural translation rather than imposition.

This linguistic hybridity is particularly evident in inscriptions, where Sanskrit is often used for cosmological or ceremonial discourse, while Khmer is employed for administrative, legal, and social matters, a distribution that reveals both respect for external knowledge and confidence in indigenous expression.

Being Khmer in the present century calls for an engagement with heritage that is neither static nor insular. Heritage becomes a living resource when it informs creativity, scholarship, diplomacy, and civic life. Contemporary cultural diplomacy initiatives, including the promotion of cuisine, dance, and visual arts, have demonstrated the potential for Angkorian legacy to contribute to global cultural exchange. However, such initiatives are most effective when grounded in historical understanding rather than surface-level representation. To be Khmer today is not to retreat into the past, but to bring the past into a meaningful dialogue with the future. This involves rethinking education, research, and cultural policy in ways that empower Cambodians to articulate their own narrative within global conversations.

Ultimately, being Khmer carries a certain responsibility. It includes safeguarding the cultural inheritance received from ancestors, nurturing the moral and intellectual life of younger generations, and contributing to national and global well-being with dignity. The continuity of Khmer identity depends not merely on preservation, but on interpretation, renewal, and the cultivation of critical awareness. This invites Khmers to reflect on the legacy of Angkor not as a distant monument, but as a living source of wisdom, creativity, and ethical imagination.

Angkor stands as an enduring testament to the ingenuity and statecraft of the Khmer people. Epigraphic evidence clearly attributes the creation and administration of Angkor to Khmer rulers and institutions. The corpus of inscriptions compiled by Coedès (1937 to 1966) documents the political organisation, religious foundations, land management, and social hierarchies that shaped Angkorian society. These inscriptions do not merely record royal achievements, they illuminate the intellectual and cultural milieu of the period, revealing how concepts of kingship, merit, law, and sacred space were articulated within a Khmer frame of reference. Vickery (1998) further reinforces the view that Angkor emerged from internal socio-political developments, challenging narratives that overemphasise external inspiration.

The continuity from Angkor to modern Cambodia is equally significant. Chandler (2007) traces a civilizational thread connecting pre-modern Cambodia to contemporary social and cultural forms, showing that language, monarchy, Buddhism, and collective memory have preserved a distinctly Khmer identity. Ang Choulean's (1986) work on popular religion provides additional evidence of this continuity, demonstrating how ritual practices and cosmological beliefs rooted in Angkorian culture remain influential in everyday life. Together, these studies affirm that Khmers are both the architects and heirs of Angkor, the original builders of the civilisation and the custodians of its legacy.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.