

UC Berkeley

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal

Title

The Khmer Tour Guide: An Economical, Political and Cultural Nexus in Siem Reap, Cambodia

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8n8573d8>

Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 25(3)

Author

Gephart, Rose

Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/B3253015965

Copyright Information

Copyright 2012 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

THE KHMER TOUR GUIDE

An Economical, Political and Cultural Nexus in Siem Reap, Cambodia

By Rose Gephart

As the sun rises over the jungle tree line in Cambodia, Siem Reap city starts to come alive. It's another day and shops are starting to open; construction trucks and small scooters fill the dirt roads in the morning commute to work. Tuk Tuk drivers are making their way to the city center to lie in wait for the hundreds of tourists that will soon fill downtown searching for souvenirs at bargain prices. A forty-year-old Cambodian man eats a simple breakfast of rice porridge and bananas with his two small children and wife. He dons his work uniform, kisses his family goodbye, and rides off on his scooter to meet a couple of European tourists at a five-star hotel. He is a tour guide, and the next eight hours of his day will consist of leading tourists around the Angkor temple complex in the scorching heat and humidity while telling them all about the history, culture, and mythology of Cambodia. This is merely one guide among 3,600 others, but their abundance does not diminish their importance in Siem Reap city.

My name is Rose Gephart and my faculty mentor is Professor Nelson Graburn from the Department of Anthropology, specializing in tourism studies. My thesis project examines the relationship between tour guides and Cambodia's present-day economy, political structure, and the transmission of Cambodian culture through the tourism industry. In this paper, I would like to focus on the argument that tour guides function as an economical linchpin in Siem Reap, Cambodia. To expand on this argument, I will discuss the Cambodian government's policies regarding the licensing and training of tour guides and how

these policies present themselves during tours, and I will offer some examples of tour guide prosperity and hardship in the economical scheme of the tourism mecca that is Siem Reap city. This argument examines the significance of Cambodia's economic success and recovery through reliance upon the role of tour guides in the tourism industry.

My research methods consisted of traveling to Siem Reap, Cambodia to conduct participant observation, conversational interviews, and formal interviews. During my fieldwork, I stayed in Siem Reap city for two months in order to establish contacts and formulate relationships with tour guides working within the city. I used several different techniques to begin these connections in order to maintain a variety of circumstances, social standings, and histories that may influence responses. I performed conversational interviews at the Angkor Wat complex and collected business cards from tour guides on site for formal interviewing. The owner of the guest house I was staying in arranged several interviews from his personal contact list, and I was also allowed access to a contact list of tour guides who paid for membership at one of the local tour guide associations. I performed thirteen interviews, all of various age, social situation, status, and background. I also established rapport with two individuals in order to observe their daily lives and interactions within the context of my research question.

To analyze the data I compiled after eight weeks of fieldwork, I utilized Naomi Leite and Nelson Graburn's concept of the commodification of culture, ethnicity, and heritage. This examines the ways in which "ethnic" culture is re-shaped to meet the tourists' needs and how commodification directly influences sense of identity. Heritage in this sense is framed as "ethnic, regional, or national cultural phenomena considered the 'inheritance' of a group at large"¹ and was especially relevant to my worksite of the Angkor complex. This area has been labeled a UNESCO World Heritage site, which has led to the formation of several ministries and organizations that are in direct competition with various branches of Cambodian authority to gain influence and control over the Angkor complex. Somewhere within this complicated network of relationships lies the Cambodian tour guide. With the analysis of the commodification of culture, I also engaged Stanley Brandes' notion that the meaning of Cambodian culture is not necessarily lost in this transition, but an alteration takes place in the transmission of cultural significance and the definition

1 Nelson Graburn and Naomi Leite, "Anthropological Interventions in Tourism Studies," in *The Sage Handbook of Tourism Studies*, ed. Jamal Tazim and Mike Robinson al eds (Great Britain: Sage Publications Ltd., 2009), 45.

of oneself within that culture through outside intervention, such as that of the state.² The last conceptual tool I used was Heidi Dahles' definition of the tour guide as a mediator or bridge "among different people through the deployment of money, service, access, and information."³

During the sixth week of research, I had the privilege of attending an official tour guide meeting led by the Ministry of Tourism with over four hundred tour guides and hospitality industry employees in attendance. Topics covered in the meeting included licensing policies that would be lawfully enforced, a new relicensing course that all of the guides were required to complete, and video advertisements boasting the ongoing growth of the tourism industry in Cambodia. The Ministry of Tourism claimed that the needs of increased tourism traffic would be met with an incentive program to increase the number of licensed tour guides. Paired with this would be the increase in manufactured homemade crafts and souvenirs to encourage economic growth through self-employment and entrepreneurial endeavors of the Cambodian people. I began my research by beginning the interview with a set of general questions regarding the licensing process, personal background, brief historical perspective, etc. About halfway into my research, I was compelled to also add questions regarding personal opinion and perspective on government participation and enforcement in the tourism industry. This was attributed to the insight gained from the official tour guide meeting I had attended, which brought the political aspect of tour guiding more to the forefront.

After the Khmer Rouge, tourism made a slow beginning in the 1980s with only a few hundred tour guides, although due to various circumstances, maybe only a few dozen could actually lead tours at any given time. As it began to grow in popularity and economic influence, the Ministry of Tourism was established and began to hire, train, and license tour guides in yearly waves, which they refer to as *generations*. Angkor Wat was given the title of a World Heritage UNESCO site in 1995, and an organization was established the same year named APSARA (or the Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap), charged with the "research, protection, and conservation

2 Stanley Brandes, *Power and Persuasion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

3 Heidi Dahles, "The Politics of Tour Guiding: Image Management in Indonesia," in *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 2 No. 3, ed. John Tribe (Great Britain: Elsevier Science Ltd., 2002), 784.

of cultural heritage, as well as urban and tourist development” throughout the country where heritage sites are located.⁴ Cambodians who wish to become tour guides have to pick a foreign language in which to take their assessment tests, with the majority of them choosing to be English-speaking guides. They then pay a fee to go through a preliminary interview and exam process which entails written multiple choice and short-answer questions. If the prospective guides pass the first phase of testing, they have to pay yet another fee and purchase reading material for a three month training course located in the capital city of Phnom Penh, led by a certified professor who reviews history, mythology, and tour guide etiquette. Upon completion of the training course, they take a closing written and oral exam testing their acquired knowledge from this training course. If they pass, they become licensed tour guides and must pay a yearly fine thereafter to renew their license.

The presence of corruption is often mentioned in discussions of Cambodian government, and its influence is no exception in the tourism industry. Despite claims that there will be strict enforcement of government policy regarding tour guide licensing, there is still evidence of bribery for unlicensed tour guides to perform tours in the Angkor complex. This, however, does not have to be construed as negative. Many Cambodians do not have the means to pay all the necessary fees or take three months from their families to travel to Phnom Penh for official training. Although the unlicensed guide has become scarcer over the past decade, there is still evidence of a number of tour guides operating below the government’s radar of legitimacy. During my interviewing, many saw the licensing process as a way of extracting more government funding from the people rather than any claim to set standards. About half of the tour guides I spoke to claimed the training process did not seem to offer tour guides anything they could not already study and learn from classroom texts or history books. Despite these claims, the other half of guides construed the training process as not only necessary but also crucial in the development of a tour guide’s expertise in Cambodia’s historical and cultural context, arguing that it was the only way to implement a standard on how to properly transmit homogenous information to the tourists.

4 “APSARA: Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap,” ASPARA Authority, 2005, accessed 1 Oct. 2012, <http://www.autoriteapsara.org/en/apsara.html>.

In the context of Brandes' notion of state intervention creating an alteration in cultural transmission and identity, most tour guides had a sense of pride in their position as "mediators" for the Cambodian people to the rest of the world. However, when asked about the history of Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge or the cultural context of the Angkor complex, they served as historical tools to share with tourists but seemed to hold no personal significance or influence in their personal lives. The Khmer Rouge aftermath is still present in the older generations from a first-person point of view, and in the younger generations through the loss of family members and childhood memories of fear and displacement. The pre-Khmer Rouge period of Cambodian life is an ephemeral topic that has been overshadowed by war, and because of this, I quickly discovered that tour guides did not seem to retain Angkorian history as part of their identities. It merely functioned as a tour guiding tool. It is here that I believe the commodification of Angkor culture has altered perceptions regarding ethnic identity. In the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia repaired and rebuilt itself by using tourism as one of its main support systems and, consequently, created a subgroup of Cambodians who act as tour guides and carry this altered sense of identity to future generations.

The operation and execution of tours in the Angkor complex are usually planned according to the time frame allotted by the tourists. Whereas a group of thirty people may only have a few hours to see as many temples as possible, a retired couple may have all afternoon to explore Angkor Wat alone. Aside from time constraint, tour guides may also adjust tours according to the tourists' specific desires or interests. Although every guide that I spoke to claimed that most tourists just wanted to know where to get the best photograph, there were also tourists who wanted to know about architecture, the mythology connected to the bas-reliefs surrounding the outer walls of the Angkor Wat temple, and other related topics. Although tour guides are allotted a certain amount of freedom to change attributes of their tours and add their own personal flavor, there is also a set of constraints that keep tour guides contained within certain boundaries that the APSARA authority deems necessary. Within this window, guides are able to maintain a sense of routine in which they may elaborate upon specific mythology and statistical facts, whereas other aspects of their tours may only contain short commentary or broad strokes of knowledge.

During my interviews, I attempted to explore in detail the connection between the APSARA authority, the licensing process, and

the tour guides, and how this affected the transmission of culture and information. Politics was a hard topic to breach with the tour guides; this line of questioning was usually received with slight discomfort and revealed a more complicated structural relationship between tourism and the government that was far beyond my capacity to comprehend in the limited time and access available to me. A few tour guides claimed that the transmission of political opinion was strictly forbidden during tours, but this was not a consistent response. Anywhere between two and five APSARA authority officials are stationed at the entrance to every temple in order to screen tourist badges as well as to discreetly monitor that every guide has a licensed badge. Guides caught without a license may be subject to fines and possibly even imprisonment after the new laws from the Ministry of Tourism are enforced. In some cases, this can be avoided if they have paid the right people. The one unlicensed guide I interviewed claimed that a guide just always had to know who the highest ranking officer on duty was and make sure his dues were paid.

I spent two weeks conducting participant observation at the Angkor Wat temple during different days, times, and with different groups, and every tour guide stuck to a structured path of stories, points of interest, and facts or statistics. Although almost every tourist group had access to the same information, the amount of detail reviewed during tours, tourist preference, time constraints, and the perceived “quality” of the tour guides, connection and engagement with the tourists themselves affected the transmission of information and satisfaction of the tourists. One example of an adjustment that may be made at the tour guides’ discretion would be what time is best to visit certain locations, whether it be for the best vantage point, the coolest part of the day, etc. Every guide also added personal touches to the experience by telling jokes or anecdotes throughout the tour.

At every temple, there is a string of souvenir stalls strategically placed at exiting paths. Tour guides are not only trained to lead tour groups straight through this area, but they are required to by the APSARA authority at the conclusion of all tours. Tourists are immediately bombarded by children peddling postcards and origami birds and women selling t-shirts, scarves, dresses, bottled water, and paintings. This tour requirement is meant to encourage tourists to place currency into the local economy and stimulate growth through the investment of local shop owners. This requirement does not necessarily hinder the

tour guide; most have friends and family who run stalls and many will often lead their groups to these specific locations to conduct business. It is in this context that I believe the tour guide acts as the mediator or bridge “among different people through the deployment of money, service, access, and information.” Tour guides act as a mediator in a vast network of relationships that involves hundreds of connections between the tourists and Cambodian people, economy, and culture while acting under the guidelines placed by the APSARA Authority, the Ministry of Tourism, and the Cambodian government.

The last point I want to discuss is tour guide prosperity in the economic scheme of the tour guide industry by providing some examples of certain individuals. Tourism season in Siem Reap does not flourish year round but rather goes through the “high season” between the months of November to March and then suffers a “low season” with a dramatic drop in tourist traffic. Almost all tour guides are considered freelance workers where jobs are very dependent upon business connections, personal relationships between family and friends that have access to travel agencies and tour guide associations, and the quality of their guiding based on the satisfaction of tourists. Cambodia claims to have an extremely low unemployment rate that lies between 2%-4%, but this statistic is also based on the fact that selling cigarettes on the side of the road or a child selling bracelets on Pub Street is considered employment. The poverty rate is still extremely high in Cambodia with 30% of the population still living below the poverty line of 61 cents in American currency per day.⁵ In comparison to a third of the population, tour guides tend to be more financially successful, but they are not considered among the richest in the country either.

Returning to the forty-year-old male tour guide I introduced at the beginning of my presentation, he illustrates one of the more successful tour guides I interviewed during my fieldwork, with success being gauged by quantitative measures of financial success. He is married with two children, both below the age of ten. His wife works as a stay-at-home mother, so his family, including his wife’s parents, relies only on the income he earns as a tour guide. When he is not spending time leading tours or attending to his family, he also works as the founder and director of an NGO orphanage that houses and teaches thirty Cambodian orphans. Another example of tour guide prosperity was a thirty-two year

5 “Poverty Reduction”, United Nations Development Programme, last modified 2010, accessed 17 Sept. 2012, <http://www.un.org.kh/undp/what-we-do/poverty-reduction/poverty-reduction>.

old female tour guide I interviewed. She was married with two children; her husband was also employed as a tour guide and the income he made, along with the success of her parents' family business, allowed her free time to pursue tour guiding as a career of passion, not survival. She described tour guiding as an opportunity to establish her independence as a Cambodian woman while still fulfilling her role as a wife and mother in the home.

Although these are both examples of financially successful tour guides, there exists another side to the spectrum in which other tour guides struggle. One twenty-four-year-old man I interviewed did not receive many calls for tour guiding because he had received his license less than two years ago, his business connections were unstable, and work was especially scarce during the low season. He was unmarried and still lived with his family in order to help his sister run the family business, a noodle shop in front of their home. Again, this guide's measure of success is based on quantitative standards of financial success. On the other hand, he had very few responsibilities as a Cambodian bachelor living at home and had plenty of free time to pursue hobbies and social activities such as football (soccer). Another example of tour guide hardship was a thirty-one-year-old male who worked as an unlicensed guide. He was married, and his wife did not have a job but was seven months pregnant. He blatantly admitted to me the pressure to make ends meet in the low season was so pressing that all he could do sometimes was pray to God for more work. His inability to pay the necessary fees to have a proper tour guide license means he has to earn enough income leading tours to support his family and pay out bribes every month to continue working at the Angkor complex.

All of these individuals serve not only as examples of how tour guides can prosper, but also how they can struggle. In conclusion, tour guides have a unique place in the economic scheme of Cambodia where they can fulfill many roles in their local community as well as serve as a nexus in a network of complicated relationships and interactions between international tourists and the Cambodian government. The commodification of Cambodian history, culture, and religion has created a social phenomenon in which the tour guide serves as a representative in Cambodian economics, politics, and cultural transmission.

In this presentation, I have shown that the licensing process and government policies regarding tour guides create a new sense of ethnic identity, and that they have enforced the tour guide's role as mediators in the economic and cultural sense. I have shown that the aforementioned government policies influence the execution of tours and how that affects the tour guide's economic standing within their community and at the Angkor complex. Lastly, I have also given examples of tour guide prosperity and hardships, both of which contribute to the tour guides' position in Cambodia's present day economy. In the past thirty years, Cambodia has pulled itself out of the destruction left behind from the Khmer Rouge to rebuild anew; it has transitioned from a third world country into an emerging world market in agriculture, textiles, and most importantly, tourism. Upon close examination of Siem Reap's present circumstance, the tour guide is not only important, but essential to the success of the tourism industry. Tour guides serve as buffers between the tourist and the local shop or restaurant owner. They serve as mediators of Cambodian history and culture, and they have, in the last two decades, become the most important tool the Cambodian government utilizes to serve as representatives of the Cambodian people to the rest of the world.

Bibliography

- ASPARA Authority. "APSARA: Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap." Accessed 1 Oct. 2012. <http://www.auriteapsara.org/en/apsara.html>.
- Brandes, Stanley. *Power and Persuasion*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988.
- Dahles, H. "The Politics of Tour Guiding: Image Management in Indonesia," in *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 2 No. 3, ed. John Tribe, 783-800. Great Britain: Elsevier Science Ltd., 2002.
- Graburn, Nelson and Naomi Leite. "Anthropological Interventions in Tourism Studies," in *The Sage Handbook of Tourism Studies*, ed. Jamal Tazim and Mike Robinson al eds, 34-64. Great Britain: Sage Publications Ltd., 2009.
- United Nations Development Programme: Cambodia Website. "Poverty Reduction." Accessed September 17, 2012. <http://www.un.org.kh/undp/what-we-do/poverty-reduction/poverty-reduction>.

