



Some words about Cambodia

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Three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.

Buddha

My dream of youth was to become a mechanic, so that I could repair cars and buses.

Chum Mey

Abstract

This article concerns my recent visit to Cambodia, a marvellous country which once was called Khmer, and which has been home to the Khmer people for the last 4.300 years. A Catholic approach is given to the reality of disability, which is still a scourge in Cambodia and a heritage from the socio-political ordeal suffered by Cambodians during the last decades of the 20th century.

Keywords: Cambodia, Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, Archaeological site of Angkor



The Author with the friends he met in St. John Catholic Parish, Siem Reap.

Introduction

There is nothing strange in the large number of titles given to Our Lady, the Virgin Mary; such a phenomenon is due to reasons ranging from Marian apparitions to geographical, cultural, and dogmatic

contexts. Being myself a catholic, I am familiarized with some of those titles, such as Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception and so on. Some year ago (more precisely, in 2017), in Lebanon, I met Our Lady of Ability, whose title works as a

social counterweight against the spectre of disability, which haunts the disabled people since immemorial times in all latitudes and longitudes of our planet. One should not forget that disability is a twin sister of life itself. The only kind of beings who are free from being born disabled or becoming disabled are the inanimate ones, those classified by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) as *mineralia*. As for the plants (*vegetalia*, still according to the father of taxonomy), the animals (*animalia*) and the humankind (*homines*) – that is to say, the living beings in general –, the only way of avoiding each and every sort of disability is to die young.



Surroundings of Beirut, in Lebanon:
Association Our Lady of Ability.

More recently, in 2024, during my last trip to South-East Asia, I had another similar surprise. In the Cambodian city of Siem Reap, in the neighbourhood of the famous archaeological site of Angkor, I met Our Lady of Inclusive Love in the church of Saint John Evangelist, where I had the pleasure of attending Mass and to deliver a lecture on the social inclusion of the disabled people.¹ Disability is ubiquitous in nowadays Cambodia, due particularly to the state of chronic warfare that lasted in that country from 1967 to 1998, a time when a considerable part of the Cambodian soil was riddled with anti-personal mines. The legacy of this is that Cambodia has, nowadays, one of the highest rates of amputees in the world. During Pol Pot's socialist rule (1975-1979), circa 20% of the Cambodians were killed by the regime, most of them after suffering all kind of torture, all of them under the pretext of being guilty of "trying to be better than the others", always bearing in mind that the communist cliché according to which "I am as good as you" was invented by Satan himself.²

Cambodia's history, however, is not only made of "blood, toil, tears and sweat", as Sir Winston Churchill said in the mid-1940, in the context of the "darkest

hour" of Great Britain, that is to say, the beginning of World War II. Cambodia has much more to offer than the content of films like *The Killing Fields* (1984) and *First They Killed My Father* (2017). In fact, Cambodia had a Golden Age, which lasted from the 9th to the 14th centuries, which means half a millennium (!) of fat cows, to use a Biblical image. We are talking about the so-called Angkor period, during which the Cambodians had a powerful and great Hindu-Buddhist empire, which had the upper hand over most of Southeast Asia and even a small part of what we now call "China". It is well known that old empires used to be "fuelled by the energy supplied by agricultural surpluses. In Cambodia, this means the cultivation of rice.", always remembering that "Rice is the rock upon which South-East Asian civilization was founded."³



Our Lady of Inclusive Love, at St. John
Catholic Parish, Siem Reap (Photo taken by the Author).

All in all, it is the nature of the empires that they are destined to rise and to fall: that is what happened to Rome, to Byzantium, to Cambodia, to Germany, to the USSR, and so on. Here we are, face to face with a historical law, which does not fail to indicate the ephemerality of the very human life on earth. This is certainly one of the reasons why Buddha recommended his disciples not to dwell in the past, nor to dream of the future, but to "concentrate the mind on the present moment", and, half a millennium later, led Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to order the whole mankind "to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Mt 6,33), so that all the other things will be given us besides.



Her crime? To speak French. Her sentence?
Torture + death. Her name? Nobody remembers.
(Photo taken by the Author)



Angkor: is the tree emerging from the temple or is the
temple emerging from the tree? (Photo taken by the Author)



Tuol Sleng (Museum of Genocidal Crime), in Phnom
Penh: the Author and Mr Chum May, a Survivor

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References

1. See, for instance, <http://www.st-augustine.co.uk/mary-of-the-inclusive-love.php>.
2. Cf. CS Lewis. *The Screwtape Letters*, New York, HarperCollins, 2000, p. 204 et passim.
3. Charle Higham. *The Civilization of Angkor*, London, Phoenix, 2001. p. 11 & 14.