



Photo by Touch Ratha

King Jayavarman VII in Cambodian History

**By Ton Sreychenda
& Lim Bunth**
Economics Today

King Jayavarman VII is the most well-known king of the Angkor period. Thanks to the statues that were preserved, Cambodians can even put a face on the most glorious Khmer king. As such, the Khmer Culture Support Committee organized a workshop to discuss about Cambodia's duty to preserve the image and the souvenir of the ancient king.

Guests take their seats in the modest but nicely decorated conference room at the Russian Center of Science and Culture. Young Buddhist monks sit on the first row, eager to listen to the presentations by eminent historians and professors. Students also attend the workshop to learn about King Jayavarman VII's glorious time.

On this day, November 30, distinguished speakers include Moeung Sonn, representative of the Khmer Culture Support Committee, Vong Sotheara, professor of History and expert in stone scriptures, and Dr Ros Chantrabot, vice-president of the Royal School of Administration, among others.

Addressing the young audience, Moeung Sonn explained that the workshop was held to support and to promote Khmer history and civilization. "It is the duty of the Khmer people to uphold our culture and civilization," he said.

Especially, the workshop aims at protecting the image of King Jayavarman VII. "We can see everyday

in hotels, gardens, and along the streets, statues of King Jayavarman VII that are broken, or incomplete," Moeung Sonn said on behalf of the committee, and he continued "It shows the lack of care of our image. And visitors, both Cambodian and foreigners, see the weakness of our country."

The scholarly meeting was punctuated by presentations on the achievements of King Jayavarman VII, his life, and also the controversial accounts of Georges Coedès (1886-1969), who stated that the king used forced labor to achieve his architectural and engineering vision.

Vong Sotheara countered that Cambodians' beloved king did not use Khmer labor. Rather he used Vietnamese, Mon-Thai and Mon-Burmese labor, as he ruled an empire that covered parts of what is now Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos.

This King of Angkor is considered a national hero, as he fought off the Chams, from the Champa Kingdom (what is now southern and central Vietnam), which sought to invade the Khmer empire. His architectural talent and irrigation genius are shown

in the construction of temples of Banteay Srey, Bayon and Ta Prohm in Siem Reap province.

The workshop was also spiced up with a passionate discussion on the use of King Jayavarman VII image, and what participants consider disrespect towards the ancient king.

Moeung Sonn is confident that this workshop will attain its goals by suggesting to the Government to set a day in the calendar to commemorate King Jayavarman VII and to find a solution to build complete statues of the king.

In case our Government does not choose a date for this event, Moeung Sonn has already an idea. "In 2005, an event to commemorate King Jayavarman VII was held from 28 to 30 September in Siem Reap. It took place with the ordination of three Buddhist monks and offerings to 1,200 monks."

"If these dates are chosen for commemoration, theater plays depicting King Jayavarman VII's reign and achievements will be performed," said Moeung Sonn. "It will be a wonderful event to uphold our history, and to provide both national and foreign visitors with a cultural outlook of our country." ■



Map of the Khmer Empire under Jayavarman VII



Workshop on "King Jayavarman VII in Cambodian History"