

Banteay Chhmar Temple Which Is Ransacked

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A) Overview

Banteay Chhmar Temple was built during the beginning of 13th century by King Jayavarman VII. This temple is surrounded by a moat that is 770 meters long and 690-meters wide and that has a diameter of 63 meters. The temple is located in Bantay Chhmar village, Banteay Chhmar comune, Thmar Puok district, Banteay Meanchey province, which is an isolated area in the northern part of Cambodia. It is 425 kilometers from Phnom Penh; put differently, it is 58 kilometers away from Banteay Meanchey provincial capital. It can also be said that the temple is around 30-kilometers away from the Boeng Trakuon Khmer-Thai border checkpoint, a famous gate that was used to smuggling out illegally traded of Khmer artifacts during the 1980s and 1990s.

Today, the Banteay Chhmar temple is in ruins. The temple's structure has been destroyed: The main halls of the temple and its ramparts have fallen down and the stones now form a gigantic stone hill. Huge trees now grow throughout the temple, and smaller trees are growing on the top of the remaining temples, nature continuing the process of destroying the temple. And, most of the statutes and sculptures have been looted. Only a few remain on the temple's fallen walls. There are so many clues that reveal that Banteay Chhmar temple was severely ransacked during 1980s and 1990s.



Banteay Chhmar Temple

At the moment, Banteay Chhmar temple is being gradually restored. However, there are many challenges. The lack of expertise and funding are the main problems. Thus, the temple restoration process will be time-consuming.

B) Banteay Chhmar Temple during 1970s - 1990s

From 1975 to the beginning of 1979, Banteay Chhmar temple was monopolized by Khmer Rouge. In that time, the Banteay Chhmar temple compound was used to grow potatoes, corns, beans, and pumpkins. The Khmer Rouge also used the temple itself as a place for the pioneer children to live. According to Chhum Khaoy, who is 54 years old and who currently lives in Chhmar commune in Kbal Tornsong village, around 400 children lived in the temple. The Khmer Rouge forced some of the children to log the forest and to work the field near Banteay Chhmar temple, while some others had to transport supplies and foodstuffs from the cooperative to mobile units. Still, at night, everyone had to return to the temple and the slept together. Chhum Khaoy noted that "In Khmer Rouge Regime, Banteay Chhmar temple had not been damaged as in current time, and big statues had also not been looted. Those statues remained on the temple's walls, top, and entrance."

However, the Banteay Chhmar temple was destroyed during the Khmer Rouge period. San Samphor *alias* Mao, who currently lives in Banteay Chhmar village, reported that during 1977-1978, Banteay Chhmar temple gradually fell down because of a flood that occurred when the Khmer Rouge shut down the temple's moat's water system to reserve the water for irrigating the plantation in the temple compound. Mao also states that the Khmer Rouge dug out Laterite rock from Banteay Chhmar temple to use to build the dam that created the Cheung Kruoh reservoir.

From 1979 to 1988, the Banteay Chhmar temple was the site of frequent fighting between the regular army (Cambodian government and Vietnamese armed force) and the guerrillas (Khmer Rouge soldiers and Son Sann's armed force [Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces, KPNLAF, well known as Para-military]). For instance, in 1983, there was fighting between the Vietnamese soldiers and

KPNLAF soldiers in the Banteay Chhmar temple, which damaged the east part of the temple. According to San Samphor, KPNLAF soldiers used B-40 rifles to shoot at those parts of the Banteay Chhmar temple where Vietnamese soldiers were hiding. In 1989, KPNLAF (regiment-21 of Thoeuk Tham, regiment-22 of Khau Chhoun, and regiment-23 of Thang Koeun) launched their large-scale attack near the Banteay Chhmar temple and finally took control the temple. During the attack, KPNLAF soldiers shot and burned a tank of belonging to the Cambodian government army in front of a pagoda near the entrance of Banteay Chhmar temple and arrested 86 hostages.

From 1989 to 1993, Banteay Chhmar temple was monopolized by KPNLF's army. San Samphor and his team members (10 individuals) were appointed by Lay Khek to manage administrative tasks in the Banteay Chhmar area. Chann Riangleakhena and his colleagues were in charge of military affairs. Some soldiers were appointed to guard Banteay Chhmar temple.

C) The looting of Banteay Chhmar Temple

Banteay Chhmar temple was severely damaged during 1980s and 1990s. Almost every part of the temple was ransacked. During this looting, the looter used warning shots to alert people do not enter the Banteay Chhmar temple. Remaining statues from Khmer Rouge regime, both small and big, were totally looted. Moreover, the majority of the sculptures along the temple walls were broken into the small pieces and taken away. As a result, the temple collapsed. Besides Banteay Chhmar temple, some other temples which are next to it, including Banteay Toap, Daun Sar, and Taprom temples, also encountered severe looting. Those antiquities were transported from the temples by using plowing machines and/or military trucks and illegally sold to Thai dealers along Khmer-Thai border, Boeng Trakuon gate.

These acts were committed by the armed group of looters. Some of them were well known as the commanders who took control those zones. And, their right-hand men directly looted, transported/smuggled, and sold the antiquities to Thai dealers. Most

of those antiquities were sold to Mr. Sum Chhay at Tapp Pya, Thailand, who worked in conjunction with the looters.

According to a witness, most of those antiquities, also, were sold to Thai military commanders. He and his armed colleagues were assigned to guard the statues that were stolen and smuggled to Thailand. The statues were transported by mini car to Boeng Trakuon gate. Then, the statues were transported to a Thai military base 5 - 6 kilometers far away from the gate, he added. He, also, said that the lintels of Banteay Chmar temple were looted as well: The lintels were wrapped in plastic bags and smuggled into Thailand. End.