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How Cambodians Shape Their History Through the Present

by Michelle Vachon | June 5, 2017

Sunday's commune elections have already become part of the nation's history.

But beyond what observers and journalists will say or write about it, and the analyses historians and researchers will make in the years to come, the story of what happened and its effect on the country will soon be part of Cambodia's "social memory."



French anthropologist Anne Yvonne Guillou. (Siv Channa/The Cambodia Daily)

And what took place at the polling stations, or people's memory of events, will change, influenced by new developments, according to French anthropologist Anne Yvonne Guillou.

"Researchers realized over the last few decades...that social memory is always shaped in

reference to the present and not the past as one might think...that it is linked to the current events that members of a society are going through,” she said on Sunday.

As she will explain at a conference in Phnom Penh on Tuesday—entitled “How is Collective Memory Shaped in Cambodia—“it’s a memory that evolves...according to political and social issues at stake at a given time.”

This “social memory” may differ from people’s personal recollections, from stories passed down through families, or from the events a country celebrates in “state commemorations,” said Ms. Guillou, who is based in Phnom Penh as part of the Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia—better known as Irasec.

In Cambodia, this may also be linked to physical location. History in this country is, she said, “very physical, very symbolic, very ritualistic and, above all, very practical.”

Ms. Guillou, who lived in Cambodia for several years in the 1990s and settled here in the mid-2000s, has undertaken decades of research in Pursat province and other parts of the country.

And her work has shown that historical sites—whether officially recognized or the knowledge of which are passed on locally from one generation to the next—have taken on religious as well as mythical dimensions over the centuries. In recent memory in Cambodia, these sites may have become linked to Khmer Rouge killings and mass graves, she said.

“They are somehow reflections, some sort of mirrors,” Ms. Guillou said, “that consecrate a large number of very diverse symbols.”

“These are not locations that one can explain in a sentence,” she added.

Today’s government officials and politicians make sure to pay respect to publicly known sites—locals may keep the knowledge of some sites to themselves.

Born out of a link between time, land and past events, “there is something very physical in this form of memory,” Ms. Guillou said.

Conference When

Tuesday at 6:30 p.m.

Where: Institut Francais, #218 St. 184, Phnom Penh

Free admission. French with English and Khmer translation

(Page 1)

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