

# Pepper and Rice and All Things Nice

*Jane Calthorpe reports on an International Ceramics Conference at the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, Cambodia, 2007*



*Ceramic Vase. National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival.*

**I**N MID DECEMBER 2007, archaeologists, ceramic experts, historians, researchers, teachers and artists came together in Siem Reap, Cambodia, for an international conference titled 'Ancient Khmer and Southeast Asian Ceramics: New Archaeological Findings, Production and the Revival of Techniques'. The conference was a joint collaboration hosted by the Center for Khmer Studies, the National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival and Heritage Watch. It took place at the Center for Khmer Studies in the grounds of Wat Damnak, one of the teaching monasteries on the Siem Reap River. Siem Reap is the hot, bustling, noisy market town full of hotels and restaurants close to the World Heritage site of Angkor, famous for its temple ruins and the magnificent architectural marvel, Angkor Wat.

The best known ceramics in Cambodia are the old glazed wares identified with the ancient city of Angkor, but the ceramic tradition of the Khmer empire goes back to the fabled eras of Funan and Chenla and, as was



*Glaze test made from local materials. National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival.*



*Detail of Khmer style decoration at National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival.*



*The kiln shed at National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival.*

demonstrated at the conference, perhaps the story extends back in time even further, as new ceramic evidence comes to light from previously unrecorded archaeological sites.

The papers presented revealed a fascinating diversity of scholarly interest in Khmer ceramics as well as some of the new archaeological findings. Archaeology is essential to the understanding of the past and the conference was an opportunity for the Cambodian archaeologists to present their findings based on sherds and ceramic objects from recent excavations. Topics such as 'New data on the distribution of Khmer ceramic kilns' by the Cambodian archaeologist and ceramic expert, Ea Darith, and 'Some new data on the technique of Khmer stonewares' by the French researcher, Dr Armand Desbat, clearly show that high-fired ceramic technology was well established around Angkor in ancient Khmer times. It was also evident that unravelling the mysteries of the past is a time-consuming and expensive process and there are still many unknowns, but new knowledge of ceramic technology is emerging as a powerful research tool for establishing patterns of trade, industrial activity and settlement in the Khmer empire.

A prominent group of speakers at the conference were the international ceramic artists who talked about their work within the context of modern day production and woodfired technology. As has already been established high-fired ceramics were produced in Angkorian times but the practice has largely disappeared in contemporary Cambodia. Inviting working potters to talk was an innovative way of giving people at the conference multiple insights into the pre-industrial technologies of ancient Khmer ceramics and linked the past to the present because the ceramic artists also participated in the International Khmer Ceramics Festival. Initiated by Serge Rega, who gave a paper, 'Revitalisation of ceramic production in Cambodia: A way to combat the illicit trade of antiquities and to generate economic growth', the festival was a successful hands-on opportunity for experimental firings, glaze testing and information swapping.

Serge Rega has established a working pottery in Siem Reap, the National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival (NCKCR), and when the talking finished people were invited to join him and his hard-working dedicated team at the NCKCR, a few kilometres away. International ceramic artists Janet Mansfield from Australia, Alan Lacovetsky from Canada, Louis Katz from USA, and Suwanee Natewong from Thailand pooled their talents, braved the heat and in some cases stayed up half the night to assist with their knowledge of building fireboxes, glaze testing and firing the kiln. Working with local clays and other raw materials they set about reproducing glazed ceramics based on shapes derived from archaeological research and museum displays.

The purpose of this activity is to provide the basis for training, work and income for local people by the production of authentic Cambodian/Khmer ceramics for the tourist trade. It is also hoped, at the same time, to combat the trade in illicit antiquities. Looting of archaeological sites is a major problem in Cambodia. Some ceramic objects are traded by local farmers who dig them up in the fields and sell them to dealers, mainly from Thailand, but when a major site is uncovered often large numbers of looters move in before the archaeologists can finish their work, and without adequate government protection, valuable information on Cambodia's cultural heritage is lost forever.

The pre-Angkorian earthenware ceramic collection and other artifacts – including bones, at Wat Bo shows just how much has been lost. I with Pen Kesornicole, talked about our work cataloguing the 500 mostly intact ceramics



*Section of a ceramic wall panel at National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival.*

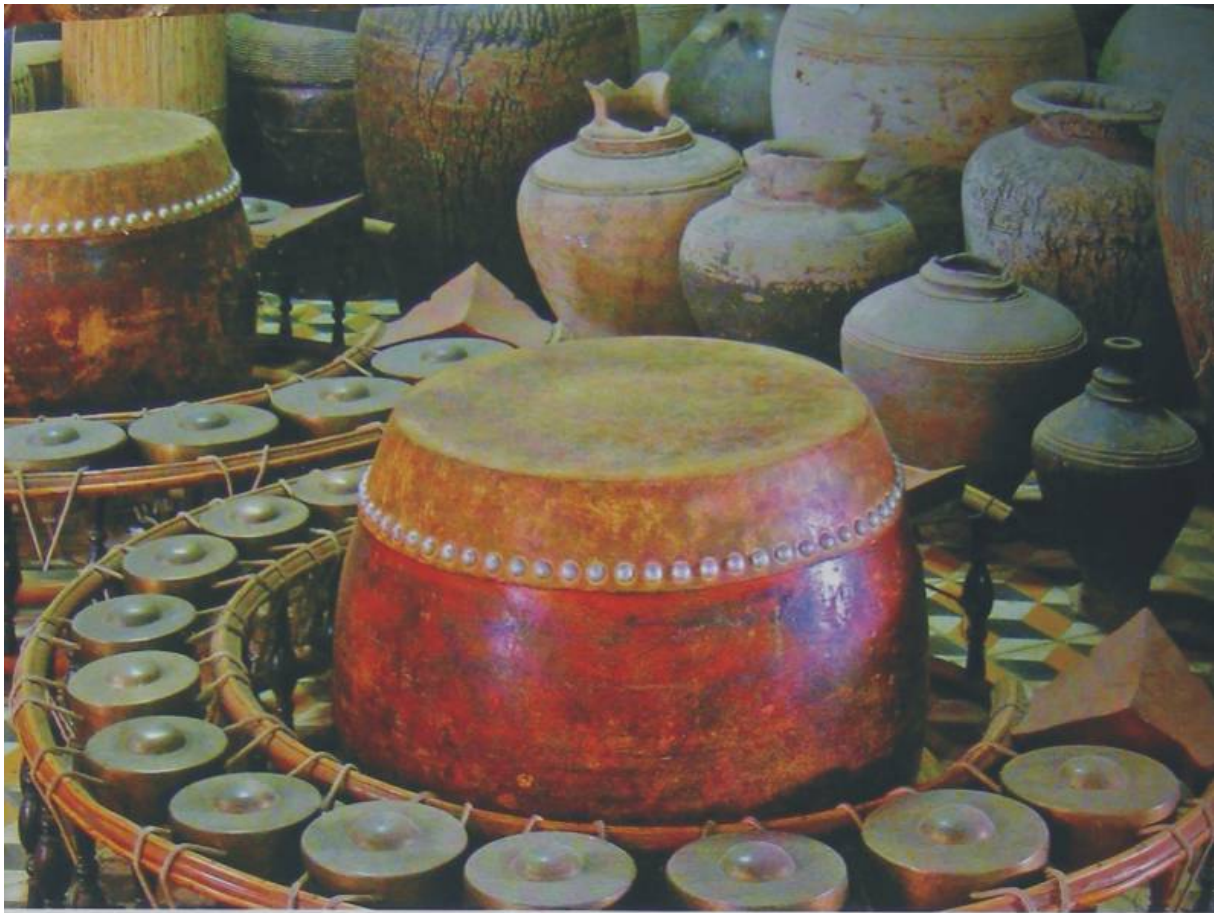
that have been retrieved from an Iron-Age looted site in north west Cambodia. The vessels were destined for Thailand but they were purchased from villagers in a rescue operation by the Venerable Monk Pin-Sem and are now on display in specially built cabinets at Wat Bo, another of the teaching monasteries on the Siem Reap River. As head monk, Lokta Pin-Sem has travelled overseas and observed how other countries value their cultural heritage. He heard about the looting and, concerned at the loss of so much of Cambodia's cultural heritage already, he raised funds and made a special journey to the area to purchase the pots. The collection, which is only a tiny portion of the material looted from the site, now represents a valuable research tool for comparative studies by future researchers.

The illicit black market trade in antiquities exists because of the demand by collectors for ancient objects that are associated with personal power, status and magic. The paper by Klaus Rominger, 'Illegal theft and trade of antiquities and its causes', was presented by Dougal O'Reilly, an archaeologist based in Phnom Penh and the director of Heritage Watch. Heritage Watch was established in 2003 to train people at a grass-roots level as well as promote an understanding in the general community that heritage is valuable. By using a mixture of training manuals, comic books and children's stories plus a campaign of TV advertisements and media coverage and by establishing a hotline, it is hoped to deter looting and make it easier for the government to investigate when it occurs.

Heritage Watch is also involved in building a value chain to promote village products. At the moment Serge Rega and Heritage Watch are working on a project to create new markets for the ceramics produced at Serge's pottery and a program is in place to train more village potters. At the conference Louis Katz talked about working in Thailand with Suwanee Natewong at Umdang Ceramics. 'Changes in Dankwean that bought about ceramic development'



*Above: Serge Rega. National Center for Khmer Ceramics Revival.*



*Ceramics and musical instruments on display at Wat Bo.*

**Contacts:**

International Khmer Ceramics  
Festival: 10-29 Dec 2008  
National Center for Khmer  
Ceramics Revival  
[www.khmerceramics.com](http://www.khmerceramics.com)  
Center for Khmer Studies  
[www.khmerstudies.org](http://www.khmerstudies.org)  
Heritage Watch  
[www.heritagewatch.org](http://www.heritagewatch.org)  
Jane Calthorpe  
[janealthorpe@yahoo.com](mailto:janealthorpe@yahoo.com)

Jane Calthorpe lives near Newcastle in NSW, Australia. She is interested in SE Asian ceramics and worked as an independent researcher in Cambodia cataloguing the earthenware ceramics at Wat Bo. She is a volunteer with the University of Sydney Greater Angkor Project (GAP) directed by Professor Roland Fletcher.

demonstrated how a small village enterprise with the right products, flexible working partnerships and good communication to outside markets can develop into a thriving success exporting all over the world.

The conference wrapped up with a panel and a lively open discussion. There was overwhelming support when Dr Phillippe Peycam, the director of the Center for Khmer Studies, raised the possibility of the conference becoming a regular event with the next one planned for December 2008. Credit and thanks for organising absolutely everything associated with this conference went to Suzanne Freilich. A volunteer for Heritage Watch with a background in archaeology and anthropology, Suzanne worked with the CKS to coordinate all aspects of the event and made sure it all came together on the day.

As well as the day of formal presentations there was an excursion into the countryside to see a kiln site, the firings with Serge at NCKCR and a visit to Wat Bo to view the total collection of both Angkorian and pre-Angkorian ceramics. No conference would be complete without extended opportunities to talk, eat and drink and on conference day we were treated to refreshments and lunch, served by chefs from the Victoria Hotel in their white uniforms and tall hats, in a colourful outdoor setting on the lawns, under the shady trees in the grounds of Wat Damnak. Everyone enjoyed the chance to network sitting together at the big round tables.

Finally, there were shopping trips to the markets and plenty of places to choose to meet-up with new friends and experience Cambodian cuisine, which is renowned for its flavours, fragrant rice and fresh pepper. There are exotic dishes to be tasted, like Fish Amok and Beef Loc Lak, and the possibility of liquid refreshment in the form of icy cold Angkor Beer at a lively restaurant while planning a visit to the famous temple while thinking about the next conference which will be 10-12 December 2008.