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Victor W. Turner - "Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas"

Abstract by Shannon Marie Ramsey

In this article Victor Turner argues that within "Society" a realm of Communitas exists which is a "modality of social interrelatedness" in which people escape the social structure in search for a "common humanity," where society is a homogeneous whole. This exists separate from the social structure which Turner defines using Merton's concept of "the patterned arrangements of role-sets, status-sets, and status sequences," which is entwined with the norms of society. A search for Communitas can be seen in a society when cultural aspects such as Liminality, Outsiderhood and Structural Inferiority are observed. Liminality refers to an intermediate or transitional state of a person that is commonly observed in rites of passage. Outsiderhood is a separation from society and a rejection of its socially defined structures, while Structural Inferiority refers to members of the lowest class of a society as escaping the structural distinctions of society to embrace a common humanity. An example of Communitas used is pilgrimage journeys where many gather at a single place with a common belief, a single clothing style is often worn by all who attend and an attempt is made at "one-ness." Communitas is often seen as a threat to the status-quo because it is a rejection of the norms governing society. It is a mistake to assume that the social realm is the same as the social structural. Communitas is an attempt to escape the structure of society in search of a unifying social experience of "human-ness."

Leslie A. White - "Energy and the Evolution of Culture"

Abstract by Sandra J. Leonard

Culture includes objects and activities which humans use to exist and survive, transmitted by social means through individuals and societies. The Tripartite Model of culture includes three interrelated components, unequal in influence: technological (tools, techniques and knowledge of use); sociological (human behavior); and ideological (religious and artistic ideas). Change in one causes changes in others. Technology is the foundation (man's survival depends on it); social systems are intermediate (as functions of technology); and ideological systems are the apex (reflecting society). For survival, life requires energy, received from lower forms; complex forms require more energy or more efficiency. Energy becomes useful when "harnessed, directed, and controlled."

The formula, E (energy harnessed per person annually) times T (tools used efficiently to harness energy) leads to C (cultural development); relates these factors of cultural systems. Energy is the active agent; tools are important to serve energy. Stages of energy sources and cultural developments included: 1) man, fire, water and wind; plants and animals provide food and work; 2) coal, oil, gas, and atomic energy become useful after harnessing by technology, tools and machinery; 3) human labor leaves the fields for industrial and artistic endeavors, leading to diversity of occupations; and 4) cultural developments lead to changes in economic organizations, warfare, and nuclear energy. Technology is "the hero" because the world consists of man and material objects, controlled through technology, with potential to build or destroy civilization. Culture will not destroy itself. If annihilated, culture has the capacity to rebuild as a single unit, eliminating warfare. The science of man's culture, "culturology," is worthy of future scientific research.

Analytical Essay of Three Anthropologists

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In anthropology there are two theoretical extremes for understanding cultures. Idealists believe that human behavior and culture can best be understood by the ideas that people have in their minds. Materialists would argue that it is not the ideas within the minds of humans that shape their cultures and behavior but their material causes of existence. That is to say that the factor that most contributes to the development of cultures are its material aspects rather than human mental concepts. For this essay I have chosen three anthropologists, Émile Durkheim, Leslie White, and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, who each hold a different ideological position, except in the case of Radcliffe-Brown who I will demonstrate is in between the two anthropological extremes, to demonstrate these two extremes in anthropological thought.

Émile Durkheim argued that social interactions in religious context formed the human intellect. According to Durkheim religion is a means of transmitting, what Aristotle called, the Categories of Understanding. These categories are essential ideas that correspond to universal properties of things like time, space, number, and cause. They provide a solid framework for us to understand objects that we perceive throughout the course of our lives. Durkheim argues that the Categories of Understanding can be found in all societies but in the earliest societies they were incorporated into religion. Religion is social in that it brings groups of people together who perform rites that are meant to create specific mental states. From this examination of religion it can be seen that the human intellect is born of social interaction. Another example of this would be how humans develop a conception of time, one of the Categories of Understanding, which are also born of social interaction. Time can only be conceived of by differentiating between individual moments. These differentiations are divided into minutes, hours, months, and years. This system of measuring time is social. Thus our concept of time can be said to be based in our need to keep track of social events. In such ways, it can be said that human social life forms human intellect.

Durkheim's theory that the Categories of Understanding are socially derived also means that they are generalizations of the human perception of the world as experienced by distinct human social groups. They constitute a basic framework of perception that all people within a social group can agree upon and allows for individuals to communicate their perceptions to one another. The categories then are like the common perception of status within my culture. Take for instance the area of Beverly Hills compared to South-Central Los Angeles. The common perception in my culture would be that Beverly Hills is a wealthy and well to-do city and South-Central Los Angeles is a poor and dangerous area. The perceptions gathered by an entire culture become part of a vast

store house of information that anyone from within that society can draw information from. Durkheim argues that people have two sets of knowledge from which they can obtain information, the limited knowledge that can be gained through individual perception and the nearly limitless store of knowledge gathered by an entire society.

Leslie White would disagree with Durkheim's theory of socially derived Categories of Understanding. White argued that it was the material causes of subsistence that shape human understanding. White theorized that culture is a tripartite system that evolves as the amount of energy added to the system increases. The three subsystems of cultures are the technological, the social, and the ideological. The technological subsystem is the primary mode of cultural change and evolution. This system is made up of the material means by which humans subsist or simply put technology and the knowledge of its use. This is not to say that the other subsystems do not play a role in the evolution of culture. They can influence the technological subsystems development but the primary driving force is technology.

White asserts that there are three things man needs in order to subsist; food, shelter, and means of defense and offense. They are all provided for by the technological subsystem and thus, White argues, the technological system is essential and primary. Thus the other subsystems are developed from this primary system. The social system consists of the relationships maintained between individuals and groups. The ideological system is made up of knowledge, beliefs, and ideas expressed in speech or symbols. As previously pointed out, the technological subsystem can be affected by the other subsystems. For example if the social system does not reward the growth of technology then the technological system will not continue to develop. To elaborate White uses the example of the agricultural technology and how modern agricultural technology is not much more complex than the medieval agricultural technology. White argues this is because the social system, lords and serfs during the medieval era, rewarded any such innovations negatively. The wealthy upper classes would heavily tax the lower producing classes for food and wealth. Thus if the producing classes were to increase their level of production by developing new innovations in their agricultural technology the resulting surplus of food would only be appropriated by the wealthy classes through increased taxes. Simply put there was no motivation for new technological innovations.

The level of a culture's development relies upon all three subsystems but the system can only grow as more energy is harnessed for use. Here technology plays another essential role because it is through technology that cultures can harness energy. The more energy a culture can harness with its technology the more complex that culture becomes. Thus White expresses this theory with a simple equation $E \times T \rightarrow C$. This equation means that if we take the Energy harnessed per year multiplied by the quality and efficiency of the Technology in use at the time we can determine a Culture's level of development. Therefore White's approach requires observation of a culture with a focus on its technology.

White's approach is much like Radcliffe-Brown's in that it requires direct observation of cultures. However, Radcliffe-Brown proposes an idealist theory of social structure. He proposes that social structures are the relationships maintained between individual organisms. Radcliffe-Brown uses a materialistic approach in his proposed study by advocating that human social structures can be directly observed. However, unlike Leslie White who examines technology Radcliffe-Brown concerns himself with the directly observable interactions that take place between individuals. Radcliffe-Brown's study into human social structures is idealist for the same reason as Émile Durkheim's study. Both would agree that social structures are developed through the ideas and

thoughts that individuals communicate to one another. However, Radcliffe-Brown focuses his attention upon observable aspects of these exchanges of information and Durkheim focuses upon knowledge gained through social interaction with common mental conceptions of things like time and space.

Radcliffe-Brown focused his study into the directly observable social interactions that take place between individuals. He viewed Social Anthropology as a branch of the natural sciences much like biology or chemistry. Thus explaining why Radcliffe-Brown's focus was on the directly observable interactions between individuals. The goal of his study of social interactions was to develop general "laws" about human societies. The data one could observe in one society could be compared to the data gathered about a separate society. This comparison of societies would eventually lead to verifiable law-like generalizations about all human societies. These "laws" would span across a multitude of subject matter like language and economics. The data gathered in these various subjects would yield "laws" specific to each subject. For instance the data gathered and compared from several cultures' economic systems would yield various "laws" about economics.

I find Radcliffe-Brown's type of approach to be the more appealing than the idealist or materialist approaches found in anthropology. The idealist approach I think is good for developing a theory but to rely solely upon it is to never have definite verifiable results. An idealist approach relies very heavily on being able to theorize about human behavior and thought. This is very useful for developing a theory but idealist approaches lack scientific verifiable results like materialistic approaches. However, this is not to say that the materialist approach is better because I think it is too analytical and lacks a human component. I do not think one can understand cultures simply from material means of existence. This kind of examination leads us only into seeing how a culture has developed materially over time. It lacks being able to understand the moral codes and behaviors that people develop in their societies.

The best approach is one that is both materialist and idealist. I think that one cannot rely too heavily upon a single approach because while each approach can help obtain certain kinds of data a single approach lacks what the other approach can offer. For example, a materialist approach like Leslie White's would tell us how the culture developed technologically and how the social system has impacted technological development. This approach, however, lacks being able to understand the mental concepts and moral codes that govern the use of that technology as well as maintain that society's social structure. An idealist approach like Durkheim's would lack an examination of the material means of existence that are required for cultures to survive. Therefore, in order to study all aspects of a culture one must develop an approach that is both idealist and materialist.

In conclusion there are two vastly different approaches in anthropological studies. The first, idealism, focuses on culture as being a development of the mind and how people have developed unspoken agreed upon generalities to communicate ideas; such as Aristotle's Categories of Understanding that Durkheim examines. Societies are, according to Durkheim, nearly limitless pools of knowledge from which we can draw information. The other approach in anthropology, materialism, focuses upon the material means of subsistence that cultures develop. Leslie White, a materialist, focuses upon the technological aspect of culture and argues that technology is the primary driving force of culture. These two positions both lack what the other position provides. Idealism lacks verifiable results while materialism lacks an examination into the actual relationships between individuals. Thus I believe that a good anthropological approach involves using a synthesis of the idealist and materialist approaches. This would be like Radcliffe-Brown's approach but the

best approach would be a synthesis of both rather than studying an idealist concept with a materialist methodology. One should be able to develop a methodology that would examine cultures in their entirety.

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Panela Production in Mesoamerica

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Introduction

The production of panela in Mesoamerica is a vital element in traditional rural cultures, and is an economic commodity that involves community cooperation. Panela is an unrefined sugar product that is derived from sugar cane. Sugar cane is a product of agro-forestry in tropical regions, which is threatened by the loss of land to cattle and non-traditional agricultural production. It is an agricultural plant that has been introduced by Europeans hundreds of years ago, and has since become a traditional dietary element in Mesoamerica. Contrary to its refined sugar counterpart, panela is unprocessed sugar that has retained vital nutrients, and therefore contributes to the often nutrient deficient diet of rural communities.

This paper will look at the traditional panela production process and its effect on poor rural farmers in Mexico. The traditional production process was observed in a rural town in Chiapas in the winter of 2008 during an ethnobotanical field study class with anthropologist, Dr. Janine Gasco. Also, the cultural significance of panela, and the traditional production process from the cut sugar cane stalk to the marketable end product will be examined. The health consequences, economic viability, and social implication of traditional panela versus commercially refined sugar will follow.

Cultural Significance

Panela is known in Mexico also as *piloncillo*, *panocha*, and *chancaca* (Binford 1992:35), and is culturally significant in several ways. Within the rural community in Mexico exists a belief in regards to food purity. This belief stems from the distrust of the cleanliness and quality of a food product whose origin is unknown due to the fear of diseases. Rural farmers therefore prefer foods whose producer is known and trusted. This belief extends to the usage of traditional production

techniques, which is of course also due to the lack of financial ability to ‘upgrade’ to modern equipment.

Panela is also a unique ingredient in traditional foods due to its strong molasses taste and rich brown color. Its consistency during the cooking process renders it perfect for sweets, deserts, candies, and even as the base ingredient in syrupy medicines. Panela is used in many foods of cultural importance, such as candies for the Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) observances. Roberto J. Gonzales states that “...foods derived from panela and sugar cane are important vehicles for communion with the deceased, a gift to the dead in exchange for the petitions made by the living” (2002:192). In addition it is used daily as a sweetener in drinks such as coffee, yielding a special flavor to beverages.

Besides containing a specific taste that identifies traditional foods, panela seems to tie even the urban consumer to a cultural identity. Zulma Roa states:

“... panela is framed by the consumers, that is to say, coming from a rural, handmade tradition that evokes an ancestral and late past that doesn’t respond to the expectations and the current urban consumers preferences, which are represented in the consumption of products that not only fulfill the purpose of satisfying its alimentary necessities, but rather they also generate him senses of individual identity, exclusivity, generation identity, to be able to achieve economic or social prestige, among others” (2004:6).

Traditional Production Process

Panela production in rural communities is being done in a traditional fashion, using equipment that in modern eyes is ‘antiquated’. Observing this process is like stepping back in time several hundreds of years. However, besides preserving a cultural heritage, rural peasant farmers often have no choice in the selecting alternative production equipment due to their extreme poverty. Eric R. Wolf describes the dependence on traditional production techniques as follows:

“Peasant technology is often described as “backward” or “tradition-bound,” (...) It is backward only because the peasant is a captive of the labor-intensive technology with which he must operate. He must always weigh the adoption of a new good against the balance of his resources. This balance includes not only financial or technical resources, but also “resources in people” to whom he must maintain access by maintaining proper cultural behavior” (1957:9-10).

Sugar cane needs to be processed quickly after being cut due to the accelerated fermentation process. Canes are therefore gathered and transported to a farmer with panela production equipment within several hours. Ideally the farmer lives adjacent to the cane field, and has enough helping hands to get the cane stalks to the mill in a timely manner. The cane is cut with a machete and transported to the processing site by a horse or oxen drawn wagon. At the processing site four production steps take place: juicing the cane, cooking the juice, pouring the mix into molds, and the packaging of the final product.

The juicing of the sugar cane is accomplished with the use of an iron mill that is referred to as a *trapiche*. The mill has several gears that are activated either by a harnessed draft animal or humans. The cane stalks are fed one or two at a time into one end of the mill, and the bagasse, or sugar cane husks, are guided out of the other end by another assistant before being piled on a discard pile. The cane juice pours out of a shaft from the center of the mill into a large bucket.

Before the juice is poured into a large cooking troth, it is being strained through a bucket with holes on the bottom in order to remove sediments. The troth is located on top of a large brick oven, which is fueled by wood. A measured amount of wood ash is mixed with water and strained through another bucket with holes. This ash-water is being added to the cane juice in the troth. It acts as a binding agent and according to Binford it “bind[s] with acids and other impurities that would impede or prevent crystallization” (1992:36). The ash and the juice mixture are being brought to a boil while being stirred frequently with a wood pole. Once a boiling point has been reached, further impurities are being removed with a home-made colander. The colander consists of a shallow gourd with holes punched on the bottom, which is attached to a wooden pole and serves then as a strainer. The mixture is being cooked and stirred for about three hours, until a syrup-like consistency has been achieved, and it has evaporated to about half its original amount. At this point the air is filled with a heavy molasses smell, and the farmer confirms the readiness of the mixture by pouring a small amount into a container with water. If beads form the consistency is correct.

Once the proper consistency has been reached, the troth is removed from the stove and placed on the ground for cooling. During the cooling process the mixture is being scraped from side to side with large wooden paddles. This is done to prevent the mixture from sticking to the sides of the troth, and to speed along the cooling process. While the mixture is cooling, the wooden planks that make up a nearby table are being turned around in order to reveal carved molds. The molds are in a cupcake shape, which can vary according to the region and country where the panela is produced. Water is being poured over them to prevent the hot mixture from sticking to the molds.

The panela mixture is removed from the troth with gourd ladles, and quickly poured into molds. This process is done with as many people as possible; since the mixture begins to thicken quickly as it cools. At this point children and other community members begin to gather in hopes of receiving samples of the sweet treat. Dried sugar cane leaves are gathered and prepared for the packaging phase. After about twenty minutes the molds are turned up-side-down, releasing the final panela product with the knock of a wooden mallet. An efficient team of people stack eight panela cakes on top of each other, butt to butt, and wrap it in the dried cane leaves. The packages are tied off with strips of leaves, and are sold in this traditional manner at the market in town.

Health consequences

There are certain health consequences to the community from the consumption of panela and refined sugar. According to Binford “panela...is a semi-crystalline substance containing both sucrose crystals and invert (non-crystallisable) sugars, as well as waters, enzymes, vitamins, acids, pigments, waxes, sterols, lipids, and inorganic substances” (1992:35). Both products contain glucose, and therefore have potential negative health consequences such as dental decay

and the acceleration of type II diabetes. However, since panela is an unrefined sugar product, it retains many more nutrients such as potassium, calcium, magnesium, B-complex, copper, and selenium. These nutrients can enhance a frequent deficient diet, and in turn add to the health and well-being to rural consumers. Refined sugar on the other hand contains no nutritional benefits; provides only empty calories that suppress appetite, inhibits the body's nutrient absorption abilities, weakens the immune system, and is even proven to have addictive qualities.

Health maintenance and disease prevention are vital components to rural communities. Rural farming is very labor intensive, requires a strong body and lots of manpower. Illness, disability, or even death of a main breadwinner can have devastating consequences for rural families. J. Susan Luerssen states that "...Once illness sets in, the impact is greater for households of lower economic means, often instigating or exacerbating a process of disintegration in which domestic units are no longer able to meet their reproductive needs and / or maintain production levels" (1993:258). Health care services are often only obtainable in emergencies at the nearest town. This requires financial resources as well as transportation, which are both limited and often unavailable to the average rural farmer. Families rely on herbs from their home gardens as well as other natural remedies to maintain and restore health. Part of this home health care is good nutrition from healthy food sources, which panela is a part of.

Economic viability

Panela production is self-sustaining, because it is a home-grown product created for home consumption. Distribution of the final product goes to community members who helped in the production effort, and is based on the reciprocity concept. A portion of the product is sold on markets or to businesses such as bakeries in local towns. Revenues earned add to farmers' income and sustainability.

Refined sugar on the other hand is a factory produced product, which can not be home-produced. It therefore needs to be purchased at a store which is cost inhibitive. Obtaining refined sugar requires a trip to town, which is often a costly and lengthy process due to the fact that few people own their own transportation such as cars, donkeys, horses or bikes. Refined sugar consumption requires money versus generating money, and is therefore a non-essential luxury product. Reliance on refined sugar creates a dependence to factory produced products, which diverts from self-sustainability.

Social implications

Since panela production is a cooperate effort, it relies on communal involvement. This involvement is often based on reciprocity, which in turn strengthens social ties. The entire process from sugar cane growth to panela production is a team effort, utilizing various community members. Farmers assist each other in the sugar cane growth process from field preparation to harvesting of cane. Draft animals are often loaned out to each other in exchange for goods and services. Since the panela production is labor intensive at different stages of the process, communal involvement is essential, even if this involvement entails just one other farming family. Extra labor is needed in particular during the mold-filling stage, since this needs to be done quickly due to the fast cooling period of the mixture. Panela production is a pleasant

social event, giving neighbors a chance to visit and socialize. Children in particular are eager to attend in order to taste the sweet treat.

Conclusion

Communally produced panela plays a vital cultural and social role amongst rural farmers in Mesoamerica. Due to its labor intensive production communal cooperation is essential. This in turn strengthens social ties, which is vital to the well-being of a rural community. The consumption of panela has positive health contributions to the community, since panela contains vital nutrients which are lost during the refining process of commercial sugar. Rural panela production can add to a farmer's income, or be part of a communal barter or reciprocity systems, which in turn aids economic sustainability. Many traditional culinary dishes use panela as an active ingredient, which makes panela part of a cultural identity. Roberto J. Gonzales gives the best description for the persistence of traditional panela production in Mesoamerica: "Notions of quality and taste on the one hand and reciprocity on the other much more adequately explain the persistence of today's thriving regional panel industry" (2002:176-177).

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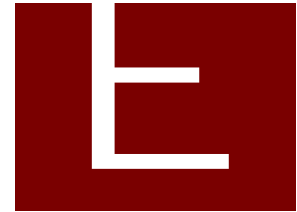
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Cambodia: A Life Time Experience in Three Weeks

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In 2005 I was introduced to the Cambodian community of Long Beach through an Ethnographic field methods class. I initially knew nothing about the people that migrated to Long Beach or their native homeland. Through research and friendships that I developed while taking dance classes in Long Beach, I became curious about Cambodia. I wondered about the location of the Angkor Empire, life along side the Tonle Sap River, rebuilding after the Khmer Rouge, and the developing relationship between Cambodia and America. I saw pictures thanks to my professor, but pictures could not provide the scent, sounds, or feel of Cambodia. In May I signed up for a class in Cambodian culture and in July I was on a plane from Taipei, Taiwan destined for Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia.

Excited is an understatement when describing my feelings about visiting Cambodia. I was overwhelmed with exuberance. For several months I dreamed about visiting the temples in the Angkor structure where I could feel the warmth of the dawning sun slowly creep up my face. The time was near and I felt like a child, anxious and too eager to contain myself. I gazed out of the airplane windows and looked at the land below. Patches of water, green fields, golden brown roads, and dusky river water lay across the surface, evidence that we were arriving in the middle of Cambodia's infamous rainy seasons.

When we landed in Phnom Penh airport, we left the plane and saw three Cambodian women dressed as Apsara. Apsara are celestial dancers that are considered the ancestors of the Khmer civilization. Although these goddesses did not speak, we received their smiles, and their greetings. I learned from them that Visa really is everywhere I wanted to be. Two of the girls gazed ahead at the large Visa logo that floated nearby. This advertisement for Visa was a surprise for me. In this moment I realized that Visa, and other Western icons are becoming a part of Cambodian reality so that tourist like me can have the convenience that Westerners crave. It also informed me that in the process of rebuilding and adjusting to globalization, Cambodian icons are bound to intermingle with other international icons. We saw similar images throughout the airport but I fully realized that I was not in California anymore when I stepped outside the airport building.

When we arrived, the day was hot and dry. While in flight, I saw the water patches in the country side of Cambodia, but I felt no evidence of moisture in Phnom Penh that day. The air was thick and

I was unprepared for the sweltering heat. Still, I was fortunate enough to be distracted by the scene before me. Behind a white crisscross fence that stood on top of a tan colored wall, I saw so many beautiful people. Tanned brown and almond colored complexions, dark brown (maybe black) hair, and dark brown eyes searched the crowds of arrivals. Dozens of them, shouted out toward the endless people that exited the airport doors. They seemed just as anxious as me to be there, although I am sure their reasons were different than my own. We were met by our hosts from Pannasastra University, Peah and Marti. They handed intricately woven necklaces (like Hawaiian lays) made of jasmine, my favorite flower. Already things were off to a good start. They led us to our bus and off we went down the streets of Phnom Penh.

Our ride from the airport was an interesting experience. Pagodas, small shops, other businesses, broken sidewalks, and green palm trees followed our path to the main intersection of Phnom Penh. At the intersection dozens of motorcyclist commanded the street while few automobiles were unevenly dispersed in the crowd. I never saw so many motorcycles on any road, not even in motorcycle movies. To beat that initial shock, I saw that there were several passengers on many of the motorcycles even while in motion. The first thing I thought was, if I ever wanted to ride a motorcycle, this is the place to do it. People here have mastered riding; surely, I could gain a sample of that experience. Although I was cautioned to avoid riding motos (as they are called in Cambodia), I was able to ride twice as a passenger with my Cambodian classmates near the end of our trip.

Transportation in Cambodia is an adventure. Tuk tuk's are common transport for tourists and we depended on tuk tuk drivers throughout our stay in both Phnom Penh and Seam Reap. The drivers are often eager and aggressive, chanting "Tuk Tuk Madame or Sir" to anyone and everyone that appears to be in route somewhere. On our first ride, my classmates and I were terrified and thrilled. We all had similar rides in the US and usually we paid heaps of cash to do so. But unlike our previous experiences (which were on theme park roller coasters) tuk tuk's seemed like uncontrolled vehicles with no handle bars to keep us strapped into our seats. We really bonded with each other in those initial moments as we swayed with our driver, dodging in and out of traffic at a racing 25 miles per hour, sometimes heading against traffic, and often swerving enough around corners to feel as though we would be thrown out onto the streets. We walked away from the tuk tuk that first night wondering if we would be able to handle rides like those everyday, but as humans do, we adapted. We built relationships with our tuk tuk drivers and looking back, I really miss the experience. We saw the same drivers often enough to learn their names like Sal and Thilo, we learned about some of their families, whether or not they enjoyed being a tuk tuk driver and what they thought about Phnom Penh. In the end, we stopped holding on to the sides of our tuk tuks and we settled into the ride of being in Cambodia.

One of the places that every tourist must go of course is the legendary Angkor complex in Seam Reap north of Phnom Penh. On the boat, past the river homes, and through the floating village we arrived at Seam Reap during our second week. Children and tuk tuk drivers crowded the riverside asking for money, "tuk tuk madame or sir", or water. We tried to our best to ignore that experience but how can Americans do so when we are so phobic about personal space. The children were covered with dust, standing on uneven rocky land, hands out, palms up, gazes piercing through our own. They wanted something from us, but we looked over their heads, tuned out their demands, and looked forward to better experiences. I felt ashamed, helpless, and irresponsible because I could do nothing pretend like they did not exist even while they surrounded us and groped at our things. I boarded the bus to our hotel, questioning what it all meant.

Despite my experiences at the riverside, Seam Reap was a breath of fresh air, figuratively and literally. The air was so clean, the sky sapphire blue, and the feel of the city reminded me of the beach cities in Los Angeles. The buildings, generally rose only to a second level and trees spread across the sky often times towering over buildings. Tuk tuk drivers were not so aggressive near our hotel and a street for all night partying made Seam Reap seem like a vacation town. The hustle and bustle of Phnom Penh was far away and there were only adventures in majestic jungles and ancient temples to explore.

We visited the Angkor complex almost everyday. Angkor Wat is made of stone and is surrounded by a beautiful 1 mile square foot moat. The first day we visited Angkor Wat and I climbed to the top. I felt like Indiana Jones (despite the hordes of tourist) and I felt valor rise within me as I took each step along the narrow side of the building. When I reached the top, I was captivated by the Apsara baas reliefs that decorated almost every wall and column inside and outside the temple. Although their costumes were similar to the models in the Visa logo from the airport, the images at Angkor Wat were topless women who seemed like magical nymphs. I could not stop looking at their intense gazes and I took pictures when ever I saw a complete carving.

I thoroughly enjoyed Angkor Wat, but my favorite temples were Bayon and Phnom Kulen. I loved the stories captured on the walls of Bayon. Everyday people from the 12 century experienced everyday life and their ruler, Jayavarman VII, chose to immortalize their lives on his sacred temple walls. I saw depictions of a woman giving birth to a child in the hands of a midwife, women moving with soldiers, men sparring, women caring baskets of food on their heads, and people playing music. I felt connected to the images at Bayon more than I did at Angkor Wat. I felt like the people on the walls of Bayon were like me, like the people of Cambodia, or any person that ever lived and I was impressed that the great Jayavarman VII allowed their memory to remain.

Phnom Kulen was also a wonderful experience for me, but for very different reasons than Bayon; the water fall was blessed by one thousand lingas. Lingas are symbols for Shiva, god of death, dance, and rebirth. Lingas were carved on the riverbed at the top of Phnom Kulen and I marveled at the idea. I could not resist the feel of holy water and I followed my tour guide into the river and saw the image of Shiva staring back at me. I later sat in a hut with my classmates, next to the river and I considered the stories that I would tell people back home. I wondered if my words could express the serenity that I felt when I sat by the river at Phnom Kulen.

Needless to say, I left Cambodia with a sense of enlightenment. Throughout the trip I questioned my experiences; I wondered what they meant. I thought about the children on the street, the tuk tuk drivers, the temples, and of course Phnom Kulen and realized that in the process of learning about Cambodian culture I learned about myself.

