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A ‘crime’ against local history

Post Weekend

Alessandro Marazzi Sassoon and Kong Meta

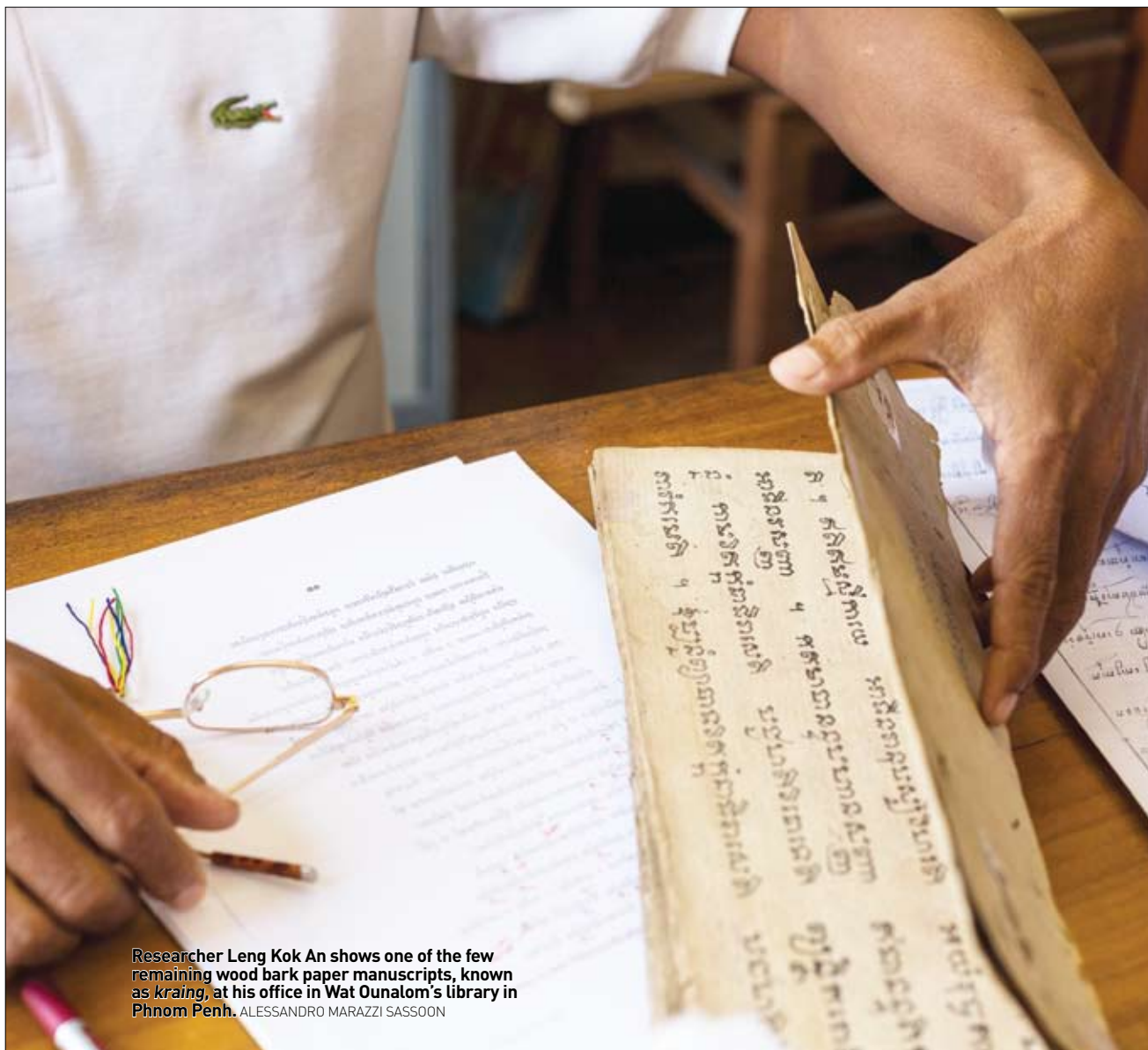
IN RUSSIAN Market, among the variety of trinkets hawked to tourists as souvenirs, are items whose cultural importance seems to have gone unnoticed by buyers, vendors and indifferent law enforcement.

In the same stores where you can find cheap Buddha statues, amulets and other kitschy items are traditional Khmer manuscripts, etched in palm leaf or wood bark paper, which carry unique written records of Cambodian history, religion and culture from the fall of Angkor to the beginning of the French protectorate.

Despite decades-long efforts and international funding to catalogue and preserve these documents, many still end up being sold illegally – mostly to unwitting customers with no knowledge of their origin or the meaning of the text. Scholars, meanwhile, say that the theft and sale is tantamount to the destruction of invaluable cultural knowledge.

Posing as buyers at Russian Market last week, *Post Weekend* reporters readily found palm leaf manuscripts – commonly known as *sleuk rith* – for sale simply by asking for them.

When the first vendor didn't have any, she eagerly fetched a long-format palm leaf manuscript – called a *sastra* – from another stall.



Researcher Leng Kok An shows one of the few remaining wood bark paper manuscripts, known as *kraing*, at his office in Wat Ounalom's library in Phnom Penh. ALESSANDRO MARAZZI SASSOON

Uber gears up to enter market

Matthieu de Gaudemar and Hor Kimsay

REPRESENTATIVES from global ride-hailing behemoth Uber confirmed the company's interest in starting operations in Cambodia during a meeting this week with Transportation Minister Sun Chanthol, according to one of the minister's aides.

Ken Ratha, deputy director of cabinet of the Ministry of Public Works and Transportation (MPWT), told *The Post* yesterday that Uber executives visited the ministry on Tuesday to explain their business model to the minister and Phnom Penh municipal officials.

"They are interested in our market so they came to seek the minister's support by explaining Uber's business model to him," he said. "The minister showed his strong support for the company's

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Residents told to vote CPP

Officials link speedy deal for White Building dwellers to election success

Sen David and Ananth Baliga

A DAY before Land Management Minister Chea Sophara was scheduled to meet residents of Phnom Penh's iconic White Building, the locale's village chiefs promised to

find a quick solution to the residents' impending eviction – if the ruling Cambodian People's Party fared well in the upcoming commune elections, that is.

At a meeting with residents of the building yesterday, chiefs Hun Sarath and Ngem Sovan, who represent the building's

two villages, said the process of finding a solution for residents of the White Building – which is slated for demolition – was complicated, but noted that re-election of CPP representatives in the June ballot would help quicken that process.

In an interview, Sovan con-

firmed asking the villagers to support the ruling party, and maintained that there was nothing unusual about it.

"Related to telling [the villagers] to vote for the CPP in order to find a solution for the building, I think it is not wrong and it is normal thing," Sovan said,

refusing to comment further.

However, advocates yesterday begged to differ, saying the remarks inappropriately politicised what should be a non-partisan bureaucratic process.

The White Building is slated

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Leng Kok An holds up an example of a *vean*, or short-format palm leaf manuscript.
ALESSANDRO MARAZZI SASSOON

A 'crime against intelligence'

Despite decades of efforts to preserve the Kingdom's historic manuscripts, the majority have disappeared – lost to neglect, war and now a black market catering to tourists

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"It's a history of Buddhism," she says, adding that she obtained it from monks in Siem Reap before asking for \$80. "It's older than a decrepit man who can't walk."

A monumental task

In a small office overlooking the main *vihear*, or central structure, of Wat Ounalom, Kun Sopheap, 61, and Leng Kok An, 52, shuffle through palm leaf and bark documents. The pair have dedicated more than two decades to the preservation of Cambodian manuscripts all around the country, recovering them from the pagoda libraries where they were held. As much as 80 percent of all manuscripts were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge in their attempt to create a communist utopia free from the feudal and "parasitic" influence of religion.

"You'll find the most in Kampong Cham, but very few in Takeo, because under the Pol Pot regime the Khmer Rouge most devastated this province," Kok An explains. "Almost all the Khmer manuscripts were destroyed there when pagodas were burned or demolished."

After the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed in 1979, surviving manuscripts were often left to rot as a desperate population entered pagodas

and re-purposed the cupboards they were stored in.

A few monks and officials at that time began to take manuscripts wherever they could – to the National Museum, Wat Ounalom, and the Buddhist Institute. But the largest collection of some 3,400 manuscripts was amassed by Preah Vanarat Ken Vong, the head monk at Wat Saravan.

Before Ken Vong died, the French School for Far Eastern Studies (EFE) began funding work to restore, preserve, document and research the collection, as well as to seek out manuscripts elsewhere.

Established in 1990, the massive project Fonds pour l'Édition des Manuscrits du Cambodge (Fund for Manuscript Publication in Cambodia, or FEMC) – headed by professor Olivier de Bernon, Kok An and Sopheap – hoped to solve what was at the time described as "a crisis situation".

According to a FEMC survey of 1,200 monasteries in Phnom Penh and Kandal, four out of five were found to have completely lost their collections, and in those where documents were found, roughly two-thirds were incomplete. Surveys in other provinces suggest a similar rate of loss throughout the country.

At the FEMC's Wat Saravan collection, housed on the second floor

of a modest building in the pagoda complex just off Street 19, Trent Walker, a PhD student in Buddhist Studies at the University of California-Berkeley, works alongside two Cambodian research assistants studying the 150 or so remaining *kraing* manuscripts, which are written on a bark-based paper.

Walker explains the significance of the three types of documents, which are written in Pali or Khmer script: short form (*vean*), which tend to be manuals; long format (*sastra*), which are most associated with sermons, legal writing and literary texts; and the bark paper manuscripts (*kraing*), which often carry particular religious significance.

For Walker, the FEMC's work is invaluable.

"This is an extraordinarily important collection – not just this one but all the collections the FEMC has curated," he says. "What they've curated represents the vast majority of what survives today ... The work that they've done is inestimable in terms of the patrimony they've preserved for future generations and extremely important for future researchers in Cambodia and beyond to understand Cambodia's literary, religious and cultural past."

For Kok An, the manuscripts are part of the legacy of Cambodian civilisation, proving the existence of advanced and complex legal and



Kun Sopheap in his office overlooking Wat Ounalom.
ALESSANDRO MARAZZI SASSOON



Researcher Trent Walker unfolds an accordion-folded (or leporello) kraing astrological manuscript at Wat Saravan. **ALESSANDRO MARAZZI SASSOON**



A sastra sleuk rith for sale in Russian Market. **A MARAZZI SASSOON**



From left to right: kraing, vean and sastra. **A MARAZZI SASSOON**



Manuscripts were often left to rot after 1979. **SUPPLIED/FEMC**



Kraing manuscripts sometimes contain illustrations. **A MARAZZI SASSOON**

social systems.

"These are the laws with which we ran the country, and it not only covers religion but also culture [and] tradition," he says. "Everything is there and was developed before America was even a country."

The FEMC project continued through 2012 when the EFEQ ran out of funding. Luckily, UNESCO continued to fund the project for a few more years, until 2015. But Kok An and de Bernon say the preservation of manuscripts is incomplete, and increasingly under threat.

"The project is finished. Because there's no budget, the work is incomplete," Kok An says. "The government does not care or pay attention."

Part of the problem, he says, is that local people are not concerned about the preservation of the scrolls. They view them as the domain of monks, which poses a conundrum: "What can we do if the monks don't care?"

The black market

According to Kok An, the pagodas are being pilfered from the inside by their residents.

"They steal scrolls and sell them in the markets, such as Tuol Tom Pong [Russian Market]," he says, though he said he did not know of specific perpetrators.

"Vendors chop up scrolls, sometimes into three parts, and that is

even more devastating, because we cannot understand the meaning anymore," he says.

Some monks buy the scrolls in markets and bring them to him, but generally "authorities don't trouble themselves to find them or track down those who steal the manuscripts".

While Kok An praised Prime Minister Hun Sen's pledge of patronage last month to Phoeun Phavy, one of the few remaining crafters of sleuk rith, Kok An couldn't help but point out a certain irony.

"Hun Sen is interested in the woman [Phavy] in Siem Reap who



It seems that nobody is offended: not the monks in the pagodas, not the lay people around, not the local religious authorities ... It is nobody's concern.

OLIVIER DE BERNON / PROFESSOR

knows how to etch sastra. But if you cannot even appreciate the remaining old things how can you treasure the creation of new things?" he questioned.

According to professor de Bernon, the lack of continued support for the FEMC has had devastating consequences.

"Let us put it this way: more than thirty percent of the manuscripts that we have restored, microfilmed and inventoried since the 1990s have disappeared," he wrote in an email last week.

"It seems that nobody is offended: not the monks in the pagodas, not the lay people around, not the local religious authorities, not the Buddhist institute, not UNESCO. It is nobody's concern."

Inquiries over the past week to the UNESCO office in Phnom Penh went unanswered. Meanwhile, Seng Somony, the spokesman for the Ministry of Cults and Religion plead ignorance.

"I never heard of the monk or achar [religious lay people] stealing these old things to sell at the markets. I never received such information," he said.

"It is not that I don't believe you about the stealing. It's not like it's well maintained at the pagoda – 100 percent – but the monks are the ones who are accountable for the manuscripts." Somony added that he

would look into the alleged thefts.

Khim Sorn, the chief monk of Phnom Penh, said that while the monkhood has been instructed to preserve manuscripts, the old generation generally failed to do so, and the new generation's lack of interest in them means that only a few pagodas with passionate monks actually ensure the safety of texts.

Even in his own pagoda, he said, "We used to see a few of them but now it got lost."

"I never heard or saw with my own eyes that the monks or achar take these things and sell it at the pagoda, but I think it possibly could be," he said.

Back at the market, one vendor pulled out a short-format vean manuscript from a drawer. Asked why she doesn't display them publicly her demeanour turns cold: "Because it's old."

At the next stall an eager vendor pulled out her collection of both sastra and vean, but said she was out of the third kind of manuscript – the rarest and most expensive, the accordion-folded kraing.

"Come back another time when I find some and I'll get you a good deal," she says.

De Bernon says that merchants that sell manuscripts and the tourists who buy them as souvenirs usually have no knowledge, or at least no sense of culpability, for their actions.

"Both pretend not to know about the vandalism they are actively participating [in]," he writes, adding that – perhaps – there is some instant karma for such perpetrators.

"There is some sad and bitter justice to punish the sin of most tourists foolishly buying manuscripts. Most of the time, what they pay [for] ... is just worth nothing," he writes, not because the manuscripts aren't "original" or "authentic" but because often they are a haphazard bundling of incomplete texts, which de Bernon describes as "a crime against intelligence".

What's more, de Bernon has noted that beyond the markets, higher-end tourist boutiques have taken to framing pages or turning them into fans.

"It is ridiculous because it is the denial of what is a text," De Bernon writes.

"Because it is sometimes very expensive, when [it is actually] worth absolutely nothing!" ■

Those wishing to learn more about the EFEQ's work and view a partial selection of digitised microfilms of the preserved manuscripts in the online searchable archive can visit <http://khmermanuscripts.efeo.fr/en/home.html>. The EFEQ's Preah Vanarat Ken Vong Library at Wat Saravan and Wat Ounalom is open to researchers on Monday through Friday from 8am-11:30am and 2pm-5pm.