

*Ceremony for the inauguration of the temporary exhibition
Of the returned piece of Koh Ker
to the Kingdom of Cambodia*

1 October 2014 at 4.00pm

**Speaking points for Anne Lemaistre
Representative of UNESCO in Cambodia**

Excellency Sok An, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of the Council of Minister and President of the Cambodian National Commission to UNESCO,

Lok Chum teav Mrs Phoeung Sackona, Minister of Culture and Fine Arts,

Madame Julie Chung, Chargee d'Affaires at the US Embassy and Deputy Chief of mission,

Dear Ambassadors,

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

- Immense satisfaction for UNESCO to be present for the launching ceremony of this temporary exhibition organized jointly by the RGC, the US Embassy, the EFEO and UNESCO, to celebrate the return back home of five master pieces of Khmer Art coming from the same Prasat Chen Temple in the Koh Ker site and, as explained by the Director of the National Museum, to present to the public these pieces reunified for the first time in Cambodia since their respective looting in the 70s.
- As you know, illicit trafficking in cultural property is a highly international affair and it can be solved mainly through international cooperation and this is the international cooperation in times of change that UNESCO wants to celebrate today.
- As you know, UNESCO works for decades on recovery of illegally transported and possessed cultural objects thanks to the 1970 Convention (which is the Convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of Cultural property) which provides a legal framework to deal internationally with illicit traffic in cultural property. Restitutions in Egypt, in Libya these last months are samples of the day to day work achieved by all the UNESCO Offices worldwide.
- For your information, the global sales of cultural property, legitimate or not, reached the value of US\$ 60 billion per year with an increase of 50% in a decade and an “unprecedented growth” of offer on the Internet. The illicit trafficking of antiquities is estimated to be superior to US\$ 8 billion per year. Together with the trafficking in drugs and arms, the black market of antiquities constitutes one of the most persistent illegal trades in the world.
- But we can talk about times of change because the practice of removing artefacts of significant importance to a culture’s history and identity from their place of origin is increasingly acknowledged by the international community as unethical. The idea that cultural artefacts are the property of the people of the place in which they are originated, is gaining recognition. A palpable expression of this gradual but change in attitude is the adoption by many museums and art dealers of professional codes of ethics developed by ICOM and UNESCO.

- In Cambodia, the recovery of cultural objects has been quite successful these last 3 decades. Since 90's, the Kingdom of Cambodia with the support of UNESCO has retrieved dozens of pieces from private owners, museums and from neighboring countries, all on a voluntary basis. For example: Many objects belonging to private owners were returned to Cambodia in 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000; In 1997, a 10th-century head of the god **Shiva** was restituted already by the Metropolitan Museum to the National Museum of Cambodia; The national Museum with the assistance of UNESCO, created a database of the returned objects.
- And yet, this is not an exhaustive list, neither it is an ending list.
- But why is this case so special? For two main reasons:
Firstly, because in previous restitution cases in Cambodia, we used the National Inventories with number and pictures to easily demonstrate Cambodia's ownership. In the present case, the site of Koh Ker was protected by the Cambodian Law but these pieces were never inventoried, we knew very little about them. By chance, their respective pedestals were all identified at the Koh Ker site. This unequivocal proof of their origins as well as archaeological and iconographic researches carried out by Eric Bourdonneau at EFEO and the APSARA Team, gave us the understanding and the meaning of the place as being a famous scene of the Mahabharata. So in addition, from the legal point of view, we have progressed towards the recognition of the needed return of the illegally excavated objects, not only the ones being in museums and national inventories. This creates a case-law to advocate in favor of the return of the illegally excavated objects and is of paramount importance for rich archaeological countries such as Egypt, Afghanistan, Irak and now Syria whose archaeological heritage is now at threat.

Secondly, this case is special because major auction houses and cultural institutions have all demonstrated their ethical standards by giving back these pieces voluntarily.

- This new era of moral stand started in June 2013 when the Metropolitan Museum gave back the 2 Pandava brothers sculptures in presence of the Prime Minister of Cambodia and Ms Irina Bokova, UNESCO DG, who encouraged other museums to follow this exemplary gesture in compliance with ICOM's code of professional ethics.
- We are pleased also that in December 2013, Sotheby's and the private owner finally agreed to give back the Duryodhana sculpture to Cambodia.
- UNESCO wants to thank also Christies who accepted last May 2014 to facilitate the return of the Balarama statue and its transportation to Cambodia as well as the Norton Simon Museum in California which made such a positive gesture by giving back the Bhima sculpture.
- As I told you earlier, this is really the international cooperation that we celebrate here today. Because to achieve these remarkable results, the American Embassy in Phnom Penh, the American Federal Authorities, in particular the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, showed their willingness to promote cultural respect through their

strong commitment and actively worked on the case for the last 2 years. UNESCO wishes to express its deep gratitude to all of them.

- UNESCO is grateful also to the EFEO (Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient), in particular Bertrand Porte and Eric Bourdonneau whose work allowed the identification of the statues thanks to the remaining pedestals at the Prasat Chen Temple. They efficiently contributed to this success.
- Thank you finally to the Royal Government of Cambodia, UNESCO's daily partner without who nothing of it could happen. His Excellency Sok An's personal commitment and belief in Cambodia' cultural heritage made possible the return of these pieces to their homeland. His Excellency Chan Tani, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, the APSARA Authority did not spare their efforts to negotiate at all stages of the process.
- What we gain today, in addition to these extraordinary sculptures, is knowledge about the Koh Ker site which was not understood and even neglected for decades when it is in fact a major chapter of the Angkorian history. I hope this exhibition will contribute to promote a better understanding and appreciation of this site but also will recall the necessity to cooperate to prevent and combat the illicit traffic of cultural objects. As we say at UNESCO, **Heritage is identity. Don't steal it!"**

I thank you for your attention,