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UNESCO and the Preservation of Angkor: Institutional Mechanisms and International Cooperation in World Heritage Governance

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Abstract: The Angkor Archaeological Complex, one of Southeast Asia's most significant cultural heritage sites, represents not only a cornerstone of Cambodia's cultural identity but also a major case of international cooperation in World Heritage conservation. Since Angkor was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1992, its preservation has gradually evolved. Today, it is managed through a multi-stakeholder cooperation mechanism involving the Cambodian government, UNESCO, multiple foreign governments, international organizations, and specialized conservation teams. This paper examines the historical evolution, institutional structure, and operational logic of the Angkor conservation regime, with particular attention to UNESCO's role within this framework. The study argues that the preservation of Angkor has generated a distinctive governance model characterized by three interrelated dimensions: The Cambodian state as the primary sovereign authority, UNESCO as the provider of normative legitimacy and institutional coordination, and the International Coordinating Committee for Angkor (ICC-Angkor) as the principal platform for multilateral technical cooperation. Moving beyond a monument-centered understanding of conservation, this paper conceptualizes Angkor as a field of global heritage governance in which conservation practice, diplomacy, technical expertise, tourism management, and capacity-building are closely interconnected. The findings show that UNESCO's role extends well beyond symbolic inscription. It has acted as an agenda-setter, coordinator of international cooperation, standard-setter in conservation practice, and facilitator of local institutional development. At the same time, the Angkor case reveals enduring tensions between conservation and development, external assistance and local ownership, and technical intervention and long-term sustainability. The article's main contribution lies in reinterpreting Angkor not merely as a successful restoration project, but as a representative model of UNESCO-framed international heritage governance. This case provides valuable insights for the protection of World Heritage sites in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Keywords: Angkor; World Heritage conservation; UNESCO; heritage governance; international cooperation

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1. Introduction

The Angkor Archaeological Complex is one of the most important cultural landscapes in the world and among the most celebrated archaeological sites in Southeast Asia. Located in present-day Siem Reap Province, Cambodia, the site encompasses Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom, Bayon, Ta Prohm, Banteay Srei. And a wide range of temple, hydraulic. And urban remains associated with the Khmer Empire, thereby unesco describes Angkor as extending over approximately 400 square kilometres and recognizes it as one of the most significant archaeological sites in the world, thereby its value lies not

only in its monumental architecture, but also in the testimony it provides to the political, Religious, technological, hence and urban achievements of the Khmer civilization between the ninth and fifteenth centuries [1].

The significance of Angkor, however, must be understood alongside its vulnerability. In the second half of the twentieth century, prolonged warfare, political instability, Looting, environmental degradation; and institutional collapse seriously threatened the integrity of the site, and during the years of conflict and civil unrest, many conservation projects were suspended. Management structures became ineffective, hence and the monuments suffered from neglect, structural deterioration, illicit trafficking of artefacts. And unchecked vegetation encroachment. It was only in the early 1990s, after the Paris Peace Agreements and the gradual restoration of political order in Cambodia, that systematic international action for the safeguarding of Angkor became possible, thereby unesco's inscription of Angkor on the World Heritage List in 1992, together with its immediate inclusion on the List of World Heritage in Danger, marked a decisive turning point by mobilizing the international community around the urgent need for coordinated protection [2].

Since that moment, the protection of Angkor has developed into a complex and relatively durable international mechanism. The Cambodian government established specialized bodies for site management, and unesco provided the overarching normative and institutional framework. France, Japan, China, and and numerous other states participated in restoration projects. Technical missions, financial assistance, hence and expert exchanges, thereby the creation of ICC-Angkor in 1993 offered a formal platform through which these diverse actors could coordinate their activities. According to official UNESCO and APSARA materials. The committee has continued to function as a central mechanism for project consistency, standard-setting, and and multilateral consultation; and in recent years its mandate has expanded to include broader concerns related to sustainable development and the connected World Heritage site of Sambor Prei Kuk [3].

Existing scholarship on Angkor has made major contributions in archaeology, architectural history, hence restoration techniques, tourism studies, and the cultural history of the Khmer Empire, hence nevertheless, compared with the vast literature on the monuments themselves, relatively less attention has been paid to the governance architecture that has enabled conservation to proceed over the past three decades [4]. In particular, UNESCO's role is often acknowledged in general terms, but insufficiently analyzed in terms of institutional design, norm production. Multilateral diplomacy. And long-term capacity-building; this creates a significant research gap. Because Angkor is not merely a protected heritage site; it also represents a practical example of how global heritage governance operates in a post-conflict context.

This paper seeks to address that gap through two interrelated questions. First. How did the conservation mechanism for Angkor emerge, evolve, and and operate under the World Heritage framework? Second. What specific role has UNESCO played within this mechanism, beyond the formal act of inscription? To answer these questions. The paper combines historical review with institutional analysis, thereby it examines the formation of the Angkor protection regime, the division of responsibilities among its key actors. The institutional role of ICC-Angkor and APSARA, and UNESCO's contributions in agenda-setting, coordination, standardization, monitoring. And professional training [5].

The central argument of this paper is that the Angkor conservation mechanism constitutes a distinctive governance model that can be described as host-state-centered, UNESCO-framed. And ICC-coordinated. Its significance lies not only in preserving monuments, but also in demonstrating how international organizations can generate cooperation without displacing state sovereignty [6]. In this model, and the Cambodian government retains primary ownership and authority; UNESCO provides legitimacy, norms; and coordination; and international technical partners operate within a structured multilateral platform, thereby this paper further argues that the Angkor experience is innovative because it bridges the traditional divide between heritage conservation and

international governance studies, hence rather than treating heritage as a purely cultural or technical issue, this perspective reveals conservation as a field of institutional cooperation; diplomatic negotiation. And shared yet asymmetrical responsibility [7].

By highlighting these dimensions, the paper aims to contribute not only to the study of Angkor but also to broader debates on World Heritage governance, post-conflict reconstruction. And international cooperation in cultural preservation.

2. Historical Context of Angkor Conservation

The history of Angkor conservation predates UNESCO by nearly a century. Scholarly attention to the site intensified in the late nineteenth century, when European explorers, photographers, and scholars publicized the monumental remains of the Khmer Empire to an international audience; the establishment of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) in 1898 marked a foundational moment in the institutional study of Angkor. During the early twentieth century, EFEO scholars carried out archaeological surveys, architectural documentation, epigraphic studies, mapping, and restoration [8]. Their work laid much of the documentary and methodological groundwork upon which later conservation efforts would build.

During the French colonial period, Angkor was largely managed within a colonial knowledge framework. This system was deeply unequal and ideologically shaped by imperial power, yet it also generated substantial technical archives. Site plans. And restoration experiments. One of the most significant techniques used during this period was anastylosis. This aimed to reconstruct damaged monuments by reassembling original architectural elements wherever possible, thereby such methods reflected the emergence of early modern conservation thinking and helped establish Angkor as a major field laboratory for tropical archaeological restoration [9].

However, colonial-era conservation remained limited in important respects. It privileged monumental architecture over living cultural context, often separated the site from local social life, hence and framed Angkor as an object of scientific recovery under foreign authority. Even so, the period was historically significant because it created the first sustained conservation infrastructure for the site.

The twentieth century's political upheavals then profoundly disrupted this fragile heritage regime. From the 1970s onward, Cambodia experienced civil war, massive social destruction, and the Khmer Rouge period. During these years, Angkor suffered from institutional abandonment, insecurity, looting, and the collapse of regular conservation activities. In practical terms, the site became vulnerable not only to weathering and biological growth but also to the absence of trained personnel, legal protection, and administrative continuity. The interruption of conservation work during this era is crucial to understanding why Angkor later required not simply restoration projects but a comprehensive reconstruction of governance [10].

The early 1990s opened a new phase, and Cambodia's gradual re-entry into international society after the Paris Peace Agreements created the political conditions for global engagement with Angkor, and UNESCO's intervention was decisive. In 1992, the World Heritage Committee inscribed Angkor on the World Heritage List and, at the same time, and placed it on the List of World Heritage in Danger in response to the site's extreme vulnerability. UNESCO and APSARA materials further indicate that the World Heritage Committee attached a set of urgent institutional conditions to the inscription, including protective legislation, the establishment of a national protection agency, the setting of boundaries and buffer zones, and the creation of mechanisms for monitoring and coordinating international conservation efforts [11].

This moment is best understood as the transition from archaeological conservation history to international heritage governance. The issue was no longer simply how to repair damaged temples; it was how to create a durable and legitimate system capable of organizing expertise, finance, authority. And long-term stewardship. In 1993, the first

international conference on Angkor in Tokyo led to the creation of ICC-Angkor; this became one of the key institutional conditions for managing international support. Official sources state that ICC-Angkor was established following the World Heritage Committee's request and that it was designed to coordinate the various projects undertaken by Cambodia and international partners [12].

The establishment of APSARA in 1995 represented the complementary national side of this new system. UNESCO decision records and APSARA's own institutional materials confirm that APSARA was created by royal decree as the national authority responsible for the protection and management of Angkor and the Siem Reap region. In governance terms, this was highly significant. The site's protection could not depend indefinitely on fragmented foreign interventions; it required a national institution capable of planning. Regulation, permits; tourism management, thereby and administrative continuity.

The historical importance of this period lies in the fact that Angkor's conservation mechanism emerged from crisis but did not remain a temporary emergency arrangement. Over time, the mechanism became more routinized, technical. And institutionalized. UNESCO notes that the successful conservation of Angkor by the APSARA National Authority, monitored by ICC-Angkor. Culminated in the site's removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2004. This milestone was not simply symbolic. It indicated that the international community recognized substantial progress in institutional capacity, project coordination. And the basic conditions for long-term stewardship.

Thus, the historical context of Angkor conservation reveals a movement through three major phases: an early scholarly and colonial conservation phase, a period of severe interruption and deterioration under conflict, and a post-1992 phase of internationally coordinated institutional reconstruction. The third phase is the most analytically important for this paper because it transformed Angkor into a paradigmatic case of heritage protection under UNESCO's multilateral framework.

3. Institutional Framework of Angkor World Heritage Protection

The conservation of Angkor under the World Heritage system has gradually developed into a layered institutional framework involving national authority, international coordination, technical cooperation. And normative oversight. This framework does not function as a simple hierarchy. Rather, it operates through differentiated responsibilities, and negotiated authority, and recurring consultation, thereby its relative success lies in the fact that it balances state sovereignty with international involvement without collapsing into either unilateral state control or externally imposed management.

3.1. The Cambodian State as the Foundation of Heritage Sovereignty

At the center of the Angkor conservation regime stands the Cambodian government. This is both a legal necessity and a political principle. Under the World Heritage Convention, states parties retain primary responsibility for the identification, protection, conservation; presentation, and transmission of heritage located on their territory. In the case of Angkor. This principle has been institutionalized through the creation of APSARA, the Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap, established in 1995, thereby unesco records describe the creation of APSARA as a key step in fulfilling the institutional conditions associated with Angkor's inscription, while APSARA itself presents the authority as central to sustainable heritage governance in the region.

APSARA's significance extends beyond monument conservation narrowly defined. It is responsible for site management, planning, regulation of interventions. Archaeological research authorization, tourism coordination, land-use considerations. Environmental management. And broader regional governance related to the Angkor area; in other words, APSARA embodies the principle that heritage protection is not

reducible to the maintenance of stones and structures; it requires administrative capacity, territorial management, hence and a state institution capable of interfacing with both domestic stakeholders and international partners.

The Cambodian state's role also matters symbolically. In a post-conflict context marked by external intervention in many sectors, it was essential that heritage conservation not appear as the indefinite internationalization of Cambodian cultural property. The Angkor model therefore rests on a careful equilibrium: international actors provide expertise and support, but the Cambodian government remains the recognized sovereign authority.

3.2. ICC-Angkor as the Core Coordination Platform

If APSARA embodies national ownership, ICC-Angkor represents the mechanism through which international cooperation is organized, thereby official UNESCO and APSARA sources indicate that ICC-Angkor was established in 1993 following the Tokyo conference and the World Heritage Committee's request; it is co-chaired by France and Japan. With UNESCO serving as the Secretariat, and its function is to ensure coherence among the numerous scientific, restoration, and conservation projects carried out by Cambodia and its international partners. It also helps define technical and financial standards when necessary and contributes to the broader management and sustainable development of the site.

This committee is one of the most distinctive institutional innovations of the Angkor mechanism. Many World Heritage sites receive international assistance, but relatively few have a durable and formalized multilateral platform of this kind; icc-Angkor provides a venue where restoration teams, diplomats, technical experts, Cambodian authorities. And UNESCO officials can review ongoing projects, discuss technical problems. Align priorities, hence and reduce duplication. Its technical sessions and plenary meetings create a regular rhythm of governance that helps transform ad hoc donor interventions into coordinated long-term engagement.

UNESCO's recent reports on ICC sessions show that the committee continues to function actively and now addresses not only monument restoration but also sustainable tourism, thereby community-related issues, and capacity-building for Cambodian professionals. This demonstrates that ICC-Angkor has evolved from an emergency coordination mechanism into a broader governance arena for safeguarding and sustainable development.

3.3. International Technical Missions and Multinational Participation

Another major component of the Angkor institutional framework is the participation of multinational conservation teams. Over the decades, many countries and organizations have undertaken restoration, research. And training projects at Angkor. France and Japan, as ICC co-chairs, have played especially prominent roles, but a much wider network of states and institutions has been involved. APSARA's official overview of ICC-Angkor notes participation by dozens of countries and international organizations in the founding process, illustrating the broad diplomatic and technical coalition behind Angkor's conservation.

These international projects are significant for two reasons. First, they have supplied advanced techniques, and financial resources, and specialist knowledge that Cambodia, especially in the 1990s. Could not easily mobilize alone. Second, they have turned Angkor into a transnational site of knowledge exchange in conservation science, archaeology, structural engineering, hydrology, and heritage management. Such participation, however, is not left entirely unstructured. It is channeled through APSARA's authority and ICC-Angkor's coordination. This is precisely what distinguishes the Angkor model from loosely organized donor competition.

3.4. The "Quadripartite" Political Logic

The governance of Angkor also rests on what may be described as a quadripartite political logic: Cambodia as the sovereign host state, UNESCO as the normative and institutional center, and France and Japan as the co-chairs of ICC-Angkor. Although many states contribute to conservation, these four actors occupy a particularly influential position in steering the mechanism. Official UNESCO sources characterize the ICC arrangement as a unique model of multilateral cooperation between Cambodia, UNESCO, and the co-chairs Japan and France. In 2022, France and Japan renewed their commitment to continue serving as co-chairs for another decade, and Cambodia approved the extension of ICC-Angkor through 2033.

This quadripartite structure is politically important because it stabilizes leadership without eliminating multilateral participation, hence it allows the mechanism to maintain continuity. Diplomatic legitimacy; and institutional memory, while still leaving room for broad international engagement. Such an arrangement reduces fragmentation and ensures that the governance of Angkor is not overly dependent on the short-term preferences of changing donor projects.

3.5. From Emergency Protection to Institutional Maturity

Taken together, these institutions form a multi-layered governance framework: the Cambodian government provides sovereignty and daily administration; APSARA serves as the operational national authority; UNESCO provides the global normative framework and Secretariat role; ICC-Angkor coordinates multilateral action; and international partners supply specialized conservation inputs. UNESCO's recognition of Angkor's removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2004 suggests that this framework achieved sufficient maturity to shift from emergency protection to more stable long-term management.

The institutional framework of Angkor thus illustrates that successful heritage protection requires more than funding and expertise, thereby it requires a structured governance architecture capable of aligning legal authority, international legitimacy, technical knowledge; and long-term coordination.

4. UNESCO's Role in the Angkor Conservation Mechanism

UNESCO occupies a central and multifaceted position in the Angkor conservation regime. Its role should not be reduced to that of a symbolic sponsor or a passive guardian of the World Heritage List. Rather, UNESCO has acted simultaneously as a norm entrepreneur, institutional architect, diplomatic convener, technical mediator, capacity-building facilitator, thereby and monitoring authority. The Angkor case demonstrates how an international organization can shape heritage governance not by replacing state authority, but by organizing and legitimizing cooperation around it.

4.1. UNESCO as Normative Architect

The first and most visible role of UNESCO was to bring Angkor into the World Heritage system. By inscribing the site in 1992 and placing it on the List of World Heritage in Danger, UNESCO transformed Angkor from a national monument in crisis into a matter of recognized international concern. This act generated what may be called normative elevation: Angkor's protection became not merely desirable for Cambodia, but a shared responsibility under the international heritage regime. UNESCO's official site description and decision history show that inscription was accompanied by a framework of obligations, monitoring expectations, and institutional conditions. Thereby linking symbolic recognition to governance requirements.

This normative role is fundamental. Without UNESCO's framework, international concern for Angkor might have remained episodic or fragmented, and the World Heritage

label created a common legal and moral vocabulary through which actors could justify intervention, mobilize support, hence and define conservation priorities.

4.2. UNESCO as Convenor of International Cooperation

UNESCO also played a decisive role in convening the international community around Angkor. The creation of ICC-Angkor in 1993 was not a spontaneous outcome of bilateral goodwill; it emerged through UNESCO-linked institutional processes and the World Heritage Committee's call for coordinated international action. APSARA and UNESCO sources both emphasize that establishing ICC-Angkor was one of the conditions associated with inscription and that the committee became the central international mechanism for coordinating all assistance to the site.

In practical terms, UNESCO's convening power solved a classic collective-action problem. Many states were willing to assist Angkor, but uncoordinated assistance could easily have produced duplication, conflicting methodologies, uneven priorities. And competition for visibility, thereby UNESCO provided a neutral and legitimate institutional umbrella within which assistance could be aggregated, reviewed. And aligned. This is one of the most important reasons why Angkor became a model rather than a cautionary tale.

4.3. UNESCO as Secretariat and Mediator

UNESCO's role as Secretariat to ICC-Angkor is institutionally significant. A secretariat does more than organize meetings. It supports continuity, documentation. Information circulation, agenda management; and procedural coherence. In multilateral governance, such background work is essential. By serving as Secretariat, UNESCO helped maintain the regular operation of ICC-Angkor and ensured that technical discussions were embedded in a durable institutional process rather than left to diplomatic improvisation.

UNESCO's position also enables mediation among actors with different priorities. Conservation experts may emphasize authenticity and structural safety; national authorities may prioritize sovereignty and administrative feasibility; donor states may seek visibility; tourism actors may emphasize visitor access and economic development; UNESCO helps translate among these perspectives within the common language of World Heritage protection. This mediating role is especially important in a site as politically and economically significant as Angkor.

4.4. UNESCO as Standard-Setter and Technical Reference Point

Heritage conservation depends not only on goodwill but on technical standards. Different restoration teams may bring distinct philosophies and methods, particularly regarding reconstruction, structural intervention, material replacement, visitor management. And risk mitigation. UNESCO, through the World Heritage framework and expert consultation processes. Has played a major role in shaping the normative environment within which such technical decisions are made. UNESCO and APSARA sources explicitly indicate that ICC-Angkor helps ensure project consistency and define technical and financial standards when required.

This function is crucial for a multi-actor site. In the absence of common standards, conservation could become incoherent, with different monuments treated according to incompatible philosophies; UNESCO provides a common reference point grounded in international heritage principles; helping to prevent the site from becoming a patchwork of unrelated interventions.

4.5. UNESCO as Facilitator of Local Institution-Building

One of the most consequential but sometimes underappreciated aspects of UNESCO's role is institution-building; UNESCO did not simply coordinate foreign aid; it supported the development of Cambodian governance capacity. The establishment and

consolidation of APSARA was central to this process; unesco records highlight the creation of a national protection agency as a condition of inscription and later recognized APSARA's growing effectiveness in management and conservation.

This matters theoretically because it shows that UNESCO's heritage role extends beyond site listing toward state capacity enhancement. The Angkor case suggests that international heritage governance is most sustainable when it strengthens domestic institutions rather than bypassing them. APSARA's current official vision. This emphasizes institutional professional capacity and the sustainability of Cambodians restoring Khmer heritage, thereby reflects the long-term localization of this governance process.

4.6. UNESCO as Capacity-Builder

UNESCO has also contributed through training, professional exchanges, and knowledge transfer. Earlier UNESCO documentation refers to programs such as the training of APSARA cultural mediators. And more recent UNESCO reports continue to highlight capacity-building for Cambodian heritage professionals as a core component of ICC-related work.

Capacity-building is not a peripheral issue. Heritage conservation is sustainable only when local professionals possess the knowledge, confidence, and institutional space necessary to lead it. In post-conflict Cambodia, and where expertise had been disrupted by decades of turmoil, training programs and professional development were indispensable. UNESCO's contribution here can be understood as the gradual transformation of Angkor from an externally assisted site into a more locally sustained conservation system.

4.7. UNESCO as Monitor and Evaluator

Finally, UNESCO performs an important oversight function; through the World Heritage Committee and state-of-conservation processes, the organization monitors conditions at Angkor and evaluates how development pressures, tourism infrastructure. Conservation interventions, thereby and environmental risks affect the site's Outstanding Universal Value. UNESCO's document portal shows a long history of decisions. Mission reports, and periodic reporting related to Angkor, indicating that monitoring has remained continuous rather than episodic.

This monitoring role serves two purposes; first, it creates accountability by requiring regular reporting and evaluation. Second, it provides a mechanism through which conservation concerns can be raised before irreversible damage occurs, thereby in a context where tourism and regional development are economically important. Such oversight helps maintain a necessary balance between use and preservation.

In sum, UNESCO's role at Angkor is comprehensive. It has provided legitimacy. Coordination, standards, procedural continuity, training. And monitoring. More importantly, and it has enabled a governance model in which international assistance supports rather than overrides host-state authority.

5. Characteristics and Innovations of the Angkor Conservation Mechanism

The Angkor conservation regime possesses several distinctive characteristics that make it an important object of academic analysis, thereby its value lies not merely in its practical achievements but also in its conceptual contribution to the study of cultural heritage governance.

5.1. Multi-Stakeholder Participation within a Structured Framework

A first defining feature is its multi-stakeholder character, and the conservation of Angkor involves the Cambodian state, UNESCO, donor governments, technical agencies. Archaeologists. Conservation architects, local administrators, hence tourism planners,

and, increasingly, community-related stakeholders, thereby however, unlike loosely networked governance arrangements, Angkor's multi-stakeholder participation is organized through a recognizable institutional framework, hence this combination of plurality and structure is one of its major strengths.

5.2. Sovereignty-Compatible International Cooperation

A second characteristic is that international cooperation has been made compatible with national sovereignty; this is especially important in post-conflict contexts; where external involvement can easily generate concerns about dependency or loss of control. The Angkor model avoids this by preserving Cambodia's formal leadership while using UNESCO and ICC-Angkor to organize support. The result is a relatively balanced arrangement in which sovereignty is not abandoned, but reframed as stewardship exercised within an international normative order.

5.3. Long-Term Coordination Rather than Short-Term Projectism

A third feature is institutional continuity, thereby many heritage interventions around the world are project-based and short-term; Angkor is different because its coordination mechanism has endured for more than three decades. UNESCO reports note the thirtieth anniversary of ICC-Angkor in 2023 and the extension of the arrangement to 2033, confirming its exceptional durability.

This continuity has major consequences. It enables cumulative learning, trust-building among actors, procedural refinement, and the gradual shift from emergency rescue to strategic planning. It also allows conservation to adapt to new challenges without dismantling the underlying governance structure.

5.4. Integration of Conservation and Sustainable Development

A fourth characteristic is the gradual integration of conservation with sustainable development. UNESCO and APSARA materials increasingly frame Angkor not only as a monumental site but also as a lived region affected by tourism, livelihoods, infrastructure; and environmental management. Recent UNESCO reporting on ICC sessions mentions sustainable tourism initiatives and broader safeguarding and development concerns, thereby APSARA-associated planning materials likewise indicate that long-term tourism planning in Siem Reap-Angkor now explicitly emphasizes sustainability.

This evolution is important because it reflects a broader shift in World Heritage practice: heritage is no longer governed solely through monument-centered preservation, but through integrated territorial management.

5.5. Professionalization and Knowledge Circulation

A fifth feature is the professionalization of conservation. The Angkor system has fostered a highly specialized environment involving documentation, technical review, research. Structural analysis. Training. And the production of guidelines, and APSARA's documentation database and published guidance materials indicate that conservation at Angkor is now embedded in a substantial documentary and technical apparatus.

5.6. Theoretical Innovation: Angkor as a Model of Global Heritage Governance

The principal innovation of this paper is to interpret these characteristics not simply as empirical traits, but as elements of a broader governance model, and specifically, Angkor can be conceptualized as a case of global heritage governance under structured multilateral coordination. This model has three pillars:

- Host-state-centered authority, ensuring legitimacy and sovereignty;
- UNESCO-framed normativity, providing international legitimacy and standards;
- ICC-coordinated multilateral action, ensuring operational coherence among diverse partners.

This formulation helps move the analysis beyond descriptive accounts of restoration and toward a more theoretically informed understanding of how international organizations operate in the heritage field. It also shows that heritage governance can serve as a lens through which to study international cooperation, norm diffusion, and institutional resilience.

6. Challenges and Limitations of the Mechanism

Despite its achievements, the Angkor conservation mechanism is not free from tension or contradiction.

First, multi-actor governance inevitably generates coordination costs. The more participants are involved, the more time and institutional effort are required to align priorities; review technical proposals. And manage procedural expectations. What appears from the outside as smooth multilateralism often depends on extensive negotiation behind the scenes?

Second, hence differences in conservation philosophy can create friction, thereby international teams may disagree on the degree of intervention appropriate for damaged monuments, the balance between authenticity and stability, or the acceptable scope of visitor infrastructure, thereby the very need for standards and technical review reveals that conservation is not a purely objective science but also a field of interpretive judgment.

Third, long-term sustainability remains a challenge, hence although Angkor has made major progress since the 1990s, parts of the conservation regime still depend on international expertise, funding, and diplomatic commitment, hence a key question is whether capacity transfer has proceeded far enough to ensure that the system remains robust under changing geopolitical and financial conditions.

Fourth, hence the relationship between tourism and conservation remains delicate, hence Angkor is both a World Heritage site and a major tourism destination. UNESCO and APSARA materials increasingly emphasize sustainable tourism, thereby this itself reflects ongoing concern that visitor pressures, infrastructure development, thereby and commercial imperatives could threaten the site if not carefully managed.

Fifth, environmental and territorial pressures cannot be ignored. Large archaeological landscapes are affected by hydrology, vegetation, urban expansion. Climate variability, and land-use change. The protection of Angkor therefore requires integrated management beyond temple restoration alone.

These challenges do not invalidate the Angkor model. Rather, they show that heritage governance is an ongoing process of adaptation. The durability of the mechanism lies precisely in its capacity to accommodate new pressures within an existing institutional framework.

7. Broader Implications for Southeast Asia and World Heritage Governance

The experience of Angkor has broader relevance for Southeast Asia, a region marked by rich cultural heritage, rapid urbanization, tourism growth, uneven state capacity, and increasing environmental pressure. Many heritage sites in the region face tensions similar to those seen at Angkor: how to reconcile conservation with development, how to attract international support without eroding local ownership, and how to move from project-based restoration to long-term institutional governance.

Angkor offers at least three transferable lessons.

First, effective heritage protection requires institutional architecture, not merely technical intervention. Sites in crisis need management bodies, legal frameworks, monitoring procedures. And coordination platforms.

Second, UNESCO can be most effective when it acts not as a substitute for the state but as a facilitator of state-centered yet internationally supported governance.

Third, multilateral heritage cooperation works best when it is regularized through standing mechanisms rather than left to fragmented bilateral projects.

For Southeast Asian states seeking to strengthen heritage protection, the Angkor case suggests that international cooperation is most productive when it is embedded in domestic institution-building and long-term planning. This is particularly relevant for heritage sites that face heavy tourism pressure or post-conflict reconstruction demands.

At a theoretical level, Angkor also contributes to debates on global governance, and it demonstrates that cultural heritage is not a marginal domain but a substantive field in which norms, sovereignty, diplomacy; expertise. And development interact, thereby in this sense, Angkor is not only a monument complex; it is a site where international order is enacted through conservation practice.

8. Conclusion

The conservation of Angkor constitutes one of the most important and influential cases of international cultural heritage governance in the contemporary world. From a site severely threatened by war, neglect, and looting, Angkor has been transformed into a comparatively mature and internationally recognized model of coordinated heritage protection; unesco's official documentation confirms the key stages of this transformation: inscription and danger listing in 1992, the creation of ICC-Angkor in 1993. The establishment of APSARA in 1995; and removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2004 after substantial advances in management and conservation.

This paper has argued that the Angkor mechanism should be understood not merely as a sequence of restoration projects, but as a distinctive governance model, thereby that model is centered on Cambodian sovereignty, framed by UNESCO's normative and institutional authority. And operationalized through ICC-Angkor's multilateral coordination, hence within this structure, UNESCO has played a decisive role in mobilizing international attention, defining standards, convening cooperation. Supporting local institutions, building professional capacity, hence and maintaining long-term monitoring.

The Angkor case demonstrates that international organizations can make a substantive contribution to heritage protection when they combine legitimacy with coordination and when their involvement strengthens rather than supplants domestic governance. It also shows that heritage conservation. Especially at major World Heritage properties. Must be analyzed as a multidimensional field linking culture, politics, diplomacy, development. And expertise.

The innovation of this study lies in highlighting Angkor as a mechanism of global heritage governance; this perspective helps explain why the site's protection has been relatively resilient and why it continues to offer lessons for other regions, hence in the future, Angkor will continue to face pressures from tourism. Environmental change. And the demands of sustainable development, hence yet the institutional foundation created over the past three decades provides an important basis for adaptive governance.

For Southeast Asia and beyond, Angkor offers a powerful example: heritage can be safeguarded most effectively when national responsibility, international legitimacy, technical professionalism, thereby and multilateral cooperation are woven into a coherent institutional system. In that sense, the preservation of Angkor is not only a Cambodian achievement or a UNESCO success story. It is a practical demonstration of how global cultural governance can operate through shared commitment, structured coordination. And evolving local capacity.

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