



Cambodian scouts wave flags during a celebration marking World Heritage Listing of Preah Vihear. AFP



Thai tourists visit the Preah Vihear temple. AFP



A central market vendors waves a national flag after the heritage listing of Preah Vihear temple. AFP

# The notion of the nation

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THE concept of heritage shares an uneasy dividing line with nationalism – and all its attendant hatred. As British philosopher and author A.C.Grayling said: “Nationalism is an evil. It causes wars, its roots lie in xenophobia and racism.”

The jingoistic favour that has sporadically seized both Cambodia and neighbouring Thailand, in their oft-rancorous dispute over the world heritage-listed 11th century Preah Vihear temple, certainly never helped matters. Nationalism has served to fuel the enmity – occasionally tipping it into fatal violence.

For example, to date, seven troops have been killed near the temple complex since the long-standing conflict entered its most recent phase, in July 2008. Cambodia even announced that the standoff represented “an imminent state of war”.

The whys and wherefores of this simmering ownership debate dating back to the late 19th century are complex, controversial, highly politicised – and belong to other articles.

Suffice to say: in 1962, the International Court of Justice ruled that Preah Vihear was based in Cambodia. While the most accessible entrance is from northeastern Thailand. See what I mean?

Mercifully, though, in late August this year, military commanders from both countries bilaterally declared a formal end to hostilities, stating their shared goal of “peace and solidarity”.

While it's too early to say how faithfully either side will hold to this martial stand-down, for now let's celebrate that, since the ceasefire, Preah Vihear has reportedly seen a flood of tourist arrivals.

Om Phirom, chief of the temple's Heritage Police,

said about 200 Cambodian and 50 foreign visitors were venturing to the site daily.

By comparison, the temple received approximately 100 Cambodian and 50 foreign tourists per month during the 13-month standoff, he said.

“This increase began a few days ago after Prime Minister Hun Sen announced that

troops at the temple would be withdrawn,” said Om Phirom.

Back in July – with tensions still high – Cambodians “noisily celebrated” the first anniversary of Preah Vihear's UN's world heritage listing, according to AFP, who said that “posters of the temple were plastered in pagodas, schools and prominent

locations around the capital.”

Thousands congregated in Phnom Penh's Olympic Stadium for an anniversary ceremony, replete with fireworks, official speeches, patriotic songs and much triumphant flag-waving.

The fervent celebrations were colourfully photogenic, as you can see here. But

one imagines they were at least partly intended to be a neighbour-baiting victory display. So let us end by reprising the wise words of A.C. Grayling:

“Nations are artificial constructs, drawn in the blood of past war. And one should not confuse culture and nationality: there is

no country on earth which is not home to more than one different but usually coexisting culture.

“Cultural heritage is not the same thing as national identity.

“The blindness of people who fall for nationalistic demagoguery is surprising.”

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