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Transmission of Khmer Traditional Performing Arts: Its Genuineness, Challenge, and Impact on Society

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In recent history, Cambodia has experienced decades of wars, political unrest, and economic setback. Political conflicts and wrestling for power and control over the fragile nation of Cambodia are still going on. Indeed, these events have a tremendous effect on the practice and fate of Khmer culture. Against the backdrop of current trend and atmosphere of our world—globalization, advanced technology, and economic orientation—the transmission of Khmer traditional knowledge is, in general, dwindling.

As our world moves from the spiritual to the economic, from the sacred and religious to the secular, our needs and priorities are changing. We experience a decline in quality in both teaching and learning, as well as in the product, as students now learn from less reliable, less good, and less solid teachers and sources what was once the genuine body of knowledge and Khmer tradition. Today in Cambodia, a new generation—youth of the present—shuns tradition completely and practices activities that are totally nontraditional.

New and, perhaps, more relevant situations and demands have caused us to address “transmission” differently. While some still adhere to the traditional way of transmitting knowledge, the so-called “oral tradition,” others adopt a new approach taking advantage of available printed, audio, and visual materials. As the older generation of musicians and artists dies out, traditional music and performing arts subside because the young lack understanding and appreciation of their traditional culture and thus do not see the need to carry on their precious legacy. Even the notion of what should be continued is now also challenged.

In this paper, I propose to examine the transmission of Khmer performing arts by looking at the effects and challenges on the process as well as its outcome. I shall pay special attention to the systemic problems facing transmission of performing arts, the effect of government policy on education, the notion of authenticity negotiated in formal education, and the outcome or result of transmission of performing arts on the nation and society as a whole. I shall address these issues in the light of the socio-political and cultural reality of Cambodia. Specific examples will be presented.



Photo 1 Classical dance training at the Royal University of Fine Arts (2006, photo by Sam-Ang Sam)

Traditional Approach to Transmission

What and how are traditions transmitted? Here, I am looking at the “form” and “process” of transmission in direct response to the need, change of context, and relevancy of the constituents who are involved in the process. By form, I mean dance (court and folk), music, singing, play (shadow and masked), and so on.

The traditional approach to transmission is conducted in a non-formal environment, in which knowledge flows from master to pupil, or within a family situation, from father to son, mother to daughter. The father or mother can give his/her son/daughter the best knowledge, the keys to fast learning, and the secrets of the trade. The traditional approach internalizes the knowledge; it makes students memorize the piece and finally perform a subjective interpretation. The rendition of Khmer music, for instance, is perceived to be sensible, emotional, subjective, an interwoven fabric of Khmer music. This approach is slow at the start. But in the end, it pays off. It equips performing artists with better ways, more comfort, and more confidence in performance. It is a long lasting process. More often than not, this process produces more committed and career musicians than otherwise.

Each of the below cases is a good example, in which the son is a dedicated, committed, and great musician, a tradition of career and continuity.

Bin Proeung/Proeung Pruon	Father/Son
Keo Snguon/Keo Sonan Kavei	Father/Son
Ep Chea/Ep Theary	Father/Daughter

The two examples below are village troupes, in which dedicated masters fervently pass on the traditional knowledge to their apprentices within the old oral tradition, one that has been practiced in their villages for centuries.

Shadow Play Troupe of Sala Kansaeng
Masked Play Troupe of Vatt Svay Andaet

Oral tradition is ideal for performance and continuity, but its transmission is time consuming. The disadvantage, however, is the shrinkage of repertoire provided artists do not learn all existing pieces in a timely manner.

New Approach to Transmission

Thus far, there has also been a new approach to transmission beyond the oral tradition. It occurs in a more formal educational environment, namely, at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. This new venue presents an approach that relies on printed, audio, and visual materials.

This approach requires a shorter time to learn. In the case of music, it gives musicians something tangible to hold on to (i.e., the scores). It is good for documentation and reference should musicians need to go back to check on, say, a forgotten passage. The drawback, however, is that musicians do not memorize pieces and depend on the scores all the time. Reading from scores does not free musicians' mind and attention from the printed pages, thus limiting their ability to embellish the piece during rendition, an inherent characteristic of Khmer music. Some even go further to say that while oral tradition is fluid and subjective, the use of scores and notations is fragmented and objective. Scores and notations reduce music to formulae. "Standardization kills diversity," to quote Robert Garfias.¹

Problems Facing the Transmission of Khmer Performing Arts

The systemic problems facing the transmission of traditional performing arts are due to changing sociopolitical conditions, including the results of war, and the material and moral lack that has resulted. Other phenomena are conditioned by the fact that concerned artists have to give priority to dealing with their daily lives and functioning in the reality of a society focused on economic development and efficiency, including incentives, market-oriented trends and environments, career orientation, market and career competitiveness, new ways of life, and the effect of popular culture.

Popular Culture

Among community activities, the most popular and frequent are social gatherings, usually involving social dancing accompanied by a so-called rock band. These dance gatherings are attended mostly by the young. Audio cassettes, compact discs, and digital video discs of Khmer popular songs can be found in every Khmer store. The production of Khmer popular music is growing at a faster rate than ever before. Its growth is due to its popularity among the youth, who are willing to pay for such entertainment, and to the accessibility of affordable modern equipment.

This interest in popular music is not strange at all. The majority of Americans listen to popular, and not classical music. Indians listen to Indian film music rather than Hindustani or Carnatic music, while the majority of Thai prefer popular music to the *piphat*, *khruang sai*, or *mahori*.

Khmer youngsters praise and then adopt Western music, particularly “pop” music, and discredit their own. They are saturated by Music Television (MTV), which only broadcasts popular music. As a music teacher of Khmer children, I ask my students what musical instruments they want to play, they will reply “guitar, keyboard, drum set.” Asked whether or not they want to learn Khmer songs, most will reply “No.” In my music appreciation class where I play Khmer music with several types of Khmer ensembles, my students find these pieces slow, old fashioned, and boring. Khmer children who are committed to learning Khmer music are even scarcer. These attitudes and behaviors are the result of a lack of understanding and appreciation of Khmer traditional values. The situation is even worse for the Khmer living beyond the borders of our country. Among them, Khmer traditional music loses its audience, its full range of repertoire, instrumentation, and performance and becomes virtually symbolic.

Change of Context

Change of context refers to changes in environment, priorities, conditions, the economy, and morality and mentality. Under today’s economic pressure, several aspects of traditional culture have been curtailed, as observable in the wedding ceremonies and religious activities at Khmer Buddhist temples. In the olden days, a Khmer traditional wedding was said to last seven days and nights. As time went by, it was shortened to three days and nights. Today, it is done in a mere one day and night. While music used to be played almost continuously, day and night, throughout the wedding ceremonies, today, it is heard only in a matter of a few hours. In some instances, sadly live music is substituted by pre-recorded tapes or compact discs. There is a loss of traditional value, due in part to the change of civic and moral education, which was the foundation of traditional Khmer family and society.

Currently, the traditional ceremonies and beliefs are still practiced among the country folks, although to a lesser extent among city dwellers. We must evaluate the

past and present perceptions of cultural practices. Time and financial resources ought to be considered, but continuity of tradition, which has been carried on for centuries, also deserve much and better attention.

Meanwhile, Khmer arts have undergone additional changes among emigrant populations abroad. Among refugees and immigrants now living in the United States, for example, there has been no formal schooling in Khmer artistry. Only a few cultural organizations have provided such programs.

With regard to traditional music beyond the borders of Cambodia, the Khmer experience different problems, not political but artistic. The shortage of musicians and musical instruments are the major problems in the preservation of Khmer traditional musical culture. There has been substitution and intermingling as well as reduction in the musical instrumentation of ensembles. Student musicians are learning in new ways, using tapes and records rather than learning directly from a master. This approach results in a limited repertoire as well as musical mutation of original pieces.

A new development in Khmer musical form can be observed outside Cambodia. The Khmer in the US have not been able to form a complete *pinn peat* (court) ensemble, which is needed for various ceremonies. In performances, Khmer musicians (myself included) both consciously and subconsciously borrow instruments from other Khmer ensembles and mix them with those of the *pinn peat*. Because of the scarcity and distribution of musicians and musical instruments, this borrowing is difficult to avoid. In addition, Khmer traditionally hold great respect for elders. In performance situations, we cannot tell our older musicians (or even younger ones) not to play with us just because they do not know how to play a *pinn peat* instrument. Moreover, excluding them from the group would reduce the ensemble even further, thus making it impossible to produce a full accompaniment. Worst of all, discouraging other musicians from playing might be seen as a break in the continuity of Khmer musical life and transmission.

In the new environment and conditions, traditions are also changed. Ceremonies that traditionally included music now do not include, for instance, the *Bonn Phka* (“Flower” Ceremony or Fundraising Ceremony), *Bonn Phchum Benn* (Soul Day), and New Year.

Change in Morality and Mentality

The senseless civil war ordeals of some thirty years in Cambodia have profoundly affected Khmer culture. The recovery process is extremely slow and painful. The Khmer have suffered and experienced the loss of lives, memories, repertoire, venues, incentive, trust, and hope.

Efforts for Effective Transmission and Cultural Programming

Public support is crucial to the success of cultural programming. All events depend upon participation from the adults and children of the community. Only through parents' participation and encouragement will children come to cultural events and participate in cultural activities. Community members also serve effectively as coordinators and cultural organizers and presenters.

Successful cultural programming involves multi-faceted expertise, and collaborative work is thus necessary. In other words, while artists and community members provide the product, it is folklorists, anthropologists, and ethnomusicologists who package and sell it. They write comprehensive program notes, do the advertising and publicity, and seek the right venues. Funding is crucial to the maintenance of the entire production, from start to finish, and it can only be secured with the help of such field experts.

Past and present efforts have resulted in, for instance, the representation of Khmer performing arts at the Los Angeles Festival (1990), the residency satellite program at UCLA (1993), the US Tour (2001), and successful execution of the Cambodian Artists Projects, the Library Development Project, the Mobile Stage Project, Khmer Artists Support Project, and the Puppetry Restoration Project, as well as filming, recording, performing tours, study trips, and documentation. These projects are generously supported by international organizations such as the Asian Cultural Council, the Rockefeller Foundation, the New England Foundation for the Arts, the Leverage Investment in New Creativity (LINC), the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, the Albert Kunstadter Family Foundation, the Slawsons, the National Initiative to Preserve American Dance, the National Endowment for the Arts, the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, the Social Science Research Council, the United States Agency for International Development, the Toyota Foundation, and the Japan Foundation.

Arts in the Public School

Arts programs should be included in the public school curricula. Courses in arts appreciation and some applied courses on the arts should be seriously considered. Short-term and long-term residencies should be designed to bring artists to the school, so that children can be introduced to their culture in early childhood education. This should be a national policy, one of the priorities of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. In the United States, not only the national arts are taught and exposed to students, but also arts of other nationalities are introduced as well. In this way, young students are given the opportunities early enough to be exposed and to learn, and thus to have a broad understanding and appreciation of cultures other than their own. During my primary school years in the late 1950s and

early 1960s, there were courses in storytelling and poetry (reading and reciting). When the 1970s came, they were no longer offered.

Royal University of Fine Arts

The present Royal University of Fine Arts was reopened in October 1980 as the School of Fine Arts (Tuy 1996:5). It can function as a production house, a factory if you will, producing hundreds of artists. The University has done impressive work with much achievement, working with bare hands from zero—a state which was created and left behind by the extremist, radical, and utopian Khmer Rouge. The task of my fellow artists in Cambodia has been the preservation of the traditional Khmer arts, and they have done amazingly well.



Photo 2 Apsara Dance (2006, photo by Sam-Ang Sam)

1. Performances

The University has been actively and impressively involved with performances (nationally and internationally) to expose students to the public and to help them generate income for the University and the artists themselves.

2. Resource Development

The University has worked to restore, renovate, and create a library, laboratories, and studios, and to develop resources for teaching and learning. The university has acquired equipment for the above facilities. It also initiates and encourages research and scholarship as well as promoting native researchers and writers in all areas of Khmer studies.

3. Research and Documentation

At present, a research center has been created at the University. Various cultural materials have been collected and preserved. Other new research and collection projects are currently undertaken. Research findings have been published, and rare and important materials have been reprinted.

4. Library and Archives Development

Archives of traditional arts have been gradually set up. Models have been drawn from existing libraries and archives in other countries in Asia and the United States.

5. Cultural Exchanges

Cultural exchange includes scholarship and fellowship study abroad. Private businesses and foundations have been approached to secure scholarships and fellowships for Khmer students to continue with their higher education in the area of culture.

6. International Affiliations

The University has established affiliations with educational institutions abroad, namely, Wesleyan University, Cornell University, University of Hawaii, and Connecticut College, to explore and develop a wider and stronger base and improved resources. In this aspect, the University will need help from friends and expatriate nationals abroad, who have contacts and connections with the institutions concerned.

Concerning transmission, various projects and programs have been developed, including:

- Mentorship-Apprenticeship Program supported by the Rockefeller Foundation
- Dance Notation Project supported by the Toyota Foundation
- Publication and recording projects by the Khmer Culture Association
- Publication and recording projects by the Cambodian Network Council
- Puppetry Restoration Project by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Slawsons

- Library Development Project by the Albert Kunstadter Family Foundation and the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia
- Research and Teaching Residency in Asia by the Asian Cultural Council

7. Mentorship-Apprenticeship Program

This program has been up and running since 1993 at the Royal University of Fine Arts (Faculty of Music and Faculty of Choreographic Arts) in Phnom Penh. It creates and provides an opportunity and environment for transmitting traditional knowledge of performing arts from senior to junior teachers. One of the ultimate goals is to eventually equip junior teachers with solid knowledge, which they can in turn pass on to their students.

8. Music and Dance Notation

Teachers and students at the Faculty of Music of the Royal University of Fine Arts have utilized classical Western music notation to record Khmer traditional music pieces. The Toyota Foundation supported a project at the Royal University of Fine Arts, Faculty of Choreographic Arts, to notate traditional dance movements and choreographies for the first time. The project resulted in a printed form and is now available to artists and the public.

Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations (CBOs) play an important and crucial role in facilitating the process of transmission, particularly outside Cambodia. They secure funds and implement programming, providing the local Khmer communities with invaluable programs, particularly for youth. Those programs include language, dance, and music classes, performances, residencies, and cultural resource development of books, audio and visual materials.

Acculturation is an inescapable phenomenon that our community encounters while we attempt to preserve our culture. Recognizing that traditional Khmer arts must continue to take their course, a number of art institutions and foundations, such as the National Endowment for the Arts, have morally and financially supported such an honored, respected, and noble endeavor. This support has enabled the artists to venture to practice, preserve, and further develop their arts. In performing arts, Khmer local art organizations across the country have increased the number of staged performances responding to the growing need and demand of the Khmer community and the community at large. The support has also compensated the artists for their time spent in practicing more for to improve their artistic quality. It gives the artists a profile and exposure in the community. It also provides them with a marketplace where their work can be presented and an income generated. More importantly, it gives challenge, encouragement, and incentive to artists to take up

arts as a serious career and to expand their activities. On the more sophisticated and scholarly level, conferences and seminars, publications, documentary films and videos, and now digital compact discs of handsome quality have been organized and produced. Workshops and residencies have also been launched to teach and create new works to expand the existing repertoire.

These programs and activities are created and implemented to increase awareness of traditional culture and its value.

Government Policies on Education and the Transmission of Khmer Performing Arts

Policy on arts education can be traced back to who is responsible for the fate of arts and culture. In Cambodia, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, a state-run institution, sets policies, takes initiatives, designs, develops, and implements programs, and oversees and enforces them (see Sam 2003). Government policies on education affect the transmission of traditional performing arts in many ways. They dictate the direction and environment, programs, and standards in response to state and national goals, including the preservation, development, and promotion of Khmer culture.

In the current situation, the government (through the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts) has not done enough in its policies. It does not have good models and examples to follow. It does not include arts education in the general school curriculum. The government does not have an arts education policy in its national goals in education. It lacks encouragement to raise the esteem with which the arts are held, or to make them a high priority and need. It does not create the notion of supply and demand in Khmer society. It is weak in making arts a good and livable career for artists.

Transmission and Its Authenticity

Often, we address authenticity out of a concern for preservation and loss of a culture. Authenticity is esteem, pride, honor, and respect. It is originality. Authenticity is used to support, not to suppress, to preserve and to continue a tradition in a healthy way. Scholars, teachers, and traditional artists respond to authenticity differently.

In Cambodia, the Royal University of Fine Arts, considered to be professional in every sense of the word, is the sole institution to offer curricula in the arts, in both theory and practice. It is responsible for the well-being of Khmer culture, setting standards, preserving its authenticity, and raising the morality and self-esteem of the Khmer people. In this institution, to a high degree, authenticity of

transmission can be achieved and preserved. Amateur groups and artists, on the other hand, do not necessarily maintain the standards and authenticity of transmission, as they lack understanding and mastery of the arts they practice.

Arts Education and Its Effects

Arts programs should be included in the public school curricula. Courses in arts appreciation and some applied courses on the arts should be seriously considered. Short-term and long-term residencies should be designed to bring artists to the school, so that children can be introduced to their culture sufficiently early. This should be a national policy of Early Childhood Education, one of the priorities of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. In the United States, not only are the national arts taught and given exposure to students, but arts of other nationalities are also introduced. In this way, young students are given the early opportunity to obtain a broad understanding of other cultures other than their own. Among the Māori in New Zealand, their arts curriculum was designed with a clear focus and goals of exploring, making, understanding, and appreciating (Hindle 2002: 15). This clear focus and goals help them define the scope and parameters for effective teaching and learning, while the curriculum provides them with a solid base and framework.

In Cambodia, there is no professional development training for teachers to be equipped to teach arts subjects as an area of specialty. Arts expertise has been drawn largely from artists of the Royal University of Fine Arts and the Department of Arts and Performing Arts. General teachers who may teach arts must do research on their own, tapping the scarce resources Cambodia currently offers.

Since 1994, the Ministry of Education, Youths and Sports has included arts programs in the curricula of primary schools. They now have 30 minutes per week of courses on Khmer music (Curriculum 1997).²

Arts education is good insofar as it is beneficial to artists. It is vibrant in the paradigm (equation) of need, demand, and supply. Arts education in general schools, for instance, helps create jobs for artists. Where schools need arts teachers to teach arts classes, artists will have jobs. This gives an incentive to institutions such as the Royal University of Fine Arts to produce more artists to meet the need and supply sufficient for the demand.

Arts education or teaching traditional performing arts enhances ethnic harmony and forms an image of a multicultural nation. It widens students' views of cultures other than their own. It increases appreciation of other cultures through teaching and learning. It tolerates other cultures and fosters multicultural health and diversity.

Conclusion

Transmission of traditional Khmer performing arts reflects the socio-economic situation of Cambodia and beyond. It is a direct response to the paradigm of need, demand, and supply. It also reflects the status and recognition of the arts that are to be transmitted. Are those arts held in high or low esteem? Transmission itself has many challenges. For instance, if we are to compare popular culture and traditional culture, one finds that popular artists do much better in terms of status, recognition, and finance. Popular artists are often synonymous with glamour and fun. Look at the sound system they use for concerts. How much, how modern, how sophisticated are they? Look at the types of microphone (cordless or head set microphones) they use in concerts. How do they perform? Standing up, walking freely, and interacting with the audience who respond to them with excitement and joy. How about traditional artists? What kinds of sound system do they have in concert? They are more likely to have the kinds of microphone that are old and out of date, with cords running all over the place and microphones stuck right in their faces. How do traditional artists perform? Sitting on the floor on a carpet, or, worse yet, without one. In fact, the overall scene of traditional Khmer performing arts is dwindling. Some have already died out; others are declining and on the verge of disappearing.

Change is a natural phenomenon; nothing remains constant except change itself. In fact, change is not only inevitable, but also necessary to respond to artists' socio-economic needs and reality. These reflect the artist's consciousness and awareness of his/her cultural heritage, pride, integrity, and national identity. The continuation of cultural practice has social functions, serving as food for the soul, entertainment, means for legitimacy, and cultural pride.

The new global trend—a technologically and economically driven world—dictates the situations in which cultural activities are conducted, including the reduced ensemble, the curtailing of pieces, the mixed ensembles, the inadequate knowledge, and the simplification of various national and traditional ceremonies. Most Khmer still hold traditional ceremonies, although they celebrate them in a greatly simplified form.

Caution must be taken to assure smooth and effective transmission. As the older generation of musicians dies, traditional music subsides because the young lack understanding and appreciation of their traditional culture and thus do not see the need to carry on their precious legacy.

The government should support and encourage the existence and activities of semi-professional troupes. Before the war, there were such troupes of *lkhaon basakk* and *lkhaon yike*, i.e., Lkhaon Basakk Tuol Ta Poug, Lkhaon Basakk Phsar Silepp, Yike Ta Khy, and other provincial troupes. Even in the small town of Bannak

(Pursat) where I grew up as a young boy, there was a *basakk* troupe, which I frequently observed, I was glad to hear that at one time, claimed H.E. Pich Tum Kravel, there were two hundred theater companies in Cambodia (Heywood 1994:14). There was an *ayang* troupe in Vatt Khmaoch (Siem Reap) that gave some twenty performances per year (ibid.). There were at total of 5,700 Troupes of Mass Culture (Kromm Silapakk Moha Chun) of all forms, including twenty professional groups (Ouk Socheat, personal communication 1990). Today, they are all gone, leaving but a sad memory.

Other avenues would be the creation of festivals and ceremonies, which provide opportunities and environments to foster the traditional arts. Wedding ceremonies nowadays are curtailed and simplified. The pagodas do not own a music ensemble. They do not even bother to hire one to perform. This is always for the financial reason that it is wasteful. Instead, people would rather pay to go to nightclubs and drink alcoholic beverages. Which is really the greater need? We must reverse both psychology and practice.

We ought to pass on to our young something of quality and meaningful, something that they can be proud of. Yet, we ought to be as realistic and relevant as we can toward the actual needs and demands of our people. I even venture further to say that we should practice our arts with joy and dignity in the active process of globalization, economic growth and prosperity, and not in a struggling and pathetic way.

Despite social, economic, and cultural adversity, Khmer performing artists strive to preserve their tradition and maintain their identity and pride. They hold on to it, desiring to impart its values to the younger generation and working fervently to do so.

Humanity and the arts are one coherent unit, and above all, arts are the most powerful tool in transforming life into an art of living, whereby harmony, love, and peace can be found in this ever-changing world. Khmer arts, which are symbolized in our culture as “flowers” and are considered by many to be the treasure of the earth, will continue to bloom in Cambodia, the United States and beyond.

Notes

- 1 A comment made by Robert Garfias during the symposium (2003) on which this report is based.
- 2 In Japan, more than 1.1 million Japanese students take music lessons (TV Headline News 5/26/96).

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