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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Sam, Sam-Ang メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00002099

Cambodian Music and Dance in North America

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There are approximately one quarter of a million Cambodians now living in the United States. Unlike earlier Asians coming to America such as the Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Indians, Cambodians are among the most recent immigrants. On the other hand, Cambodians came to America, not for economic reasons, but for fear of harsh punishment and persecution by the torturous Cambodian Communists, better known to the world as the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot.

Up until the mid-1970s, Cambodia had been peaceful. On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge launched an aggressive attack on the Cambodian national armies and took over Cambodia. Immediately, the Khmer Rouge began the evacuation of the cities, pushing people to the countryside, where they separated family members and put them in harsh labor camps. They systematically killed off some two million Cambodians during their subsequent rule of three years, eight months, and twenty days. Among those, eighty to ninety percent of Cambodian artists, including musicians, were killed (Kampuchea Review 1979, 1982; Jones 1987:1; Pack 1989:J4). Since then, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians have fled the killing fields and resettled in safe havens, such as the United States. There have been two waves of Cambodian refugees to the United States, the first in 1975. This wave included professionals and skilled individuals. The second wave, beginning in the early 1980s, included unskilled individuals such as farmers and peasants, in particular, those who lived near the Cambodian-Thai border. Consequently, they more easily crossed the border, and sought refuge in Thailand then on to the United States and elsewhere.

In this article, I attempt to look at the roles of music in the Cambodian community and my role as a Cambodian

musician and a cultural advocate. It is difficult, if not impossible, for me to address issues pertaining to Cambodian music in North America and not make any reference to that in Cambodia. Cambodians in Cambodia and those in the United States have different priorities concerning music due to context, situation, environment, and pressure, but they are interrelated. In Cambodia, they are more concerned with the loss of culture, reviving a culture and the dying traditions, preserving a culture, developing a culture, and restoring pride. While in the United States, Cambodians are more concerned with identity crisis, sharing a culture, ethnic solidarity, restoring pride, continuity, ceremony, homesickness, entertainment, and peer pressure. Indeed, it is a wake-up call responding to the Khmer Rouge radical and utopian policies to uproot the Cambodian culture.

Unlike other Asian music ensembles in America, which are more academic-based, the Cambodian ensembles are almost entirely community-based due to the lack of awareness and unfamiliarity among the public at large and the priorities of the Cambodian American community: revival, maintenance, development, and promotion respectively. Indian and Indonesian musics, for example, have been introduced to the American public for many decades. Thus, the American public is aware of and familiar with them.

Cambodian music ensembles can be found in virtually every Cambodian community in America. Only a few musicians lecture, do workshops, perform, and serve in residencies in schools. Most perform for community social functions: weddings, New Year celebrations, and social gatherings. Connecticut College and the University of Washington were the only two American institutions in the United States to have Cambodian ensembles, created mainly to enable me to teach American students. After I left those institutions, the ensembles were also discontinued.

In the Current Practice

Cambodians in America practiced those art forms which are functional and most familiar to them from Cambodia. Those forms include court dance and folk dance. In addition, there are

two forms of theater—*yike* (folk theater) and *basakk* (theater of Chinese origin)—which are occasionally staged. Among the approximately two dozen music ensembles, *kar* (wedding), *pinn peat* (court), and *mohori* (entertainment) ensembles are found prominently in the current practice. The most popular form of all is modern urban (or popular) music, primarily ballroom dance music, movie music, and "pop songs."



Photo 1: Wedding ensemble (Philadelphia, 1984; photo by Sam-Ang Sam)

A New Trend: What Is American About It?

In an effort to keep Cambodian traditional modes of artistic expressions alive in our Cambodian American community, and in reaching out to a wider audience in a changing world, by and large, Cambodian music is more observatory than participatory. Americans seem reluctant and shy away from participation in new things, at first at least. This is perhaps because Cambodian music is new to America, unfamiliar, and there are few advocates, and we, as a people, are facing different problems from other Asians. Besides,

Cambodian musical instruments are difficult to learn compared to others. Indeed, it takes years to be a virtuoso in any tradition.

Cambodian culture in America is indeed firmly based in its traditional Cambodian form. Democratic principles of inclusiveness, gender, context, and repertory change over time. Are these changes good or dangerous for Cambodian culture? Finding meaningful ways to keep Cambodian music alive, accessible, and viable in America is a difficult task. The end results of what have been done so far in America are at times frightening. Today, there is confusion about the male-female traditions. Traditionally, the Cambodian court dance is known to be a female tradition, in which women take all roles and characters—king, prince, queen, princess, and demon—except the role of monkey which is played by men. Some fifty years ago, even the monkey role was performed by women. There have been situations in which musical pieces have been shortened. Many musicians play the *chhing* (small finger cymbals) in a reversed manner. Low quality of performances due to a lack of knowledge of the true quality of art can be seen everywhere in Cambodian communities in America. The professionals have often been criticized for being narrow-minded, but they might be narrow-minded because they are afraid of losing their culture, one of quality. For instance, a dance troupe in California performs the Coconut Shell Dance using ashtrays instead of the actual coconut shells. Do we call this a new idea? Is it alright to do that? Many view this as an insult and disgrace to the culture and tradition.

Connection to the Homeland

Maintaining cultural ties with the homeland is crucial to cultural continuity and the assurance of high quality in the arts. Although some students have traveled to Cambodia to study traditional arts, there are more and more opportunities for learning from dedicated and professional musicians and dancers who teach and perform in America. There have been a few instances in the recent past which have brought a few professional artists from Cambodia to the United States. It began with the Los Angeles Festival in 1990, when in fact five

dancers defected from the troupe after the tour. Other artists are in the United States through marriages with Americans or Cambodian Americans. These artists came to the United States and so far have not returned to Cambodia. They are now teaching students in their localities.



Photo 2: Amarin-Rangsey Sam with dance master, Chea Khan (Greensboro, North Carolina, 1995; photo by Sam-Ang Sam)



Photo 3: Malene Sam with her dance master Chea Samy (Becket, Massachusetts, 1993; photo by Sam-Ang Sam)

The connection and exchange provide nourishment and are vital to the continuity and the success of Cambodian culture. The more one knows about the tradition, the more careful one becomes. These performers can definitely have an effect on a form or tradition. For performers, an excellent performance or presentation is evidence of great work and a source of pride. Professional musicians become discouraged after mediocre performances.

Recognition and Encouragement

The National Endowment for the Arts (Folk and Traditional Arts Program, National Heritage Fellowship, and International Program) has recognized and honored works to preserve, shape, and share traditions of ethnic heritages. Other arts funders, such as the National Initiative to Preserve American Dance, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Asian Cultural Council, the Albert Kunstadter Family Foundation, the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, the Social Science Research Council, the National Endowment of the Humanities, the New England Foundation for the Arts, and the State and City Arts Councils have all supported efforts to preserve Cambodian culture.

Transcending Boundaries

What makes young men and women want to study Cambodian music? It begins with their parents who encourage their children to go to music classes to be exposed to Cambodian culture. Cambodian youngsters also go to cultural events on their own initiatives for peer socialization and courtship. Artists who are raised in America need to express their spontaneity. There must be room for that. As long as there is a commitment, sincere desire to learn, dedication, responsibility, sensitivity, and most importantly, “respect” for the tradition, one can actively participate and learn, regardless of race and background.

Most of the quarter million Cambodians who live in the United States are concentrated in two locations, Long Beach (California) and Lowell (Massachusetts), but smaller groups are found in Washington, D.C., Seattle, and Philadelphia. Wherever possible, the Cambodian communities maintain traditional customs and observe as many of their religious and national festivals as possible. As with most immigrant groups, however, the younger generation now coming of age in North America is strongly inclined to adapt themselves to their new environment. A small minority has striven to maintain the artistic traditions of their homeland.



Photo 4: Three second-generation Cambodian dancers in the US (Greensboro, North Carolina, 1995; photo by Sam-Ang Sam)

The maintenance of Cambodian culture in North America depends on the geographical proximity of balanced groups of musicians, singers, and dancers, a coincidence of free time, and appropriate contexts for performance. All have been and continue to be problems. In the case of village ensembles, substitutions have either been impossible or dissimilar (e.g., using American banjo in place of the *chapey dang veng* [long-

necked lute]). Popular music requires a distribution system of media materials (cassette tapes, compact discs, DVD, and videos), but Cambodian shops are rare outside the places where the population is concentrated.

With the fall of the Cambodian monarchy in 1970 (albeit, restored in 1993 when Prince Sihanouk returned as King Sihanouk), the court traditions ceased to be exclusive. Court musicians and dancers living in the refugee camps began teaching their arts to interested commoners. Because the court arts were seen to embody the very soul of Cambodian culture, they quickly came to represent the Cambodian heritage that gave all individuals grounding. Having had near sacred status before 1975, they came to have a kind of spiritual status after 1979. Their restoration represented the restoration of the Cambodian soul. Consequently, the court arts in North America have been entirely democratic, open to anyone willing to learn. They became part of the healing process of a people deeply scarred by events so terrible that those who have not experienced them could never even imagine their horror. The court arts were not merely elegant, sophisticated, and exotic but became fundamental to maintaining and expressing Cambodian identity.

The classical repertory underwent numerous changes in North America to accommodate missing instruments and the limitations of the performers. These include:

1. Because of the lack of musicians and instruments, the *pinn peat* ensemble, traditionally comprised of *sralai* (shawm), *roneat* (xylophones/metallophone), *korng vung* (circular frame of gongs), *chhing* (small finger cymbals), *sampho* (small double-headed barrel drum), *skor thomm* (large double-headed barrel drums), and *chamrieng* (vocals), now also includes *tror* (two-stringed fiddles), *krapeu* (three-stringed zither), *khimm* (hammered dulcimer), and *khloy* (duct flute). Some of these modified *pinn peat* ensembles also use Western flute or recorder instead of the *khloy*.
2. Because of the lack of *sralai* players, *pinn peat* ensembles have the *roneat ek* (high-pitched xylophone) player perform the traditional and well-known "Salauma," normally played on a *sralai*.

3. Lacking *skor thomm* players, the *sampho* player now plays both parts, resulting in a decline in timbre variety.
4. Male dancers now dance male and demonic roles in the *lkhaon kbach* instead of the traditional female dancers.
5. Because of inadequate knowledge of repertory of both music and dance, substitutions and abbreviations of classical pieces occur. For example, musicians may substitute a simpler and more familiar piece for the correct one. Sometimes when musicians cannot play all the sections of a traditional piece, they repeat what they know instead.

Young Cambodians often feel that their parents and older relatives are too conservative, old-fashioned, and even backward. They perceive Cambodian music, song, and dance as too slow and therefore boring. Nonetheless, a few young Cambodians do seek out lessons in traditional arts and attend performance events.

Cambodian associations in some communities, such as Cambodian-American Heritage in Maryland, offer classes in the traditional performing arts. Some students have little interest in learning these arts, but they come to dance and music classes for their social value, especially to meet members of the opposite sex: courtship failures usually lead to dropping the class. There is also the problem of commitment; some come to class once and are never seen again. In addition, community arts and outreach groups, such as the Cambodian Network Council in Washington (DC), Portland Performing Arts in Portland (Maine), Country Roads: Refugee Arts Group in Boston, New England Foundation for the Arts, and the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts actively seek and work with Cambodian artists to offer master classes, document traditional pieces on film, and sponsor concerts and festivals.

Although young Cambodians have had opportunities to study the musical and theatrical arts of their parents, it is necessarily on an informal and sporadic basis, depending on the availability of teachers and spare time. More often young Cambodian Americans praise and adopt Western popular culture and discredit their own. They wish to be American rather than

Cambodian, to fit in rather than stand out as possibly exotic. Their preferred instruments are guitar, keyboard, and drums. During breaks from their study of Cambodian music, which they often characterize as boring or slow, they are inclined to form small groups to rap, dance the “electric slide” or the “macarena.” Few choose to express themselves in Cambodian form.

The classical tradition has been maintained but in an incomplete form. A full *pinn peat* ensemble has not been possible, making incomplete or ad hoc mixed ensembles the norm. Some of the older musicians possess an imperfect knowledge of repertory, but younger, possibly more knowledgeable, musicians are prevented from correcting their elders by customary standards of behavior. Work schedules often conflict, even in those rare circumstances where there are enough musicians in a given area, making the scheduling of practices and performances challenging. Not surprisingly, many of the traditional ceremonies that required music in the homeland now omit it. Others have been simplified and shortened, such as the wedding ceremony. What used to be three days and three nights is now one day. These are the new social, economic, and logistical realities. Many wish to remain faithful to their ancestral culture, but the challenges are daunting and temptations to give in to the popular culture of North America are overwhelming.

Popular Music

Popular music has long been a part of Cambodian life, although before American influence came to dominate, it was French style song that Europeanized Cambodians enjoyed. International styles of ballroom dance and its music, such as bolero, cha cha, foxtrot, and rumba, were and continue to be popular both in Cambodia and in North America. But the generation of Cambodians born in North America prefers American-style rock music. Cambodian youth often form rock and pop bands which are engaged for many kinds of community events. Some have managed to produce cassette and video tapes which are sold in Cambodian and other Asian groceries.

Cambodian rock bands use Western instruments such as electric guitars, electric bass, keyboard, and drum set. Most of this music is intended for dancing. The bands play popular songs composed by various groups and artists, including the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Bee Gees, Credence Clearwater Revival, Santana, Lionel Richie, Michael Jackson, Van Halen, Rod Stewart, and Madonna. They also play Cambodian popular songs in such Cambodian rhythms as *roam vung*, *roan kbach*, and *saravane*. These dance gatherings are attended mostly by the young (See Chap 1962; Sam and Campbell 1991; Chen et al. 1993).

Cambodian Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations play a vital role in the preservation and promotion of Cambodian culture. They sponsor classes, workshops, and performances. Such organizations are the Cambodian Network Council (District of Columbia), Cambodian-American Heritage (Maryland), Cambodian Studies Center (Washington), Khmer Studies Institute (Connecticut), United Cambodian Community (California), and Cambodian Association of Illinois (Illinois). Cambodian Buddhist temples in different parts of America also offer similar programs.

Personal Experiences and Efforts

For over two decades, I have been dedicated and committed to the preservation, maintenance, development, and promotion of traditional Cambodian music in America through various projects. It is encouraging and at the same time challenging for me to take the initiative and lead in this venture. Often times, I am perceived and expected to be a role model, having succeeded academically. Leadership is definitely needed in my Cambodian community. In many circumstances, I serve as a link between the Cambodian community and the community at large. In this context, I have acted as a performer, scholar, researcher, and presenter. I have been the focal point for coordination, referral, and resource. The burden is heavy, but I

never hesitate to carry it as I often look back to my predecessors, who had carried even heavier burdens.

As the result of my consistent endeavors, I have made possible some important works, including publications, video productions, compact discs, films, live performances of dance and theater, and cultural exchanges between Cambodian artists in Cambodia and America.

Publications

Through my efforts and those of a core group of friends, we have published several books on Khmer culture within the past decades. The publication project is to encourage and promote native scholars and scholarships. Scholarship on Cambodia has been left to foreigners. There is a consensus among Cambodian scholars that it is time to begin research, study, writing, and publishing ourselves. Several works have already been produced as a starting point towards reaching these goals and objectives.

Video Productions

I have produced a professional video entitled *Khmer Court Dance* (1992), featuring four dances and a dance drama, with an introduction to the history of Cambodian court dance—a project supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. This video can be an excellent tool for teaching and a yard stick for quality checks.

Compact Discs

Several compact discs on traditional Cambodian music have been released and made available to the public by the World Music Institute, Music of the World, Cambodian Network Council, Center for the Studies of Khmer Culture, and Cambodian Business International. These are good resources for music lovers, musicians, and particularly dancers who cannot afford live music and need good prerecorded music accompaniment for their performances.

Films

In 1993, the National Initiative to Preserve American Dance (NIPAD) funded a film project to document a dozen of the Cambodian court dances and dance dramas. The film also

includes interviews with dance masters and musicians, as well as teachers and students at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh.

Performances

In the United States, performances of dance, music, and theater are regularly staged. Cambodian dancers and musicians participate in cultural festivals across the country.

Cultural Exchange

There have been cultural exchange programs for approximately two decades now. Exchanges have taken place between Cambodian dancers and musicians in the United States and Cambodia. We have been working very closely with the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, the Royal University of Fine Arts, the Department of Arts and Performing Arts, and the Center for Culture and Meditation in Phnom Penh.

Funds for these projects and activities have come from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Asian Cultural Council, the Albert Kunstadter Family Foundation, the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New England Foundation for the Arts, the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, and the Portland Performing Arts.

Because Cambodians were resettled in widely scattered areas, it was difficult to form coherent ensembles and mount performances. My wife, Chan Moly Sam, and I, having lived and worked in the United States for many years, have worked tirelessly to reunite ensembles and troupes, produce teaching materials and archival documents, and offer workshops and residencies, most supported by an array of private and public foundations and agencies. As a result, a number of young artists, some born in the United States, have begun learning the traditional arts of their homeland. In some cases there have been innovative projects, especially involving dance, such as those at the Portland Performing Arts in Maine in July, 1996, and the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts in October, 1996. The latter included collaborations with English dancer Jonathan Lunn and American dancer Gwyneth Jones.



Photo 5: Chan Moly Sam prepares her daughter Laksmi Sam for a performance (Seattle, Washington, 1992; photo by Sam-Ang Sam).

Conclusion

Despite cutbacks in public spending for the arts in the United States, there is still hope for the traditional music to continue being performed. However, much work remains to be done and effort to be taken. Traditional musicians must strive hard to increase musical activity to encourage, train, and produce more professional musicians, and to remain ever competitive. The road to the future will be rough indeed. There will be no free ride. Musicians must continue to create, be active, and be heard,

making themselves needed at all times. Diversification of funding is a reality and therefore a necessity and strategy for the survival and continuity of the traditional culture and cultural programming. The community must begin to take part and share the burden.

More collaboration is necessary to empower ourselves. Connection with Cambodia must continue. We must continue to produce high quality work. We should seek further support from the community, and involve them in cultural activities, so they take ownership of the community projects. In this way, they feel responsible and obligated to see that the projects work well and live on.

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