

Silent Temples, Songful Hearts: Traditional Music of Cambodia



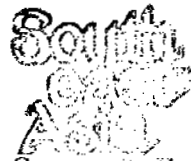
Silent Temples, Songful Hearts: Traditional
Sam Sam-Ang // Patricia Shehan Campbell

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Sam-Ang Sam
Patricia Shehan Campbell

World Music Press

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Traditional Music of Cambodia**

by
**Sam-Ang Sam
Patricia Shehan Campbell**

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About the Authors

Sam-Ang Sam, Ph.D. is one of the very few remaining Khmer master artists who are alive and able to practice and teach their traditions. He was born in Krakor, in Pursat province. He showed a strong interest in music from early childhood, and was enrolled in formal studies of traditional Khmer music at age 14 when he entered the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in the early 1960's, obtaining instrumental instruction from Masters Yim Sem, Yim Saing, Sek Ouch, and Long Samreth. He also had vocal training provided by Mistress Ham Nam and Master Ros Lom. During his two-year residency in Siem Reap province, Sam-Ang Sam learned the *sralai* (quadruple-reed shawm), now his principal instrument, from Master Thoeung and Master Chhuon.

Sam-Ang Sam graduated with the degree of Diplôme des Arts and Baccalauréat des Arts in 1970 and 1973 respectively from the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. In 1974 he was awarded a fellowship by the Cambodian Government to further his study in Western Music Composition at the University of the Philippines, under the guidance of Eliseo Pajaro and Ramon Santos. While at the University of the Philippines, he also had his first exposure to ethnomusicology while attending classes on Philippine music offered by Jose Maceda. From there he came to the United States in 1977 and continued his study at Connecticut College where he received both the BA and MA degrees in Music Composition under the tutelage of Chinary Ung, Noel Zahler and Arthur Welwood. Sam-Ang Sam then enrolled at Wesleyan University and received his Ph.D. degree in Ethnomusicology.

He is a scholar on Khmer music, and with his wife, dancer Chan Moly Sam, has jointly written two books on Khmer music and dance published by the Khmer Studies Institute. He has performed on a number of sound recordings on the labels of the Khmer Studies Institute, Cambodian Business Corporation International, World Music Institute, and the Center for the Study of Khmer Culture. He has performed in Asia, Europe, and the United States, including the White House in 1985.

In recognition of his dedication to the preservation and maintenance of Khmer culture and scholarship, Sam-Ang Sam has received several awards and grants, including the Arts and Culture preservation Award, Social Science Research Council grants, National Endowment for the Arts grants, the Ford Foundation/Asian Cultural Council grants, and the Middletown Commission on the Arts Grant. He frequently travels to Cambodian communities throughout North America to perform traditional music for dances, festivals, and various ceremonies requiring particular music. He is currently Artist-in-Residence at the University of Washington.



Patricia Shehan Campbell, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Music and Chair of Music Education at the University of Washington. She received her Ph.D. in music education with a concentration in ethnomusicology from Kent State University, where she studied South Indian mridangam and Karnatic vocal techniques with Ramnad V. Raghavan, played in the Thai Ensemble and studied Laotian kaen with Terry Miller and Jaremchai Chonpairot. Her interest in world music has taken her as a student, researcher and clinician to Bulgaria, Hungary, India, Japan, China and Australia. Dr. Campbell is a consultant on music in early and middle childhood, multicultural music education, and the use of movement as a pedagogical tool. She is author of numerous publications that blend ethnomusicological and educational issues, including *Lessons from the World* (1991), *Sounds of the World: Music of Eastern Europe* (1989) and *Sounds of the World: Music of Southeast Asia* (1986). She co-authored *From Rice Paddies and Temple Yards: Traditional Music of Vietnam* (with Phong Nguyen, 1990) and *Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education* (with William M. Anderson, 1989). She served as a consultant for the NEA-funded project that studied Laotian resettlement in the U.S. resulting in the film *Silk Sarongs and City Streets*. She is an active member of the College Music Society, the International Society for Music Education, The Dalcroze Society of America, the Organization of Kodaly Educators, the American Orff-Schulwerk Association and the Society for Ethnomusicology (chair of the Education Committee and a member of the SEM Council). She also serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Research in Music Education* of the Music Educators National Conference.



Forward

From the perspective of a society inclined to cut funding to the arts at the drop of a budget, it is difficult to understand why the Khmer value their arts so highly. For the typical American community, the arts are the first area cut during a fiscal crisis; in Cambodia they were the first aspects of culture to be restored after liberation from the Khmer Rouge in 1979. Music, song, and dance for the Khmer are not merely pleasant diversions which have a place only after all other needs have been filled; they have a near-sacred status and constitute a major component of Khmer identity.

During a week-long visit to Cambodia in late 1988, I had the privilege of observing dancers and musicians from the University of Fine Arts perform in a former dance pavilion at the palace in Phnom Penh. Most performers were young; a few older masters had survived the holocaust. This performance was not something that could be taken for granted. It represented a part of the rebirth of the Khmer culture from the ashes of death and destruction wrought by the radical Khmer Rouge, who had sought to obliterate Khmer culture; they nearly succeeded. In many ways this restoration precedes the physical rebuilding of the country. Evidently that sacred link with the collective spirit of the Khmer people is so strongly expressed through music and dance that these arts must be rebuilt before material things are given any attention.

Dr. Sam-Ang Sam, co-author of this book, together with his wife and daughters, have been the leading figures in the United States seeking to keep Khmer music and dance alive. They have taught and performed widely and written about their arts. They have encouraged older musicians who came as refugees to keep performing and with them have given many performances. These efforts to make Khmer music known to the younger generation are of the utmost importance. Being Cambodian-American means keeping the best of the old culture and adopting the best of the new. Considering the importance of the arts to Khmer identity, this book has the added significance of helping young Cambodian-Americans understand who they are and where they came from.

Terry E. Miller
Center for the Study of World Musics
Kent State University

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Contents of the Companion Tape

Tape Cut	Lesson	Title	Performer(s)
Side A:			
1.	1	“Mun Pel Nhaim”	Malene Sam, Laksmi Sam, vocals Sam-Ang Sam, <i>tror so</i> Music : Sam-Ang Sam Lyrics: Yang Sam
2.	1	“Doeur Roeu Keng”	Malene Sam, Laksmi Sam, vocals Sam-Ang Sam, <i>tror so</i>
3.	1	“Leang Dai”	Malene Sam, Laksmi Sam, vocals Sam-Ang Sam, <i>tror so</i>
4.	2	“Chapp Kaun Khleng”	Malene, Laksmi, Sam-Ang Sam, voc..
5.	3	“Leak Kanseng”	Malene, Laksmi, Sam-Ang Sam, voc.
6.	3	“Chhoung”	Sam-Ang Sam, vocal
7.	4	“Sarika Keo”	Malene Sam, Laksmi Sam vocals Sam-Ang Sam, <i>tror so</i>
8.	5	“Bakkha (Baksa)”	Malene Sam, Laksmi Sam, vocals Sam-Ang Sam, <i>roneat ek</i>
9-A.	6	“Thung Lc”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>khloy</i>
9-B.	6	“Thung Le”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>roneat ek</i>
10-A.	7	<i>khloy</i> : “Khmer Changkeh Reav”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>khloy</i>
10-B.	7	<i>pey pork</i> : “Surin”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>pey pork</i>
10-C.	7	<i>sralai</i> : “Chhouy Chhay”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>sralai</i>
10-D.	7	<i>tror so</i> : “Khyall Chumno Khe Praing”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>tror so</i>
10-E.	7	<i>khimm</i> : “Locung Preah Punlea”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>khimm</i>
10-F.	7	<i>roneat ek</i> : “Khmer Krang Phka”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>roneat ek</i>
10-G.	7	<i>roneat thung</i> : “Chenn Choh Touk”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>roneat thung</i>
10-H.	7	<i>korng vung</i> : “Sinuon”	David Hunter, <i>korng tauch</i>
10-I.	7	<i>chhing</i> : pattern	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>chinng</i>
11-A.	8	ensemble: “Khmer Changkeh Reav”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>roneat ek</i> David Hunter, <i>korng tauch</i> Rita Hutajulu, <i>korng thomm</i>
11-B.	8	<i>roneat ek</i> , basic melody “Khmer Changkeh Reav”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>roneat ek</i>
11-C.	8	<i>roneat ek</i> , elaborated melody “Khmer Changkeh Reav”	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>roneat ek</i>
11-D.	8	<i>korng tauch</i> : “Khmer Changkeh Reav”	David Hunter, <i>korng tauch</i>
11-E.	8	<i>korng thomm</i> “Khmer Changkeh Reav”	Rita Hutajulu, <i>korng thomm</i>

Tape Cut Side B:	Lesson	Title	Performer(s)
11-F.	8	ensemble “Khmer Changkeh Reav”	SAS, DH, RH (as in 11-A)
12.	9	“Khvann Tung”	Sam-Ang Sam, vocal
13.	10	“Loeung Preah Punlea”	Sam-Ang Sam, vocal
14-A.	11	Drums: <i>Thaun-Rumanea</i> *Level one rhythm pattern and drum syllables [8-beat] *Level one rhythm pattern (8-beat), embellished	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>thaun-rumanea</i>
14-B.	11	Drums: <i>Thaun-Rumanea</i> *Level two rhythm pattern and drum syllables (16-beat) *Level two rhythm pattern drum syllables (16-beat), cmbcllished	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>thaun-rumanea</i>
15.	12	“Phleng Pradall” [Boxing Music]	Sam-Ang Sam, <i>sralai</i> Malene Sam, <i>chhing</i>
16.	13	“Anhcheunh Loeung Roam”	Sarocun Chey, vocal Words/music: Sam-Ang Sam
17.	14	The Legend of Tiger	Narrated by Laksmi Sam

Preface

This book and its companion tape are intended as an introduction to traditional Khmer music and culture in Cambodia and as preserved in Cambodian-American communities in the United States, and is the first of its kind to be published in the English language. The book contributes to an understanding of the Khmer people through chapters on their history and geography, their long-standing customs, and their performing arts of music, dance and theater. So to allow the reader an ease of entrance into a world of uniquely beautiful musical and artistic expressions, we introduce a composite of traditional Khmer attitudes and practices regarding religion, language, family, festivals and education. Likewise, so as to allow the listener a comprehensive view of the songs and musical selections belonging to Khmer culture, we discuss its evolution and innovation over time and as a result of the experiences which recently-arrived Cambodian-Americans have known. The fourteen sections in the last chapter are designed for the teaching of Khmer music, and Khmer culture through music. We maintain that the essence of Cambodia can be captured in song and sound; the guided lessons enable young people and adults, Khmer and non-Khmer, to know the beauty and logic of Khmer musical traditions.

While the book provides information about Khmer traditions, the heart of the culture is found in the musical sound. The accompanying tape provides the listener with recorded examples of all the Khmer music featured in the text, from folksongs and songs of childhood to solo instrumental pieces to art music of the court ensembles to the pop-rock sound of the *roam vung*. Performers include Sam-Ang Sam, his daughters Malene Sam and Laksmi Sam, his students, as well as Cambodian-American members of the *mohori* ensemble. They sing and play in a manner that conveys a reverence and love for the crystalline simplicity of some pieces and the intricate complexities of others. The listener is invited to absorb the sound, language, and mood of these pieces by listening first—without explanation. The book can best complement the listening experience when it is read later, when it can serve to enhance and guide the earlier musical exposure. Matters of pronunciation, elisions, and gliding tones will settle in the ears when the emphasis is on aural learning rather than on deciphering notation that is incapable of accurately graphing subtleties of the total sound.

We feel that the beauty of Khmer music is not to be preserved as a museum piece, set high upon a “do-not-touch” pedestal with its practices kept out of reach and unattainable by those outside the tradition. Rather, we would hope that the Khmer and the non-Khmer alike would become enlightened of one of the world’s great traditional and ancient cultures through its music. Refugees and their families in Cambodian enclaves in California, Massachusetts, Washington, Minnesota, and in east- and west-coast cities are quickly becoming assimilated into mainstream American culture yet they yearn to hold on to their heritage. Some seek resources that will enable them to transmit traditional

Khmer music and culture to Khmer children in community centers, church schools, and after-school settings. Teachers of music, the arts, history and social studies in public and private schools as well, seek material that will guide students to an understanding of the lives of some of their newest classmates. Ethnomusicologists and adult students of Southeast Asian culture and music will find information on musical structure and style, as well as cultural context. The homes, farms, fields, shops, schools, and temples which Khmer students or their families left behind in Cambodia just over a decade ago are often silent today, yet the memories of their mother country are strong and stored for safekeeping in their hearts. We believe that by being exposed to and absorbing the songs, the Khmer culture will be revealed to students of every age. We thus offer *Silent Temples, Songful Hearts: Traditional Music of Cambodia* as a tribute to the beauty and strength of the Khmer people, with the aim of enriching the lives of all those who listen to their music.

Sam-Ang Sam and Patricia Shehan Campbell
Seattle, Washington
August, 1991

Notes

Musical Transcriptions: When attempting to pour a musical tradition like that of Cambodia into the mold of Western notation several problems arise:

➤The notation of songs and instrumental pieces only *approximates* the pitches of the recordings in many cases, because the instruments used in the recording were adjusted to be in tune with each other, but do not necessarily match a piano or tuning fork. Rather than artificially altering the pitches by digitally re-mastering the tape, we have decided to leave the recording as actually performed. This poses the problem of offering a transcription that is easy to read but in a slightly different key from the recording, or including a transcription that is exactly the same as the recording but might include several sharps or flats, and moreover cannot then be played on soprano recorder or the Orff Schulwerk instrumentarium by young students. In general, we have included a performable transcription in a key closest to that on the tape, and also indicated the original key. In the few cases where being able to play along with the tape seemed an important option, we have included a transcription in the performed key in an appendix toward the end of the book. (See “Musical Transcriptions in the Key of Recorded Performance,” Appendix.)

➤Another difficulty encountered in trying to “trap” the performance is that the music of Cambodia is not meant to be “frozen” in any one version through notation; it is alive, dynamic and ever-evolving. The slides, slurs, embellishments and improvisations are central to the instruments, voices and tradition, but by nature problematic and actually inappropriate to fully notate for a collection such as this. As with jazz or the music of Africa, the listener might hear these pieces played precisely this way once and then never again. Rather than etch all of the nuances and musical embroidery of these individual performances in stone, we have opted to notate a simple, bare-bones transcription, stripped to the skeleton—the essence of the piece.

Transcription of Khmer words: There is no consistency in the Romanization of Khmer words; transcription varies from one writer to the next. Despite the complexities and variety of phonemes within the Khmer language, we have devised a system that is consistent throughout the pages of this book. (See “Romanization of Khmer Words,” next section.)

Phonetic Pronunciation: The Khmer language has sounds that a native English speaker will barely be able to distinguish, let alone pronounce from an approximate transcription. The sounds in some cases are actually impossible to write accurately using the English alphabet. We had many discussions about how to sing certain words or phrases, and more on how to “describe” them phonetically. (See “Romanization of Khmer Words,” next section.) Staying true to traditional transmission processes in Cambodia, we agreed that the music and pronunciation are best learned by listening. The ear will guide the listener far more effectively and accurately than the written music, transcription of the language, transliteration or phonetic approximation possibly can. Remember, therefore, to use what is on the page as a guide or starting point only and listen, listen, listen.

Khmer: The term *Khmer* refers to the people of Cambodia, or to those who are descended from people whose home was Cambodia. Khmer refers also to the language, the culture, and the traditions of the people of Cambodia and Cambodian refugees and immigrants. In general, we have used Khmer in all cases where people are referred to unless there is the likelihood that other ethnic groups of Cambodian nationality are included in the reference, and Cambodia for political, historic, or geographic references.

Court-Classical: These terms are used separately and simultaneously to refer to the music of the wind and percussion ensemble (*pinn peat*) which has traditionally been used to accompany court dances (all-female dancers), masked plays (all-male dancers), shadow plays, and religious ceremonies.

Vatt: A Buddhist temple or pagoda, *vatt* has often been misspelled as “wat.” There is no “w” in the Khmer language.

Romanization of Khmer Words: A Transcription System

Khmer Sound

English Sound: As in Khmer word: [translation]

Single-Vowel Sounds

ap
ap
app
app
at
at
att
att
ay
eh
en
en
enn
ey
ih
in
inn
oh
ok
okk
om
omm
or
orng
ut

*indicates there is no sound close to Khmer

carp
job
cup
top
cart
ought
cut
lot
tie
yes
plain
*
men
*
police
mean
win
*
*
*
*
*
*
*
put

kap [poem]
dap [bottle]
khapp [thick]
sapp [corpse]
kat [ID card]
that [drawer]
batt [lose]
chatt [bitter]
bay [rice]
seh [horse]
sen [cent]
samnen [offering]
chenn [Chinese]
srey [female]
nih [this](aspirated ending)
masin [machine]
minn [not]
proh [male]
thok [cheap]
tokk [table]
krom [under]
kromm [group]
tror [fiddle]
korng [gong]
chhut [act]

Double-Vowel Sounds

ai
aim
aing
ao
au
ea
eah
eak
eo
eu
ie
oam
oat
ou
uo
uoh

fight
some
*
how
low
ear
*
*
milieu
idea
warm
what
you
your
*

dai [hand]
praim [five]
baraing [French]
sao [Saturday]
dau [change]
tea [duck]
Preah [Buddha]
yeak [giant]
keo [glass]
chheu [wood]
tien [candle]
roam [dance]
moat [mouth]
krou [teacher]
khuor [brain]
puoh [snake]

Triple-vowel Sounds

<i>eou</i>	*	<i>peou</i> [youngest]
<i>oEU</i>	*	<i>punloeu</i> [light]
<i>oeung</i>	*	<i>noeung</i> [and]

Consonant Sounds

<i>ch</i>	*	<i>chek</i> [banana]
<i>chh</i>	<i>church</i>	<i>chhoeu</i> [sick]
<i>chhng</i>	*	<i>chhngay</i> [far]
<i>kh</i>	<i>cake</i>	<i>khaim</i> [bite]
<i>khnh</i>	*	<i>khnhomm</i> [I]
<i>ng</i>	<i>singer</i>	<i>nhuoh</i> [ogre]
<i>nh</i>	<i>canyon</i>	<i>nhaim</i> [eat]
<i>p</i>	<i>speak</i>	<i>pi</i> [two]
<i>ph</i>	<i>pen</i>	<i>phoum</i> [village]

NOTE: In most cases the final consonant is not pronounced in Khmer. Rather, many of the words ending in consonants have an aspirated ending.

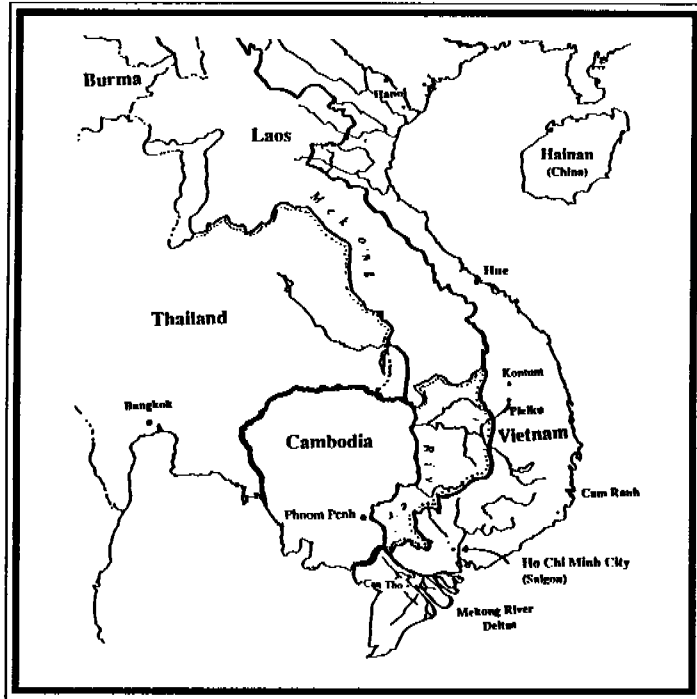


1

Historical and Cultural Background

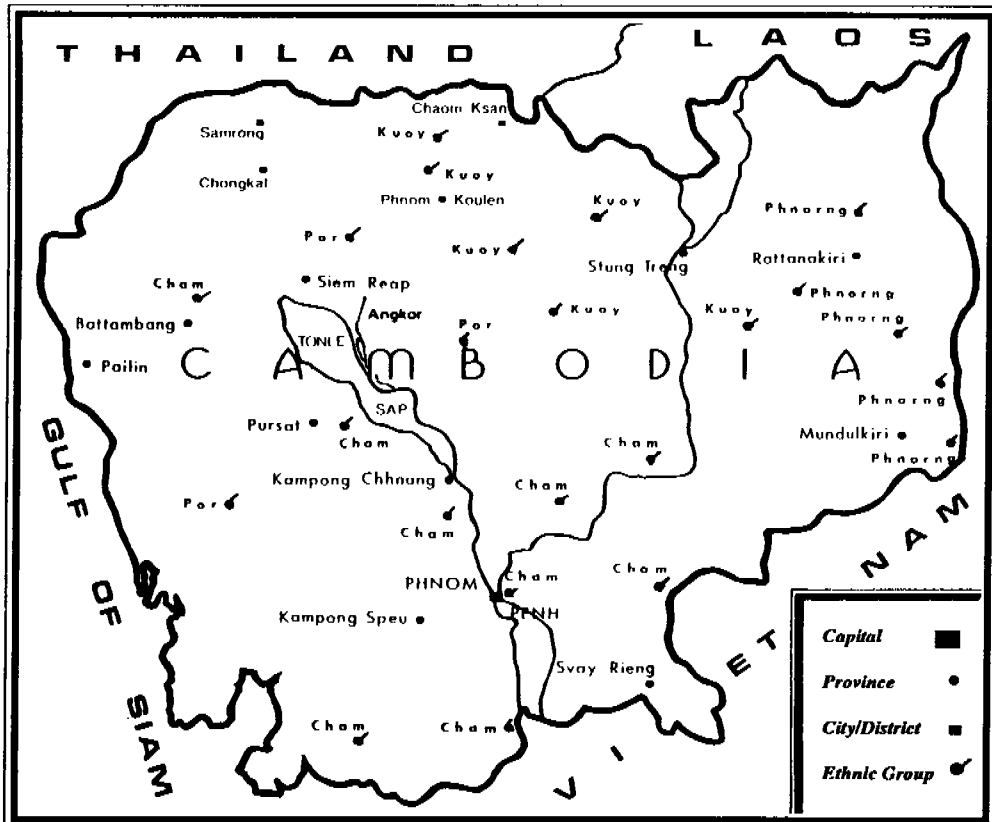
MAPS

SOUTHEAST ASIA



©1990 World Music Press. (This map may be photo-copied.)

CAMBODIA



(Map by Sam-Ang Sam. May be photo-copied.)

1 Historical and Cultural Background

As one of the mainland Southeast Asian countries (south of China and east of India), Cambodia is situated in the lower corner of the Indochinese Peninsula. Cambodia is bounded on the west by Thailand, on the north by Thailand and Laos, on the east by Vietnam, and on the south by the Gulf of Siam (see map). At 66,000 square miles, Cambodia is about the size of the state of Washington. Because of its central “crossroads” location in Southeast Asia, Cambodia has been the recipient of considerable foreign influence throughout recorded history.

Geography

Two important geographical features, the Mekong River and the Tonle Sap (Great Lake) have dominated the Cambodian economy and regulated the lives of people for many centuries. The Mekong River traverses the eastern half of Cambodia from north to south. Its total length (from its source in central China) is about 2,600 miles, of which 500 run through Cambodia to the Gulf of Siam (see map). Almost 10% of the country’s area is water or marshland, and this area increases during the summer monsoon season when the Tonle Sap, the Mekong and the Bassac rivers overflow their banks and inundate marshes, forests and cultivated fields.

There are sparsely settled hills and plateaus in the northeast. Along the Gulf coast are the heavily-forested Cardamom and Elephant Mountains. The greatest portion of Khmer people live in the central plains, in cities like Phnom Penh, the capital, Siem Reap, Battambang, and Kampong Cham. The centuries-old farm villages along the Mekong and Tonle Sap have grown to the size of cities, with residents still dependent on the resources the waters provide.

Because of the topographical variety, from fertile plains and marshes to forest, bush and mountains, Cambodia is home to abundant plant and animal life. Among the trees found in Cambodia are rubber, palm, cotton, kapok, mango, banana, and orange. Cultivated plants include corn, peppers, tobacco, cotton, sugar, mulberries, and indigo. Betel vines, paddy and lotus grains are also found in profusion. Native bird species include herons, egrets, cranes, pheasants, wild ducks, marabous (a kind of stork with a pouch of pink skin that it distends), pelicans, and cormorants (a kind of seabird commonly used for catching fish, with a long neck, hooked bill and bright distensible skin under the mouth). Hunters find tigers, leopards, panthers, bears and small game, as well as wild elephants, rhinoceroses, wild oxen and buffalo all throughout Cambodia.

The seasonal monsoons determine rainfall and the temperature of Cambodia. From May until October, the summer monsoon wind brings heavy rainfall and temperatures up to 90-degrees F. During the wet season, there may be more than three feet of rain and floods that raise the water levels of the lakes and rivers to overflowing. From mid-October through April, the dry monsoon wind brings slightly cooler (about 75-degrees F.) and drier weather to the country.

Climate



The countryside of Cambodia.



Morning Street Activities, Phnom Penh. (Photo by Yang Sam, 1989.)

Almost 90% of Cambodia's inhabitants still engage in agricultural pursuits. As one of the countries of the Asian "rice bowl," Cambodia produces enough rice to feed its population and to export to countries throughout the world. During earlier periods, particularly the Angkor period (802-1432), Cambodia produced not one rice crop per year but four, inspiring the envy of China and the old Chinese phrase, "as wealthy as Cambodia." While there have been many varieties of rice resulting from farmers experimenting, the "sticky" or "wet" rice is best suited for the subtropical lowland environment subject to monsoons.

Economy

Second in importance to rice, the fishing industry provides the main source of protein in the diet, and is a boon to the Cambodian economy. During the dry season, the Tonle Sap becomes an extensive fresh water fishing center, the largest in Southeast Asia. Almost all of the 100,000 tons of fish caught is fresh-water carp. The marine fisheries along the Gulf of Siam, although underdeveloped, provide a wide variety of species, including mackerel, jack, drum, snapper, grouper, and mullet.

Other foods in the Cambodian agricultural economy and diet include corn, first introduced by the French as an agricultural product, the indigenous sugar palm (as opposed to cane sugar) which thrives on rich well-drained soil, and pepper, found on the seaward slopes of the Elephant Range, and traditionally tended to by Chinese laborers. While poultry and hogs are raised for domestic consumption, fish rather than meat supplies the most protein by a wide margin.

Since the establishment of the first rubber plantation in 1921, Cambodia has consistently ranked in the top ten among the world's producers of natural rubber. About 55% of the rubber trees are tapped daily, and the contents of the collecting cups are then filtered, developed into smoked or dried sheet, crepe, and latex, and exported to other countries, most notably the United States.

Cambodia's history is long and intricately interwoven with that of the many royal and religious figures who claim places both in folklore and historical documentation. The legends, inscriptions on ancient temples and monuments, fragmented records found in Cambodia, China, India, and much later, France, tell the tale of the Khmer people and the many contenders for the rich and fertile lands of Cambodia. While the Khmer acknowledge the contributions of foreign cultures to their own, they also recognize their distinctive traditions and customs and the rich historical past which shaped them.

History

Racial migrations into the mainland regions of Southeast Asia occurred in prehistoric times, as early as the Neolithic period. The Khmer, who comprise about 85% of the population of present-day Cambodia, came down from the northwest in about 2,000 B.C. to settle in the fertile Mekong Delta area. Two powerful states had already been established in Cambodia by earlier Indonesian peoples at the time of the Khmer arrival: Champa, the area that is now most of southern Vietnam, and Funan (Founan), the area that covered what is now most of Cambodia and part of central Vietnam. The Funanese people, who lived in the lower Mekong River region, overcame the Chams and the

Khmer and by the fifth century A.D. exercised the rights of overlords in their vast kingdom that stretched as far as the Bay of Bengal, including the Malay Peninsula.

One of the Funan kingdom's vassal states was the Khmer state of Chenla, situated in the region of northern Cambodia and southern Laos. In the sixth century A.D., Chenla overcame Funan and reversed the position of overlord and vassal. During the reign of Isanvarman I, who married a princess of the neighboring kingdom of Champa, Chenla completely absorbed the Funan kingdom and extended the Khmer territory to the Chinese border. The name "Cambodia" was derived from this period, after the founder of the Khmer dynasty, Kambu Svayambhuva or "Kambuja."

The Khmer people regard the Angkor Period (802-1432) as the height of their power and greatness, and a time in which their customs and traditions were spread through much of Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Malay peninsula. The kings Jayavarman II and Jayavarman VII of the period are still hailed as heroes who asserted the independence of the Khmer Empire, developed its economy, built hospitals and temples, and raised the Sanskrit literature to new heights of scholarship. Jayavarman VII was responsible for establishing Buddhism as the state religion, and adapting it to create a Buddah-king cult. The arts flourished. The Angkor Vatt of the period is an archaeological treasure of this brilliant period of Khmer history, a monument to Cambodia's glorious past.

Following the death of Jayavarman VII, the Khmer Empire began to fall apart. The people had been exhausted by the huge construction projects and wars of conquest during the Angkor period. The downfall of Angkor was brought about by the Thai kingdom of Ayuthaya, which finally captured Angkor in 1431. King Ponhear Yat of the vastly reduced Khmer Empire made Phnom Penh his capital, and Angkor was ultimately abandoned to the jungle. For the next four centuries, a subdued Khmer people struggled to maintain a national identity. Much of their former culture was destroyed or lost, including treasures and documents.

Because of the continued aggression by the Siamese of Thailand and Annamese of Vietnam, Cambodia appealed to France for protection in 1863. For nearly a century, the French exploited Cambodia commercially, and demanded political, economic, and social powers. In 1886, along with Vietnam, Laos, and part of South China, Cambodia became part of the Indochinese Union or "French Indochina."

During the second half of the twentieth century, the political situation in Cambodia became chaotic. King Norodom Sihanouk, who had come to the throne in 1941, proclaimed Cambodia's independence from France in 1953. Sihanouk ruled the country struggling to maintain Cambodia's neutrality during the political upheavals in Vietnam and Laos until March 18, 1970, when he was overthrown by troops loyal to the Republic, led by Lon Nol. Just five years later, on April 17, 1975 the genocidal Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot took over the power and virtually destroyed the lives, health, mentality, morality, education, culture and civilization of the Khmer people. On January 7, 1979, the current government headed by Heng Samrin, chased away the Khmer Rouge with the help of the Vietnamese, and has since controlled Cambodia.

Exodus from Cambodia

As is typical of so many immigrants to the shores of the United States, the Cambodian refugees fled their homeland in reaction to horrendous events beyond their control. Circumstances were such that it was no longer viable for them to remain in their customary way of life, so hundreds of thousands sought refuge first along the Thai-Cambodian border, and then moved on to other countries: Australia, New Zealand, Japan, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy, Canada and the United States. (The United States has granted permanent resettlement to great numbers of Cambodians—more than any other country in the world.) This tremendous Cambodian migration took place in two distinct waves. The first wave, occurring from 1975 until about 1980, involved refugees who by and large were educated and skilled individuals. Since 1980, a second wave brought great numbers of poor and illiterate Cambodians, many of whom suffered traumatic experiences in the process of escape from their homes. This sudden and involuntary plunge into refugee status found many Cambodians practically and psychologically ill-prepared for their wrenching departure from a familiar society and bruising entry into an alien one.

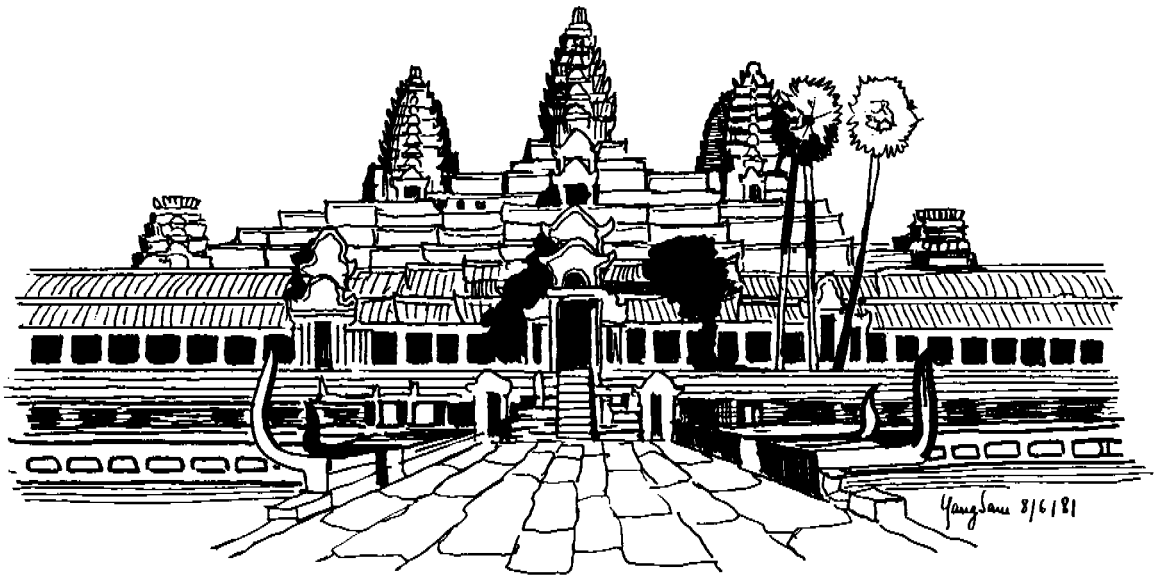
Approximately one quarter of a million Cambodian refugees have come to the United States. They hold a strong belief that America is the land of opportunity, freedom and justice, and view staying behind in Cambodia as a dead-end. Many view life in the United States as a positive orientation into the future, despite the difficult adjustment to a different economic, social and cultural environment. They expect the least and hope for the most.

Younger Cambodian-Americans have limited knowledge of Cambodia and lack the deep sentiment of the older Cambodians. They adjust well to the realities of their new world, and appear convincing in their skill at coping with cross-cultural barriers. Cambodians over the age of fifty often reminisce about their past experiences and customs, and find adjustment and acculturation far more difficult. The language barrier itself slows the process by which they can understand the new American culture. While Cambodian politics and politicians have tended to set people apart by way of various distinctive beliefs, Khmer culture unifies the old and the young, the educated and the illiterate, the rich and the poor. With common language, food, customs, traditions, and religious beliefs, the Cambodians bond together in communities, creating “Cambodian Towns” within cities including Long Beach, California and Lowell, Massachusetts.

In Cambodian communities across America, adults and elders practice religious, national and traditional ceremonies and customs. Although modifications of Cambodia’s traditions, they nourish the cultural roots of the older generations (although not always of children and young adults). During major community events such as Ancestral Day and the lunar New Year, Cambodians gather to reaffirm their ethnic solidarity. While the elders long for Cambodia and entertain thoughts of retirement there, younger generations building new lives in the United States are no longer interested in returning to their homeland, and yet are not abandoning their ties to their culture completely, either.



2
**Customs
and
Traditions**



Angkor Vatt. (Illustration by Yang Sam.)



Jayavarman VII, the last great Cambodian king, who made Buddhism a state religion. (Illustration by Yang Sam.)



Bayan Temple, known also as Angkor Thom, built by Jayavarman VII. Called the Temple of Four Faces. (Illustration by Yang Sam.)

2 Customs and Traditions

The state religion of Cambodia is Theravada Buddhism, a tradition the majority of the population follows. Buddhism constitutes the moral fibre of Khmer lifestyle, and includes tenets of Hinduism and animistic religions as well. Buddhists believe that life is a cycle of death and rebirth in which the individual passes through a succession of incarnations. Depending upon the person's conduct in previous lives, an incarnation may be in a higher or lower status. Buddhists strive to perfect their souls in order to be released from the cycle of death and rebirth and thus enabled to move on to the state of Enlightenment, or nirvana.

Religion

In the traditional Khmer society, boys must enter the monkhood for at least three months during their lifetime, often at the age of twelve or thirteen. During this time, they learn Buddhist philosophy, social morality, and practice praying. The monasteries at which they study are centers of Khmer life, not only for prayer but also for education, medical care, and administrative organization. Since the 1950's, the Buddhist education system has been centered on the transmission of general knowledge of contemporary Khmer culture, from the primary level to the university. The religious institution where Buddhist knowledge could be acquired included the High School of Pali, the Buddhist Institute, and the Buddhist University. The *bonzes* (monks) who reside in these monasteries are at the highest level for achieving nirvana. They wear their distinctive saffron-yellow robes and shaven heads, and set out each morning to collect food from the local people.

The modern Khmer comprise about 85% of the population of Cambodia, and are the products of many centuries of cultural blending. The waves of migrations from India, beginning in the third century B.C., brought about a mixing of ethnic traits for almost a thousand years. The Indo-Malay invasion from Java in the eighth century, A.D., the Thai invasions, and the more recent infusion of Vietnamese, Chinese and Europeans into Cambodia contributed to the composite that is the Khmer ethnic make-up today. The ancestors of many peoples have been assimilated into the culture of Cambodia, and the term "Khmer"—once a description of the dominant ethnic group—now designates nationality. The largest minority groups are the Chinese and the Vietnamese, each constituting about 7%. The remaining minorities include the Khmer Leu, Cham-Malays, Thai and Laotians who have lived side-by-side with the Khmer for centuries, and smaller numbers of recently-arrived Europeans, Japanese, Indians, Pakistanis, and Filipinos.

Ethnic Makeup

Language

The language spoken by the majority people of Cambodia is Khmer. Although there are accents reflecting slight regional variations, it is understood by all people throughout the country.

Unlike Thai, Laotian or Vietnamese, the Khmer language is not tonal. There are borrowed words as well, from the Pali, Sanskrit, and French languages. In particular, the Khmer language has adopted the French words for bread, butter, carrot, coffee, beer, radio, television and other various Western concepts.

The Khmer use a script that is different from the Roman alphabet. The language includes thirty-three consonants, twenty-four vowels, and fifteen full vowels which can be used as a word without having to combine with consonants. However, Khmer is also written from left to right, like English. There is only one form for both singular and plural nouns. For example, the phrase "one pencil" is *khmao dai muoy*; "two pencils" is *khmao dai pi*. The words *khmao dai* ("pencil") are unchanged, whether they are used to refer to one, two or ten. Khmer verbs are not conjugated as they are in English. For example, the Khmer say: *khnhomm teou* ("I go"), *neak teou* ("you go"), *koat teou* ("he/she go [goes]"). *Khnhomm teou sala thngai nih* ("I go to school today"). *Khnhomm teou sala msil minh* ("I go [went] to school yesterday"). (See Romanization guide.)

When speaking Khmer, it is not customary to address someone directly by name. Instead, forms of address such as titles associated with a person's status and age are used, such as big brother, little brother, uncle, aunt, grandpa, and grandma. If a name is used, then the title Mr., Mrs., Miss, or Dr. usually precedes the first name (which comes last in Khmer name-order). For example, a person with the Khmer name of Sok Sambath would appropriately be called Mr. Sambath. (His family name is Sok, his first name is Sambath.)

Khmer forms of address can be very complex. Mastering the intricacies takes much practice over a long period of time, and requires functioning within the actual social context for a speaker to feel fully at ease with them. There are groups and sets of these forms of address, and vocabularies associated with age, status and sex of the persons engaged in conversation. For example, parents use different vocabularies when addressing their children than when addressing their spouse. Children use different vocabularies when addressing each other than when speaking to their parents. Monks have different vocabularies when addressing laymen, and vice versa. The royal language is different from that of common people. The word "sleep" is *phtum* for royalty, *soeung* for monks, *samran* for old people (polite form), *keng* for young people, and *dek* for the common people (which can be impolite and even insulting to some Khmer). The word "yes" is *chah* for royalty and women, *por* for monks, *bat* for men and boys, and *oeu* for older people when addressing the young (which can be impolite and insulting to some young Khmer).

A Khmer household usually consists of a married couple and their unmarried children, although some households include married children and widowed parents as well. Respect for the elders is a part of Khmer culture, but the people of Cambodia rarely emphasize ancestor worship and filial piety to the extent that the Vietnamese and Chinese do. Children are important to the traditional Khmer family, and five children are considered ideal.

Family

A traditional family in Cambodia is an independent unit, sharing domestic, social and religious activities while owning and operating its own rice paddy and vegetable garden. A peasant's house in rural areas may be raised as high as ten feet from the ground on stilts, with a kitchen joined to the house by a ramp. Animals are kept beneath the house. City dwellers with greater wealth may have more space, more privacy, more animals and more furnishings than the average rural household.

In a typical rural setting, the husband is responsible for physically-demanding tasks such as hoeing and preparing the fields for seeding, with husband and wife working together to transplant the rice. The Khmer woman holds a central position in the home, shaping the cultural and ethical development of her children. She is the family treasurer, and stands on an equal footing with her husband. Children have few chores or responsibilities before adolescence, and then are introduced to gender-specific chores such as cooking, sewing and child care for the girls, and farming techniques for the boys.

The traditional Khmer outfits are similar to those of the Thai and Laotians. They are the *samput chang kbenn*, or simply, *samput*, a cotton or silk garment of different colors and designs, that is wrapped around the waist with one end rolled and passed between the legs and fastened into a belt at the back; the *sarong*, a cotton or silk single piece of material wrapped around the waist which falls down to the ankles; and the *krama*, a piece of cloth of various sizes made of cotton or silk of different colors, usually with a striped pattern.

Clothing

In Cambodia, the *krama* is worn by farmers, peasants, and fishermen while working outside. It may be used as a hat to protect a worker's head from the hot sun, wrapped around the forehead and tied at the side or back. This versatile cloth can be twisted into a tight rope, shaped into a circle, and placed on the head like a crown so that big pots or baskets of fruit will balance easily for carrying, and to protect the head from heavy objects. Women often wear the *krama* diagonally across their chest, securing it with a knot or a pin. When going to the river to bathe, men use the *krama* like a wrapped skirt, grabbing the excess and rolling or bundling it at the side.

The *krama* is generally worn as an informal garment. When Khmer people shop, dine, visit, or work in cities they wear western-styled clothes or the *samput*. For special occasions, women might wear the *samput* made of traditional fine Khmer silk.

Traditionally, the Khmer celebrate their holidays and festivals year round. Still, they have their favorite calendar days. The most widely celebrated holidays are *chaul chhnaim*, *phchum benn*, *bonn phka*, and *bonn cheat*. The *chaul chhnaim* or Khmer New Year takes place from April 13-15 during the dry season, when farmers do not work in the fields. Astrologers determine the actual time and date by calculating the exact moment when the new animal protector (tiger, dragon or snake, for example) arrives. The Khmer in Cambodia spend the entire month in preparation for the celebration, cleaning and decorating their houses with candles, lights, star-shaped lanterns, and flowers. During the first three days of the lunar year, celebrants travel to the pagodas to offer

Festivals



Buddhist monk dressed in saffron robes. (Illustration by Yang Sam.)



Young dancers rehearse a folk dance during a workshop at Jacob's Pillow. Note the men and women wear the *samput*, fastened in a variety of ways. (Photo by Winnie Lambrecht.)

food to the monks. They pray for prosperity, good health, and show appreciation to their parents and elders. They make resolutions, pay debts, and exchange gifts. Among the many communal experiences of *chaul chhnaim* are participation in music-making, dancing and games, like those you will find in Chapter 4.

Phchum benn is a religious ceremony in September which recalls the spirits of deceased relatives. For fifteen days, people in Khmer villages take turns bringing food to the temples or pagodas. On the fifteenth and final day, everyone dresses in their finest clothes to travel together to the pagodas. Families bring overflowing baskets of food and children offer helpings of the delicacies to the monks. All offer prayers to release the ancestors from sin and to allow them to pass on to a better life. According to Khmer belief, those who do not follow the practices of *phchum benn* receive curses from their angry ancestors.

Bonn phka, the Flower Ceremony, is a fundraising event that is religious in nature. It is organized to raise money to support a local monastery that may seek the building of a new shrine hall or living quarter for the monks. *Bonn phka* is one of the most joyous celebrations for the Khmer, who voluntarily donate money to the event according to their wealth. The *pin peat* ensemble (featuring xylophones, gongs, shawms, cymbals and drums) performs traditional music, and a drum ensemble called *chhayaim*, whose performers wear comical clown-like masks, enhances the celebration.

Bonn cheat is a national celebration that is political in nature. It is the biggest of all, for it is celebrated as a symbolic gesture of solidarity for the country and nation. Unlike other festivals and celebrations which are community- or village-oriented, this is organized by the government. In Cambodia, from the Monarchy to the Republic and from communism to socialism, the tradition of celebrating the *bonn cheat* has been carried on. The date for the event, however, has changed from one regime to the next. The Monarchy celebrated *bonn cheat* on November 9 (the date of Cambodia's independence from the French), the Republic on October 10 (marking the termination of feudal regime in Cambodia), and the Communist Khmer Rouge on April 17 (the date of their take-over of the Republic and the beginning of the genocidal actions against the population). Today, the socialist government of Cambodia celebrates its *bonn cheat* on January 7, the date when the current regime chased away the dark shadow of the Khmer Rouge and took control of Cambodia.

In the United States, Cambodian refugees continue to celebrate *chaul chhnaim*, *phchum benn*, and *bonn phka* as avenues for continuing their traditional customs, to remember their past experiences, and to add traditional entertainment to their lives. *Bonn cheat* is not celebrated, however, for such celebration is seen as indicative of association, favor, and support for the current or recent regimes in Cambodia.

Birthdays are not important to Khmer people in Cambodia. It is often jokingly explained that "Every time you celebrate your birthday, you are reminded of getting older. If you do not celebrate it, you believe that you are forever young." Nonetheless, many Cambodians in the United States now celebrate their birthdays, with children throwing parties for their parents and parents for their children.

Both in Cambodia and Cambodian communities in the United States, events such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day, and Wedding anniversaries are not typically celebrated. Instead, a celebration like the Death Anniversary is important, because this is the time for remembering and honoring those relatives and friends who have died.

Traditional Khmer education stresses the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student through the oral process. Teachers lecture to their class, or perform for them, while students take mental and written notes, memorizing ideas for later recall. Teachers are highly respected, and students are expected to regard them as founts of knowledge. Questioning the teachers can be seen as a challenge, disrespectful, and an insult.

While French terms are still used in Cambodia for the various diplomas and certificates, for official correspondence, and for the signposts of government agencies, English has also been used. The current educational system of the old French colonial programs is somewhat changed today both in content and duration. Primary school education is compulsory for children ages six through ten years. They study mathematics, sciences, Khmer language and literature, social studies, and an assortment of other languages including Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, French and English. At age eleven, students continue for six years of secondary school education, choosing a major field of study in their final year. For those hoping to enter the university, they must successfully pass the National Baccalaureate II (*Baccalaureat Unique*) examination. The license is the terminal degree offered by most universities in Cambodia. The birth of higher education in Cambodia is relatively recent. The oldest university (Buddhist University) was created in 1954 and the latest (University of Battambang) came into being in 1967. Even during the pre-1975 period, Khmer universities already faced problems of shortages in both native and foreign teachers and teaching materials. Under the control of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), all educational institutions were closed, allowing the Khmer people no opportunity for formal education. Today, some universities have been re-opened, but instructional time is shortened due to a severe lack of teachers, and also to provide underpaid teachers with the time to hold a second job to maintain themselves and their families. Even in these difficult circumstances, the Khmer people recognize the absolute importance of education. The Ministry of Education supports and supervises all levels of education today. The state provides expenses for buildings, furniture, teaching equipment, materials and teachers' salaries. There are no fees imposed on students at any level of education. Some universities, including the University of Fine Arts, even provide such services as board and lodging to allow students (especially orphans) to reside on the university compound for easy access to artistic training.

Although they are very much a part of Khmer life, music and the arts have little place in formal education. At the primary and secondary levels, while children may recite poems, learn folk tales, and sing popular songs under the guidance of their classroom teacher, there is no provision within the structure of the formal educational system for the study of the sophisticated vocal or instrumental traditions of Khmer art music. Training is undertaken instead by special arrangements with private teachers outside the schools, or more likely, at the University of Fine Arts with members of the Faculty of Music or the Faculty of Choreographic Arts.

The Arts

The arts of Cambodia, along with religion, literature, philosophy, and architecture, are almost Indian in inspiration and expression. Many Khmer kings were of Indian descent, and royal courts, temples, and statuary were modeled on those in India. Early epic literature reveals, by its frequent allusions to Indian literature, a familiarity not only with the standard religious and philosophical works of Hinduism but also with the classic epic poems such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The practice, initiated in the Khmer royal courts, of reciting texts, as well as the major theme used in the Khmer masked play, shadow play, painting and sculpture, did much to increase this familiarity.

A complex folklore has arisen from the blend of beliefs in pagan spirits and in Hindu mythical figures. The fantastic and supernatural have a great appeal to the Khmer and indeed have proven a considerable comfort in times of stress. The misery and fear experienced by the Khmer stimulated their imaginations, and as a result, the legends created have taken root in the Khmer folkways.

The visual and performing arts of the Khmer people, deliberate in pace but infused with spirit, are important aspects of the culture. The history of Cambodia, its society, customs, and beliefs are all expressed through the various art forms. On the old sculptures of the great temple of Angkor are found both musical instruments and *apsara* (celestial dancer) figures. These *vatt* carvings have immortalized Khmer music and dance forms, and have helped in their continuation.

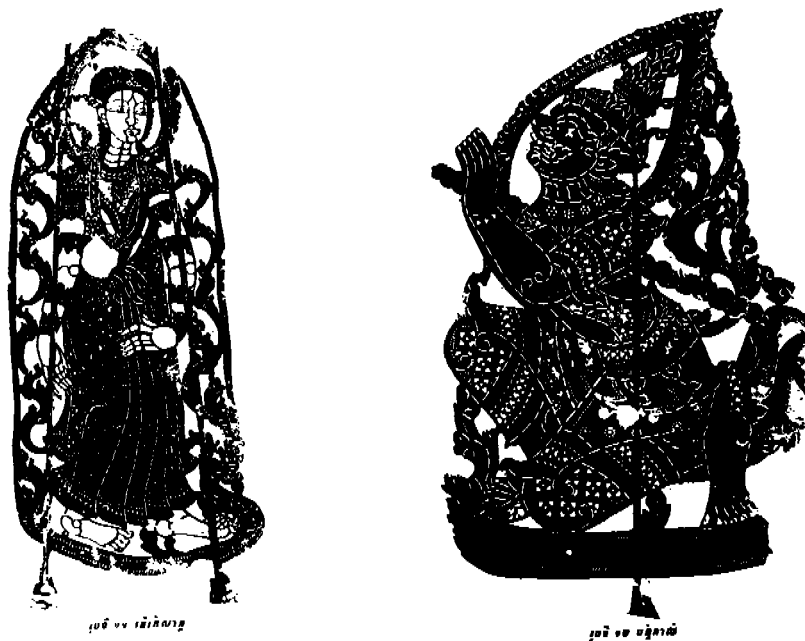
While music plays a significant role in Khmer culture, it is the court dance that may first come to mind when considering the performing arts of Cambodia. Dancers, who are almost exclusively women, wear costumes of embroidered patterns, elaborate jewelry, and beautifully designed masks and headgear. The costumes, dance movements, and gestures identify different characters such as king, queen, prince, princess, and the demon. Young dancers undergo long and tedious training under a strict discipline, developing the desired curve in the arms, elbows, wrists, fingers and waist. Every gesture that the body makes has its own meaning, either literal or symbolic, that renders the performance of court dance as a highly sophisticated form no less expressively intricate than Western ballet.



(Left) *Apsara*, one of the 1,737 figures carved on Angkor Vatt. (Illus. by Yang Sam.)

(Right) Chan Moly Sam (l.) and Somaly Hay (r.) perform an *apsara* dance. (Photo by Bonnie Periale.)

Other art forms of Cambodia include painting, sculpture, and theater forms based on Reamker, the Khmer form of the Indian epic, the Ramayana. The masked play is a theater and dance form, complete with musical accompaniment. The shadow puppet play involves flat leather puppets that are cut into figures of the king, queen, prince, princess, bird, monkey, giant, and clown, and painted with yellow and black lines. They are designed with many small pinholes punched through the leather, through which light passes, producing shadows of intricate, highly decorative figures. (See illustrations below.) The shadows are cast against a white scrim (translucent screen), by torches or burning coconut shells grouped behind the puppeteers. Puppeteers manipulate these decorated puppets by holding and moving sticks attached to various parts of the puppets' limbs. Before the advent of television and films, the shadow play performance was an all-night entertainment enjoyed by people of all ages. It is only rarely performed in its entirety today.



Leather shadow puppets. Note the pinhole design that allows light to shine through in intricate patterns.

Many of the traditional arts of Cambodia are being replaced by more modern and easily accessible forms of entertainment such as radio, television, cassette tapes, compact discs, films, videotapes, and talk shows. In this new environment, the traditional arts of the Khmer people are, unfortunately, in danger of disappearing. In the next chapter, however, we will see how the musicians and dancers now living in the United States and other countries of the world are experiencing an increasing interest in their art. Through lectures, performances, writing and teaching these living archives of Khmer culture are helping to re-establish, maintain and nourish these age-old traditions. This climate of appreciation and rediscovery might inspire young people to help the roots and branches of Khmer culture flourish in the soil of their new homelands.



3

**Khmer Musical
Forms, Genres
and
Instruments**

3 Khmer Musical Forms, Genres and Instruments

Khmer music is intimately connected to the history and geography of the country. From the earliest times, the Khmer may have had their own local music that grew out of Mon-Khmer musical roots—we see hints of these early traditions preserved in the regional folk styles common today. The *saing* [conch shell] reveals a clear horn-like resonance through its calls, and is used with devotion by the Brahmin at the royal palace to signal the arrival of a sovereign; the *sneng* [horn] is used during elephant hunting expeditions; the *ploy* [mouth organ] is used in the folk dance ensemble of *kangok Posatt* [peacock of Pursat]; and the gong ensemble is used in the folk dance tradition of *kapp krabey phoeuk sra* [buffalo sacrifice] by the Phnorng tribal groups inhabiting the hilly plateau.

Music in Historical Perspective

During the peak of Khmer civilization, the temple compounds at Angkor were centers of music and dance. Carved on the walls of the *Vatt* are *apsara* [celestial dancer] figures, and various instruments that include the *pinn* [angular harp], *korng vung* [circular frame gong], *sampho* [small barrel drum], *skor yol* [suspended barrel drum], *skor thomm* [large barrel drums], *chhing* [small cymbals], and *sralai* [quadruple-reed shawm]. These instruments were believed to have given birth to the present *pinn peat* [ensemble] which accompanies the court and masked play, shadow play, and religious ceremonies. Among Khmer ensembles, the *pinn peat* is the most resonant reflection of the powerful period of Angkor.

As the Khmer Empire went into decline, its musical and artistic forms were affected. In their place a new style of emotional and melancholic music emerged that incorporated a selection of specific melodies, and even their distinctive modes or pitch patterns. This music, when heard today, offers clear aural reference to Cambodia's decline after the Angkor period. The nineteenth century saw a renaissance of Khmer court (classical) music, and in the twentieth century, the Khmer people took upon themselves the conservation and preservation of traditional arts. Masters were identified, and their practices were carefully emulated and documented.

An initial encounter with traditional music of the Khmer may startle the Western listener, who might find it extremely different from Western style and structure. Unlike the predominance of harmony in the West, Khmer music is linear in character. The texture of Khmer music has been described as polyphonic [many independent melodies], heterophonic [simultaneous variations of a melody], and having polyphonic stratification [many layers of sounds].

Musical Characteristics

Khmer melodies are based upon two main scales, one pentatonic [five tones] and another heptatonic [seven tones]. The tuning concept and practice of these scales has been an everlasting argument. It has

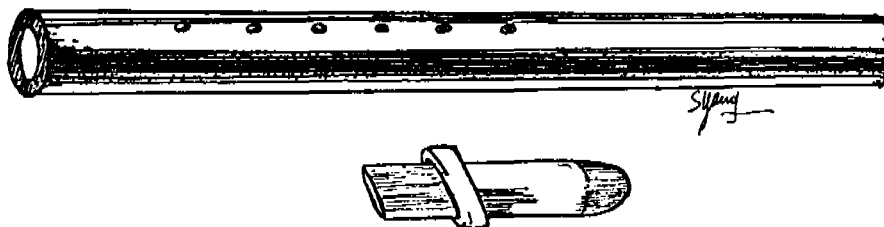
Scales

become a cliché that the tuning of all Southeast Asian music is “equidistant,” i.e. the interval between every two adjacent pitches in a heptatonic scale is the same. (Technically, 171.4 cents as compared to a Western half-step at 100 cents and whole-step at 200 cents). While this is true in much of the classical music of Thailand, such is not the case in Khmer music. Rather, the tuning system varies from tuner to tuner, from ensemble to ensemble, and from place to place. Musicians at the University of Fine Arts, for example tune their xylophones and gongs differently from musicians in Siem Reap province in northern Cambodia.

Melodies contain important structural pitches or points which are the skeletal structure of the pieces. If transcribed in Western conventional notation, these important pitches appear after the barlines, and closely correspond to the rhythm cycles of eight, sixteen, or thirty-two beats played by a drum. (See Lesson XI.) **Ornamentation** or embellishment is a special characteristic of Khmer music. Musicians who have developed a high level of skill and mastery of an instrument will provide intricate ornamentations when performing a piece. These ornamentations will reveal the musician’s stature, distinguishing an outstanding performer from a mediocre one. A good performance reflects the musician’s knowledge of the piece, the idiomatic performance style of their instruments, as well as their own ability to work creatively and skillfully within the tradition while performing.

Khmer melodies are often composed in duple or quadruple meter. There is no tempo marking or conductor to lead the ensembles. Instead, each ensemble has a lead instrument to start and end a piece, and the drum and cymbal players set the tempo. Rhythmically, Khmer music bears a noticeable kind of “dotted” or uneven rhythm. This is one quality that distinguishes it from the more even rhythm of Thai music. **Meter**

Khmer musical pieces are grouped into several categories according to their nature—narrative, descriptive, and sentimental—and also their language, dialect, or regional/national “accents”—Khmer, Laotian, Burmese, Javanese, Chinese, Mon, and European. (Because their names relate to specific groups, their compositions have a certain character, style, and general manner appropriate to each.) These categories are often obvious in the titles, such as “Khyall Bakk Cheung Phnum” [The Wind Blows at the Foot of the Mountain], “Krapeu Kantuy Veng” [Long-Tailed Crocodile], “Sdech Sok” [Sad King], “Khmer Krang Phka” [Khmer String Flowers], “Lao Doeur Prey” [Laotians Walk in the Forest], “Chenn Se” [Chinese Medical Doctor], “Phoumea Doeur Yoeut” [Burmese Walk Slowly], and “Baraing Bakk Phlett” [French Fan]. **Categories**



Pey Praboh: double-reed pipe. (Illustration by Yang Sam.)

Musical Instruments

Khmer music is generally assumed to belong to the “gong-chime” culture, in that foremost among its instruments are many types of gongs, xylophones, and metallophones. A variety of aerophones, chordophones, idiophones, and membranophones exist; only the *principal* ones are described here. Photographs and illustrations of them are grouped in this chapter and also sprinkled throughout the balance of the book.

Khmer aerophones include conch shells, buffalo horns, flutes, free-reeds, double reeds, and quadruple reeds. Of these, the quadruple-reed instrument called the *sralai* is one of the most unique instruments in the world. It consists of a thirteen- to sixteen-inch body of hard wood or ivory with a shape that bulges at the center and flares outward at both ends. Six fingerholes are bored into the center bulge, drilled through sixteen carved pairs of decorative rings which also serve to deter the fingers from slipping in performance. The quadruple-reed (made of four little tongues of dried palm leaf fastened to a brass tube with thread) is placed completely in the mouth, with the performer’s lips resting against the *sralai*, and the tongue placed right under the reed to control the opening. If more of the tongue is pressed under the bottom part of the reed and the pressure is slightly increased, the pitch is raised. It is played using only the three middle fingers of each hand. Two sizes of *sralai* exist, each with a two-octave range, and one tuned about a perfect fourth higher than the other.

Aerophones

The Khmer flute, called *khloy*, is of the end-blown duct or fipple variety. It is one of the most popular instruments in Cambodia, partly due to the accessibility of bamboo which is most commonly used to make flutes. Under a straw hut in the fields or on the back of a buffalo, a young boy commonly adds the sound of his *khloy* to the sound of the wind blowing while he watches his cattle. The body of the *khloy* is made of bamboo, wood, metal, or even plastic. There are six or seven fingerholes and a thumbhole (although some do not have this hole). Some also have a membrane hole which is covered by a thin rice paper or bamboo skin to create a buzzing sound quality. The *khloy* has a two-octave range, from approximately D4 (D just above middle C) to D6 (D two octaves higher). Besides its common use as a solo instrument, the *khloy* is also found in the *mohori* [entertainment] and *kar* [wedding] ensembles.

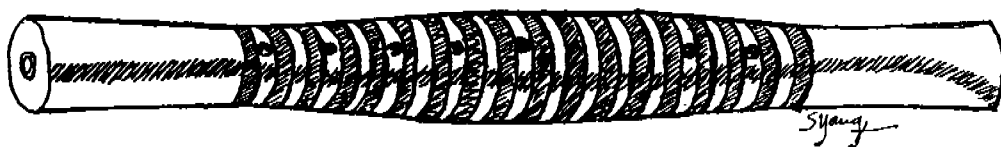
Another important aerophone is the side-blown single free-reed pipe known as *pey pork*. The body of the *pey pork* is made of bamboo or cane with seven fingerholes and one thumbhole. The reed is made of bronze and is placed in a hole approximately one inch from the end of the pipe. The range of the *pey pork* is just over an octave; this is the smallest range of all Khmer wind instruments with the exception of the *sneng* [buffalo horn], which has the range of only a perfect fourth. At one time, the *pey pork* was played to put a medium into a trance or in conjunction with worship of the spirit, and in wedding ensembles. Today, this free-reed pipe is played as a solo instrument or to accompany singing.

The audience listening to these instruments will detect no break in the sounds that might indicate a breath had been taken. This is due to the extremely important technique of **circular breathing** employed by *sralai*, *khloy* and *pey pork* players. The key to the technique is that about half to two-thirds of the way before the breath is fully used up,

the performer expands the cheeks (serving as an air chamber) and pushes the remaining air out through the mouth and into the instrument while taking a new breath through the nostrils. This breath-taking must be done quickly so as to keep the air flowing continuously. To learn the technique, students practice by blowing through a thin soda straw (or in Cambodia, a water lily stalk) into a glass of water to make bubbles. During practice, bubbles must continue without interruption. If the bubbles stop, there has been a break in the flow of air into the water, indicating the circular breathing technique has not yet been mastered.

Common Aerophones

<i>sralai</i>	Quadruple-reed shawm; hardwood or ivory
<i>khloy</i>	End-blown flute; bamboo
<i>pey pork</i>	Side-blown single free-reed pipe; bamboo or cane
<i>pey praboh</i>	Double-reed pipe



Sralai, quadruple-reed shawm. (Illustration by Yang Sam.)

Among the many idiophones of Khmer music are the xylophones, the gongs, and the small cymbals. Khmer xylophones are called *roneat*, and are classified as “bar idiophones.” The *roneat* have bamboo or wooden keys which are strung together with two cords running through holes in each key, and are suspended on hooks at each end. The xylophone keys are tuned to desired pitches using tuning blobs called *pramor*, a mixture of lead, beeswax and rosin. The *roneat* player strikes the keys with two mallets having soft or hard heads, for indoor or outdoor performances respectively. Two sizes of *roneat* exist, one with sixteen keys, and another with twenty-one. The *roneat ek* (higher pitched xylophone) is considered to be lead instrument in an ensemble, because of its role in starting a piece or cuing other instruments. The *roneat ek* generally plays variations of a melody that is usually sounded by a vocalist or *sralai* player. Stylistically, the *roneat ek* plays in octaves or less commonly in fourths or fifths.

Idiophones

Another principal instrument of Khmer music is the *kornng vung*, a set of sixteen bowl-shaped gongs in a circular frame, used in the *pinn peat* ensemble. The individual gongs that make up the set are made from copper (for bright sound) mixed with bronze (for long life), and are bossed (have a raised section). The gongs are various sizes, and are placed over a rattan frame twelve inches high or so, constructed in the shape of nearly a full circle. Each gong has four holes, two on each side. Gut strings are placed through these holes, then run over the frame and tied to the frame itself. The gongs are suspended



Phon Bin demonstrating *roneat ek* [high-pitched xylophone]. Note mallets tied together with string—a technique common among beginners to maintain the correct distance between mallets for the octave or certain desired intervals. (Photo by Winnie Lambrecht.)



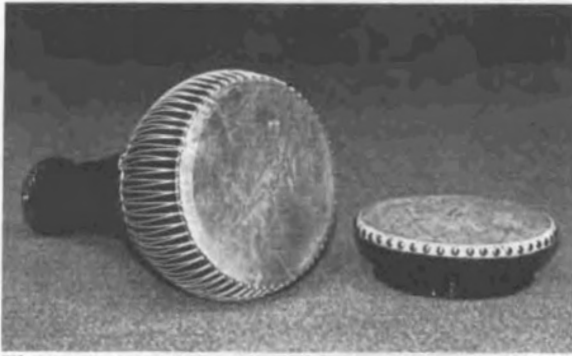
Sam-Ang Sam playing an elaborately decorated *khloy*. (Photo by Bonnie Periale.)



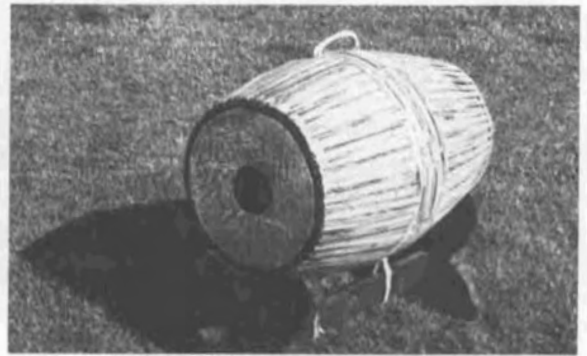
Phon Bin playing the *krapeu*. The *khimm* is in front. (Photo by Winnie Lambrecht.)



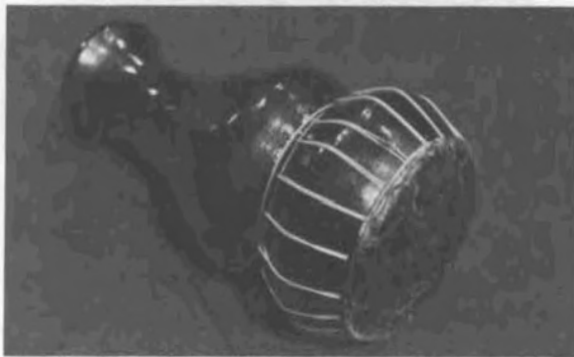
Phon Bin demonstrating the *khimm*, hammered dulcimer. (Photo by Winnie Lambrecht.)



Thaun-rumanea drum pair. (Photo by Sam-Ang Sam.)



Sampho (small barrel drum.) (Photo by Sam-Ang Sam.)



Skor arakk (goblet drum). (Photo by Sam-Ang Sam.)



Chhing (small cymbals). (Photo by Sam-Ang Sam.)



Roneat thung (low-pitched xylophone).
(Photo by Sam-Ang Sam.)



Korng thomm (low-pitched circular gongs).
(Photo by Sam-Ang Sam.)



Pinn peat ensemble. Two large barrel drums on the right are *skor thomm*, the *krapeu* is in front. Player to the far left shows position for sitting within the *korng tauch* or *korng thomm*. (Photo by Frank Proschan.)

in the frame, arranged so that the largest and lowest-pitched is to the left of the player, the highest is to the right. The player sits in the middle of the set. Each gong is tuned to required pitch using the same *pramor* mixture described above. Soft mallets are used for indoor use, hard ones for outdoor performances.

A critically important instrument in Khmer music is the *chhing*, a pair of bowl-shaped cymbals of thick and heavy bronze, with a small rim. *Chhing* are the timekeeper of the ensemble. They measure about two inches and are joined together with a cord which passes through a small hole at the apex of each one of them. Each cymbal of the pair is held in one hand and the two are struck together. *Chhing* produce open (ringing) and closed (dampened) sounds, called “chhing” and “chhepp.” They are marked respectively with the signs (o) for open and (+) for dampened.

Common Idiophones	
<i>roneat</i>	xylophone; suspended bamboo or wooden keys
<i>roneat ek</i>	higher pitched xylophone
<i>roneat thung</i>	lower pitched xylophone
<i>kornng vung</i>	set of 16 circular copper/bronze gongs in rack
<i>kornng tauch</i>	high-pitched circular frame gongs
<i>kornng thomm</i>	low-pitched circular frame gongs
<i>chhing</i>	small bronze cymbals

The *sampho* is considered to be among the most important Khmer musical instruments. The *sampho* is a small barrel drum. Its body is made of hollowed wood, and at either end is a calf-skin head tightened with gut; the center of each head is painted black. The player hits both heads of the *sampho* using his hands. One head is larger than the other, so that the drum produces a lower and a higher tone at each head. They are tuned with a pasty mixture of cooked rice and ashes from burnt branches of the coconut tree. The *sampho* controls the tempo and regulates the rhythmic cycles of Khmer music.

Membranophones

Another membranophone is the set of two drums called the *thaun-rumanea*, which can be found in the *mohori* ensemble. The *thaun* is a goblet-shaped drum, made of a clay or wood body in various sizes. Snake, goat, or ox skin is stretched over the head and then tied to the body with nylon string or wire. The *rumanea* is a flat frame drum similar to the Laotian and Thai *ramana*, Indian *kanjira*, West African and Native American square or circular frame drums, or Irish *bodhran*. The *rumanea* is never played alone, but the *thaun* is occasionally used by itself in the *laim thaun*, a popular music ensemble still heard in the countryside where electric guitars (and electricity) are not available. The drummer uses bare hands to play the *thaun-rumanea*. Cambodian musicians have prescribed three different rhythmic patterns called *muoy choan* [level one], *pi choan* [level two], and *bey choan* [level three] for *thaun-rumanea*. The rhythmic patterns increase in tempo and complexity, from eight beats at the first level, to a doubling to sixteen beats at the second level, and to a quadrupling to thirty-two beats at the third level. The density of the second level is usually greater than the first, and the third level is more dense than the second. (See Lesson XI.)

Common Membranophones

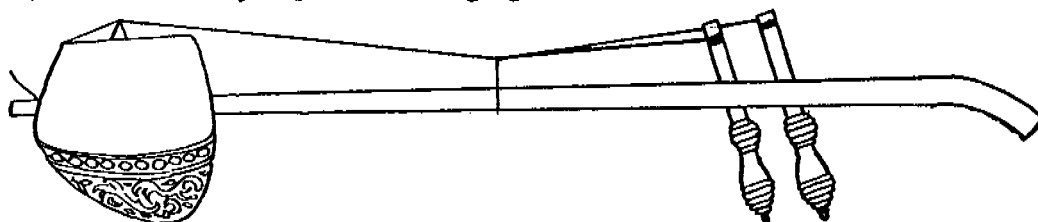
<i>sampho</i>	barrel-shaped drum; wood body; 2 calf-skin heads
<i>thaun</i>	goblet-shaped drum; clay or wood body; snake-, goat- or ox-skin head
<i>rumanea</i>	flat frame drum
<i>skor arakk</i>	goblet drum
<i>skor thomm</i>	large double-headed barrel drums

A number of important chordophones are integral to traditional Khmer music. The *tror* is a bowed lute, once considered a folk fiddle. It is believed to be a modification of the Chinese *erh-hu*, which was used in the Chinese ensemble brought to Cambodia around the turn of the century. The *tror* has a range of approximately one octave. There are five types of *tror*: *tror chhe* (high-pitched two-stringed fiddle), *tror so tauch* (medium-high-pitched two-stringed fiddle), *tror so thomm* (medium-low-pitched two-stringed fiddle), *tror ou* (low-pitched two-stringed fiddle), and *tror Khmer* (three-stringed spike fiddle). The variety of *tror* are used in the *arakk* [worship of the spirit], the *kar*, and *mohori* ensembles. They are also heard as accompaniment to vocal music.

Chordophones

The *khimm* is a chordophone instrument belonging to the board zither family. Today board zithers can be found in many places under different names such as *santir* (Iran and Iraq), *chang* (Soviet Union), *santoor* (India), *yangum* (Korea), *hackbrett* (Switzerland), *yang chin* (China), *cimbalom* (Hungary), *kim* (Thailand), *dan tam thap luc* (Vietnam) and hammered dulcimer (North America). The Khmer *khimm* may have been brought to Cambodia at some time during this century, along with the Chinese opera, which has since been modified and adapted to a local form of theater called *basakk*. There are two sizes of *khimm*, both of which have fourteen fixed bridges, over which run double and triple metal strings of two and one-half octaves. They are played with a pair of padded sticks. The *khimm* is prominent not only in the *basakk* ensemble but also in the *mohori* ensemble that accompanies Cambodian folk dances and plays.

Still another important Khmer chordophone is the *krapeu*, a long three-stringed zither. A similar instrument, *jakay*, can be found in Laos and Thailand, and in Burma where it is called *mi gyaun*. *Krapeu* means crocodile. The instrument received its name because its body or board resonator has the shape of a crocodile. Twelve frets are mounted on the body of the instrument, and two nylon strings play melody while one metal string sounds a drone. The *krapeu* player uses a small piece of buffalo horn or ivory as a plectrum or pick, which is tied to the player's index finger with a string. Several ensembles, including the *kar*, *mohori*, and *ayai* [alternate singing], feature the *krapeu*.



Tror ou (low-pitched two-stringed fiddle). Illustration by Yang Sam.

Common Chordophones

tror chhe
tror so tauch
tror so thomm
tror ou
tror Khmer
khimm
krapeu

high-pitched two-stringed fiddle
 medium-high-pitched two-stringed fiddle
 medium-low-pitched two-stringed fiddle
 low-pitched two-stringed fiddle
 three-stringed spike fiddle
 hammered dulcimer with 14 bridges
 long three-stringed zither, 12 bridges;
 played with a plectrum



Phon Bin, instrument builder and musician living in Massachusetts, demonstrating *tror Khmer*.
 (Photo by Winnie Lambrecht.)



A *tror so tauch* player at the Lowell, Mass. Folk Festival, 1988. (Photo by Winnie Lambrecht.)



Phon Bin demonstrating the unusual *chapey dang veng* [long-necked lute].
 A *roneat ek* is in the background. (Photo by Winnie Lambrecht.)

Musical Forms and Genres

Among the most important Khmer musical forms is the dance music of court and folk settings and occasions. Khmer court dance has been associated with the court of Cambodia for over a thousand years, at least since the time of the Angkor period. Likewise, folk dance has been close to the heart of rural life in Cambodia from time immemorial.

In the Angkor Vatt compound, gigantic bas-relief masterpieces symbolize the union of celestial and earthly beings in the court dances that were offered to the god-king during the golden age of the Khmer culture. Following the wars with Thailand, a renaissance of Khmer culture occurred that included the restoration of the court dance. Female dancers were preferred for court dances, with male dancers reserved for the role of the monkey in the dance drama, and for the performance of masked plays.

Court Dance

Court dancers were trained from childhood in the royal palace. They seldom left the palace grounds, unless to attend to the king in his travels. Dancers were trained from the age of five or six for a repertoire that included pure dance pieces, and dance dramas based upon romantic and mythological stories as well as the great epics such as *Reamker* (the Indian epic, the Ramayana), *Preah Chinavung*, and *Preah Chann Korup*. Young girls underwent strenuous training, perfecting the gestures that involved their arms, elbows, hands wrists, legs and feet. Early-morning training sessions began with an intense routine of bending and stretching the limits by which the body can naturally be extended, twisted and turned.

Costumes of Khmer court dance include intricate masks and headdresses (called *mkott*), and elaborate jewelry worn on the neck, forearms, wrists, and ankles. The jewelry is made of precious stones, gold, silver, and brass, depending upon the patronage of the troupe. The court dances added lustre and grace to the king's courts, in particular during the king's anniversaries, religious and ceremonial festivals, national ceremonies, and in the entertainment of the king's guests



Muni Mekhala Dance Drama featuring Chan Moly Sam (l.), and Somaly Hay (r.) in the role of Ream Eyso the giant or ogre. (Photo by Bonnie Periale.)



(Above) Court dance hand gesture meaning “flower.” There is a series of stylized gestures with specific interpretive meanings. (Photo by Bonnie Periale.)

(Left) Chan Moly Sam wearing elaborate *mkott* [crown] for court dance. These crowns and other jewelry can be very heavy. (Photo by Bonnie Periale.)



Robaim nesat [trap-fishing dance]. A folk dance. (Illustration by Yang Sam.)

Folk dances of Cambodia and their musical accompaniment are performed by and for the people of rural areas. Adults and children alike dance to increase a communal sense of security, to release emotions, to communicate with their ancestors, and to bring good fortune to the community. Especially for religious ceremonies, traditional festivities like the rituals of harvest season, and recreational gatherings, folk dances based on local legends and on the life of the people in the villages are performed, improvised, and injected with new gestures. While court dances are restricted to their classical form with a prescribed language of movement and gesture, folk dance is a reflection of the feelings of rural people and their spontaneous response to the music at hand.

Folk Dance



Robaim chraut srauv [harvest dance]. (Illustration by Yang Sam.)

Because the Khmer value music in their lives, it is heard on the occasions of a baby's birth, at funerals, at hairshaving events, and even in the boxing arena. Boxers do not fight without music. In Cambodia, the boxing ensemble consists of one *sralai* (quadruple-reed shawm) and one *sampho* (small barrel drum). Boxing music is unique. There is one piece that is immediately recognized by every Khmer who assists or attends boxing events. This piece is divided into two parts: the invocation of the spirits or *krou* [teachers] to concentrate the boxers' mind and to give them confidence, and the fight itself. Music for the first part is slow and in a rubato (free and flexible rhythm) style; the *sralai* plays the melody accompanied by the *sampho* which provides only a few strokes at important structural points in the melody. The second part is in a steady and faster tempo than the first. As the boxing rounds progress, the music accelerates and stops only at the end of the rounds or when a boxer is knocked out. In a good fight, the audience also joins by clapping their hands in rhythm with the *sampho*. (See Lesson XII.)

Boxing Music

Weddings

The Khmer wedding has traditionally been a prominent occasion for music, and *phleng kar* [wedding music] developed over the centuries as one of Cambodia's most popular musics. *Phleng kar* refers to the ensemble, one of the oldest in Cambodia, and also to the repertoire. Instrumentation includes a low- and hi-pitched *tror*, *khloy*, *krapeu*, *khimm*, a goblet drum called *skor arakk*, and a singer. The fixed airs of the *phleng kar* can be modified to suit the social rank of the couple and their family. The *phleng kar* ensemble plays throughout various events of a wedding ceremony that lasts three days and three nights. Each part of the ceremony is accompanied by the ensemble, from the time of building a house as a dowry to the ceremony of the cutting of the hair of the bride and groom, to the rite of *sampeah neak ta* [Salute to the Local Guardian Spirit], during which cotton threads are tied to the wrists of the married couple. Because marriage is so common, in Cambodia and even in the United States *phleng kar* music remains popular.



Traditional wedding 1989, Danbury, Connecticut. The bride and groom take part in the rite of *sampeah neak ta* [salute to the local guardian spirit] during which cotton threads are tied to the wrists of the couple by many of the guests. (Photo by Tho Sangphet.)



These musicians were brought in from New York City for the wedding in Danbury, Connecticut. (Photo by Tho Sangphet.)

Tradition and Change

The Communist, genocidal regime of Pol Pot claimed the lives of millions of Khmer adults and children. Musicians, dancers and other artists were not exempted. So many lost their lives that the method by which traditional musical skills and repertoire had always been transmitted was virtually destroyed. The present condition that exists in refugee camps and in Khmer communities in adopted countries abroad, including the United States, is, sadly, a confusing one. The lack of a clear path to solid musical expertise and in-depth knowledge has actually endangered the preservation of many musical styles, techniques, and pieces. Some musicians who learned their art in refugee camps are not aware of—or do not pay attention to—issues of authenticity, preservation and tradition. In addition, because so many of the highly trained musicians died, the neophytes have virtually no way to be exposed to the original versions for much of their repertoire, and thus pieces and techniques have changed without the performers fully realizing where the changes were made. Instead, they apply a personal and popular interpretation to what had always been sophisticated forms and styles.

There are now only a few artists teaching and performing who were formally charged with carrying on the tradition closely. The resulting break in the oral tradition has resulted in the loss of more than half of the oldest melodies that had previously been passed on from generation to generation. Now many pieces are totally unknown, while others are known only by name. Many musicians find the demands of making a living in the modern world leave little time for serious practice, and because there is frequently little monetary compensation for performances, most musicians must treat music as a hobby. The result is that when certain music is needed for particular celebrations there is no time for adequate rehearsal, and both skill and accuracy suffer.

In particular, the following developments in traditional music and dance have been observed in Cambodian settlements in the United States, the Thai border camps, in France and in Cambodia itself.

1. Because of the lack of musicians and instruments, the *pinn peat* ensemble which was traditionally comprised of *roneat* (xylophone), *korng vung* (circular frame gongs), now also includes *tror* (two-stringed fiddle), *krapeu* (three-stringed zither), *khimm* (hammered dulcimer), and *khloy* (duct flute). Some of these modified *pinn peat* ensembles use Western flute instead of the *khloy*.

2. Because of the lack of *sralai* (quadruple-reed shawm) players, the *pinn peat* ensemble uses a *roneat ek* (high-pitched xylophone) to play the traditional and well-known *saloma* piece, which had always been played on a *sralai*.

3. Because of the lack of *skor thomm* (large double-headed barrel drums), the *sampho* (small double-headed barrel drum) player now plays both parts on the *sampho* only. The result is a decline in timbral variety.

4. Because of the lack of female dancers who traditionally perform male and giant roles in the *lkhon kbach* (court dance), male dancers are now employed for those parts.

5. Because of the inadequate knowledge of the repertoires of both music and dance, substitutions and abbreviations of classical pieces have occurred. For example, some musicians cannot play the two or three sections of a standard traditional piece, and repeat the first section two or three times instead.

Today, traditional Khmer music is performed in Cambodia and in the Cambodian communities around the world for such occasions as weddings, religious ceremonies in the temples, and during dance and theater performances. Of the approximately one quarter of a million Cambodian refugees resettled in the United States, about three dozen principal musicians and dancers are actively performing for audiences in North America, in dance and music residencies in schools, universities, and museums, as well as for celebrations within Cambodian communities. Musicians actively performing include Bun Loeung (MN), Chhoeuy Man (CA), Chum Ngek (MD), Dip Seth (CA), Dul Chea (CA), Heam Yoeung (WA), Iv Sary (CA), Khlay Ra (MD), Kim Chhay (MA), Kong Peang (PA), Pel Sam-Uon (WA), Phan Bin (MA), Poeung Noeung (WA), Pok Chhum (CA), Sam Sam-Ang (WA), So Vann (WA), Sou Hoeurn (WA), To Hear (CT), Ung Chinary (AZ), Van Pok (PA), Van Yan (PA), and Yin Ponn (CA). Principal dancers include Chhim Chan Dara (CA), Hay Somaly (CT), Hing Rachana (MN), Meas Massady (MD), Hing Thavaro (MN), Moeur Sokhanarith (CT), Nuth Vanthy (MN), Phoung Phan (CT), Sam Chan Moly (WA), Sin Ny (MD), Tes Sam-Oeun (MD), and Yim Devi (VA). (Note: These names have been listed here using the traditional style of name order.)

Khmer Music in the U.S.

For practical and economic reasons, folk music is more often heard than other Khmer genres because it is used at wedding ceremonies which occur weekly in Cambodian communities across the country. Musicians are paid when playing for these ceremonies. The court (classical) music, unfortunately, is of serious concern. Because it accompanies the infrequent or annual-only performances of court dance (during the Cambodian New Year), it is becoming an endangered musical species.

Young Khmer people often find their parents and older relatives conservative, old-fashioned, and backward. They perceive Khmer music, songs and dances as too slow and therefore boring. Unfortunately, there have been few young Khmer seeking out lessons on traditional instruments, or who are learning to perform Khmer songs. Still, many will attend concerts of the traditional music and dance.

The dance traditions seem to be faring a bit better at this point. Both folk and court traditions of the dance are well-preserved, as there are dancers who seem to want to learn and perform both traditions. Seeing the need to pass on Khmer traditional culture to the younger generation, and recognizing young people's enthusiasm for learning the dance, Cambodian associations in several communities (for example, the Cambodian-American Heritage in Maryland and the Cambodian Studies Center in Washington) offer classes in the traditional choreographic arts. In addition, community arts and outreach groups such as Country Roads: Refugee Arts Group in Boston, and the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival

in Massachusetts are actively seeking and working with Cambodian dancers and musicians to offer master classes, document traditional pieces on film, and sponsor concerts and festivals.

Rock music was enjoyed in Cambodia by the young Khmer even before the war. Khmer popular music, once called *phleng Manil* [Manila music], is probably fifty years old, and was believed to be brought to Cambodia by the Filipinos in the 1940's. When compared to American rock music, the Khmer version seems simple and old-fashioned. When it began to emerge, Khmer rock music incorporated Latin American rhythms such as the bolero, the cha-cha, the tango, and the bossanova into its repertoire. Because Khmer rock bands today play for older as well as younger listeners, the Latin American rhythms are still popular. Moreover, as Khmer rock musicians are not as dedicated as some Americans who earn their living as members of professional bands, Khmer rock music tends to retain its simpler and earlier flavor.

While using the borrowed rhythms from the West, Khmer rock musicians also include their traditional Khmer rhythms—*roam vung*, *roam kbach*, *saravann*, and *laim leav*— in their rhythmic repertoire necessary for the social gatherings or parties which involve social dancing. What makes this rock music distinctly Khmer is the playing style, the incorporation of Khmer rhythms, and the use of traditional Khmer melodies. Of particular note is the fact that among the various Khmer genres, rock music is the most popular, because it is appreciated by young Khmer who are willing to pay for this kind of entertainment. In the Khmer music industry, consequently, Khmer rock or pop music is in greatest demand and is easily available for purchase from Asian stores in Cambodian, Vietnamese and Chinese communities where there are large concentrations of Asian refugees and immigrants.



Laim leav dance - a popular dance and rhythm.

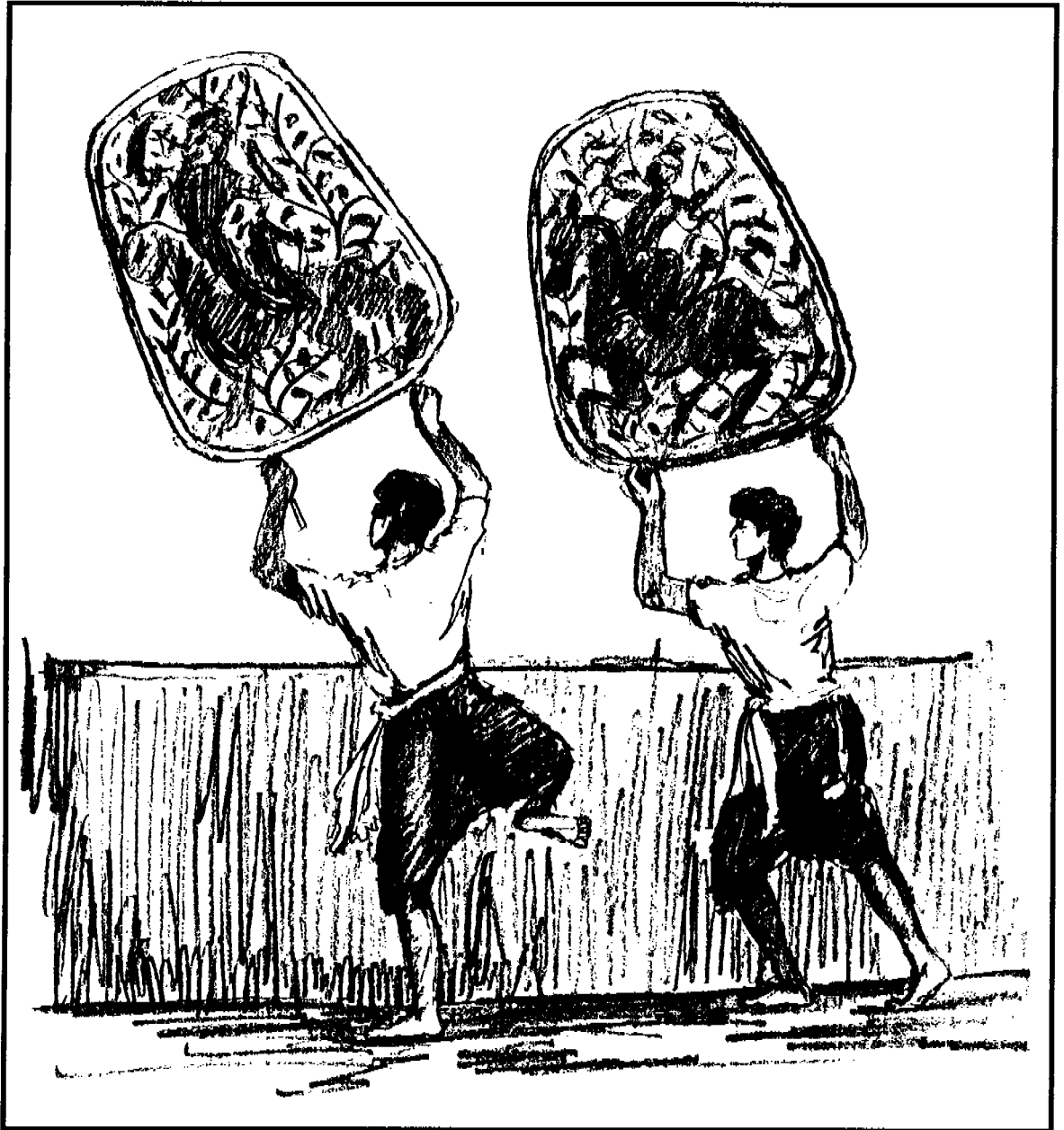
Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning Khmer music is a practical and performance-oriented process. Cambodian musicians tend not to be theorists; they do not verbalize about their music. Likewise, intelligent listeners judge musicians by their playing rather than their discourse about music. Those who master the art of Khmer court music do so by developing their listening ear and their creative mind for the embellishment which is the ultimate in Khmer musical expression.

In the tradition of becoming a Khmer musician, every student must experience an apprenticeship that involves several years and stages. Musical training comprises long-standing Khmer rituals that begin with the taking of a teacher. A student is introduced to a teacher by a third person, who may be another teacher, a relative, or a friend. As a social acquaintance is established, the student can prove his commitment, courtesy, respect and patience to the future teacher. Should the teacher accept him, a ceremony called *sampeah krou* [salute the teacher] is prepared for the student, in which permission and blessing from the teacher's teachers is requested. The ceremony includes an offering of five incense sticks, five candles, five meters of cloth, and five *riels* (in the old days, five *riels* could buy a bowl of noodles and a cup of coffee). During the course of study, the student often brings gifts for the teacher: money, fruits, cakes, and cigarettes. The student continues to show respect and obedience to the teacher in order to assure a warm atmosphere and emotional harmony. The relationship is very much a mentorship, and not simply a situation of "taking lessons."

Musical knowledge is traditionally passed on orally from master teacher to student, without the use of notation. The student imitates and follows the master during private lessons. The teacher plays a phrase on an instrument, and the student repeats. Again the teacher plays a phrase, and again the student repeats it. When the first phrase is memorized, the modeling-and-imitation process is applied to a second phrase, a third phrase, and so on, until the piece has been memorized. With the learning of each new phrase, there is the task of linking it in performance to the earlier phrases. Through this process, Khmer musicians learn a repertoire of several hundred pieces by heart.

Since the introduction of Western music to Cambodia, musical notation has been used by teachers and students at the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. Notation can expedite teaching and learning, but it can also prove to be a disadvantage if musicians become dependent on notation rather than on their own ears and intellects. Notation is best used by students who write only the fundamental melody and important structural pitches of a piece, master and memorize these melodies, and then discard the transcriptions. In actual performance, students develop the skill to provide variation, ornamentation, and embellishment appropriate to the style. It is through many years of listening to their teachers that students learn to master the complexities of traditional Khmer music.



Staging the Shadow Play. (Illustration by Yang Sam.)



4

**A Guide
to the Music of
Cambodia**

4 **A Guide to the Music of Cambodia**

The selections which follow are designed as an introduction to the traditional music and culture of Cambodia, to be used by groups with the guidance of an instructor or by individuals working independently with the tape and book. Teachers of music, social studies and language arts, general classroom teachers, and community outreach leaders may find effective use of the lessons, and both Khmer and non-Khmer readers and listeners will find the recorded selections and annotation enlightening and enjoyable. The written annotation to the taped musical selections unravels the intricacies of Khmer music, and presents the songs in cultural context that encompasses information on geography, language and literature, folklore and customs. The “Study Guide” for each selection is oriented toward participatory experiences, with provision allotted for the development of listening skills, critical thinking about Khmer music, the related arts and their context within the culture. Each “Study Guide” has a separate section entitled “For the Music Professional” (intended for music teachers, ethnomusicologists or the serious student) that offers more detailed musical analysis, additional experiences in rhythmic responses, the singing voice, and instrumental performance.

This collection presents a varied sampling of treasures from the venerable Khmer culture representing folk and game songs, instrumental selections, and stories. The fourteen lessons which follow are logically sequenced to facilitate an understanding of Khmer music and culture. Each piece corresponds to a recorded selection, found in the same order on the companion tape. Traditional and composed songs are notated, and each is presented with its text and literal translation. (Please refer to the “Notes” section at the beginning of this book for general information about the transcriptions.) The cultural context of the game songs, wedding songs, dance music, instrumental pieces, and musical stories is presented, so that the music can more easily be perceived as it is intended—a reflection of the traditions which Khmer hold dear. To that end, each selection opens with a personal comment or anecdote by Sam-Ang.

The study guides offer step-by-step procedures, so that the user can recognize the intent of the lessons to develop both musical skills and cultural understanding. Still, the lessons may provide only a framework for the creative teacher, student, or independent reader-listener, who will identify the critical content and tailor it to suit classroom or individual needs. Each section may be presented as a self-contained unit, or may be expanded or abbreviated as necessary. We have suggested age and grade levels. Feel free to make adjustments to allow the widest use of the material in a variety of settings. We have included suggestions for further discussion of cultural issues, and ideas for further musical experiences that include listening, singing, movement and instrumental performance.

While there are highly sophisticated musical traditions, genres and performance practices within Khmer culture that demand a lifetime of training, even beginners can know the enriching experience of singing a traditional Khmer song, playing a traditional Khmer melody on flute, recorder or xylophone, or moving with stylized gestures in response to

popular Khmer music. Careful, repeated listening to the companion tape will reveal the delicate, refreshing beauty of much of the music, and also the stylistic nuances typical of performances of even the most modern popular songs and melodies.

The music of Cambodia can be presented for its sound essence alone, a kind of sonic artifact of the culture, but a broader study of Khmer culture will lead to a fuller understanding of musical—and artistic—traditions. An immersion into the world of Cambodia and Cambodian-Americans may entail the use of maps and photographs of the cities and countryside of Cambodia and the Khmer people. We have provided numerous drawings and photographs. Refer to the selected bibliography, discography and filmography for resources for stories, slides, and videotapes to add a broad cultural context for experiencing the music.

Invite Khmer residents from the local community to visit the group to share their past experiences and customs, to tell a story, to show samples of traditional clothing or art, to play a game or sing a song, help with pronunciation, share a recipe or play an instrument. Such a guest will lend a humanistic real-life perspective to the study of both the music and culture, and will be heartened by the interest taken in the gift of their knowledge.

At the end of each “Study Guide” is a special section of particular interest to music teachers, ethnomusicologists and serious students. This special focus includes additional information on the musical structure or techniques, and more in-depth activities specifically related to musical understanding and performance of the selections. For singing in Khmer style, listeners should recognize that vibrato is not a part of the performance style. Both children and adults tend to employ the light “head voice” rather than the heavier “chest voice”; the emphatic or strident “playground” and “street” voices are not appropriate in this vocal tradition. The pieces have been notated in a fundamental, skeletal approach, and the astute listener will recognize that Khmer melodies are embellished with slides between pitches, passing tones, and occasional turns or trills. (Furthermore, as we described in the “Notes” section at the beginning of the book, there is a problem with transcribing the music to match the pitch of the instruments on the recording. You may have an accurate transcription, but those instruments are not in tune with piano, recorder, flute, xylophone or Orff Schulwerk barred instruments, and an accurate transcription requires several sharps or flats, making it difficult for younger students to read, or impossible for some instruments to play. We have therefore provided transcriptions in the key closest to the actual that will still enable performance on Western or classroom instruments, and in an appendix at the back is an additional transcription in the key of actual taped performance. See also the “Romanization of Khmer Words” guide for some pronunciation assistance. There are many sounds that are impossible to write, however, so once again it is essential to listen to the singers attentively.) To approach the actual Khmer playing and singing style more closely, we invite you to play the tape repeatedly. Listen carefully, and sing along with the performers, polishing and adjusting as you go. If you have a variable speed tape player, increase the speed so that the pitch is raised the half-step to the transcription, and then you may play along as well.

For the Music Professional

Several melodies are presented for performance on classroom instruments such as xylophones and recorders. Unlike many other musical traditions which may be inappropriately “arranged” for easily accessible instruments, some of the music of Cambodia can be authentically reproduced on these instruments since *roneat* (xylophone) and *khloy* (flute) are so central to court (classical) and folk traditions. In particular, the xylophones can present a rewarding experience as a hands-on introduction to Khmer music. Because the tuning system in Cambodia is similar to Western tuning (especially in court music), there is no need to “tune” the xylophones as is the case when striving for an authentic tuning of a classroom-simulated Indonesian gamelan or African xylophone ensemble.

Performance Considerations When Using Classroom Instruments

For music and classroom teachers who wish to use xylophones from the Orff instrumentarium, several issues concerning adaptation should be considered. First, metallophones may also be employed to play pieces designated for xylophones, as the gamut of musical instruments in Cambodia includes barred instruments of wood, bamboo, metal and bronze. Second, according to Khmer tradition, any of the vocal pieces may be transferred to an experience in instrumental performance. This might also mean that a song may be simultaneously sung and played, and that its melody may serve as an instrumental interlude between verses. Third, while the *roneat ek* characteristically plays melodies in octaves, this is probably not possible on Orff xylophones due to both their restricted range and also the lack of kinesthetic development of most young students for handling octaves. Still, students may be made aware of this performance technique through listening and discussion, which may lead to a fuller appreciation of the complexity of the music and its performance practice. Fourth, students should be encouraged to use two mallets in alternating fashion for playing successive pitches of a melody. Fifth, in the case of pitches of longer duration, a tremolo on the xylophone should be played with both mallets in order to sustain the sound through its designated time length. Working with young students will necessitate playing the most basic version. Older students will be more able to attempt the first steps at embellishments, tremolo, and playing in octaves.

While teachers may seek to develop in their students a repertoire of songs and instrumental experiences from Cambodia, the process by which Khmer music is transmitted should also be kept in mind. As music is transmitted orally by teacher to student in Cambodia, it is important that students here also be given the experience of learning by listening. If you intend to learn and/or teach this music with the goal being a performance, you are well advised to listen and re-listen to the tape—in the car, at meals, or while conducting routine tasks at home and in school. Immerse yourself and your students in the pronunciation and phrasing, style, timbre, accompaniment, rhythms and other subtleties that are impossible to record fully on paper. Gradually, the music and language will assume a level of familiarity and comfort in the ears of the previously uninitiated, and the vocal and instrumental pieces will be understood for their inherent beauty and logic. In the ideal situation, given the time and inclination for extended listening (and practice), music teachers will be able to present the music orally, to be received aurally by their students. In the classroom, students can also be presented with informal and unguided opportunities to listen (for example, while entering the room, during independent project time, in an art class as background for a related art project in shadow-puppetry, during a recess or free-play period) along with more formal presentations of the music.

Learning by Listening

