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Making the Traditional Musical Instruments of Cambodia

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Abstract (Abstract): The classical orchestra, pinpeat, as depicted in the murals of Angkor Wat and still played in Phnom Penh today, is made up of wind and percussion instruments. There are no blown brass instruments, although Western military and dance band instruments are now used in modern orchestras for theater performances and weddings. The instruments are: two xylophones (roneat), two wind instruments (srelay), two drums (skor thom and som poh), and two circular gongs (khong). There is also a small, hand-held cymbal that is used to reinforce the beat of the music.

In other orchestras, such as the mohori - used mostly for weddings - and the propinie - used mostly for folk ceremonies - other instruments such as string and wind instruments are added to combinations of the pinpeat orchestra. The strings are made up of two stringed bowed instruments that come in three sizes. These are the trew, and are similar to instruments found in other parts of Southeast Asia and China. The three-stringed instrument with the center string more elevated than the outer strings is called trew khmer, and is bowed with a horse-hair bow similar in style to a cello. A plucked one-string instrument called the khsae diev, which used the chest cavity as a resonating chamber, is built on half a gourd and is plucked with an ivory plectrum. A solo instrument called the chapie is a lutelike instrument of two strings with stops on the neck; it is used mainly to accompany the Aiyai singers as they recount the long histories of the country as well as current gossip songs. When the Pol Pot regime was overthrown in 1979, the Ministry of Culture decided that reopening the Fine Arts School was imperative to rescuing Khmer classical dance, music, and theater, all integral parts of Khmer culture. It was then discovered that there was a tremendous shortage of traditional musical instruments, occurring partly from neglect and partly from wanton destruction. Anything associated with classical music was seen as contrary to the spirit of "Year Zero," the name given by the Pol Potists to their scheme to reinvent Cambodia from scratch. They destroyed the musical instruments were either left saucepans; the wooden instruments were either left out in the rain to rot or were used as firewood.

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Full text: Making the Traditional Musical Instruments of Cambodia.

All of the musical instruments that make up the classical orchestra of Cambodia can be constructed within the country with indigenous materials. Traditionally, these materials were collected from almost all areas of the country and were then traded through long-established routes to various centers where the instruments would be assembled. These traditional crafts and trading routes were disrupted during the 1970s when civil war divided the country, and again during the four-year Pol Pot period, when all classical and traditional cultural activities were stopped. Crafts that possibly dated back prior to the time of Angkor were no longer practiced, and no new generation was learning the skills. The Orchestras of Cambodia

The classical orchestra, pinpeat, as depicted in the murals of Angkor Wat and still played in Phnom Penh today, is made up of wind and percussion instruments. There are no blown brass instruments, although Western military and dance band instruments are now used in modern orchestras for theater performances and weddings. The instruments are: two xylophones (roneat), two wind instruments (srelay), two drums (skor thom and som poh), and two circular gongs (khong). There is also a small, hand-held cymbal that is used to reinforce the beat of the music.

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orchestra. The strings are made up of two stringed bowed instruments that come in three sizes. These are the *trew*, and are similar to instruments found in other parts of Southeast Asia and China. The three-stringed instrument with the center string more elevated than the outer strings is called *trew khmer*, and is bowed with a horse-hair bow similar in style to a cello. A plucked one-string instrument called the *khsae diev*, which used the chest cavity as a resonating chamber, is built on half a gourd and is plucked with an ivory plectrum. A solo instrument called the *chapie* is a lutelike instrument of two strings with stops on the neck; it is used mainly to accompany the *Aiyai* singers as they recount the long histories of the country as well as current gossip songs. Wind instruments include flutes of various sizes and several instruments that make use of an added reed. These reeds can be constructed from bamboo or a section of copper metal, and are placed on the side of the blowing tube. The wind instruments can be made from buffalo horn, bamboo, or a tall reed that grows in some swamps and marshes. End reeds used in two of the woodwind instruments are made from the leaf of the sugar palm, an essential part of Cambodia's lowland landscape.

The percussion instruments such as the *roneat* and the *khong* are all tuned to a fixed scale and have to fit within the orchestra in which they are playing. They are fine tuned by adding a mixture of wax and lead that has been melted together and then fixed either into the raised nipple of the gongs or on the back of the wooden key that is struck by a hammer.

The *roneats* are almost always played in tandem: one instrument plays melody in octaves while the other weaves ornamentations and variations around the central theme. These two instruments have the same body, but the struck keyboards are of different material. The instrument played in octaves has a keyboard made from a type of bamboo that grows on the edge of the sea in the *Kampot* and *Kompong Som* regions. The instrument that plays the ornamentation uses the heart of the rosewood that grows best on the highest parts of mountain ranges in either the *Elephant Mountain* or in the *Kompong Thom* and *Ratnakiri* provinces. This wood is best if it has been air dried, not kiln dried; the sound derived from airdried wood is more brilliant and resonant.

The struck percussion instruments use a variety of mallets made from various materials, each according to the instrument. The largest drum is struck by a round baton of extremely hard wood found in the highest elevations of the forest. The smaller drum uses a drumstick with a head of woven thread spun round a solid wax center. The mallets on the *khongs* are traditionally made from elephant skin that has been cured in salt and then sun dried - this gives the best resonating sound from the struck bronze.

The bodies of the *trew* (the bowed string instruments) can be made from a variety of materials: part of an ivory tusk with the center hollowed out, hard wood, or very strong bamboo. One *trew* uses the hollowed-out shell of the coconut with an intricate pattern carved in the back for sound holes. All of the *trews* have a soundboard made from cobra or python skin. The resonating quality is controlled with either a piece of ivory stuck to the surface or with a piece of wax, which alters the vibrations and adds to the timbre. Strings are now usually made from imprinted violin strings or nylon fishing cord, but are also made from the traditional green hide known as *catgut*.

The gongs were traditionally made in small village forges with various scrap metals, combining copper bronze with an approximately 20 percent tin additive. Numerous small impurities are found because the molds used for pouring the gongs are made from clay with a termite mound lining. These gongs are mounted on liana cane frames and suspended with small ties of either leather or cord passing through four holes in the walls of the gong.

When the *Pol Pot* regime was overthrown in 1979, the Ministry of Culture decided that reopening the Fine Arts School was imperative to rescuing Khmer classical dance, music, and theater, all integral parts of Khmer culture. It was then discovered that there was a tremendous shortage of traditional musical instruments, occurring partly from neglect and partly from wanton destruction. Anything associated with classical music was seen as contrary to the spirit of "Year Zero," the name given by the *Pol Pot*ists to their scheme to reinvent Cambodia from scratch. They destroyed the musical instruments were either left saucepans; the wooden

instruments were either left out in the rain to rot or were used as firewood.

Of the two heavily inlaid and ornamented orchestras that were part of the former royal palace ballet and music ensemble, only two instruments were recovered in 1979; one was so damaged that it is unusable. There were only 47 musicians and dances left from the former National Theater and Fine Arts School to help re-create and teach at the new Fine Arts School. The Fine Arts School

The Fine Arts School began in 1980 mostly with students taken from the various state orphanages, where students had been auditioned for their musical, dancing, acting, and painting skill. The music school had two sections: classical Khmer music and Western music. The teachers for the latter were mostly from Vietnam, and the students used Western instruments supplied by the Vietnamese.

The classical Khmer music section began with very few teachers and 95 students. Instruments were so scarce that often up to 10 students that were available were poorly tuned, since there was no money to buy the mixture of wax and lead needed for tuning. As additional musical instruments were found, they were purchased or borrowed from those who had found them.

Because traditional workshops and manufactures were no longer in business they did not have tools or raw materials to make instruments - hardly any instruments were being constructed in Cambodia. The few newly fashioned instruments were inferior in quality, often made from nontraditional materials.

In 1988 the Save the Children Fund (Australia) was approached to help the Fine Arts School construct a workshop for building traditional instruments. The workshop would act as a training ground for young craftspeople and would supply the school with enough instruments so that students could have their own instruments. Extra instruments could be sold to provide ongoing cash for the workshop. The Save the Children Fund agreed to finance the construction of the workshop along with all the equipment needed, and to purchase a two-year supply of raw materials so that the school would have a stock to work with in the construction of the instruments.

In September 1989 International Catholic Relief (CIDSE) agreed to fund the building of a forge on a site next door to the instruments workshop. It also agreed to supply the forge with raw materials and charcoal so that the scheme could operate without a real financial burden to the school for the first two years. These two buildings will give the school the space for constructing all Cambodia's traditional instruments, and at the same time train a new generation of instrument makers. Finding Traditional Materials

The problem now is in obtaining the supplies necessary for building the instruments. Much of the material that went into constructing various instruments was traditionally supplied by small traders from various provinces within the country, as many of these products were quite diverse in their origin. During the years when the country was divided by the Khmer Rouge, these supply lines had been disrupted; by 1990 they had completely disappeared. The destruction of villages and the tremendous loss of life in many of the regions also helped to eliminate many of the traditional suppliers.

Finding the right rosewood for the cases and the keys of the roneat is very difficult. The best trees are those that grow on their own on the tops of ridges in the Elephant Mountains and in the forests of Kratie as well as several areas of Kompong Thom. These areas, however, are vulnerable to attack from the Khmer Rouge patrols, and there has been no serious logging in these areas for 20 years.

The bamboo for constructing flutes is usually found in the mountain areas, and is best cut at the end of the dry season when the sap has stopped flowing. Traditionally this would have been an activity relegated to the end of the rice season, undertaken to earn extra cash to purchase rice and fertilizer. Now that time is one of intense military activity, when the various factions in the Cambodian conflict try to consolidate positions. Much of this activity takes place either on the edge of the mountain ranges or in the mountains themselves. This prevents villagers from entering the area to collect this material, especially as the demand is now very small. Much of the forest edge is heavily planted with personnel mines that can blow off a leg or an arm. The risks are just not worth it.

The heavy bamboo that is used to make the keys of the roneat is found in an area that has seen much guerrilla activity over the past few years. This material, too, is best collected when the sap is not running, but it also coincides with the worst time of guerrilla activity.

The gong workshop is experiencing many of the same problems. Most of the copper now found in Cambodia comes from cases of shells used to bombard enemy camps on the Thai-Cambodian border - not pure copper as had been used in the past. This copper contains hardening agents that simple forges cannot separate. As a result, the modern gongs have a much harsher, metallic ring. A new gong cannot be included within an old set because the timbres are so different.

These obstacles are very gradually being overcome as the Fine Arts School begins to make contact with the various provinces and the cultural authorities in these areas. What is necessary is to re-create the former trading links within the country so that a steady supply of the raw products can be harvested at the correct time of the year. More Faith Than Finances

The performing arts, plastic arts, and folk, culture of Cambodia had almost disappeared by 1979. It was only through the great efforts of a few people with more faith than finances that the Fine Arts School began. It has grown to two campuses, with the added faculties of architecture and archaeology joining the original performing and plastic arts sections.

The country is re-creating its culture often with a gap of an entire generation in the students. Very few teachers are under the age of 45. A group of people with the faith and ability to rebuild this ancient culture from so little will also re-create the traditional trading links necessary for constructing the traditional instruments, instruments that are an integral part of every Khmer dance, drama, or social event.

Photo (Musician playing a type of trew instrument)

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