

V. The Intangible Heritage List of UNESCO

1. The Intangible Cultural Heritage Inscribed as Masterpieces

The Royal Government of Cambodia has submitted five arts forms for the World Intangible Cultural Heritage List, namely Khmer Classical Dance, or Royal Ballet, large Shadow Theatre, Khoal Drama/masked theater, Yike (a popular and ancient form of Cambodian musical theater), and Chapei (Khmer musical string instrument similar to guitar with three strings).

Until now, two of five arts forms, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia or Khmer Classical Dance and Sbek Thom (Khmer Large Shadow Theatre), were proclaimed the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO on 7th November 2003 and 25th November 2005 respectively.

To ensure sustainable continuity of intangible arts, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts of Cambodia has established an Intangible Cultural Heritage Committee (IHC) to fulfill this function.

The Brief Description of Two Arts Forms of Cambodia: The Royal Ballet or Khmer Classical Dance and Sbek Thom (Large Shadow Theatre).

A. The Royal Ballet of Cambodia

Robam, or Lakhaon Kbach Boran Khmer, and Robam, or Lakhaon Preah Reach Troap are usually used to refer to Cambodia's Classical Dance. Robam, or Lakhaon, sometimes expresses different forms of art during the performance. It is called Classical Dance or Royal Ballet when the dance is performed episode by episode and Lakhaon Kbach Boran Khmer or Lakhaon Preah Reach Troap (Royal Ballet Theater) if the dance depicts

some episodes from Reamker (Khmer version of the Ramayana). Robam (Dance) is used when only gestures and movements of the hands play an important role in expressing emotions.

Famous for its graceful hand gestures and its splendid costumes, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, or Khmer Classical Dance, closely associated with the royal court during more than one millennium, embodies values of refinement and spirituality characteristics of the Khmer culture. The Performances of the Royal Ballet took place within the framework of various rites associated with the royal power and the prestige of the country.

The codified gestures and poses that dancers must master require many years of intensive training. An orchestra performing sacred music accompanies the dancers and a female chorus provides running commentary on the plot and the emotions mimed by the dancers. The characteristic of Khmer choreography is that the dance does not have fixed gestures, but figures in perpetual movement, which gives a single fluidity in Asia. Musicians and chorus-singers accompany the gracious evolutions by the dancers, wearing embroidered wire clothes of gold and splendid jewels. This makes the Royal Ballet of Cambodia too original to merge with others.

This artistic tradition, which narrowly escaped annihilation in the 1970s, was viewed as the emblem of the Cambodian people throughout the world. After the downfall of the Pol Pot regime in 1979 the Royal University of Fine Arts, under the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, established the repertory and training program for dancers and musicians.

The Royal Ballet, officially associated with the kings and religion, consequently became a central element of the rebuilding of the country and a Khmer identity. The transmission of Khmer arts never stopped in spite of the tragic history and today it takes place thanks to the former Masters of Dance, choreographers, Masters of music and costumers.

In 1997, in response to the concern voiced by numerous Member States for the urgent need to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO created the program 'Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. The aim of the Proclamation was, and still is, to encourage government, NGOs and local communities to identify, preserve and promote their intangible heritage. It also encourages

individuals, groups, institutions and organizations to make significant contributions to managing, preserving, protecting and promoting the intangible heritage.

As a symbol of Khmer identity the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, and its traditional dances, was proclaimed as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible of Humanity on November 7th 2003. As a result the Royal Ballet of Cambodia benefited from a high level of attention from both national and international institutions.

In 2005, an Action Plan for the Safeguarding of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia project was set up with the support of UNESCO/Japanese Fund-in-Trust. The working group, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in close collaboration with the UNESCO Phnom Penh Office, have successfully achieved all projected components.

B. Lakhaon Sbek Thom (Large Shadow Theatre)

Lakhaon Sbek Thom (Khmer Large Shadow Theatre) is one of the oldest traditional forms of dance drama in Cambodia that can be traced back to the Angkor period as seen on the temple inscriptions. It is a sacred art form that exclusively performs the epics of the *Reamker* (Khmer version of the Ramayana) only. Therefore, *Lakhaon Sbek Thom* is valued as an important part of tradition, belief and identity for the Khmer community.

As Sbek Thom is a sacred theatre, a performance is therefore an act of worship. Traditionally it was only performed in certain ritual ceremonies or for other old people who have had a great influence or status in society, or for funerals. Cambodian farmers have also performed *Sbek Thom* in times of drought, to ask the gods for rain.

Performances generally take place in rice-fields or within the grounds of a Pagoda. A white cloth serves as a screen. Behind the screen, a low rectangular frame built of banana trunks contains the fire which serves as the light source for casting the shadows of the *Sbek Thom* images.

In 1968, a *Sbek Thom* troupe was established within the Classical Dance Troupe that later became the Department of Performing Arts. After 1979, artists who survived the Khmer Rouge period gathered shadow puppets from different places in the country in order to continue performing.

2. The Provisional Intangible Cultural Heritage Inscribed to Be Examined

The Royal Government of Cambodia is now preparing three new nomination files to be submitted in 2010 for the World Intangible Cultural Heritage List. They are Lakhaon Khol (Khoal Drama or masked theater), Yike (a popular and ancient form of Cambodian musical theater), and Chapei (Khmer musical string instrument similar to guitar with three strings). The brief description of these three arts forms..

A. Lakhaon Khol (Khaol Drama or Male Masked Theatre)

Lakhaon Khaol is one of the oldest forms of Cambodian performing arts practiced as early as the Angkor period. It is believed to have started approximately in the 9th century in accordance with bas-reliefs found on Angkor Monument walls. During this Angkor period, *Lakhaon Khaol* was developed as an entirely made version of Khmer classical court dance.

The exact reasons are still unknown but some research has pointed to the form growing out of a religious context in which Brahmanism was in conflict with Buddhism during the reign of King Jayavarman VIII (1243-1295AD). In this time, many female dancers were killed and others were taken on as concubines. Training male dancers was an opportunity to recreate a dance form based on Buddhist doctrines.

The only story specifically performed by *Lakhaon Khaol* is the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the Ramayana. The performance is accompanied by story telling, with the narrators playing a key role in directing the performance. It is accompanied by the traditional pin peat orchestra.

Lakaon Khaol was very popular in the Lon Nol regime from 1970 to 1975 and later became of a favourite of King Sihanouk. At that time, there were eighty professional troupes. The troupes were disbanded during the war and today the only original troupe remaining is that 'Wat Svay Angdet'in Phnom Penh.

Today, *Lakhaol Khaol* forms part of the curriculum at the Royal University of Fine Arts.

B. Yike (a popular and ancient form of Cambodian musical theatre)

Yike is a popular and ancient form of Cambodian musical theatre which is believed to have originated from sea faring people. With regards to the poetic expression in the songs, it can be assumed that *Lakhaon Yike* appeared in the late 8th century during the reign of King Jayavarman II.

In its earlier form, *Lakhaon Yike* was often presented as a post-performance event in the Royal Palace following classical dance performances. It soon became so popular that it was performed on its own. Over the years, the form changed, incorporating various costumes and musical instruments and adapting to new Khmer customs. Immensely popular in the 1920s, it is a form of musical in which popular stories and mythical subjects are both sung and spoken in dialogue, with the narrator (singer) directing the performance. Its repertoire includes both traditional and contemporary stories.

Lakhaon Yike currently forms part of the drama curriculum at the Royal University of Fine Arts of Cambodia.

C. Chapei (Khmer musical string instrument similar to guitar with three strings)

The *Chapei* is a long-necked guitar that is played in *arak* music groups as well as *pleng kar* (wedding music). Besides its function in both orchestras, *chapei* is played in many events such as wedding ceremonies and traditional ceremonies *Kour Chup*, *Bombous Neak*, *Kathin*- involving large ceremonial offerings.

Chapei is often played solo, whose music and lyrics describe Buddhist legends, other related folktales and stories of everyday life. Performances are lively and themes are often comical and improvised. Audiences are known to greatly enjoy the humor of the songs. Occasionally, *chapei* is played in duets to accompany poetic recitals.