

Indigenous Music Mediation with Urban Khmer:

Tampuan Adaptation and Survival

Todd Saurman⁺ (U.S.A.)

Abstract

This paper describes some lowland/highland Khmer points of interconnection for indigenous Tampuan communities from the highland Northeast, Cambodia. Tampuan community musicians respond constructively to a Siem Reap tourist cultural show that depicts their indigenous ethnolinguistic group. Tampuan musicians make trips to the urban center of Phnom Penh to represent themselves in a CD recording, a concert, and a TV program. I contend that some community members are expressing strong cultural values as they mediate with the national and urban culture in spite of a history of Khmerization efforts by lowland Khmer. A strong value of mediation reinforces highland desires to communicate with outsiders perceived as having great effect on highland everyday life. Meanwhile some urban Khmer who may mourn the loss of Khmer traditional culture and support its revival have demonstrated interest in the traditional cultures of Khmer highland communities as they possibly empathize with others perceived to be experiencing levels of alienation and marginalization similar to their own.

Keywords: *Cambodia, Indigenous, Music, Revitalization, Cultural Change, Mediation*

⁺ Dr. Todd Saurman, Asia Area Coordinator for Ethnomusicology, SIL International. email: todd_saurman@sil.org.

Introduction

The Cambodian highland indigenous people are quite possibly the least likely group to come to mind when considering urban issues. Even though migration to Cambodia's largest city, Phnom Penh, is rare, they do connect in some surprising ways. As Anna Tsing demonstrates in "In the Realm of the Diamond Queen", so called marginalized indigenous groups, their marginalized subgroups (women in Tsing's study), and apparent marginalized individuals (a "crazy" woman/shaman) can be keenly aware of issues related to the national and international worlds of urbanites (Tsing, 1993). Such keen awareness in the opposite direction is much less likely. No doubt there are misconceptions on both sides, but perhaps the misconceptions as well as the unexpected connections can highlight some of the boundaries of urban life and give insights into perceptions of urban life for those thought to be most outside of the urban world. Tampuan value of mediation is demonstrated through connections that reinforce highland desires to communicate with outsiders that are perceived as having great effect on highland everyday life. Exploration of these connections contributes to an analytic space for viewing "both constraint and creativity," which may result from marginality (Tsing, 1993:18).

Phnom Penh along with the third largest city and tourist destination, Siem Reap, emerge as priority points of engagement. For indigenous people, the mediums for connection or having a voice with government, universities, NGOs, cultural organizations or with other interested national and international audiences may ironically and perhaps accurately be most often perceived to exist within the urban environment. In contrast, various people from urban settings may express a range of views about indigenous highland communities from condescension to romanticization, but some may find themselves empathizing with highland others, perceiving them as experiencing levels of alienation and/or marginalization similar to their own.

Lowland/Highland Relations

Tampuan indigenous communities are located in the highlands of Northeast Cambodia in Ratanakiri Province on the border of Southern Laos and the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Historically the highland indigenous people have been looked down upon by the lowland Khmer as "uncivilized" (Ovesen & Trankell, 2004; White & Bourdier, 1996; Baird, 2008a) and as "minorities" in a more derogatory sense. Over the last quarter century of nation-state development there has been a dramatic shift in the everyday lives of the highland communities.

While very few Tampuan have migrated out of the Cambodian highlands, Khmerization has had devastating effects on Tampuan society through the migration of lowland Khmer to the highland area, formal education in a Khmer school system, government interventions, and the influence of modern Khmer media; most Tampuan live with the threat of being increasingly marginalized within a growing Khmer society. Intergenerational contact and transmission of cultural knowledge and values have decreased dramatically in the last two decades.

For the Tampuan, music creativity may be involved in the contestation of nation-state power, but it may also allow community members to mediate tensions between nationalization and cultural preservation through the continuing creation of culture. Instead of viewing the indigenous group as a homogenous force taking purposeful action through music to resist or contest pressure from the nation-state, it seems more likely that certain individuals are also contesting even their own internal pressures to “preserve culture” (as something homogenous and static) through creating culturally resonant innovations in music that invite active community engagement and intergenerational connection, thus reviving the processes of creating and constructing culture.

Tampuan and Lowland Khmer Contrasts

How can community members reconcile a desire to maintain the value of their roots with a need to survive under the influence of Khmerization? There is at least token support from the Khmer government for cultural preservation among the highland groups. Since at least the early 1990s the government communicated that the highland groups were allowed to maintain their culture, songs, and dances (Ovesen & Trankell, 2004; White, 1996). Many Tampuan struggle with increasing outside influences such as Khmerization and desire to somehow maintain their culture and ethnic identity. As one younger Tampuan musician, Wain Churk, said, “It’s good to try and think about old songs. [Our people] are throwing it away, and forgetting about their roots... We look at the leaves, the flowers... but like a flowering tree – we forget the root” (Churk, 2001: personal communication).

Generally, the highland ethnic groups have been distinguished from the lowland Khmer in several ways: Highland agriculture has traditionally been based on the practice of swidden cultivation and the cultivation of highland rice. Their religion is traditionally animistic, having sacred land and burial grounds (Baird, 2008a; Ovesen & Trankell 2004; White, 1996). These aspects of their culture are threatened because much of their land has been taken or bought in the last two decades by the government, businesses, and individual local lowland Khmer. Socially, the highland groups tend to be egalitarian with an emphasis on consensus and nonauthoritarian leadership whereas the lowland Khmer tend to be more hierarchical with authoritarian style leadership (Gregerson, 2009; Baird, 2008a; Jonsson, 1997). Highland indigenous groups can also still be distinguished by the sound of their music (instruments, tunings, styles, music system)¹, which contrasts with lowland Khmer folk music, Khmer classical music, and Khmer Western-influenced pop music.

While younger Tampuan people often play amplified prerecorded Khmer rock at community gatherings, there may only be a few Tampuan who can play chords on a guitar, and so the main music that Tampuan communities engage with is still played on gongs, locally made flutes, and string instruments. Most young people have not learned to play or create songs on any instruments as they have little opportunity to access Khmer or modern Western instruments and the transmission of Tampuan music has almost completely stopped for well over a

decade. Most young people are like cultural orphans with limited options available for any type of music creativity.

The Tampuan at the center of this study are an exception as some have begun researching various genres of Tampuan music and dance and also have begun creating songs in a more modern highland style of music that still use gongs and other Tampuan traditional instruments. This style is called *sinlipa* style (art song). Most of the performances are intended to communicate within Tampuan and/or highland communities both through Tampuan song texts and symbolically through the use of highland and Tampuan music instruments, but some revitalizing activities have also been directed toward Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

A brief historical review of indigenous and nation-state relations and especially how the state has attempted to develop indigenous people demonstrates attitudes and misconceptions toward indigenous people that have caused more harm than benefits. Music plays a role in that history and yet its role from an outside view stands in stark contrast to the Tampuan activities at the center of my ethnography where the Tampuan are seen to use music to mediate development and to revitalize their communities. It is easy for the outsider to impose their own views on the selective preservation of music culture. Such treatment of music may symbolize treatment of the indigenous highland people of Cambodia in general.

History of Nation-State Relations and Development

The highland groups may have lived in their present area for thousands of years, and while there was increased contact with others during the French colonial period, there was little of what could be called “development” among the rather remote indigenous groups of what is now Northeast Cambodia. There is a long history of the indigenous people being used as slaves or conscripted for labor or fighting. The French tried to bring in roads and education along with promoting a less nomadic existence, but the highland groups did not see any need for these changes and so the moves were unsuccessful.

For the most part, lowland Khmers in Cambodia equate being Cambodian with being Khmer, as they are the majority. In other words, there is little recognition of other ethnic groups living within Cambodia’s borders (White, 1996). Other ethnic minority groups mostly in other parts of Cambodia would include, Lao, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cham, and Kuy. Ethnic differences are seen as racial differences and yet there is evidence that one could convert to being a Khmer by adapting their language and customs (Ovesen & Trankell, 2004; White, 1996). Development for many is really about nationalization and creating unity and strength of the nation-state as protection from other nation-states. “Although largely unstated, many government officials and developers view indigenous culture as inferior to that of the dominant society” (McCaskill, 1997:42). Historically, Khmer government officials and elites have demonstrated an attitude of ethnic superiority in relation to the “minority” groups.²

During the Sangkum period under Prince Sihanouk (1953-1970), lowland Khmers attempted to “civilize” the highlanders. They were seen as ignorant and superstitious (White & Bourdier, 1996). The goal was to replace the clan spirit with national consciousness (White, 1996). Prince Sihanouk promoted education and health care services as a way of helping the highlanders to become Khmer as quickly as possible and insisted on the use of education as a means for rapid Khmerization of the local population, along with the regular presence of health care services. By June 1957, education was seen as key to the government’s Khmerization efforts. The idea was to “Gather the Phnongs³ – make them feel the need to learn how to speak, read and write Khmer – teach them how to get dressed – teach them how to work” (Baird, 2008a:224 citing Meyers, 1979:685-6). Making the highlanders modern was to help them to lose their cultural identities. “The government wanted the highlanders to exchange their traditional dwellings for Khmer ones, their traditional clothing for Khmer attire, and their languages for Khmer. They expected them to convert from Animism to Buddhism” (Baird, 2008a:222). The Vietnamese in Vietnam had been encouraging lowland people to migrate to the highland areas to nationalize the highland groups there and so in 1958 the Khmers began to do likewise.

It would appear that some of the biggest changes in highland traditions began during the Sangkum period. Customs, dress, and houses began to change. Older Tampuan who remember that period say that they had lost many of their traditions since that time. There has continued to be a willingness on the part of the highland groups to accommodate aspects of Khmer culture (Ovesen & Trankell, 2004). Throughout the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge period (1975-1979) the highland groups lost many of their elders and with their passing they also lost a sense of their oral history (White, 1996).

Under Pol Pot, highlanders were viewed as more Khmer than urban Khmers because they had not been as influenced by Vietnamese and Chinese foreigners. That did not stop the Khmer Rouge from suppressing their religious and social practices, but still they were portrayed as supporters of the revolution (Ovesen & Trankell, 2004; White, 1996). While it is not clear how much the highland groups supported the Khmer Rouge, it does seem likely that some communities cooperated early on in reaction to how they had been treated by the Khmer government previously (White, 1996). There is a wide range of personal testimonies from the Khmer Rouge period. Some became soldiers for Pol Pot as they felt that they had no choice. Others who came to understand the radical nature of the Khmer Rouge policies escaped into Vietnam, only to return later with the liberating Vietnamese forces (White, 1996).

Under the Vietnamese-guided Constitution of The People’s Republic of Kampuchea (1979-1989), the state made plans to develop the economy, education, culture, social affairs, health, and communications throughout the highland and other remote areas (Ovesen & Trankell, 2004). After this transition the Khmers returned to the same basic approach of the Sangkum period. However, policies were modeled after those developed by the Vietnamese toward their own ethnic

minorities (Ovesen & Trankell, 2004; Baird, 2008a). While gaining literacy in Khmer was a major goal, “minority languages were respected and each tribe was given the right to write, speak, and teach in its own language” (Baird, 2008a:247).

Even though the highlanders were historically included as “Khmer,” they had not been officially given rights as citizens at least as late as 1996 (White & Boudier 1996). According to White (1996), the highlanders thought of themselves as Khmer citizens. According to Ovesen & Trankell (2004), as of 1954 people could become citizens by becoming fluent in Khmer language, customs, and traditions. As of 2002, less than half of highlanders could speak the Khmer language (Mallow, 2002).

Khmer language education is particularly relevant when examining how Tampuan language and music have become major points of negotiation for establishing ethnic identity. The Khmer government has communicated that the highland groups were allowed to maintain their culture, songs, and dances (Ovesen & Trankell, 2004; Baird, 2008a; White, 1996). The social disruption caused by Khmerization, however, continues to be a major challenge. Education as initiated by Khmers to fulfill the nation-states plan to make the highlanders into Khmerized citizens has disrupted the traditional authority that village leaders held in the past as the holders of traditional knowledge.

Shifting Land Rights

Within the last decade the international aid community has given vast amounts of monetary aid and influenced how development has been implemented throughout Cambodia. The United Nations and various NGOs have been working in northeastern Cambodia with the purpose of helping and alleviating poverty, all in the name of “development” (Baird, 2008a:317). Cambodia has adopted a multi-party “democratic” system and initiated neoliberal market reforms, and with the support of the UN, has made massive development efforts in Ratanakiri province by providing health and education development support. The Khmer government has encouraged expansion of road networks, commercial logging, the rapid expansion of cashew plantations, land alienation, the development of Virachey National Park and Yeak Loam Commune Protected Area (sometimes spelled Yeak Laom or Yak Loam), and hydroelectric power development (Baird, 2008a; Riebe, 1999).

For the lowland Khmers, farming has traditionally been defined as the growing of lowland rice. For the highlanders, swidden cultivation of highland rice and other crops along with hunting and gathering has traditionally been the main sources of sustenance. Until recently, swidden cultivation had been completely sustainable (Ovesen & Trankell, 2004). The Khmer introduced cash crops of palm oil, coffee, and cashews to the highlands, and have forced highlanders to reduce times between crops in the same areas thus depleting the fertility of the soil. Previously, the French and Khmer had exploited the Northeast with rubber, pine, and coffee plantations (White, 1996). Even under the strong influence of Khmer education, migration, and marketing some highland groups have maintained dual agricultural systems, growing both lowland and highland rice.

The social solidarity of village communities has primarily depended on cooperation over subsistence farming. Lowland Khmers view swidden cultivation as inefficient and as the cause of deforestation, even though the yields of highland cultivation of rice are very high and forests are allowed to grow back between cultivation periods (White & Bourdier, 1996). During good years there is usually a surplus of rice (White, 1996). Rather, it is the increase in lowland Khmer and other populations in Ratanakiri that contribute most to the poverty and to deforestation.

After 1989 major exploitation of Ratanakiri province's forests began. This had a huge impact on the ecology and the social life of the indigenous communities (Ovesen & Trankell, 2004). Illegal logging continues to devastate remaining forests. Cutting of the forests without permission from spirits clearly goes against the customary laws of the highland groups (White, 1996). "The most pressing change facing the highlanders today is the commercial exploitation of the upland areas" (White, 1996). New laws say that land must be farmed continuously (based on lowland rice practices) or property rights are forfeited. In the past the highlanders continually moved to cultivate areas that had remained fallow for fifteen to twenty years, thus allowing time for reforestation. Now they are expected to own the one piece of land permanently, but as of 1996 villagers were mostly unaware of this (White, 1996). Private companies are being given land without addressing the rights of the highland people. Legal clarification of land rights was needed (White, 1996). Just like in the Sangkum period, the Khmer government is still deciding what parts of highland culture should be kept and what should be done away with (White, 1996). For the highlanders there is no separation between their ancestral lands, the forests, and their traditions. Traditions are being defined by the government as "playing gongs, singing, and dancing" (White, 1996:23) thus exemplifying the modern practice of selectively segmenting traditional cultures with little regard for the holistic nature of local communities.

Land Laws and Music Transmission

In 2001 a land law was established that states, "no authority outside the community may acquire any rights to immovable properties belonging to an indigenous community" (Rith, 2008). However, there have been no sub-decrees drafted or implemented and so the law cannot be enforced in detail and land can be taken as "economic land concessions." So paradoxically one of the most disruptive and intrusive changes of the last decade has been the taking of highland land by the lowland Khmer, often legally by having highlanders sign over deeds that they could not read. Illiteracy still remains high and so the highlanders are left vulnerable; experience has taught them not to sign documents. As avoidance of an integrated life with Khmer lowlanders is no longer possible, the future of economic and land development among the highland groups requires successful programs of education and increasing Khmer literacy. Music has increasingly played a role in Tampuan literacy and bilingual education with Tampuan songs promoting and aiding Tampuan literacy efforts both at local and national levels. The desire to create, teach, and learn new Tampuan songs has provided motivation for some Tampuan to read and write in Tampuan language

especially among those who would otherwise be less motivated or confident to learn a writing system seen as having little relevance beyond Tampuan identities, relationships, and everyday life. For those who depend exclusively on oral communication, one community used songs to communicate commune land regulations that would help protect their land.

For younger people there has been a dramatic shift toward vernacular literacy during the last ten years, through formal and nonformal education not only among the Tampuan (Crowley, 2007) but among other highland groups as well. Baird notes the use of vernacular language in education as implemented by certain NGOs in contrast to the standard Khmer-only education system using government curriculum. Non-Timber Forest Products Project (NTFP) and International Cooperation for Cambodia (ICC) have adapted to the highland cultures by initiating spatially flexible nonformal education programs, whereas CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere), while being less spatially flexible, offers instruction in both vernacular and Khmer languages in a bilingual curriculum that is sensitive to local livelihoods and traditions (Baird, 2008a). Along with nonformal health education, ICC has also focused on bilingual or multilingual (highland and Khmer languages) education programs. Baird points out that the Ministry of Education is increasingly acknowledging that the students who have learned to read first in their mother tongue actually have greater success later learning the Khmer language while also being able to contribute to their own linguistic traditions (Baird, 2008b).

Following its historical precedence, the Cambodian government still appears to support indigenous music and dance as they have legally linked them to new indigenous land rights. The land laws established in 2001 describe three phases for official recognition. Recognition must be requested from the Ministry of Rural Development, applied for with the Ministry of Interior, and then finally the communities must apply for a community land title with the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction. The first phase requires communities to prove they share a common language, customary law, and culture. They must also exhibit their art, dance, and ceremonial events for government approval. This raises serious questions about who determines what is cultural. If their music and dances adapt to modern forms and old ones are forgotten, will they no longer be eligible for land titles? How much does this legal process influence highland group's efforts to "preserve culture" for government approval out of desperation for protecting their land? As of February 2011, thirty-one highland communities had been recognized for the first phase with the Ministry of Rural Development. Seventeen communities plus three pilot groups sponsored by an NGO had reached phase two with legal recognition by the Ministry of Interior. No indigenous communities had yet reached the third phase of receiving communal land titles (Walker and Nimol, 2011). The first two phases took seven to eight years. As of 2012, 153 indigenous communities had entered into the process of land titling with the help of several groups, including the International Labor Organization. Out of those 153, thirty have registered as legal entities, which is the last stage of the procedure (Galvin, 2012). Again, such selective attempts at

influencing highland cultural preservation, no matter how well-intentioned, treats highland music and dance as static and essentialized in contrast to a holistic internally motivated use of music to bring life to their language, music and communities.

Revitalization of Tampuan Music as Mediation

In spite of the attitudes and actions of many influential lowland Khmer, my key Tampuan contacts for over the last twelve years have demonstrated strong Tampuan values and skills of mediation as they negotiate their identities and the desires of their communities to survive and adapt under the pressures of Khmerization (Saurman, 2012). Three of these Tampuan contacts are Bech Yek or Yeck, who at the time of this writing is the program provincial coordinator of IBCDE (Identity Based Community Development and Education) for ICC in Ratanakiri; Thieng Savoeun, ICC staff member and gifted Tampuan composer in multiple music systems (Tampuan, highland, Khmer folk, and Western); and Wain Churk or Ven Che, who worked many years for CARE Cambodia and is the leader of the Yeak Loam Arts Group. All three are now in their mid-thirties and are married with children.

My ethnography has focused primarily on how some Tampuan are revitalizing the making of music in their communities and thus have contributed to an ongoing revitalization of those communities. The activities they have engaged in meet three basic conditions that I propose are necessary for the revitalization of music within primarily oral cultures. First, people that are fully integrated in Tampuan communities are taking ownership of processes needed to revitalize their music without depending on outsiders to sustain those processes. Second, they are adapting methods to reignite the intergenerational transmission of music, language, and cultural knowledge. Third, and often most ignored by cultural preservationists, some Tampuan are creating new songs that actively communicate within multiple generations (Saurman, 2012). Not only are there attempts at communicating within Tampuan communities through song texts and genre selections, but mediation efforts are also being directed at communicating with others outside their communities who they perceive to be most effecting Tampuan everyday lives.

Sound Recording Projects

While consulting with ICC and other local NGOs on how to support local music periodically since 2001, I started more in-depth field research with the Tampuan in March 2010. The following vignettes are examples of holistic and internally motivated music use which demonstrate specific urban connections and contrasts personally observed from Tampuan everyday life.

Within the first weeks of my 2010 fieldwork I met with Churk and the Yeak Loam Arts Group for a Sunday afternoon rehearsal at the Yeak Loam Cultural Center. They were preparing for a rare trip to Phnom Penh to make a professional recording in a music studio with Cambodia Living Arts. I met the arts group ten days later in Phnom Penh and attended the first day of their recording sessions.

They needed to make many adjustments to being in an urban environment. Several times older members inadvertently walked into glass doors, usually hand rolled cigarette first, accompanied by much laughter among themselves. At the time Ban Lung had plenty of shops and guest houses with glass doors, but the doors were rarely closed since the shops and lobbies were rarely air conditioned. It is unlikely that older Tampuan ever enter those modern shops or even go into town much at all.

At one point during the first recording session it became apparent that lowland urban Khmer shared some commonalities with the belief system of the Tampuan that at first baffled the few Western observers. Unexplained noises were heard by the lowland Khmer sound engineers during the morning recordings and it was therefore mutually decided that the Tampuan performers needed to perform a ceremony with rice wine and a chicken after lunch to appease these disrupting spirits. Playing of gongs was part of the short ceremony.

A Western reporter and videographer from the Phnom Penh Post were also present at the recording. They interviewed Churk and a Yeak Loam village elder, one of Churk's main mentors in Tampuan culture and music. Also while in Phnom Penh, a private meeting was arranged for Churk and two expert string players, Yok and Sep, to exchange performances with an expert Khmer arak singer/musician who accompanied himself on a three-string Khmer lute (*chapei dornng vang*).



Figure 1. Spirit ceremony for disrupting spirits in the recording studio.

Seven months later I accompanied the Yeak Loam Arts Group on their trip to Phnom Penh for a concert and promotion of the CD release. During this trip I anticipated hearing Tampuan travel impressions of modern national and urban experiences, but most of the comments were observations about plant life either

along the road or transported on trucks. The group requested a long rest stop closer to Phnom Penh to look at green rice fields that extended to the horizon and they declined the opportunity to go to a modern shopping mall while in Phnom Penh. The Tampuan arts group rehearsed at a place arranged by Cambodia Living Arts for the evening concert of songs from the CD, and then performed for a room packed with a very appreciative seemingly middle-class lowland Khmer audience.



Figure 2. Yeak Loam Arts Group singers in Phnom Penh record “Songs From The Lake.”



Figure 3. Yok, Sep, and Churk traveling in Phnom Penh.

ICC in Ratanakiri has also made several CDs, but primarily for communication

within Tampuan communities . One CD promotes literacy and the RIDE (Ratanakiri Integrated Development and Education) project (ICC RIDE 2009). Yeck, Savoeun, other ICC staff, and an Arts Group from La'eun village worked on this recording project for at least three years. It consists of twenty-three songs accompanied by gongs and other Tampuan music instruments in sinlipa style (considered a more modern highland style) that teach about and promote literacy, health issues, care for the environment, values of working hard and getting along. One song composed by Savoeun encourages Tampuan to welcome important officials to villages and special occasions. That song is also intended to encourage young people to respect elders in the village. As part of my field research I discovered that some of the literacy songs from that CD were the most popular new songs among young and old Tampuan living around the Ban Lung, Yeak Loam area. It is possible that the songs are popular due to the ease with which the songs can be learned and sung by most Tampuan and due to the significance of the widespread interest in Tampuan literacy over the last decade.

Video and Television Recording Projects

In March 2010 a group from the Ratanakiri ICC center traveled to Phnom Penh to make the first-ever television program controlled primarily by highland people and how they wanted to be represented. There have been other television shows where lowland Khmers had gone to Ratanakiri to film staged traditional songs. ICC's performance was for the royal-sponsored Bayon TV station and they wanted to communicate about highland bilingual education. They taped shows for broadcasting one half hour each Wednesday evening for one month. The show featured ICC staff dressed in traditional Tampuan clothes but singing lowland Khmer-style songs composed by Savoeun using highland languages. The songs were accompanied by Khmer traditional music instruments such as the tro or double-string bowed fiddle and the kloy or flute. The show was intended for lowland Khmer as there would be few, if any, Tampuan watching television. Throughout the show lowland Khmer hosts explained the importance of the multilingual education programs among the highland groups in Ratanakiri.



Figure 4. Savoeun sings on national television.

In 2006 people from several highland groups took part in a video project of high quality where they again represented themselves. I received a video CD copy of this Forest Mountain Voice project from the unlikely source of a lowland Khmer friend living in Phnom Penh. One of the main Tampuan producers of the project, Sovann Hien told me of his plans to increase the use of Tampuan culture for tourism.⁴

In the last few years an internet site, “Big Stories Small Towns,” has posted short videos made by film makers and local community members from various language groups around the world that highlight aspects of their lives. There are a quite a few well-made videos on the Tampuan people of Ratanakiri and the segments represent a variety of Tampuan people’s views.

Song Competitions and Cultural Shows

Art groups from several Tampuan villages have traveled to Phnom Penh and won awards at national competitions for indigenous performers. The group from Savoeun’s village won first prize for dance at one of those competitions. Such awards certainly raise the status of Tampuan music and dance. The preparations require training, community cooperation, and some degree of creativity for creating a pleasing spectacle that people from around the country can observe and judge. However, music and dance competitions provide little motivation for Tampuan to actively use their songs for communication within their primarily oral communities. That is not to say that competitions cannot be used as a mediation opportunity for both communicating with other Tampuan through songs texts and somehow educating and accurately representing themselves with a wider audience.

Highland groups of Southeast Asia are often represented in cultural shows by the national population. Siem Reap is not only the location of Angkor Wat but it is also filled with a thriving tourism industry. Of the many places to see performances of traditional Cambodian music and dance in Phnom Penh or Siem Reap, some also represent or misrepresent specific highland groups. One of the last things lowland Khmer performers expect is that highland Khmer may be attending one of those performances. One coworker living among the Bunong in Mondulakiri province reported to me how he attended one of these performances in Phnom Penh with some Bunong friends. At the close of the performance they spoke with the performers and told them that they were Bunong. The performers refused to believe it. Some lowland Khmer believe that the highland Khmer have tails and a hole in their chest so on another occasion one of the Bunong had to open his shirt to show a disbelieving lowland Khmer that he indeed did not have a hole in his chest. The lowland Khmer may have been too embarrassed to ask if he had a tail.

Tampuan music performances for the purpose of tourism are not likely to promote active use of music for communication among the Tampuan, however, tourism plays a less visible role for allowing mediation by Tampuan individuals between Tampuan communities and those outside their local communities. First

of all I would not have been able to do this research if my main contacts had not learned English through experience as tour guides in their younger years.

Secondly, links between the Tampuan value of mediation and tourism were very apparent to me as I attended an ICC Tampuan music composition workshop led by Savoeun. For the workshop, some of the best musicians and young people interested in creating new Tampuan songs were called together from Tampuan communes throughout the Ban Lung - Yeak Loam area. In one activity participants watched a video recorded at a Siem Reap cultural show with Khmer “representing” a Tampuan wedding ceremony. The recording was made by some ICC personnel while in Siem Reap to attend a conference. Surprisingly none of the Tampuan present displayed any visible adverse reaction and the younger participants even laughed at the parts where any lowland Khmer audience might laugh. Savoeun had the group discuss what elements the cultural show performers got right, what they got wrong, and graciously, what they could learn from the representation about making shows for tourists. The participants quickly came up with a list of things they could learn, presumably for their own future cultural shows. Paradoxically, my research describes a current absence of Tampuan cultural shows for tourists. In the past local restaurants and resorts would occasionally pay art groups to perform. In Siem Reap the Tampuan ICC staff (Yeck, Savoeun, and others) had the opportunity to give feedback to the performance directors and graciously offered to help them be more accurate in their representation.

Mediation Versus Cultural Preservation

The use of electronic media (video, television, CDs, radio) all illustrate how various Tampuan people are mediating with national and global forces. For the highland groups the internet has probably contributed little to connecting people from within language groups or even between highland groups because up to the time of my research only those located in the Ban Lung area had internet access and there are few if any other Tampuan scattered around the country, much less the globe. Internet does, however, offer global connections both as an influence on Tampuan and offering possibilities for influencing others (national, regional, and global), such as through some of the videos of Tampuan representing themselves on the internet.

The new songs that younger Tampuan create lose some of the cultural aspects that would be typically identified by outsiders in goals for cultural preservation. The new songs avoid the old language that is not easily understood by a younger audience. The styles of songs that are the oldest and most likely to be lost are often not used in new songs except on the CD made by the Yeak Loam Arts Group. Improvisation, which is the basis of one particular genre of Tampuan singing is not appropriate for most of the newer contexts where performances are planned, songs are learned from written texts, and newer songs are sung in unison by a group. On the other hand, those newer songs may be exhibiting deeper aspects of culture (unity, helpfulness, respect, effective communication, mediation, and community) arrived at through deeper cultural reflexivity than having to perform

for government approval. Such aspects may only be apparent to an outsider through ethnographic study. These cultural values begin to address the deeper question of why any process of music revitalization might be occurring in the first place. By consistently creating new songs with a mediation role based on relationships (at interhighland, national, regional, and global levels) Tampuan individuals are contesting what they have often experienced with lowland Khmer or nation-state interactions.

Researcher as Mediator

Churk often explained to me his visionary plans for revitalizing Tampuan culture, or rather, helping all Tampuan adapt and survive. One day when I paraphrased what he seemed to be expressing about how meaningful creativity and innovation were essential for Tampuan to stop the loss of their culture, values, and environment; he stopped and asked, “Could you send an email out about that?” When I asked him whom he wanted me to send an email to, he said, “The whole world!” as he broke into laughter. He eventually clarified that he meant all of the outside stakeholders that get involved with Tampuan people – government officials, NGO workers, development representatives, tourists, missionaries, educators, researchers, project funders, etc. It is obvious that he feels that I have some ability to access and influence some outsiders in ways that he does not or at least that I could affirm the ideals that he strives to communicate to other outsiders with whom he has contact. Either way he has given me a mandate to communicate a view that he feels affects Tampuan everyday life. Churk has specifically requested that I help his community by representing him, his ideas, and his community. I believe the request was to communicate with many outside stakeholders and not just the academic community.

Conclusion

The Tampuan will continue to need much creativity in adapting to the constraints of marginality as they work to influence urban policy makers about highland needs. The opportunity to appear on national television was one important way to educate others on the multilingual and multimusical possibilities of the highland groups along with promoting acceptance of their adaptations to a national education system in multilingual education. The personnel at Cambodia Living Arts and the appreciative urban audiences for the Yeak Loam Lake Arts Group concert may indeed empathize with the alienation and marginalization of highland groups and the prospect of them losing their language, music, and culture. While such empathy helps raising awareness and concern for cultural preservation of highland groups among some, it has rarely been accompanied by opportunities for obtaining a more holistic view of the highland everyday life and the dynamics of change that are occurring there. Going beyond views of cultural preservation or contestation of national dominance, Tampuan individuals are also contesting even their own internal pressures to “preserve culture” (as something homogenous and static) through creating culturally resonant innovations in music that invite active community engagement and intergenerational connection while mediating the processes of creating and constructing culture and communicating with external communities. A more holistic view along with increased awareness

of lowland/highland relations and identities could be helpful not only for the treatment of indigenous people, but also for greater urban reflexivity.

Endnotes

1. A music system consists of a unique inventory of pitches or pitch intervals, emic rules for which pitches can follow which pitches, rhythmic structures, overall forms and structures, etc.; all interconnected with significance of connotative meaning for those familiar with that particular system (similar to a language as a system).
2. Of course one cannot generalize about the positions of all Khmer or government officials. It is difficult to conceive, for example, that the lowland Khmers who see highland groups as destroyers of the forest are the same people who would seek to pay them to clear the forests to make way for cash crops. On the other hand, many who have lived closer to the highland groups have had good relations with them (White 1996).
3. Phnongs is a name commonly used by lowland Khmer to refer to all highland groups but also refers to the Bunong language group living primarily in Mondulkiri Province.
4. While tourism is often promoted as a means of cultural preservation, on its own it would do little if anything to promote the creation of new songs for actively communicating within Tampuan communities. For the most part, I have not seen the Tampuan find sustainable ways to convert their practices of communicating through song into profitable spectacle for outsiders.

References

- Baird, Ian George. "Various Forms of Colonialism: The Social and Spatial Reorganization of the Brao in Southern Laos and Northeastern Cambodia." Ph. D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2008a.
- Baird, Ian George. "Reflecting on Changes in Ratanakiri Province, Northeastern Cambodia." *Watershed* 12.3 (2008b): 65-73.
- Big Stories Small Towns. N.d. www.bigstories.com.au/compatibility/home (accessed September 14, 2013).
- Crowley, J. D., Vay Tieng, and Wain Churk. *Tampuan Khmer-English Dictionary: With English Khmer Tampuan Glossary*. Phnom Penh: EMU International and National Language Institute of the Royal Academy of Cambodia, 2007.
- Galvin, Maeve. "The Land is our Life" *Phnom Penh Post*, March 6, 2012. Available online www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/Special-Reports/Page-11.html (accessed September 8, 2012).
- Gregerson, Marilyn. "Tampuan Leadership, Traditional Law and Decision-Making: A Study of Six Villages." Pre-publication draft. International Cooperation Cambodia, 2009.
- International Cooperation Cambodia (ICC) RIDE Project. "Tampuan Literacy Songs for Development." [Audio CD], 2009.
- Mallow, P. Kreg. "Perceptions of Social Change Among the Krung Hilltribe of Northeast Cambodia." M.A. thesis, Wheaton College Graduate School, 2002.

- Long, Douglas. "Yeak Loam musicians perform in Phnom Penh." *Phnom Penh Post*, April 2, 2010. Available online www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2010040236744/Lifestyle/yeak-loam-musicians-perform-in-phnom-penh.html (accessed November 8, 2013).
- McCaskill, Don. "From Tribal Peoples to Ethnic Minorities: The Transformation of Indigenous Peoples." In *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia*. Edited by D. McCaskill and K. Kampe. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm, 1997. 26-60.
- Ovesen, Jan, and Ing-Brit Trankell. "Foreigners and Honorary Khmers: Ethnic Minorities in Cambodia." In *Civilizing the Margins: Southeast Asian Government Policies for the Development of Minorities*. Edited by C. R. Duncan. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004. 241-269.
- Riebe, Kenneth G. "Policy Making for Sustainable Development and the Yeak Laom Commune Protected Area." Ratanakiri, Cambodia: International Development Research Center of Canada and UNDP/CARERE, 1999. Available online <http://hdl.handle.net/10625/25201> (accessed September 8, 2012).
- Rith, Sam, and Sebastian Strangio. "Besieged Ratanakiri Minorities to Reap Benefits of Growing Ecotourism." *Phnom Penh Post*, November, 6, 2008. page 4 (print edition). Available online www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php?option=com_jcs&view=jcs&layout=form&Itemid=554. (accessed September 8, 2012).
- Saurman, Todd. "Singing for Survival in the Highlands of Cambodia: Tampuan Revitalization of Music as Cultural Reflexivity." In *Music and Minorities in Ethnomusicology: Challenges and Discourses from Three Continents*. Edited by Ursula Hemetek. Wien: Institut für Volksmusikforschung und Ethnomusikologie, 2012.
- Saurman, Todd. "The Shifting Cultivation of Tampuan Songs: Beyond Preservation to Communication and Creation of Culture." (unpublished) 2013.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Walker, Summer, and Tep Nimol. "Cultural Roots Key to Securing Land Rights for Ethnic Kreung." *Phnom Penh Post*. February, 24, 2011. Available online www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php?option=com_jcs&view=jcs&layout=form&Itemid=554 (accessed September 8, 2012).
- White, Joanna. "The Indigenous Highlanders of the Northeast: An Uncertain Future." In *Interdisciplinary Research on Ethnic Groups in Cambodia: Final Draft Reports*. Phnom Penh: Center for Advanced Studies, 1996. 335-374.
- White, Joanna, and Frédéric Bourdier. "The Indigenous Population of the Northeast." In *Interdisciplinary Research on Ethnic Groups in Cambodia: Executive Summaries Cambodia*. Prepared for the National Symposium on Ethnic Groups in Cambodia. Phnom Penh, July 18-19, 1996. 23.