

**Sub-Regional Experts Meeting in Asia on Intangible Cultural Heritage:  
Safeguarding and Inventory-Making Methodologies**  
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## **Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Cambodia Methods and Approaches**

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### Project Overview

Title:	Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Cambodia
Partners:	UNESCO Office, Phnom Penh / Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts
Project Duration:	December 2002- February 2004
Total Funding:	US\$ 35,000
Funded by:	UNESCO
Date of Publication:	February 2004/ JSRC Printing House/ 120 pp
Researchers:	Intangible Cultural Heritage Committee of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts / Individual artists and practitioners
Catalogues:	Performing arts and select topics on oral cultural heritage  83 titles of classical dance 49 titles of folk and popular dance 22 forms of theater 27 styles of music groups traditional and modern circus 12 ethnic minority languages 14 genres of oral literature and folklore 13 types of artisan skills

Each art form is presented with a brief historical background, main descriptive characteristics, a short repertory of performances, and recognized “master artists” past and present to honor those who created and continued the art, as well as to identify those who embody today’s “living heritage”.

Original artists, dancers, choreographers, directors (primarily from the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts) are listed, along with dates of original performances and more recently “revived” works from the Khmer Rouge period (1975-1979).

## **Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Cambodia**

### **Introduction**

In February 2004, a publication entitled “Inventory of Intangible Culture Heritage of Cambodia” was published in partnership with UNESCO (Phnom Penh Office) and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. At the start of the 15-month project in December 2002, an Intangible Cultural Heritage Committee (IHC) was formed at the proposal of the UNESCO office in Phnom Penh. This Committee structure proved appropriate and effective to identify the necessary qualified experts in the various performing art fields.

This importance of this documentation cannot be underestimated. In the context of Cambodia, we must be reminded that 90% of artists, dancers, musicians, actors, playwrights, and poets perished in the Khmer Rouge period (1975-1979). This inventory is a tribute to the revival efforts and the strength of an oral tradition that continues resiliently today.

The inventory consisted of two phases: Phase 1 (Dec. 2002- April 2003) focused on collecting data and the translation of these texts on performing arts; Phase 2 (April 2003-Feb 2004) focused primarily on editing the collected information, and collecting additional data for the second section - selected topics of cultural oral heritage and artisan skills. In each phase, a UNESCO consultant was responsible for supervising the project and acting in liaison with the Ministry. The consultant/ facilitator for Phase 1 was Mr. Fred Frumberg, the consultant/ facilitator for Phase 2, was myself.

The ICH Committee, composed of researchers, teachers and artists of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and the Royal University of Fine Arts supplied the research information for the first section on performing arts. The ICH Committee marks a prominent first-step in coordinating research and expertise in this domain. Artists and teachers in the field were responsible for researching different performing art forms in their area of expertise.

In the second section, the inventory of ethnic languages in Cambodia was written by an expert linguist in the field. The remaining sections were mostly abbreviated versions of text references/ existing research material and interviews conducted with artists and teachers active in the field of art and handicrafts in Cambodia today.

It must be emphasized that this inventory does not aim to be comprehensive in providing a cultural mapping of performing arts countrywide. Largely conducted by the Ministry, the inventory highlights the Ministry’s efforts in performing arts fields, with specific focus on the Royal University of Fine Arts and the Dept. of Performing Arts. As a first step, the inventory does not provide an in-depth study on each of these forms, but rather, aims at giving a complete overview of all the known forms with practical information on each one.

Creating this inventory of such a vast range of forms, artists, and works was not a simple task. For instance, simply selecting which items to include in an inventory on intangible culture was a major challenge. Given the sheer variety that Cambodian culture has to offer, the topics selected

however, can be no more than representative pieces of a much larger mosaic, a mosaic that we hope one day can be more comprehensive.

## **A. Methodology- Phase 1**

Phase 1 (the first section on performing arts) documented various forms and styles of classical dance, folk and popular dance, musical theatre, music and circus. Research was conducted by the ICH Committee.

### *1) Key experts were identified in the ICH Committee*

One strategy of this inventory was that key experts could be readily identified by teachers already working in their field. Within the structure of an established Committee, this helped to form effective alliances and facilitated coordination. Several meeting and follow-up appointments were made by the UNESCO consultant to make the objectives clearly understood. All members of the Committee were contacted and willing to cooperate with the inventory and suggested guidelines.

### *2) Use of Semi-Structured Questionnaires*

In the preliminary stages, semi-structured questionnaires were made and handed out to all members of the Committee. Questionnaires were drawn up with key questions on brief historical background, main descriptive characteristics, a short repertory of performances, along with recognized masters, past and present of each form.

The information varied from art form to art form, largely dependent on the availability of information (using existing data and newly researched information) and oral memory. Enough was covered however, to standardize the information presented in an inventory of forms, with more research and background provided for some art forms, others less.

### *3) Collection of Photographs and Submission of Texts*

There was a delay in the deadline for submission because many people had written and researched more than was required. (See what happens when they are given the opportunity!) The Ministry's large collection of photos past and present also greatly aided in the process of documentation.

### *4) Translation of Collected Data*

Data was collected by the Head of the ICH Committee and translated from Khmer into English (many submissions were handwritten in Khmer script) along with supplying original photographs. This proved a lengthy process as the translation had to be transcribed into phonetic terms.

## **B. Methodology- Phase 2**

Phase 2 involved editing the collected performing arts' texts and compiling information for the second part of the inventory entitled 'Oral Cultural Heritage'. This section included ethnic languages, folklore, poetry; rituals associated with animist beliefs, (eg *Neak ta*, Khmer guardian

spirits, fortune tellers etc.) and a range of artisan skills. Many of these genres of oral folklore form the foundation of traditional Khmer performing arts.

The methodology of Phase 2 differed in that the Committee was not the key focal point in supplying research. As funds were already channeled to the Ministry for Phase 1, this part of the study was not under their domain.

There was discussion to enlarge the inventory using the following methodology:

- 1) Topics were identified by UNESCO and discussed with the Ministry;
- 2) Tailored questionnaires were devised and distributed by the UNESCO consultant and a UNESCO assistant in the Culture Dept. to key individual artists, practitioners, experts and NGOs working in specific fields. The questionnaire followed similar guidelines as in Phase 1, historical background of the art form, a list of masters working in the field area, for handicrafts- the process by which a certain handicraft is made and in what areas, with photographs collected;
- 3) In some instances, artists were interviewed; and/or
- 4) Research was compiled by the UNESCO consultant through already existing data.

Due to time constraints and limited funding, contributions to this last section were largely “added-on”. Retrieving the contents largely depended on the goodwill and interest of the artists and researchers, and many were not formally paid under the project funding, as this was not pre-conceived and structured into Phase 1. If it had been a more comprehensive study with more planning time, this would have been done by a more formalized procedure.

## **C. Challenges and Issues Encountered in the Inventory Making in Cambodia**

### *1. Language/ translation*

In this case, the primary research was first conducted and written in Khmer, and afterwards, transcribed and translated in English. It was not ideal for Khmer researchers to have their work translated in English as they could not adequately proof-read the material or provide any additional commentary. Subtleties in translation for changes in meaning also posed a risk. Proper spelling of phonetic terms was time consuming for it had to be checked and verified. The text therefore, underwent many stages of editing.

### *2. Selection / politics of representation*

Due to limitations in funding and time lines, no study can be comprehensive on intangible cultural heritage. The central premise thus came down to: What elements/art forms are selected over others? This involves the politics of representation- this process was decided by whom?

Political aspects to be considered: Nationalistic aspects are inevitably filtered through in such a publication. The Ministry naturally used this as an opportunity to showcase their work and history. Caution must be paid to the process of raising one art form over another in the act of documentation, forming “symbolic” status in the process of selection. Due attention must be paid to those forms /voices that are excluded, as well as varying interpretations on the history or facts of the art form.

### *3. ICH and the documentation of oral memory*

#### a) Dates /facts/details remain approximate

As the inventory is a collaborative effort on the part of many people, the level of detail on the various forms varies widely. Art forms that have been transmitted solely via word of mouth is difficult to trace through history. For this reason, many dates of origin remain approximate or incomplete.

#### b) Varying interpretations- political aspects

Research on the history of an art form and other details also may be contentious and interpreted from personal bias and experience that “written fact”. This is difficult to verify as there will always be varying interpretations.

Political aspects to be considered: One comes across facts/ details that are not suitable to government, or that they may not wish to include in the inventory. For example, certain historical facts on various art forms can be subject to re-interpretation and used to ‘re-write’ the historical background of the art form in an advantageous, nationalistic way. This is sensitive when many art forms manifest several external influences; the art form may even originate outside the country but has been adopted, ‘localized’, developing its own unique characteristics.

## **D. A First Step**

Cambodia’s ICH inventory is a first step to further research in these areas. Like a library with many books, there now lies a directory in which to search and learn more, especially on lesser-known art forms. Even the Ministry themselves were astonished to see how many forms and dances and theatre forms there were. The publication has become one source of pride, an output of their work acting as a “mirror” that can further encourage them to better understand the historical significance and larger context of their work.

### *1. Advantages of the inventory making project in Cambodia*

The publication has encouraged fund raising and awareness raising on the variety and diversity of Cambodia’s intangible cultural heritage. Copies of the inventory are sold at the Phnom Penh International Airport and other book centers in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

The inventory has proved useful for public relations and improving chances of funding for the development of Cambodian arts. As the documentation strategically identified endangered ICH and those art forms that have not been revived since the Khmer Rouge period, efforts have been

made to target these forms accordingly through funding proposals requesting safeguarding. Just recently on November 25, 2005, *Sbaek thom* (large shadow puppet theatre) was declared a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

The data collection also involved training of local researchers and encouraged teachers to expand their research and knowledge in their field area.

## *2. Draw-backs of the inventory making project in Cambodia*

To date, the inventory has been published in English but does not yet have a Khmer version. More funding would be necessary to translate the edited version back into Khmer. The question of audience and the purposes of the inventory cannot be more emphasized.

In my personal view, the inventory was successful but not completely followed through in what should be its prime purpose as an educational tool. The point should be made that this is largely a document of the Ministry's work, so its purpose differed from that of a cultural mapping inventory- compiling information through first-hand fieldwork in rural areas of the country. In this way, there needs to be more outreach to local communities and the general public beyond the Ministry, with the publication used as an educational tool in schools and universities.

Due to time and funding constraints in Phase 2, topics were principally defined by UNESCO and the Ministry of Culture in Phnom Penh. Thereafter, research was supplied by demand. Inclusion of research at the community level in rural areas, as well as the involvement of the Ministries of Culture in provincial areas could have been considered to widen outreach.

## **E. What are the Next Steps?**

### *1) Translation*

Translate the inventory into Khmer, the vernacular language.

### *2) Revival of endangered art forms*

Teachers at the university can aim to replenish their teaching repertoire and revive those documented dances that have not been performed since the 1970s. In this way, the inventory serves to preserve and safeguard cultural heritage as well as providing a basis for stimulating future creativity.

### *3) Expand the inventory nationwide*

The next step would be to expand this inventory countrywide, and attempt to conduct a cultural mapping of artist troupes "who is doing what and where". Possibilities include:

- an expanded in-depth version on topics already documented;
- explore and include more ICH topics;
- include art and cultural organizations and artist troupes that are active nationwide.

The following references could be drawn on:

- a) Visiting Arts “Cambodia Arts Directory” published in 2001 by Tim Doling covers many government and NGOs active in the realm of contemporary arts and culture countrywide.
- b) An unpublished UNESCO report entitled “HIV/AIDS Feasibility Study on Performing Arts in Cambodia: 10 Selected Provinces” conducted in Cambodia from July to Sept 2002 by authors, Delphine Kassem and Tara Mar. Funded by UNESCO Phnom Penh Office, the study provides recommendations and assesses the feasibility of Cambodian provincial theater troupes incorporating AIDS messages in their current repertoire in order to target rural areas with high HIV/AIDS prevalence. Detailed information was provided for 46 troupes and musicians in a 200 page annex report with interviews conducted in ten selected provinces. A wealth of data was retrieved. Though low on resources and funding, findings show that there is much performing arts activity in the rural areas. More research and documentation is needed on the “official” and “non-official” or popular art forms.

#### *4) Train more researchers in ICH and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR)*

In the art field, there are many artists that are performers, not researchers. They are however, important resource people that are masters of their art. Training local researchers in this field is essential. Education institutions such as the Royal University of Fine Arts can initiate coursework involving the collection of oral traditions, interviewing, and documentation methods of ICH.

In Cambodia, awareness of intellectual property rights (IPR) is minimal. To date, there is little NGOs or government agenda to specifically address this issue, especially in the domain of intangible cultural heritage. Violation of copyright ‘rights’ is rampant. If a more expanded inventory is done in the rural areas, this issue must be included as an important element, as well as government commitment for law enforcement and protection.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This inventory would not have been a success if it had not been for the enthusiasm and commitment on behalf of Cambodia’s Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts to produce and research such a document. For them, it was not only funds to produce a published document in their field, but paid tribute and commemoration to artists that died in the Pol Pot regime and those artists with the dedication and commitment to further the arts in Cambodia today.

This inventory is a first step, and acts as a strong foundation with potential to develop documentation of ICH further. Although much remains to be done, we hope this inventory will encourage future researchers to deepen their knowledge of Cambodian cultural heritage, as well as being a useful reference for future generations. This inventory hopes to mark an encouraging step for artists, musicians, writers, teachers alike to instilling a stronger sense of pride in their dedication to teaching, creating, and performing.

It is recommended that other countries working on ICH inventories consider using existing social structures and existing networks already in place to coordinate the necessary research. The more partners you involve to work on the inventory the better, but be well aware that the process is

slow and time-consuming, especially when translation of texts is involved. Setting limits for what topics to include and setting deadlines for submissions is crucial. The purpose of such a project, the question of *who the inventory is for*, to what audience, must be carefully considered and followed through in order to optimize results and the benefits national inventory making can offer.