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# Sbek Thom

KONG Vireak  
PREAP Chanmara

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Author: KONG Vireak & PREAP Chanmara

Coordinator: OK Sophon, VIN Laychour & HONG Makara

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## **Foreword by Minister of Culture and Fine Arts**

Cambodia possesses many types of performing arts such as music, theater, dance, folktales and poems. Some of this traditional heritage have disappeared through Cambodia's long history. *Sbek Thom* is also one of them, amount considerable ancient arts of Cambodia, which is a sacred art and deeply rooted in Khmer society.

Nowadays, the attention has been paid to the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Knowledge, traditions and artistic talents are in danger of disappearance and difficult to restore. Thus, we need to promote education, training activities, to continue to maintain the legacy alive in the longer term.

*Sbek Thom*, which contains traditions and art values, was proclaimed a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005.

The research and publication of this book is a good occasion to disseminate *Sbek Thom* in Cambodia for general public as well as abroad. I would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to the Royal Government of Japan for having made this project successful and to UNESCO for its constant support to preserve Khmer culture.

The safeguarding of this traditional heritage is the duty for all of us. Therefore, we should continue to provide assistance and encourage education and training in this field in order to revitalize *Sbek Thom* in a sustainable way.

Minister of Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts



Phoeurng Sackona

## **Foreword by UNESCO Representative in Cambodia**

Intangible cultural heritage is more fragile and more susceptible to fade from existence than tangible cultural heritage, yet it accounts for most of the heritage of developing countries. Trade imbalance, globalization, and the inflow of mass media inevitably result in asymmetric cultural exchanges between industrialized countries and developing countries, simultaneously causing people from around the world to standardize and assimilate.

This silent compulsion has a particularly strong influence over developing countries. Cambodia is no exception. At the center of this crisis lies Sbek Thom, Khmer Shadow Theater, which was proclaimed a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity on 25 November 2005 and featured in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 4 November 2008.

Within the framework of Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage through the Strengthening of National Capacities and funded by the Government of Japan under a capacity-building programme in Cambodia, the UNESCO Office in Phnom Penh, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, local NGOs and arts associations, organized a training session on the transmission of the Sbek Thom traditions and knowledge to younger generations in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

Moreover, UNESCO Phnom Penh, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and the Royal University of Fine Arts and with the financial support of the Government of Japan, conducted research and inventory of Sbek Thom in important regions of Cambodia with the objective to update information on the situation of artists, masters, private troupes, NGOs and art associations working in the field of Sbek Thom.

Once again, I would like to express my special thanks to the researchers and Sbek Thom artists and masters for their generous contribution toward making this project successful. I hope that this publication will become a key reference for researchers and students in the future.



**Anne Lemaistre  
UNESCO Representative in Cambodia**

## **1. Introduction**

Various forms of performing arts can be found in Cambodia. Some are used in entertainment and ceremonies, while others serve as offering rituals to the gods. Although each genre consists of its own unique performance technique, Cambodian performing arts, previously known in Khmer as *mahosrab* or *lpaen* can be broadly classified into two categories: dance and theater. The Khmer word for “dance” is *rapām*, derived from the verbal root *rām* (to dance). This type of performing arts invokes soft and slow movements of the hand, leg and body. Theater, known today in Khmer as *lkhon*, refers to stage enactments of ancient myths, religious stories and folktales. Lkhon performance requires talent and skills training in accordance with each genre of performance.

One form of performing arts is *Sbek Thom* (lit. “Large leather”), a type of shadow theater that utilizes large leather cut-outs. *Sbek Thom* is classified under the *lkhon*—or theater—category. It should be noted that there are three different forms of shadow theater in Cambodia: *Sbek Thom*, *Sbek touch* (lit. “Small leather”) (also called *Ayong* (“puppet play”) or *nang talung*), and *Sbek Por* (lit. “Colored leather”). *Sbeks*, which translates to “leather” in Khmer, are cut-out cowhide silhouettes of figures and other images and used as props. Notably, the *Sbek Thom* performance is always accompanied by a traditional orchestra, known in Khmer as *pin peat*, as well as narrators.

Because *Sbek Thom* only re-enacts excerpts from the *Reamker*, the Cambodian adaptation of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* from India, the leather panels depict gods, demons, human beings, animals, representations of nature and other

objects that appear in the story (*Figure 1*). The *Reamker* is a long story composed of many episodes. Performing *Sbek Thom* may require hundreds of leather panels (*Figure 2*). For these reasons, the *Reamker* has never been re-enacted in its entirety; only selected episodes are performed at a time.

*Sbek touch*, or “small puppet theater,” re-enacts short folktales, modern stories and occasional comedies. The size of each *Sbek touch* panel is small (*Figure 3*), and can be readily handled and transported during a performance (*Figure 4*).



Figure 1: Characters of the *Reamker* on *Sbek Thom*.

*Sbek touch* is often very entertaining and funny.

*Sbek por*, or “colored leather,” involves leather cut-outs of characters that are then painted (*Figure 5*). These performances take place during the daytime and often retell folktales or the Buddhist Jataka tales.

It should be noted that shadow plays can be found in other Asian countries outside of Cambodia, including India, Indonesia, Thailand and Burma. However, the form, aesthetics, and significances of a shadow play will vary according to the cultural setting of its country. Here, we analyze Cambodia’s *Sbek Thom* in light of ancient documents, observations of performances and interviews with performers.



Figure 2: Up to more than 100 *Sbek Thom* can be used in a performance.



Figure 3: *Sbek Touch*, also known as "Ayong" or "Nang Talung," in Battambong in the 1960s (Source: Reyum, *Khmers encountered the culture*, 2001).



Figure 4: *Sbek Touch* can be moved by hands and legs or other body movements by pulling the bamboo sticks so that the strings move along (Source: Reyum, *Khmers encountered the culture*, 2001).

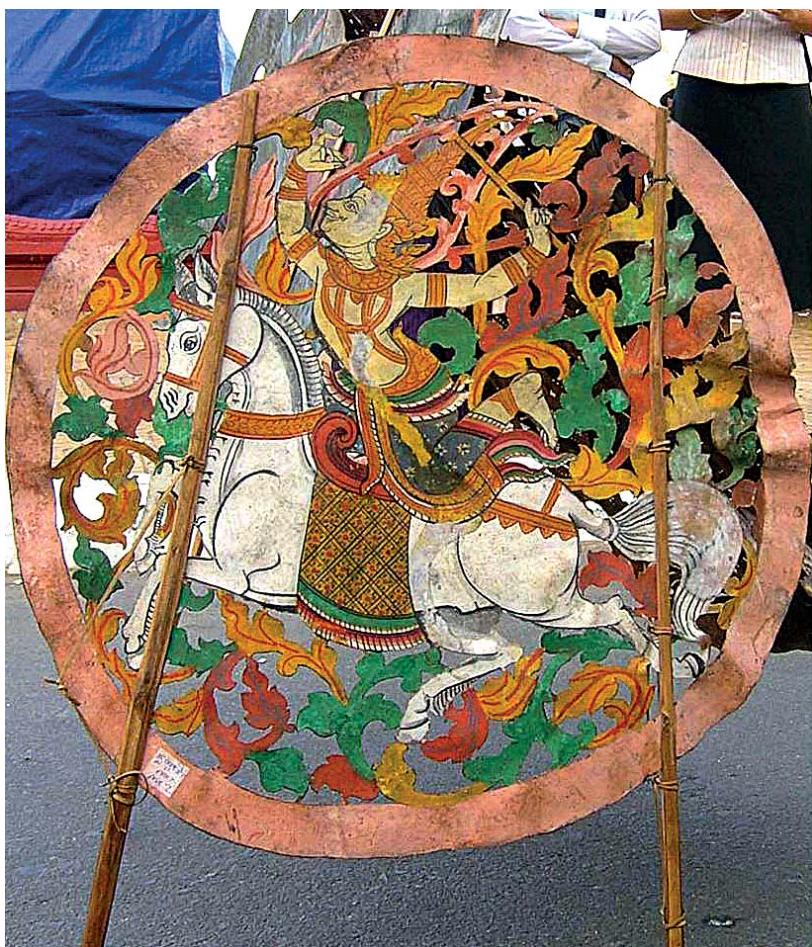


Figure 5: Colored Sbek.

## **2. Brief History of *Sbek Thom* in Cambodia**

In analyzing the history of *Sbek Thom*, it is necessary first to trace the history of the *Reamker* in Cambodia, since *Sbek Thom*, as mentioned above, is a re-enactment of this story. Influenced by Indian culture, along with other cultural elements, around or before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Khmer people adopted the *Ramayana* into their own culture. A 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup>-century statue of *Rama*, found in Angkor Borei in the Ta Keo province, attests to *Ramayana*'s clear iconographic presence in Cambodia (*Figure 6*). Numerous representations of episodes of the *Ramayana*, dating from the Angkor period (9<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries), are displayed in temples such as Banteay Srey, Baphuon, Angkor Wat, Banteay Samre, Bayon, Banteay Chmar and others (*Figure 7-8*). In Angkor Wat alone, one may find episodes of the *Ramayana* portrayed nearly everywhere. One of the most prominent representations is a 50-meter long bas-relief in the northwestern section of the first gallery. It depicts the infamous battle of Lanka. Additionally, the inscription of Veal Kanteal (K. 359), dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century and around the same time as the first appearance of the *Rama* statue from Angkor Borei, mentions Brahman Sri Somasarman's donation of the *Ramayana* text to a temple and his order for its daily, uninterrupted recitation. According to ancient tradition, the recitation of the *Ramayana* could cleanse all sins (Siyonn 2007).

In the subsequent 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, there appeared new composed texts of the *Reamker*, which remain prevalent in Cambodian society today (Pou, 1979).

The Inscription of Veal Kanteal (K. 359) dated to 6th or 7th century, about the same time as the appearance of the statue



Figure 6: 6<sup>th</sup> century statue of Preah Ream (an important character from the *Reamker*) from Angkor Borei, Takeo province. The statue is currently on display at the National Museum in Phnom Penh.



Figure 7: Bas-relief on a pediment of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Banteay Srey temple that depicts an episode of the battle between Sugriva and Valin.



Figure 8: Statue of the battle between Sugriva and Valin in a 10<sup>th</sup> century temple in Koh Ker, Preah Vihear Province. It is currently on display at the National Museum in Phnom Penh.

of *Rama* from Angkor Borei, mentions that Brahman Sri Somasarman donated *Ramayana* text to a temple and ordered its recitation uninterrupted daily. According to ancient tradition, the recitation of the *Ramayana* would be able to cleanse all sins (Siyonn 2007:). Moreover, a pedestal of *Rama*, *Sita* and *Laksmana* was found in Preah Khan Temple, dating from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, along with an inscription on a doorjamb (*Figure 9*) that reads:

- Kamraten Jagat Ramadeva (*Rama*)
- Kamraten Jagat Laksmana (*Laksmana*)
- Vrah Bhagavati Sita (*Sita*)

The pedestal of *Rama*, *Sita*, and *Laksmana* and the inscription mentioning their names together imply that these figures were worshipped as gods in ancient times.

Clearly, the *Reamker* has been deeply rooted in the Cambodian society for centuries. The epic plays a significant role in many aspects of Cambodian culture, such as rituals, ritual objects, fortune-telling, cures for sickness, names of *Neak Ta* (local protective deities) and even names of certain plants. Similarly, parts of the *Reamker* are also found in recitations, narrations, songs, paintings, carvings, dances, and plays. (Chanmara, December 2009 – December 2010).

It is clear now that the *Reamker* associates closely with Cambodian beliefs and practices. Additionally, its performance is without a doubt intended for purely religious purposes. It is unclear whether the Ramayana was performed in forms of shadow play in ancient times. Interestingly, epigraphic evidence reveals that the terms “tuktar” and “tukatar” were used in pre-Angkorian time. The first appears in K. 786, dating from 668 and 677 (*Figure 10*); and the second appears

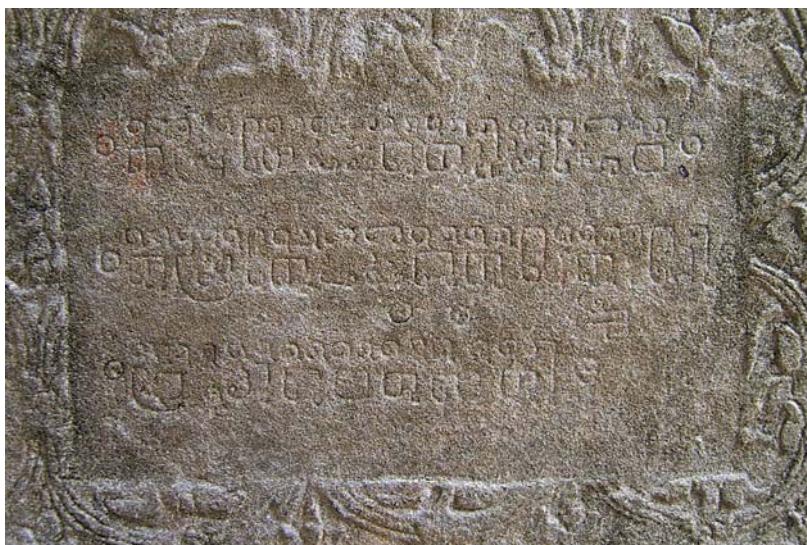


Figure 9: 12<sup>th</sup> century Preah Khan inscription that mentions Preah Ream, Preah Lak and Sita.

in K. 155, dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> century (*Figure 11*). Although the terms were used as the names of temple servants, they are worthy of consideration.

These terms may have a meaning similar to their contemporary term *tukkatā*, which refers to “statue” or “figure that can be carried” or refers instead to “narrative paintings,” “animated drawings or figures,” or “comic books.” If the meaning of the term is indeed the same as that used nowadays, the animated drawings or figures in ancient times imply the existence of the performance of *Sbek Thom* or *Sbek touch*, which was cast by light on a white screen, much like animation today.

It is evident that *Sbek Thom* was performed in Cambodia from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries onward. According to reports by Mr. Vann Molyvann, former rector of the Royal University of Fine Arts in 1960 (Molyvann 1965), Mr. Hang Thunhak, director of the National Theater of the Royal University of Fine Arts from 1960 –1970, and Mr. Ly Theam Teng (Ly Teamteng, 1971), there were several troupes of shadow plays in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Battambang. The Battambang troupes were skilled in performing *Ayong*. The Siem Reap troupes, however, were famous for their performances of *Sbek Thom*.



Figure 10: 7<sup>th</sup> century inscription of Baset (K. 78) that mentions the term *tuktara*, which seems to have a similar meaning to the contemporary term *tukkatā*, or an image that can freely move from place to place.



Figure 11: 7<sup>th</sup> century inscription of Prasat Chork (K.155) that mentions the term *tukatara* which seems to have similar meaning to a contemporary term, *tukkatā*.

### **3. Ceremonies in which *Sbek Thom* are performed**

Because it enacts only the *Reamker*, which contains sacred characteristics, *Sbek Thom* is performed at very reserved religious ceremonies associated with rites of invocation and prayers. Ceremonies in which *Sbek Thom* is generally performed include cremations of kings, royal family members, abbots and well-known monks; coronations; kings' birthdays; royal ceremonies; markings of sacred boundaries of new Buddhist worship halls; consecrations of new Buddha statues; life-prolonging ceremonies of chief monks; and other village ceremonies. Currently *Sbek Thom* is also performed on other occasions, such as national days like the National Culture Day

#### **4. Performance of *Sbek Thom***

Because the *Reamker* is very long, to enact the complete story would take many days. There are many episodes and characters, so it would require additional countless trainings and rehearsals and hundreds of leather panels. For this reason, a complete performance of the story has never been re-enacted. Practically speaking, only a few episodes are selected for performance, and these last for a few nights. Episodes are selected based on the objective of the ceremony for which it is performed.

During the performance, the leather panels are held against a screen of white cloth. Firelight casts shadows of figures on the screen. The performers skillfully move the panels to and fro according to the narration and musical accompaniment to look as though the characters of the story are moving on their own (*Figure 12*). Besides accompanying musicians, a troupe of performers include the directing master who directs the performance, narrators, musicians, leather panel handlers and fire watcher.



Figure 12: Performance of *Sbek Thom*.

## A. Stage

The performance stage for *Sbek Thom* contains a white screen of two to three meters wide and eight to nine meters long. This screen is hung vertically about one meter above the ground (*Figure 13*). Behind the screen is a “room” formed by a walled enclosure of mats (*Figure 14*). In this room, leather panels are arranged in proper order for performance (*Figure 15*). Moreover, it also serves as a space for panel handlers to align themselves in proper story sequence before approaching the stage (*Figure 16*). An altar of fire, raised about one meter above the ground, is located in the middle of the room (*Figure 17*). This fire serves as the light source for casting shadows on the screen during the performance (*Figure 18*).



Figure 13: White screen for performance of *Sbek Thom*.



Figure 14: A room behind the screen.



Figure 15: *Sbek Thom* in the performance room.



Figure 16: Performers holding the *Sbek Thom* before going on stage.



Figure 17: A bonfire altar used for the performance of *Sbek Thom* (Source: Ang Choulean).



Figure 18: A bonfire for performances.

## B. Music

The performance requires a complete traditional musical orchestra, known in Khmer as *pln peat vong Thom*. This orchestra includes *sampho* (double-headed, strapped, barrel-shaped drum), two *skor Thom* (type of barrel-shaped drum), *raneat ek* (small xylophone), *roneat thong* (large xylophone), *roneat dek* ("iron" xylophone), *kong touch* (small pot-gong circle), *kong Thom* (large pot-gong circle), *sralay touch* (small wooden oboe), *sralay Thom* (large wooden oboe), *chhing* (pair of small cymbals), and sometimes double-headed, barrel-shaped drums (*Figure 19-20*). Generally, ten or eleven musicians play in the orchestra. In addition, there are many musical melodies that correspond to different acts of the play, such as fighting, flying, floating, and arrow shooting scenes; invocations; departures; and moments of happiness, sadness, and anger. Sometimes, there are also distinctive musical melodies for different gods, demons and monkeys.

Music is played continuously throughout the performance. Even during narration, there are background accompaniments of *kong*, *sampo*, and *skor Thom*. For this reason, musicians must know how to play at least 24 different songs (Hun Saron: 2004). The melodies are played at the requests of narrators. Due to their performance expertise, even when narrators mistakenly request the wrong tune, the musicians will play the right one.



Figure 19: *Pin Peat*, the musical ensemble for the *Sbek Thom* troupe.



Figure 20: Playing *Pin Peat* during the performance of *Sbek Thom*.

### C. Leather panels or *Sbek*

For some performances, particularly re-enactments of very short episodes, panels of characters are used repeatedly. Nevertheless, a remarkable number of leather panels are needed for a performance (*Figure 21*). For the most popular episodes, more than 150 panels are needed (Pich Thom Krovel: 1995). One can assume then that the complete performance of the entire *Reamker* epic would call for hundreds of panels.



Figure 21: Numerous leather panels are arranged in precise order for performance.

## D. Narrators

A big performance requires one narrator to tell the general story and another for the characters. Narrators often sit near the musicians and do not reveal themselves onstage. In this way, they do not draw the attention of the audience away from the story. The narrators are sometimes also the directors of the *Sbek Thom* performance (Pich Thom Krovel: 1995). *Sbek Thom* troupes in Phnom Penh often have one or two elder men who know the story by heart to narrate a short performance. In Siem Reap, there are usually two narrators: a man and a woman.

The narration is in a semi-verse form known as *kamrong keo*, which mixes different poetic styles and proses according to each act of the performance. Sometimes narrators know the story by heart and sometimes they read from manuscript (*Figure 22*).

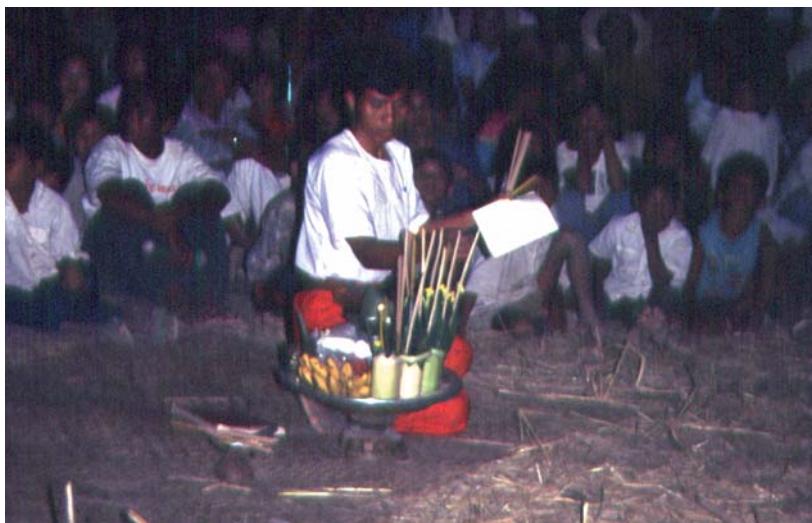


Figure 22: Narrators always have a *kran* (a type of traditional manuscript) on a small stand during performance (source: Ang Choulean).

## E. Performers

Performers hold the *Sbek Thom* panels and cause the figures in the panels to fly, stand and sit according to music (*Figure 23*). Depending on the episode of the *Reamker*, which consists of numerous acts, many performers are needed, sometimes up to 20 performers (*Figure 24*). The performers are usually men. They move on and off stage continuously, and sometimes even fight each other to appear as if the characters in the story are fighting (*Figure 25*).



Figure 23: Panel handlers.



Figure 24: About 20 panel handlers.



Figure 25: Panel handlers sometimes put down the panels and fight each other (source: Ang Choulean).

## F. Master

Each troupe of *Sbek Thom* has a master who acts as the director of the performance. The master knows the story and music to be played in each circumstance by heart. He also leads in preparation of ritual objects for ritual performance (Figure 26). At times, the master is also the narrator of the story.



Figure 26: The directing master of *Sbek Thom* leading the preparation of ritual objects during performance.

## G. Episodes to be performed

Selecting the episode for performance depends on the ceremony for which it is to be performed. The master will arrange the selected episodes accordingly. Sometimes the performers require rehearsal before the performance. During the performance, the performers not only "animate" the panels, but also sometimes fight among themselves. Therefore, they must rehearse fighting techniques (*Figure 27*).



Figure 27: Panel handlers rehearsing before performance.

## H. A ritual before the performance

Before performance, a ritual known as *hom pithi*, or sometimes *khum rong*, is performed. A panel depicting an Ascetic is placed in the middle of the white screen. A panel showing Preah Ishor shooting arrows is placed to the right of the Ascetic, while a panel portraying Preah Naray shooting arrows is placed to the Ascetic's left (*Figure 28*). Other characters, such as Preah Ream and demon King Reap, flank the three principle figures. Ritual objects, including *baysei*, *sla dhor*, ripened banana, betel leaves, areca nuts, flowers, rice, incenses, candles, and a bowl of "sacred" anointing water, are also displayed (*Figure 29*). The performers light incense to pay homage to the supernatural Masters, *sampeah krou* (*Figure 30*). Then the directing master starts to invoke to gods so that the Master of music, Master of narrators, and Master of panel handlers come to the altar. Next everyone bows to respect to the "presence" of the gods and the Masters (*Figure 31*).



Figure 28: A leather panel depicting an Ascetic is placed in the middle of the stage during the opening ceremony ritual.



Figure 29: Leather panel, which depicts images of important characters displayed during the opening ceremony ritual.



Figure 30: Panel handlers lighting incense and candles to pay homage to the mythical Masters during the opening ceremony ritual.



Figure 31: Performers paying homage to the panels (i.e. the Masters) that are placed before them.

## I. Performance

After the ritual of paying homage to the gods and the Masters, the performance opens with fire burning behind the screen (*Figure 32*). The narrator begins the story with a scene about a fight between a black and a white monkey. During the fight, the white monkey binds the black monkey and leads him to the Ascetic, who is surrounded by his entourage. The Ascetic tells the two monkeys to stop fighting each other (*Figure 33*).

The performance continues with great noise caused by the narrators, music, and other activities produced by performers as they follow the sequence of the story (*Figure 34*). Panels are prearranged in proper order for performers behind the screen. The master directs the performers according to the episode and its narration.



Figure 32: The bonfire burns brightly at the start of the performance.



Figure 33: The first episode of *Sbek Thom*.



Figure 34: An episode of *Sbek Thom*.

### J. Gestures and dance movement

Performers must familiarize themselves with the gestures and movements of each character as appropriate for the act. For example, the handlers must know certain hand movements and their timing, such as when to raise, lower, move, turn and shake the panels. Leg gestures are similar; the performers must know when to bend the knees, stand, jump, run... etc. The body should also bend according to each character personality (*Figure 35*). Gestures differ from one character to the other; from monkey to human being; and from god to demon.



Figure 35: Body movements and gestures of panel handlers vary according to personality of each character.

## **5. Beliefs associated with *Sbek Thom***

The *Reamker* is considered a sacred story in Cambodian tradition. Paintings, sculptures, dances and storytelling about the *Reamker* begin with ritual performances, with ritual objects prepared, and contain taboos. The story is profoundly rooted in religious practice; therefore, Cambodians are traditionally forbidden from telling or performing it in their homes. Instead, its performance takes place in an open space, such as a rice field, public space, or courtyard of *Wat*, a Buddhist monastery. In ancient times, the *Reamker* was recited in sacred compounds such as temples.

*Sbek Thom*, which is reserved only for the performance of the *Reamker*, is associated with many religious restrictions. Its making, storing, and performing are always done according to tradition and require special ritual performance. Furthermore, an appropriate place outside of home is needed for performance. Its performance is strongly associated with religious ceremony, and not simply for entertainment purposes. *Sbek Thom* has never been performed for weddings or house-warming ceremonies.

## **6. Making and Storing *Sbek Thom***

Cowhides are usually used for making the *Sbek Thom* panels. However, it is believed that figures of the Ascetic, Preah Isor and Preah Nearay possess magical power, and were highly venerated; their figures were traditionally made from the hides of bears or tigers (Pich Tumkrovel, 1995).

Fabrication of the leather panels undergoes two steps: drying and cutting into required figures. For the first step, a newly skinned hide must be "killed," a process known in Khmer as *samlab Sbek*. During this process, the cowhide is wholly immersed in ash to prevent it from rotting. Then the panel is removed and stretched out so that any remaining flesh can be dislodged with sharp knives. Afterwards, the hide is soaked in a solution made of beaten tree bark. The *Kandol* tree, in particular, which tastes strongly bitter, tart and sour, is often used to make this solution. The purpose of the soaking process is to obtain certain colors, durability, and protection from insects. After one or two days of soaking in the water, the hide is stretched to dry and then stored flat. Hides are used according to size and need: for instance, a bigger piece can be used to portray the cut-outs of two figures.

Before the cutting process, images such as characters, royal palaces, and others are drawn on the hide. Small holes are then cut into the hide (*Figure 36-37*). Nowadays, in some regions, a drawing on a piece of paper is placed on the hide, which is then cut by tracing along the drawing (*Figure 38*). The leather panels vary in size and contain different motifs, such as flowers, *Neak* (multiple-headed serpent) and characters.

After cutting out the image, the hide is attached to bamboo stick handles for performers to hold during a performance. For a smaller panel, a bamboo stick is attached in the middle (*Figure 39*); to han-

ble bigger panels with ease, two bamboo sticks are attached to the edge of the panel (*Figure 40*).

The finished panels are stored in an appropriate place, such as a building of a *Wat*. If they are kept in a village, they should be stored in a separate place away from residences, because it is believed that these panels are sacred and possess magical power.



Figure 36: Making the *Sbek*, 1960s (sources: ?)



Figure 37: Sketches on the cowhide, which is later cut out into images (source: Ang Choulean).



Figure 38: Images on the paper, which is later stuck to the cowhide and then cut out.



Figure 39: Small-sized *Sbek*, which is attached in the middle to a bamboo stick.



Figure 40: Large-sized *Sbek*, which is attached to two bamboo sticks, making it easy to hold.

## **7. Training of *Sbek Thom***

Both the government and private sectors participate in *Sbek Thom* training. Members of *Sbek Thom* troupes from the Department of Spectacle within the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts have various skills in performing art, which include classical and traditional dance; sometimes they are also skilled in both *Sbek Thom* and *Ikhon khol* due to their many years of direct training at the school of arts within the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. Training of *Sbek Thom* for members of this troupe do not require much time and effort, because of their basic knowledge in performing arts.

On the contrary, performers of private *Sbek Thom* troupes or troupes affiliated with art associations need more time and effort, especially for young beginners. Besides direct training from the master, beginners also indirectly train by observing skilled performers during rehearsals and performance.

## **8. Current *Sbek Thom* Troupes**

Currently, several *Sbek Thom* troupes are associated with and supervised by the Department of Spectacle within the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. Many non-governmental associations that focus on arts, for instance the Sovanna Phum Art Association, which is very active in Phnom Penh, also have their own *Sbek Thom* troupes. In Siem Reap, there are also a few troupes, including the Wat Bo troupe and Lok Ta Ty Chien troupes located in Sala Kansaeng village, as well as a small troupe led by Lok Ta Hing and located near Vat Chork. The following are brief descriptions of each troupe.

### **A. Troupe of Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts**

The Department of Spectacle within the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts has different skilled dance and theatre troupes—including *Sbek Thom*. Within this Department, there are two highly skilled narrators of *Sbek Thom*, Mr. Sin Samey and Mr. Seng Sam Ang, along with many talented panel handlers and musicians who can participate in *Ikhon*, dance and other performances as well. This troupe often performs for official occasions, such as national days, festivals and special international delegations. Due to the performers' extensive background in various performing arts skills, whenever there is a need for a *Sbek Thom* performance, performers can be easily grouped to perform requested episodes.

The *Sbek Thom* troupe of the Department of Performing Arts of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, consists of principle masters as following:

1. Mr. Sdeung Chamreun
2. Mr. Suoer Vithy

3. Mr. Pok Saran
4. Mr. Sin Samey
5. Mr. Seng Sam An
6. Mr. Chhorn Samat
7. Mr. On Chea Heng
8. Mr. Prak Siphaneath
9. Mr. Moa Bunna
10. Mr. Moa Vuthy
11. Mr. Chap Siphat
12. Mr. Mou Ket Neam
13. Mr. Eang Kim On

These masters are not only the performers, but also the trainers of *Sbek Thom* and other performing arts skills (*Figure 41*).

Moreover, under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, the Department of Choreography at the Royal University of Fine Arts also trains students in *Sbek Thom* performance. Students are trained in *Sbek Thom* are also trained in various other performing arts, such as *Ikhon khol* and the Royal Ballet (*Ikhon luong*), both of which have very similar performance techniques. Each academic year, students are allowed to choose various performing arts as assignments for school projects. Among them includes *Sbek Thom* (*Figure 42-44*).



Figure 41: Mr. On Chea Heng, *Sbek Thom* and other performing arts performer of the Department of Performance and Arts of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, is training his trainees to perform the *Sbek Thom*.



Figure 42: Students from the Department of Choreography at the Royal University of Fine Arts performing *Sbek Thom* as a final project during their third year.



Figure 43: *Sbek Thom* performance of an episode of *Neang Puhakay* as a final semester project by students from the Department of Choreography at the Royal University of Fine Arts.



Figure 44: Performance of *Sbek Thom* as a final semester project by students from the Department of Choreography at the Royal University of Fine Arts.

## **B. Troupe of Sovanna Phum Art Association**

Established in 1994, Sovanna Phum is an art association that produces trainings and performances based in Phnom Penh. Every month, performances of *Sbek Thom* are held on Friday and Saturday evenings. Some performers were former students of the Art School at the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. Others come to this Art Association for training (*Figure 45*).

Similar to those within the Ministry's troupe, Sovanna Phum performers have many art skills; performers in classical dance and Ikhon khol already know how to perform *Sbek Thom*. Before each performance, they need little rehearsing. For some performances, they form a team among themselves or invite performers from other art associations.

Sovanna Phum Art Association has a theatre hall (*Figure 46*) to hold performances of *Sbek Thom* and *Sbek touch* by audience request (*Figure 47-48*). This art troupe also performs in certain festivals and tours internationally.



Figure 45: Mr. Mann Kosal (left) explains to the visitors about the background of *Sbek Thom* troupe of Sovanna Phum Art Association.



Figure 46: Theater Hall of Sovann Phum Art Association.



Figure 47: Sbek Thom Troupe of Sovann Phum Art Association performing for tourists.



Figure 48: Sbek Thom Troupe of Sovann Phum Art Association performing for tourists.

## **C. Troupe of Kok Thlok Sbek Thom Association**

Kok Thlok Artists Association, currently directed by Mr. Phoeung Kompeah, was established in 2006 in Phnom Penh. The Association has a troupe of *Sbek touch* and *Sbek por*. This troupe constantly performs in Phnom Penh, and sometimes in provinces and as well as abroad.

Formerly, due to insufficiency of panels, the troupe borrowed them from the Department of Performing Arts. Nowadays, troupe is making 100 panels of an episode on “*Rama building bridge to Lanka*;” 90 of them were completed (*Figure 49*). The troupe is led by Mr. Eang Hoeurng along with a few others (*Figure 50*) and as well as leatherwork makers, cutters (*Figure 51*) in making panels, and rehearsals for performances (*Figure 52-53*).

Kok Thlok Artists Association is bigger than other troupes in terms of human resources (*Figure 54*). Some panels are 2.20 m. by 1.80 m. (*Figure 55*). Depicting large figures and other vegetation motifs (*Figure 56*), these panels were normally painted in dark yellow (the color was produced from Kandol tree) and black on the edges (*Figure 57*). Other panels depict characters along with palaces and as well as delicate motifs (*Figure 58*).

The troupe has 20 artists including narrators, musicians and panel animators. Although most of panel animators are men, there are also women:

1. Eang Hoeurng
2. Pok Dirama
3. Heng An
4. In Sidaen

5. Sok Samnang
6. Lay Pok
7. Sum Sithoeurn
8. Pen Chanton
9. Sok Sovan
10. Long Mlis
11. Ouk Sokha
12. Seng Nalin
13. Yim Chanty
14. Meach Sokly

There are two male narrators, who take turn in narrating during the performance:

1. Sok Mom
2. Pech Phat

There are 4 musicians:

1. Peang Kanika plays Skor Thom and Sampho
2. Khy Samnang plays Roneat Ek
3. Phat Solidet plays Kong Thom
4. Run Vanny plays sralay



Figure 49: Some of *Sbek Thom* Panels of Kok Thlok Association of Artists were just finished and the others are unfinished.



Figure 50: Mr. Eang Hoeurn (left), the trainer for making panels and performance, Mr. In Sidaen (right), the panel maker and performer of the Kok Thlok Association of Artists.



Figure 51: Women are making new panels at the Kok Thlok Association of Artists.



Figure 52: Men are making new panels at the Kok Thlok Association of Artists.



Figure 53: Mr. In Sidaen is making new panels at the Kok Thlok Association of Artists.



Figure 54. Different sizes of the Kok Thlok Association of Artists' panels.



Figure 55. Biggest Panel of the Kok Thlok Association of Artists with the size of 2.20 m. by 1.80 m depicting Preah Laks injured by an arrow.



Figure 56: A panel of the Kok Thlok Association of Artists depicting some large characters mixed with vegetation and other motifs.



Figure 57: the Kok Thlok Association of Artists' panel with dark yellow with black on the edges.



Figure 58: A panel of the Kok Thlok Association of Artists depicts characters along with palaces and delicate motifs

## **D. *Sbek Thom* Troupe of Grandfather Ty Chien**

The *Sbek Thom* troupe of Grandfather Ty Chien is located in Salakanseng village, Svay Dongkom Commune, Siem Reap District, Siem Reap Province. This is a family-run troupe. After the death of Grandfather Ty Chien in 2000, his grandson, Mr. Chien Sophan, became the director of the troupe. Grandfather Ty Chien was trained in *Sbek Thom* performance in Siem Reap at a young age. As an active performer since before 1975 (*Figure 59*), he mastered how to “animate” panels, narrate the story and direct performances. He was also knowledgeable in the construction of *Sbek* panels.

After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, Grandfather Ty Chien paid little attention to *Sbek Thom*. He conducted his daily life like the rest of his fellow villagers. Later he became achary (officiating priest) at a Buddhist monastery. Encouraged by his peers in the early 1990s, Grandfather Chien formed a *Sbek Thom* troupe. With the establishment of his troupe, he taught others how to perform *Sbek Thom*. However, most of his students were his own relatives (*Figure 60*). His troupe was often invited to perform for various formal occasions, such as establishments of new worship hall ceremonies, life-prolonging and cremation ceremonies for chief monks, village ceremonies (*Figure 61*), national festivals, National Days, and even tourists’ shows.

After Grandfather Chien’s death in 2000 (*Figure 62*), his grandson, Mr. Chien Sophan, who learned and actively participated in performances directed by his grandfather, became the director of the troupe. Grandfather Chien had trained primarily his relatives, neighbors and close friends.

The troupe continues to use the same performances and carvings. Its members make their own performance panels. They buy cowhides from markets and dry them (*Figure 63*). Then they draw desired images, and finally cut out the hide according to the traces of images. They usually paint the panels red and leave some parts light brown (*Figure 64-65*), or paint them dark red with another shade of red at the edges (*Figure 66*). They use natural colors from barks of trees, such as *Kandol* or cashew nut trees (*Figure 67*). Today this troupe has more than 80 panels (about 156 panels are required to perform many episodes). Lacking proper storage, some of the panels are temporarily kept at the director's house (*Figure 68*). The troupe also makes panels for other *Sbek Thom* troupes.

For performance, the troupe does not need much training; it only rehearses right before performances under the supervision of Masters Ty Chum and Ty Choeurm in an open space or small building (*Figure 69*) inside the director's courtyard.

Normally, there are seven main episodes of the Reamker used for performance:

1. Preah Ream's construction of a bridge to Lanka
2. Demon Ponhakay
3. Neakabas arrow
4. Demon Kampan
5. Promeas arrow
6. Sok Char
7. The City of Demon Indrajit

The troupe, which includes panel handlers, musicians, narrators and directing masters, consists of about 30 people ranging from 10 to 60 years old. These people have other regular

jobs to make a living. They gather to rehearse requested episodes only when they need to perform.

Below is the list of performers in Grandfather Ty Chien's troupe.

2 trainers:

1. Grandfather Ty Chum
2. Grandfather Ty Choeurm

14 male panel handlers:

1. Eng Chantong
2. Phet Sun
3. Chien Suchit
4. Yonn Om
5. Noy Narith
6. Pech Samnang
7. Loeurng Choy
8. Ven Suvannara
9. Yonn Dara
10. Choeuy Socheat
11. Sat Sopheana
12. Pov Seyha
13. Ly David
14. Ly Davan

2 male narrators:

1. Chien Sophan
2. Eng Chantong

9 male musicians:

1. Pat Pron plays Roneat Thong
2. Kdeb Sophal plays Samphor
3. May Samoeurt plays Kong Thom

4. Nhib Phon plays Reneat Ek
5. Eng Chan Ty plays Sralay
6. Phal Kong plays Sralay
7. Phon Chun plays Skor Thom
8. Duong Roth plays Kong Touch
9. May Siyen plays Roneat Dek



Figure 59: Grandfather Ty Chien in his middle age, showing the movements of panel handlers.

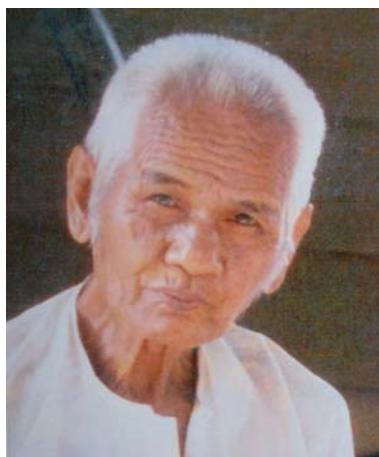


Figure 60: Grandfather Ty Chien in 1990.



Figure 61: Grandfather Ty Chien leading the performance of Sbek Thom for a ceremony in Siem Reap.



Figure 62: Mr. Chean Sophan, the current directors of Grandfather Ty Chien's *Sbek Thom* troupe.



Figure 63: Drying cowhide to make the *Sbek Thom*.



Figure 64: The *Sbek Thom* of Grandfather Ty Chien have black and dark brown colors.



Figure 65: The *Sbek Thom* of Grandfather Ty Chien have black and dark brown colors.



Figure 66: *Sbek Thom* of Grandfather Ty Chien have black and dark brown colors.

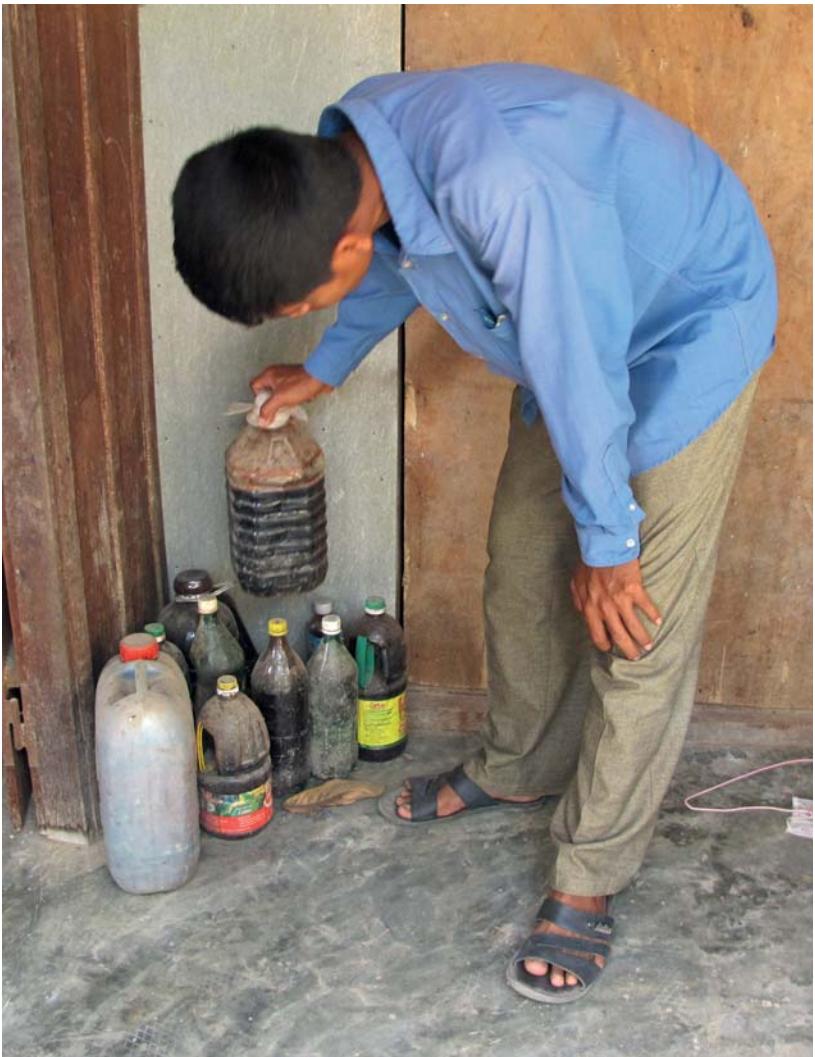


Figure 67: Pieces of bark from *Kandol* trees or cashew nut trees are boiled to use as paint on the newly finished cowhide.



Figure 68: *Sbek Thom* of Grandfather Ty Chien's troupe is temporary placed in his home, because there is no proper storage facility yet.



Figure 69: The hall used for rehearsals by Grandfather Ty Chien's troupe.

## **E. *Sbek Thom* Troupe of Wat Bo**

The *Sbek Thom* troupe of Wat Bo is located in Wat Bo Buddhist Monastery in Wat Bo village, Salakamrek commune, Siem Reap town, Siem Reap province. The troupe was established in the late 1990s by Venerable Pin Saem, who had close connections with the troupe of Grandfather Ty Chien in Siem Reap. Venerable Pin Saem is deeply passionate about Khmer culture. He strives to maintain old Buddhist tradition in his monastery by housing painters, sculptors, traditional musicians, and *Sbek Thom* performers. This troupe learned the art from Grandfather Ty Chien's troupe and other masters from Phnom Penh.

Nowadays, the troupe has more than 30 people, and is directed by Mr. Van Sopheavuth (*Figure 70*). The troupe is more active than any other troupe in Siem Reap due to its management and central location. It has opportunities to perform in various ceremonies, national festivals and tourists' shows. The space of Wat Bo allows the troupe to set up a stage and perform shows that last from 45 minutes to an hour for tourists (*Figure 71-72*). Similar to ancient times, normally during performances at this temple, the screen is lit by the burning of coconut shells (*Figure 73-74*). Moreover, traditional lighting tools are also used during the performance (*Figure 75*). Due to frequent performances, the troupe trains actively. Unlike past performances, which lasted from three to four hours, a performance today lasts only one hour long. Therefore, the rehearsals are shortened accordingly. The troupe does not hold trainings for the public, due to low funding and lack of training programs.

Inside this monastery, there is a wooden building used for daytime rehearsals, as well as performances (*Figure 76-78*). During the night time, rehearsals are conducted preferably in an open space in front of the building for more room and cooler air (*Figure 79*). Each panel animator must know how to play all the characters of a story in case there is a need for a substitute. During the training for one character, for example, every performer participates. First they learn the body movements from their master and then they each practice by holding the actual panel (*Figure 80-82*). Similarly, the musicians also train to play each melody according to the required episodes (*Figure 83*). The narrators also practice at the same time (*Figure 84*).

Interestingly, during trainings and rehearsals, neighboring kids gather to watch attentively (*Figure 85-86*). Young boys interested in the performance often watch the trainings and rehearsals (*Figure 87*). During breaks, the boys hold up leather panels and imitate what they saw. In this manner, the boys are indirectly trained and later even recruited into the team (*Figure 88*).

At Wat Bo, besides performances, there is also a *Sbek Thom*-making team, which was created by Venerable Pin Saem.

Now the troupe of Wat Bo has 30 members ranging from 20 to 60 years old. Below is the list of its members:

14 male panel animators:

1. Sun Chan
2. Sa-Ang Thip
3. Ving Reaksmey
4. Ream Vireak

5. Pin Chamroenroth
6. Puy Poeurn
7. Soeur Bun Heap
8. Soeur Bun Hy
9. Soeur Bun Hea
10. Keo Sopheap
11. Ith Meas
12. Yan Sovan
13. Sun Suthy
14. Tha Veasna

15 male musicians:

1. Eam Vichet plays Sralay
2. Ly Thuch plays Kong Touch and Kong Thom
3. Lonh Chanvuthy plays Sampo
4. Lounh Korng plays Skor Thom
5. Diep Rotha plays Kong Thom
6. Kun Makara plays Sralaya
7. Lonh Bunthoeurn plays sralay
8. Sek Hai plays Skor Thom
9. Rith Chany plays Samphor
10. Hon Hak plays Kong Touch.
11. Sok Sei plays Roneat Thung
12. Chea Sambath plays roneath Thong
13. Leng Naren plays roneath Thung
14. Chon Vichekar plays roneath Ek.
15. Chak Kim Oun plays Kong Thom.



Figure 70: Mr. Van Sopheavuth (right), the director of Vat Bo's *Sbek thom* Troupe.



Figure 71: The Wat Bo Troupe performing in the temple yard for tourists at nighttime..



Figure 72: is the Wat Bo Troupe performing *Sbek Thom*.



Figure 73: The Wat Bo Troupe using coconut shells to burn during the performance.



Figure 74: The Wat Bo Troupe using coconut shells to burn during the performance.



Figure 75: Various musical instruments are played during the performance of *Sbek Thom* at Wat Bo.



Figure 76: The hall used for daytime rehearsals and performance at Wat Bo.



Figure 77: Location where rehearsals and performances take place at Wat Bo.



Figure 78: Rehearsal of the *Sbek Thom* during daytime at Wat Bo (source: Chea Socheat).

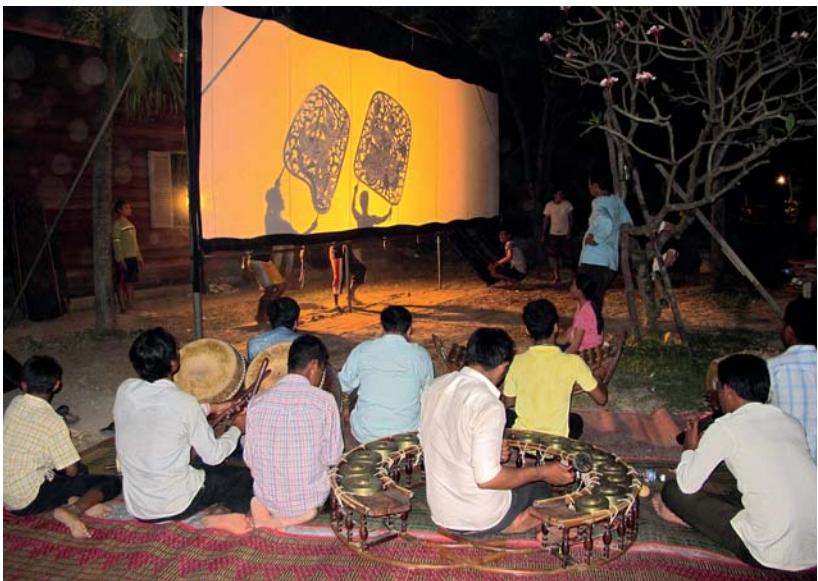


Figure 79: Location where rehearsals take place during nighttime at Wat Bo.



Figure 80: Rehearsing panel animations during nighttime at Wat Bo.



Figure 81: Practicing the movements of *Sbek* by following the Master.



Figure 82: A Master overseeing the practice of movement of *Sbek*.



Figure 83: Master On Chieng Heng training musicians for a performance of *Sbek Thom* at Wat Bo.



Figure 84: Practicing the narration for performance of *Sbek Thom* at Wat Bo.



Figure 85: Children and adults watching the practice of *Sbek Thom* at Wat Bo.

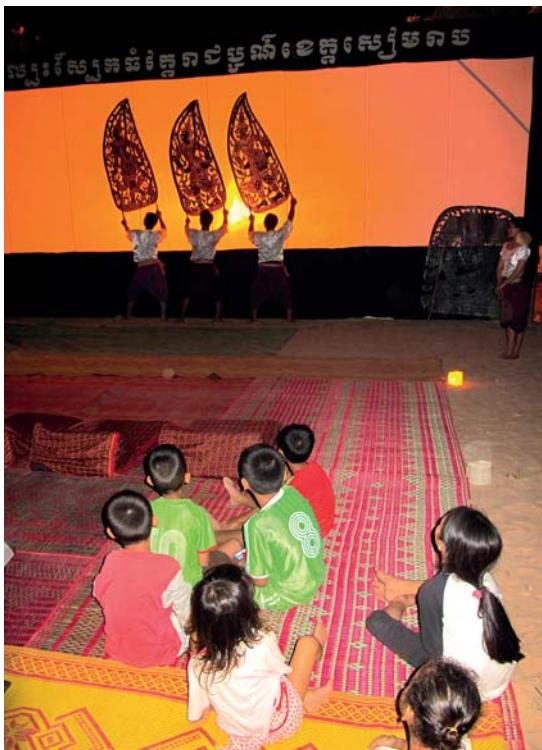


Figure 86: Children sitting and watching a nighttime performance at Wat Bo.



Figure 87: Children imitating the performance of *Sbek Thom* at Wat Bo.



Figure 88: Children holding the *Sbek* and imitating the performance during the performers' break.

## **F. *Sbek Thom* Troupe near Wat Chork**

The *Sbek Thom* troupe was established about five or six years ago. It is located near the Wat Chork temple in Krosang village, Svay Dongkom commune, Siem Reap District, Siem Reap province. This group is small and has only 30 panels. It sometimes needs to collaborate with Grandfather Ty Chien's troupe in Salakanseng village. The troupe near Wat Chork is in the charge of Grandfather Mey Ruon, alias Grandfather Hing. Performance materials are stored and rehearsals are conducted in his home. The troupe originally derived from Grandfather Ty Chien's troupe, and some of its members are still affiliated with Grandfather Ty Chien's troupe. Thus the performance style is very similar.

Grandfather Ty Chum, alias Ta Tuy, is the training Master for this troupe. With the exception of Ms. Muon Yun, all of the panel handlers are men: Suon Sopheap, Muon Neang and Grandfather Hin. In order to perform a show, they must invite members from Grandfather Ty Chien's troupe. The narrator is Grandfather Moa. There are 7 to 8 musicians, whose names are listed below:

1. Phum Sarith, alias Ky and trainer of Rotheat Ek,  
plays many musical instruments
2. Doe plays Kong Thom
3. Ra plays Sralay
4. Ho plays Sampor
5. Chong plays Kong Touch
6. Son plays Kong Thom
7. Chong's son, whose name is unknown, plays many instruments.

Despite its small size, the troupe's performances are growing. When the monks of the nearby Wat Chok temple request a performance, the troupe never charges a fee. For this reason, the troupe is known as "Wat Chork troupe," even though it does not belong to the temple nor is it located in the temple's compound.

## **9. Conclusion**

*Sbek Thom* is a sacred form of performing arts that is associated with religious practices. Formerly, it was primarily performed in religious contexts, such as religious ceremonies, coronations, royal ceremonies, village ceremonies, inaugurations of new worship halls (Vihear), and funeral ceremonies of kings, members of the royal family, chief or other well-respected monks.

Nowadays, *Sbek Thom* is not only performed for religious ceremonies, but also for festivals, national day celebrations, and even tourists' entertainment.

Today Cambodia has at least five active *Sbek Thom* troupes. The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts supervises one of the troupes, and the rest are managed by art associations and the private sector.

The spread of *Sbek Thom* is diminishing in modern-day Cambodia. There are many new forms of entertainment. Traditional performing arts, usually for ceremonial purposes, are now fading from use, because other forms of entertainment are cheaper, more appealing and easier to organize. They cannot compete with new forms of entertainments, such as dances, films, comedies or concerts. In particular, the performance of *Sbek Thom* requires many people and a great amount of rehearsals and preparation. In addition, holding *Sbek Thom* performances is also an expensive endeavor: to perform only one episode of the Reamker for about one or two hours costs from \$400 to \$500 US dollars. This is one of the leading causes for *Sbek Thom*'s decreasing popularity. The diminishing spread of *Sbek Thom* does necessarily mean

that Cambodians do not care about this part of their cultural heritage. Their awareness of this performing art heavily depends on the sponsors of ceremonies. If *Sbek Thom* is performed, people will become more exposed to it and understand it better. Because of the increase in new forms of entertainment commissioned in ceremonies, Cambodians are becoming aware about *Sbek Thom*.

According to our observations, *Sbek Thom* now survives in three situations in Cambodia:

1. In the ceremonies, though not often, performances by family- and art association-owned troupes are still commissioned.
2. During national days or national festivals, the government-owned troupe occasionally performs.
3. Tourists watch performances at art associations or hotels.

The performance of *Sbek Thom* seems to be mostly active in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh. Troupes sometimes tour internationally as well. However, members of *Sbek Thom* troupes cannot make a living on performances only: they need to have other jobs. In the past, those who lived in the provinces cultivated rice for a living. Even without an income from the performances, they could still survive. Nowadays, members of *Sbek Thom* troupes have to work even harder to make a living. Their poor living conditions is one of the biggest reasons why performers are not actively preserving the art of *Sbek Thom*. To earn their keep, musicians play in traditional music bands at weddings and ceremonies; those who know how to carve make *Sbek Thom* panels (*Figure 89-92*), as well as other souvenir objects (*Figure 93-95*), to sell to tourists. These are, in fact, ways of preserving *Sbek Thom*.

Greater preservation of *Sbek Thom* must be pursued, because this art is not only intangible cultural heritage that is meaningful to Cambodians, but also important for all of humanity. It must be endorsed through sponsorship of spaces, tools, time and performers. *Sbek Thom* performances need to be encouraged and promoted for both private or national ceremonies at national and international levels.



Figure 89: Selling the *Sbek Thom* at Sovann Phum Art Association.



Figure 90: Making *Sbek Thom* and *Sbek Touch* to sell at Sovann Phum Art Association..



Figure 91: Selling *Sbek Thom* to Tourists.



Figure 92: Selling *Sbek Thom* and *Sbek Touch* to tourists.



Figure 93: Making other souvenir objects from cowhides.



Figure 94: Making bracelets from cowhide.



Figure 95: Making smaller *Sbek* to sell to tourists.

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## UNESCO Office in Phnom Penh

P.O Box 29  
#38, Samdech Sothearos Blvd.,  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Tel: +(855) 23 72 30 54 & 23 72 50 71  
+(855) 23 21 72 44 & 23 42 67 26  
Fax:+(855) 23 42 61 63 & 23 21 70 22  
E-mail: [phnompenh@unesco.org](mailto:phnompenh@unesco.org)  
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