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**At the Origin of the Khmer Melodic Percussion
Ensembles or “From Spoken to Gestured
Language”**

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Abstract

Frescoes representing melodic percussion orchestras have recently appeared in the central sanctuary of the Angkor Wat temple. They prefigure two orchestras existing today in Cambodia: the pin peat and the kantoam ming. These two ensembles are respectively related to Theravada Buddhism ceremonies and funerary rituals in the Siem Reap area. They represent a revolution in the field of music because of their acoustic richness and their sound power, supplanting the old Angkorian string orchestras.

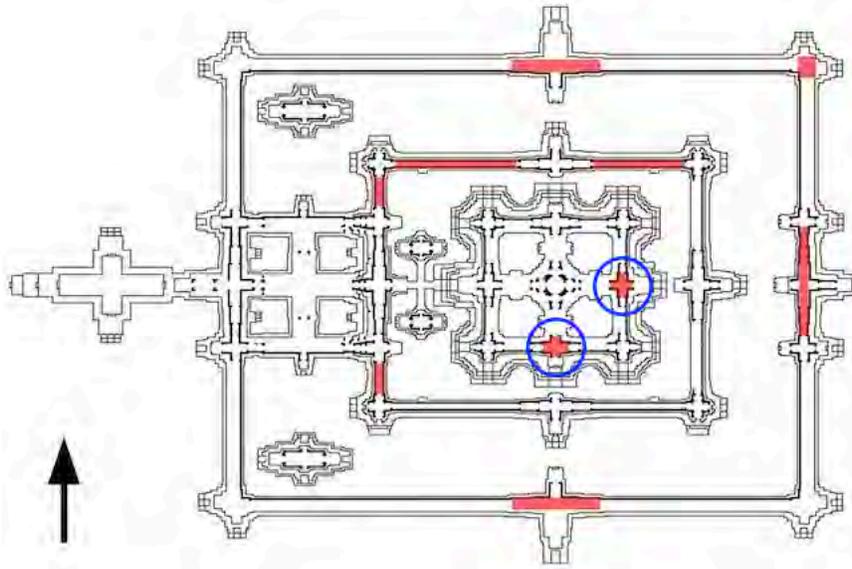
This project analyzes in detail the composition of the fresco sets and establishes a link with the structure of Khmer melodic percussion orchestras. The analysis of some graphic details, related to other frescoes and bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat, also makes it possible to propose a dating.

The study embodies one of an anthropological ethnomusicology, while also incorporating a discourse analysis, so to frame the uncovering of new historiographers of music and instrumentation, so to re describe musical discourses, more so to shed new light on melodic percussion of Angkorian music.

Keywords: Khmer, Melodic percussion, Frescoes, Cambodia, Theravada Buddhism

Exceptional frescoes in Angkor Wat





Frescoes representing orchestras have recently been spotted in the central sanctuary of Angkor Wat (bakan), one situated to the south and the other to the east

The first one is complete but the second one only partial because of the degradation of the wall.

The first fresco was mentioned in an article published in 2014 by Noel Hidalgo Tan: “The hidden paintings of Angkor Wat”. The second stems from my own research.

These two discoveries are important in many ways:

- They highlight the antiquity of the melodic percussion in Cambodia, but also in Thailand and Laos.
- If most of the instruments, in their definitive or archaic form, were known by the bas-reliefs of the northern gallery of Angkor Wat, their reunification into a coherent whole was hitherto unknown.
- The xylophones composing the contemporary Cambodian pin peat appear here for the first time in the history.

The Southern Orchestra





The southern fresco must be read from left to right, like Khmer writing. The very attenuated original colors were enhanced thanks to a chromatic manipulation technique developed by myself.



This fresco shows eight instruments. From left to right: two gongs, two drums, a gong chime, a xylophone, an oboe, a trumpet.

- Gongs: On the far left, a musician holds a mallet in his right hand. In front of him, two bossed gongs of different sizes are suspended inside a frame whose upper left part seems decorated.
- Drums: To the right of these two gongs, two barrel-shaped drums are placed horizontally, one behind the other. To the right of the drums stands the drum player. A vertical strip between his sarong and his conical headgear represents the playing stick(s).
- Gong chime: In the middle of the fresco, a gong chime with of eight gongs and two decorative elements in triangle at the ends. At the center of the instrument stands the musician with two mallets.
- Xylophone: The cradle-shaped instrument located to the right of the gong chime is obviously a xylophone. The probability of a metallophone with bronze or iron blades still present in contemporary pin peat orchestras must be excluded because of the cradle shape. Indeed, the heavy metal blades are always laid flat while those of xylophones, wood or bamboo,

follow the curved line of the soundbox. The ends seem to curl like scrolls. Above, we can distinguish the musician with two mallets. This is the first xylophone's iconography in Cambodia.

- Oboe: On the right and partly above the xylophone, an oboe with an oblong pirouette similar to that of contemporary Khmer instruments, cut in a coconut shell.
- Trumpet: At the extreme right, a trumpet. The instrument, long and fine, ends in a conical bell. According to its shape, there is little doubt that this instrument must be metallic.

The Eastern Orchestra



The eastern painting is very tainted. Unlike the southern one, it spreads out on a large section of wall facing east and simultaneously on a narrow return of angle facing north. The left part of the large panel is illegible.



- Trumpet: On the extreme left, the trumpet is similar to that of the south panel, forming an angle of 45° with the axes of the ground and the wall. The pavilion is directed northward while the east panel turns to the west.
- Erased instrument(s): On the left of the gong chime, one sees the back of a musician's clothes represented in profile. One or two instruments seem to have disappeared.
- Gong chime: It seems to have nine gongs. If we compare it graphically to the south one, the artist represented the gongs by a single round of color without distinction of the nipple. By comparing the representation of these two chimes with those of the north bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat, the counting of eight and nine gongs is corroborated.
- Xylophone: Its representation is in all respects similar to that of the south.



- Barrel drum: To the right of the xylophone, we find the outline of a barrel-shaped drum similar to the Khmer skor sampho. The stand, if it existed, is not visible.
- “Long” drum: To the right of the barrel drum, a “long” drum. This type of instrument exists until now in some melodic percussion orchestras in Cambodia, Thailand and Laos. We call this drum simply a “long drum” because it could be cylindrical, slightly conical or like an elongated barrel-shaped. Typologies still vary.
- Oboe: Its representation is in all respects similar to that of the south.

Arrangement of the Instruments

The arrangement of the instruments is not the result of chance. From left to right, they structure the musical cycle, from the lowest to the highest and from the slowest to the fastest. The more highly pitched the instrument, the more notes it will generate. Given what is still known today with the Khmer pin peat ensemble, the xylophone plays the same time division as the gong chime, but allows a greater velocity and consequently cuts the time more deeply.

This symbolism is strong because it depicts the very structure of Khmer society. The low and rare voice is that of the patriarch or the king. The high and generous voice is that of the children or talkative, thus, the higher the voice flow is important the less the message will carry. Conversely, the rarer the speech, the more it is listened to.

One or Two Orchestras?

Do these two paintings compose two orchestras or just one? Because these two orchestras are on two distinct walls oriented in two directions, one might think that they are two different sets. If we examine the instruments of the two frescoes, the cymbals that are present in all the orchestras since the pre-Angkorian era are lacking. In symbolism, they represent the heart of the orchestra hence the pulse. This is the reason for my search and I found that the cymbals between the two frescoes is in another wall facing north.



Decorative Band Under the Orchestra

The decorative band under the southern orchestra (04) is also no coincidence. Seven symbolic flowers are visible but it is likely that there were eight at the origin. Each consists of four large petals and four small ones located respectively at the four cardinal points and the four intermediate directions. Each flower is framed with a black line. They probably represent a kind of symbolic score of musical temporality. The large petals represent the main sequence of the cycle underlined by the gongs, the temporal mark of the drums. If it is true that eight flowers existed, it could indicate that the music was structured over eight cycles or a combination of eight. The music of the kantoam ming funeral orchestra is played according to the structure of each of these flowers. Each cycle repeats indefinitely in funerals ceremonies.

The Painter and Dating

There is no doubt that the author of these two frescoes is the same person. One can conclude that this artist is probably at the origin of numerous paintings spread over the whole temple of Angkor Wat.

These paintings could be dated according to the nature of a sailboat present in the collection of the frescoes of Angkor Wat. It could be a Dutch ship of the 16th century. Further research is needed to confirm this.

From Spoken to Gesture Language

Because CALA is a congress of linguistics, I will now address a question the transmission of knowledge and the message through spoken/singing or gestured.

What we know today about the instrumental music of kantoam ming and pin peat, the two melodic percussion orchestras of Cambodia, is that the songs are at the origin of the instrumental melodies. The songs are first a kind of discourse. Nowadays we can consider two phases in Cambodia: a construction phase and a deconstruction phase.

1. The construction phase

- a. In Cambodia to create song, at the beginning there is an idea expressed first by words and second by singing.
- b. Each song is transposed on melodic musical instruments in which we can recognize the original melody.
- b. But this melody, as a sculpture, is ornamented with aesthetic elements stemming from a global tradition of cultural know-how, but also through individualized practices belonging to each music master.

2. The deconstruction phase

During the revolution of the last quarter of the 20th century, the Khmer Rouge eliminated almost all intellectuals and musicians. Before this revolution, the music masters were generally able to associate the music of the pin peat or kantoam ming's repertoire to a song and to sing the lyrics. After the revolution, the youth essentially learned due to a technique specific of the Khmer: the kinesthetic memory, the memory of the movement.



Indeed, teachers teach by physical contact with their student, for example by holding his arms and moving them according to the notes to play.

In Conclusion

In conclusion, we are witnessing the passage from a spoken to that a gestured language whose musical rendering is similar, that is to say a song embellished with aesthetic exogenous elements to the melody itself. If we have attached our example to the recent Khmer Rouge revolution, such processes have always existed throughout the world and history: the deep meaning is lost but the form remains.

So, if one wishes to know what music was played on the instruments depicted in Angkor Wat, one will answer that the general structure and aesthetics of the music of the time and that of today are close. The melodic music and its arrangements have transcended the original words, whether the language is Old, Middle or Modern Khmer.