

# Stories of Cambodian *Angkuoch*: Documenting a Rare Musical Instrument, its Makers and Players

SONG Seng | Cambodia

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**Abstract:** This piece introduces the endangered Cambodian musical instrument Angkuoch, its makers and players, and a project documenting the making process. It also reflects on ethics of instruments in museum collections.

**Keywords:** heritage, musical instruments, public musicology, sustainability, Southeast Asia

*The online version of this chapter includes all embedded content and is available at <https://worldmusictextbook.org/song-grant-2021>.*

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The musical instrument popularly known as the “Jew’s Harp” (also jaw’s harp, mouth harp, trump or *guimbarde*) is found in many countries around the world. The origin of the name, and of the instrument itself, remains unclear to scholars, though it is believed it is an ‘extremely ancient instrument’ that may have originated in Asia, perhaps China (Fox 1988:22, 49).

The Cambodian version of the instrument is unique. Called *angkuoch* in Khmer, it is a precious part of Cambodia’s living cultural heritage (Libin 2014; Narom 2005).

Nowadays, *angkuoch* and its associated practices are in need of urgent safeguarding. Social and cultural shifts in Cambodia over the last half-century, including the devastation of the Khmer Rouge era in the 1970s, mean that only a few people still know how to make and play *angkuoch* (Miller & Williams 1998:204).

Supported by the *Endangered Material Knowledge Program* of the British Museum (UK) and by UNESCO (Cambodia), in early 2020 we (the authors) led a team documenting *angkuoch* and *angkuoch*-making as it is practised in Siem Reap Province in northern Cambodia. Our aim was to help preserve knowledge about *angkuoch* for present and future generations.

By briefly introducing the *angkuoch* makers and players who participated in this project, and by presenting some of the information they shared with us during our fieldwork, this article serves as an introduction to *angkuoch*. It offers a sense of the changes to *angkuoch*-making over time, and the current state



Figure 1: BIN Song making angkuoch daek (iron Jew's harp) (with his wife, standing). Photo: Catherine Grant, 8 January 2020.

of the instrument in its social and cultural context. It also reflects on one of the key outcomes of the fieldwork: identifying the likely maker of the angkuoch in the British Museum.

## The Angkuoch Daek

BIN Song (b. 1942) may be the only living person who still knows how to make the iron Cambodian angkuoch: angkuoch daek.<sup>1</sup> He was first introduced to angkuoch daek as a child, by a man from the neighbouring Kuy ethnic community. Intrigued, he taught himself how to play angkuoch, and eventually to make it too. As a young man, he became known for his skills with the angkuoch.

Like artists all over Cambodia, BIN Song stopped making and playing the angkuoch when the despotic Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975. When the

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<sup>1</sup>Khmer names are usually said and written with the family name first and the given name second. In this article, Khmer family names have been written in all capital letters for clarity. It is also common that children use their father's given name as their family name, which is why KRAK Chi's sons are named CHI Chen and CHI Monivong.

project team encouraged him in late 2019 to make an angkuoch daek, he had not made an instrument for nearly fifty years.

At first, BIN Song hesitated to accept our invitation. He was concerned that his eyesight was no longer up to the task. Moreover, since he had lost his teeth, he could not test the instrument out as he made it. Yet he agreed and later he told us: “I’m getting old now, and when I reflected on it, I realised it was important to pass this knowledge on to the next generation. If I don’t, who will? If not now, when?”

The British Museum will keep in its collection the angkuoch daek that BIN Song made for this project, along with video documentation that shows every step of the process. While BIN Song is happy that people from all around the world will have a chance to learn about the angkuoch daek, his foremost message is to young Cambodians: “do not give up on angkuoch! This is our culture and heritage!” He urges:

I want to tell people in the next generation that no matter what, you should certainly play this angkuoch. Learn to play! ... Keep it alive! Don’t let it be lost!

## The Language of the Angkuoch

SON Soeun and BIN Song (both born 1942) are lifelong friends. In the 1950s and ‘60s, they grew up together in Preah Ko village in Siem Reap Province, even entering the monkhood together for a time.

When the young BIN Song began to make and play the angkuoch daek, SON Soeun became intrigued by the instrument too. Over time, SON Soeun learnt to play proficiently. In the local lingo, the instrument was called “angkuoch bird” on account of its shape. The two boys would often slip an angkuoch bird in their pockets to play for pleasure whenever they chose.

When the two boys were growing up, boys and young men often used the angkuoch to flirt with girls and young women. Words can be “spoken” through the instrument, although it takes some practice to interpret them (Miller & Williams 1998:204). In this way, young people developed a secret language – the language of angkuoch. As youths, Song and Souen would often use the angkuoch for this purpose. SON Soeun recalled:

When I was a bachelor, I went to visit the houses of girls at night. When I reached my lover’s house, if she was already asleep, I played to call her. If I kept calling, she would wake up and come to meet me. And then we sat together. I could call her to meet me wherever I wanted as long as she heard the sound of my angkuoch.

In addition to its role in wooing potential lovers, angkuoch traditionally accompanied “Prern”, a genre of folksong that was popular in Siem Reap Province at the time BIN Song and SON Soeun were growing up (Khean et al:2003). An



Figure 2: SON Soeun playing angkuoch daek (iron Jew's harp), with his childhood friend, instrument-maker BIN Song. Photo: Catherine Grant, 11 January 2020.

especially popular Prern song was "Santouch." BIN Song recalled its lyrics for us (in part):

Standing near the water pond, if your share with me your rice wine,  
I will dance for you to see, my dear.

Several angkuoch players – both male and female – could join in, first singing and dancing together, then playing angkuoch with one hand and dancing with the other. People also enjoyed playing and listening to angkuoch during festivals or special celebrations.

## A Family of Angkuoch Russey Makers

KRAK Chi (b. 1950) is a rice farmer and bamboo angkuoch-maker from Srah Srong village, a stone's throw from the world-famous temple complex of Angkor Wat. KRAK Chi has childhood memories of his father playing the angkuoch in the evenings for pleasure. Chi also remembers local children buying the angkuoch russey (a bamboo angkuoch) from instrument-makers in the village,



Figure 3: KRAK Chi playing angkuoch russey (bamboo Jew's harp). Video: THON Dika, 5 January 2020. Scan the QR code or visit [the website](#) to view examples.

then selling the instruments on in the dozens to tourists at the nearby Angkor temples.

People played angkuoch in their houses. When they were free, sometimes they brought it to the rice field and played it right there. If they lived close to Sras Srong lake, they brought it to play around there. (KRAK Chi)

As with the iron angkuoch daek, boys and young men liked to use angkuoch russey to woo lovers. KRAK Chi told us:

Boys and girls flirted with each other through the angkuoch. In this present generation, people use the phone to talk to each other - but at that time they used the angkuoch.

KRAK Chi remembers an old custom of putting “charming wax” on the instruments to make sure that any advances that were made via the angkuoch were irresistible.

KRAK Chi’s young son CHI Chen (b. 1988) used to buy angkuoch russey from the famous angkuoch maker MONG Koeuy in the neighbouring Preah Dak village, and then sell them on to tourists by the dozen at the famous Ta Prohm temple near his village Srah Srong. By his teenage years, CHI Chen had become a proficient player and successful seller of the instruments.

Watching MONG Koeuy make the instruments, KRAK Chi decided to learn how to make them too. He was motivated partly by the prospect of a modest income from selling the instruments and partly by the desire to keep alive the tradition of his ancestors. At one stage, KRAK Chi could make around 15 angkuoch in a day.

KRAK Chi then taught his other son, CHI Monivong (b. 1990), how to make the instrument. The two brothers, Chen and Monivong, soon became known as new-generation makers and players of angkuoch russey. However, in their twenties they found that fewer tourists knew about angkuoch. Consequently,



Figure 4: KRAK Chi making angkuoch russey (bamboo Jew's harp). Photo: Catherine Grant, 5 January 2020.

fewer people were buying the instrument and it became harder to earn an income by making and selling it. CHI Chen explained:

Not many people know about angkuoch anymore. Most who do are old. When old people saw me playing at the temple, they said: 'Chao (grandchild)! This is angkuoch. This instrument has existed since the era of our ancestors.' But younger people said, 'Brother! What are you holding? Is it a wooden pin to fix nets?' I told them: 'No, it is an angkuoch. People use it to make music.' I played for them and they were happy.

Now Chen and Monivong are in their early thirties with full-time jobs, and they no longer have much free time for angkuoch-making. However, they are happy that their father is teaching his two young grandsons how to make angkuoch. They hope that the family tradition will continue and develop, and that people of all ages will know and enjoy the angkuoch in the future.

## MONG Koeuy

At one time, MONG Koeuy (c.1937-2012) was a renowned angkuoch russey maker in Siem Reap province. He lived in Preah Dak village, not far from where KRAK Chi and his sons CHI Monivong and CHI Chen live. It was MONG Koeuy who introduced the angkuoch to the young CHI Chen, and who later taught Chen's father KRAK Chi how to make the instrument.

MONG Koeuy learnt to make angkuoch from his father when he was a child. He sold the instruments he made to tourists at the nearby temples, along with coconuts and other things. Later, as a young man, MONG also worked as a farmer and a carpenter.

MONG married his second wife LAV Mech (b. 1945) during the Khmer Rouge era. He began selling angkuoch again soon after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, and the income supported their children through school.

MONG Koeuy passed away in his late 70s in 2012. Four of his sons are proud to continue their father's tradition.

## The Angkuoch in the British Museum

Until the recent acquisition of two new angkuoch through this project<sup>2</sup>, the British Museum had only [one angkuoch in its collection](#), an instrument of unknown maker, donated in 1966 by a certain W Hanson Rawles, about whom nothing further is known. Today, museum practices carefully document, wherever possible, the provenance and donation circumstances of items to their collections.

<sup>2</sup>In December 2020, the British Museum acquired two angkuoch made for this project: an [angkuoch daek](#) made by BIN Song and an [angkuoch russey](#) made by CHI Monivong.



Figure 5: Siblings KOEUY Leakhena and KOEUY Reatha with their mother LAV Mech (seated), wife of angkuoch-maker MONG Koeuy. Photo: Catherine Grant, 17 January 2020.

When the research team showed a photo of the Museum instrument donated by Rawles to the brothers CHI Monivong and CHI Chen and their father KRAK Chi, they all thought that the instrument bore strong resemblance to the unique style of MONG Koeuy, especially in its shape, thickness and length, as well as a characteristic node near the tongue of the instrument.

When we showed MONG Koeuy's wife LAV Mech and her children Leakhena and Reatha the photo of the British Museum instrument, they became emotional. They too recognised features of their father's instruments, which he had once sold widely to local and foreign tourists. In Leakhena's words:

When I first saw this photo [of the British Museum angkuoch], I was very excited. I never knew my father's craft had been promoted internationally. Even locally, some people do not even know about it, so I had not thought it was very prized. Seeing this angkuoch, I miss him. To my family, the angkuoch symbolises my father.

On request of the family of MONG Koeuy, the project team is working with the British Museum to include in its catalogue this new information about the likely provenance of the instrument. We feel that this is important for two reasons. First, making this knowledge publicly available enriches the very limited contextual information known about this object. Since this object represents angkuoch in the museum's collection, making accessible the new findings about this specific instrument will expand the internationally available (English-language) information about angkuoch in general, and contribute to the preservation and documentation of knowledge about it for future generations.

Second, as museums around the world strive to redress past questionable—or simply plain unethical—practices, adding this new information to the catalogue will finally duly acknowledge the likely maker of the object, MONG Koeuy, over 50 years after the British Museum acquired the instrument. Such an acknowledgement is evidently and understandably important to the family of MONG Koeuy. While we as authors hope that this project makes an important contribution to documenting and safeguarding angkuoch, we also believe that acknowledging the knowledge and skills of this historical angkuoch-maker is no less important.

## Additional Materials

### Acknowledgements

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Figure 6: KOEUY Leakhena with a copy of the British Museum catalogue entry for the angkuoch russey in its collection.

KOEUY Leakhena, KOEUY Reatha and the family of MONG Koeuy, whose story we share here with their permission. Finally, thanks to research assistant SAY Tola and videographer THON Dika for their input to the project.

### Discussion Questions

Why do you think it might be important to document knowledge about instrument-making and instrument-makers? Consider the various types of people who might wish to access such documentation, now or in the future.

- Do you know of any other examples of projects that document musical instruments, instrument-making, or instrument-makers?

What ethical considerations arise from housing musical instruments in museums?

- How did this project relate and respond to one of those considerations?
- Can you think of any other ethical considerations arising from this project? How might the project team have addressed these?

### Recommended Readings

- Murphy, Bernice L., ed. 2016. *Museums, Ethics and Cultural Heritage*. Oxon, UK: Routledge.
- SAM Sam-Ang. 2008. "The Khmer People of Cambodia." *Garland Handbook of Southeast Asian Music*, 85. New York: Routledge.
- Wright, John. 2001. "[Jew's harp](#)." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### Digital Resources

[Jew's Harp](#). British Museum.

The current catalogue entry for the angkuoch in the British Museum collection. During the course of this project, the British Museum updated its online catalogue; the earlier entry we used during fieldwork in January 2020 (shown in Figure 6) includes a photograph of the asset.

[Documenting the Instrument and Instrument-making of Angkuoch, Cambodian Mouth Harp](#). Endangered Material Knowledge Program, British Museum.

The webpage for this project, which (from 2021) will link to the EMKP Digital Repository, where all project outputs will be freely publicly available. Outputs include an 18-minute video-documentary, a 24-page booklet, and nearly 400 files documenting angkuoch-making (photographs, audio files, video recordings, and interview transcriptions).

*International Jew's Harp Society.* >The website of the International Jew's Harp Society, including a blog post (30 January 2020) introducing the angkuoch documentation project.

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