

"The Importance of Music in Khmer Traditional Wedding Ceremonies"

By: Francesca Billeri

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Abstract: This lecture presents part of a fieldwork research on traditional Khmer wedding music conducted in Phnom Penh and Takeo province 5 years ago to complete a Master degree at Rome University. Wedding is considered to be one of the most important ceremony for the Khmers and it is believed to be of mythical origin. It consists of a succession of rituals which symbolize different aspects of wedding such as eternal union, magical blessing, success, happiness and fertility. Some rituals recall an episode of the myth of *Preah Thaung Nieng Niek* the first rulers of the kingdom of Cambodia. Even the musical instruments are considered of mythical root as linked to some legends of stringed instruments of Indian origin "pin" which are depicted in the bas-relief of Angkor temples. Through the analysis of traditional wedding ceremonies emerges the dense and complex Khmer symbolism, cosmology and religious syncretism in which Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism and animistic beliefs live together harmoniously. The song texts as well as the ritual objects embodies these elements. Music (*phleng kar*) is the lifeblood of the wedding ceremony since it not only accompanies the wedding rituals but also describes the ritual scene. The meaning of *phleng kar* text songs is the result of the Khmer popular wisdom and reflects social and cultural values such as the position and duties of women, the spouses' position in the Khmer society and the passage from adolescence to adulthood. To illustrate these aspects several ceremonies and songs have been recorded and successively analyzed, collated and classified according to the performing contexts, musical features, song texts and ensembles. The research aim is to document traditional wedding music named *phleng kar* and to show the vital role of traditional music within the wedding ceremony context as well as the Khmer society and culture.

BIODATA:

Francesca Billeri is a PhD student in Music at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Currently, she is working on the classification system of Khmer traditional music, in particular *phleng arak*, *lakhon yikè* and *lakhon bassac* theatre. She is also interested in the documentation, preservation and revival of Khmer traditional music. Recently, she has received a fieldwork award sponsored by SOAS University of London. In 2009, Billeri conducted a research on *phleng kar* repertory for the completion of a Master degree in Ethnomusicology at "La Sapienza" University of Rome under the supervision of Professor Giovanni Giuriati. She has studied the Khmer troupe at "Sovanna Phum" association in Phnom Penh and the roneat ek with Lok Kru Meas Saem. In 2006, Billeri completed both a Bachelor degree in Music at Palermo University and a piano diploma at the Conservatoire of Ribera, in Italy. From 2002 to 2009 she worked as pianist, accordionist and Javanese gamelan performer in Rome. In 2013, she has taught music in London.