

Highlander Narratives in Ratanakiri:  
A Contribution to Cambodia's Cultural Heritage

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The north-eastern part of Cambodia including the whole territory of Ratanakiri province has been for centuries the home of indigenous peoples whose nature understanding, cosmological representation, land management and socio-cultural symbolic practices illustrate an original approach in the way of living in society and “being together”.



(Addressing words to the spirit living in the plant)



(Feasting moments with mythology narratives)

The native populations have chosen to settle in a milieu dominated by secondary and primary dense forests located on a plateau caught between two rivers - the Sesan and the Srepok - and on a hilly landscape progressively culminating towards the north nearby the Lao border. Even if highlander societies never lived in geographical or social isolation they developed a deep material and immaterial knowledge in relation with the biotope with whom they rely on.

They have accumulated by experimentation, observation and borrowing a remarkable amount of acquaintance with their surrounding ecological niche. This physical familiarity has been associated with a set of cultural and spiritual patterns encompassing - among other features - myths, legends, epics, songs, rhythmic formulae and mnemonic texts. Some of these narratives, accompanying family and collective rituals, are habitually performed at certain occasions like village foundation, house building, agriculture cycle regeneration, healing process and other essential moments in highlanders' existence such as communal house (*roong*) periodical erection, wedding and funeral ceremonies.



(Gongs playing)



All these cultural components constitute the basis for the oral diffusion of a cultural heritage in constant revitalization which, far from being assigned to a static tradition, reflects a human ability to adjust and negotiate with historical contacts and more recent contextual situations.

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(Incantations during a collective ceremony)

The narratives also deal with a huge spectrum of topics taking into account interethnic encounters as well as natural and social events considered to be significant for the local group's memory. Oral narratives are not restricted with a remembrance linked with the past: they follow the present and may even anticipate the future. This dynamic initiative demonstrates the highlander's competence to interpret and re-appropriate emerging social configurations. In other words, they show us how peoples living in a forest environment reinvent and compose their own history.



(Listening, hearing and observing)



(Prayers dedicated to a buffalo sacrifice)

The various types of oral discourses stand as a springboard for intergenerational transmission of knowledge. They act as a vector for what can be called an informal but pertinent education. In most of the two hundreds villages inhabited by one of the seven ethnic groups (Tampuan, Jarai, Brao, Kreung, Kavet, Lun, Kachok, Bunong), the perpetration of this traditional passing down unequally subsists, according to the level of respect and attention prevailing between elders and younger generations.

Consequently, it deserves a particular attention and needs in priority to be recorded. Giving an account of the plurality and the diversity of this largely unknown cultural source of wealth is not only a matter of exotic curiosity.



(Songs and dances in a Tampuan village)



(Source offering)

The identification of major oral literatures should be considered as a scientific approach that has so far hardly been undertaken among indigenous peoples in Cambodia.

This initiative will remind the whole Khmer society to regard the Other (non-Khmer) as an actor detaining a reservoir of ability enriching the intangible patrimony of the country.