

Sbek Thom, Khmer shadow theatre

Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts



Sbek Thom, CLA Youth Festival 2010.

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Sbek Thom, Flying Circus, Wat Bo, Siem Reap, 2010.

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Sbek Thom is a Khmer shadow theatre featuring two-metre high, non-articulated puppets made of leather openwork.

Dating from before the Angkorian period, Sbek Thom, along with the Royal Ballet and mask theatre, is considered sacred. Performances, dedicated to the divinities, could only take place on specific occasions, three or four times a year, such as at Khmer New Year, the king's birthday or for the veneration of famous people. The shadow theatre was weakened after the fall of Angkor in the 16th century. However, it then evolved beyond a ceremonial activity to become an artistic form, while retaining its ritualistic dimension. Sbek Thom was inscribed in 2008 on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The puppets are made from a single piece of leather in a special ceremony for each

character. Shiva and Vishnu, for example, are cut from the hide of a cow that has died accidentally or naturally and are finished in a single day following a specific ritual. The hides are dyed with a solution made from the bark of the Kandaol tree. The artisan draws the desired figure on the tanned hide, then cuts it out and paints it before attaching it to two bamboo sticks which allow the dancer to control the puppet.

The performances traditionally take place at night in the open air beside a rice field or pagoda. A large white backdrop is held between two tall bamboo screens in front of a large fire or, nowadays, projectors. The shadow of the puppet's silhouette is projected onto this white screen. The animator brings the puppet to life with

precise and specific dance steps that produce a range of movements. The performance is accompanied by an orchestra and two narrators. Performances from the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the *Rāmāyana*, might last several nights and require up to 160 puppets for a single session.

Sbek Thom was almost wiped out under the repressive Khmer Rouge regime but since 1979 has undergone a revival, thanks to the few surviving artists. The collections of puppets were mostly destroyed but are gradually being remade and troupes are reforming. However, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts has managed to ensure the transmission of knowledge, techniques and know-how, especially relating to the manufacture of the puppets. ☉