

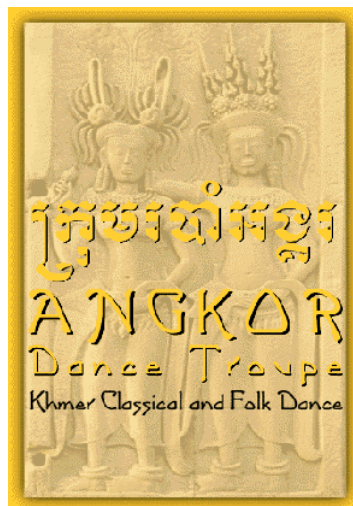
COMMUNITY ARCHIVES
ON
PROBLEM SOLVING TECHNIQUES OF

ANGKOR
Dance Troupe

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Every Organization faces crisis and problems. These crises develop into challenges for the leaders. But true leaders take the challenges in form of opportunities and walk the organization through. As somebody has rightly quoted "*A rough road leads to the stars.*"

I would like to welcome you all to the Archive created on '*how the Angkor Dance troupe*' has solved problems since its inception.



Themes covered throughout the Archive
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In order to get the inside story of the Dance Troupe, I interviewed key people involved with it. Let me introduce them:

- Dr. George Chigas, Program director, Angkor Dance Troupe
- Mehmed Ali, Coordinator, Mogan Cultural Center
- Vichenny Keo-Sam, President, Angkor Dance Troupe

Acknowledgements

I am very thankful to all the above interviewees for the time they took out from their busy schedule to talk with me about the Troupe. I would also like to thank my professors: Dr. Linda Silka and Dr. Nina Coppens for their guidance.

Struggling with the Need for Permanent Space

Many groups in Lowell struggle with the problem of space: Where can they meet? How can they afford the space they need? Can they share space with other groups? The Angkor Dance Troupe struggled with these issues and there is much that we can learn from their experience. Below we describe that experience and how the problems with space were resolved.

Before, October 2001, the Angkor Dance Troupe did not have any permanent space to practice and rehearse for their upcoming Performances. In the beginning in 1986, the troupe used to rehearse at the State Park Building which is a public building. The troupe used that space on informal bases for about two years. Then for a long time, they rehearsed at the Center for Folk Life at the Boot Mills and the Troupe hoped that this space would become a permanent location for them. However, much to their disappointment, the Center closed its operations and the troupe once again needed to find a new place. After that, the troupe rehearsed at different school buildings, wherever and whenever they found space. For example, they practiced in the auditorium of the Charter School. However, because these spaces belonged to others, the Troupe was often not a priority and sometimes would have to give up the use of the donated space if the space was needed for other purposes. The Troupe could not practice if the school had its own function/meeting going on.

The problem with space was more than a problem of location. The lack of space started to make the youth feel that they didn't belong somewhere and that their training was not viewed as important by many in the city. The Troupe needed a space that they can call their own. They wanted to be able to put up their pictures and needed to belong to a permanent physical space.

How then did the Troupe solve this problem of Space? How did the Troupe get the space in Mogan Cultural Center?

Ruth Page, then the Troupe Executive Director, made the initial contact with Pat McCrary, the Superintendent at Lowell National Historical Park, and after many discussions, the Park generously agreed to provide a space from Mogan Cultural Center for the use of the Troupe. So, as of 2001, Angkor Dance Troupe now has a home. That home is on the third floor of the Mogan

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Cultural Center on 40 French Street. The space agreement is for five years of time. However, the Mogan Center hopes that the relationship will continue for an indefinite time.

Vichenny Keo-Sam, noted that, "Ruth Page, the former Executive Director of the Troupe was instrumental in obtaining the space. Her dedication and devotion solved this problem. She worked together with the Troupe teachers to reach out and help the program to organize in the American Community among those who do not have knowledge of the Cambodian culture. She served as a bridge to educate the mainstream population to understand the needs of the Cambodian community."

Mehmed Ali of the National Park prepared the co-operative agreement that made the use of the space possible. The agreement spelled out what the Troupe would do for the Mogan Cultural Center in return for the use of the free, dedicated space. The Troupe receives use of the facilities and internet access. In return, the Troupe provides three free performances for the National Park each year.

Why the Mogan Center? The Mogan Center represents an interesting coming together of three institutions including University of Massachusetts and the National Park. The University acts as Lowell National Historical Park's key partner in the Mogan Center through its operation of the Center for Lowell History, as well as other educational activities. The University also rents space to hold several classes for its continuing education. The Park in turn uses this money to provide programs to the community.

Ali adds, "The Dance Troupe has added life to the building which was missing previously. The kids come up and down adds activity in the building."

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Grants and Resource Development

Many organizations in Lowell struggle to find ways to support their work financially. The Angkor Dance Troupe has faced these same difficult issues. Below is described some of the steps the organization has taken to creatively address the funding problem. We can all learn from their strategies.

In the beginning, the Troupe was an informal group of dancers. They came to the United States as refugees and they had two main motivations behind starting a dance organization. They hoped to find positive ways to overcome the bad memories created by the horror of the killing fields and they wanted to find ways to preserve their culture before it become entirely lost. The troupe at that point was known simply as the Traditional Arts Troupe.

The funding during early days was very thin. Very few grants were available to arts' organizations. The very first grant that the troupe received was through the Parker Foundation in early 1990s. The Troupe also received rudimentary funding from a group named Refugee Arts Groups (RAG) and this funding was intended to assist the Troupe in finding ways to market itself to potential funders. But the funding was not enough. When you bring 100 dancers together, Traditional Arts funding is far from enough.



What then could the Troupe do to continue its basic mission but locate larger funding streams that would support the important work of the Troupe? The Troupe members thought about their work and realized the extent to which they were now focused on making a difference in the lives of youth. A new way of presenting the work of the Angkor Dance Troupe was born. The Troupe did not really have substantial funding until they began pointing out the importance of their work for Youth at Risk. Many grants that were obtained were awarded on the basis of the Troupe working with

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youth who are at risk, youth who might otherwise join a gang and do illegal activities or who were not doing well at school and were at risk of dropping out. This focus was particularly timely during the 1990s when concerns about the youth gang culture in Lowell were at their height. The Troupe became known as having an innovative, positive, and recreational way of involving youths and preventing them from joining gangs. The Troupe also presented compelling stories of refugees and traumatic experiences of the parents. This focus also helped obtaining key grants. However, this focus—important as it was—continued to be only a partial solution to the problem. Getting grants remains a challenge.

George notes, "Especially because of the free rent space we have at the center and the tremendously strong structure of volunteers like Tim, the Troupe continues to survive and even thrive." Still, the Troupe is interested in finding more permanent solutions to stabilizing their funding streams. The new Director, George Chigas, has a plan in mind. He hopes that they can achieve the goal of having 30% of budget come from the individual and corporate sponsorships, 30% from the dance performances of the troupe, and another 30% from the grants and funding. The Troupe has been successful in getting the last two components in place; what is now needed is to get the first, that of corporate sponsorships in place. Then, the financial structure of the Troupe will be in place for now and well into the future.

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The Challenge of Personnel Problems

All groups struggle with how to have their operations run smoothly. The Angkor Dance Troupe has been no stranger to these problems. The Troupe has generously agreed to share some information about these problems so that we can all learn from the effective ways they found to solve these problems.

With an entity as complex as the Angkor Dance Troupe, there many differences in how people see the Troupe and what its goals should be. Sometimes these perspectives complement each other; other times they do not. How can these differences be addressed and how can the fractures that result be mended?

The Troupe has meant different things to different people. For people like Tim and other senior dancers, there has been a strong desire to pass down traditional culture to future generations. For him, the youth are like his children and the Troupe is his family. The Dance Masters who come from Cambodia give tremendous dedication to the dances they teach. They live with Tim and to him they are his grandparents. For others working with the Troupe, such as some of the instructors, the work teaching dance is a job but also represents a place where they enjoy working. For the youth, the Troupe is a place where they feel safe, comfortable with each other, and where they can negotiate the nebulous cultural context between traditional and modern culture. The youth now have a strong subculture where they are able relate to each other.

George Chigas, the new Director, views his work with the Troupe as an important job but also as a central way to ensure that a valuable resource for the region grows and prospers. Other Board Members see the Troupe as an important resource by which the people of the region can gain perspective on arts and history. For many in the community, dance is one of the cultural identifiers of the city and therefore they look at the Troupe as an important resource. Any many ways, the Troupe has become the heart of Cambodian festivals and many other programs. The Troupe youth are now asked to perform at Festivals.

Sometimes these differences in perspective have stood in the way of working together and the question has been one of how to integrate the

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perspectives and make sure that the needs underlying each are met. One of the roles of the new Director has been to attempt to understand why the people become involved with the Troupe and what they see as its future.

For example, Tim Chan Thou is the person who has been with the Troupe through 'thick and thin.' He has never worked for compensation. When the Troupe had no funding, he was still there. He now has a new designation, that of Executive Director of the Troupe. He is paid for 10 hours a week. However, he devotes much more time than that working toward the success of the Troupe.

Story from Vichenny Keo-Sam on the same challenge:

Another problem the Troupe faces right now and has not yet successfully solved is the challenge of cultures understanding each other. In the past, the leaders of the Troupe have come from different cultural backgrounds. The Troupe leadership included Cambodians and non-Cambodians. These differences have sometimes led to misunderstanding of how each culture expresses its dedication to the Troupe and its future. The understandings do not always go deep enough. Different cultures can have different ways of looking at the same situation. People have to struggle to "take off their lenses and put other people's lenses." What the Troupe leaders are now working on involves finding effective ways to learn from each other and understand their differences.

The President of the Troupe describes this time as challenging and in many ways traumatic. She has learned the importance of not taking sides or pointing fingers. Instead she works to unite everyone through one mission of the Troupe, constantly reminding them about why they were there.

The board:

Along the same lines, there was also conflict on the board. Most agencies experience board conflict so, again, there are opportunities for all of us to learn from how the Angkor Board is learning to resolve conflicts. Key to these conflicts was a lack of understanding of one another's culture. As the Board President notes, "It can be difficult to work with people who are not from your culture and who don't understand where you come from." Sometimes, people struggle to be adjustable and flexible. They sometimes

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want to look at the present situation from their point of view only. There can be a lack of appreciation and acknowledgement of each other's culture and beliefs." She sees these conflicts everywhere in the world. Such challenges are not limited to the Angkor Dance troupe. The Board President mentions, "It's like wearing a hat that you have never worn before. You will see the difference if you wear that hat only for one day. However, this is easy to say, but too difficult to perform. It becomes difficult for people to put off their own hat, which they have worn for years, and suddenly put some other hat on. The worry is that it might not look good".

The Board President notes that, "Being a person of color skin, you have to understand and be adaptive. You have to be the one who have to adjust to, learn, and be aware of environment." She does not blame the oppressors. However, she points out that it can be hard for them to understand because they have never been oppressed. That could be another base for the conflict of the Angkor Dance troupe, a conflict between the whites and non-whites.

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Community Participation

The new Director points out that there were two basic purposes for the Troupe when it started. The first goal was to maintain the surviving troupe in Cambodia and the second goal was to bring the surviving dance masters here to the United States. The result was beautiful and exciting. The Masters dancers from Cambodia would come and there will be all day long practice sessions filled with dance and arts around. The involvement of the Master Dancers gave a quality boost to the Troupe. Their involvement also increased the reputation regionally of the Angkor Dance Troupe in Lowell. The question now is how you add participation from the parents and the community.

The Board President reports that it has been a challenge to increase the participation of the parents whose children have been involved with the Troupe. Youth come in the Troupe and use it as an escape and a fun thing to do during a day. The parents of those youth do not always recognize how important it is for their children learn about their culture.

According to Vichenny, the Cambodian community does not give as high a credit to the artists as they might. In Cambodian culture being a dancer or a movie star is sometimes considered low-end career. As a result, movie stars or dancers do not get lot of credits for what they are doing. If you are working in a restaurant or a store, on the other hand, you are seen as having a recognizable career.

Too often, the parents do not take much notice of their children's participation in the Troupe. The youth, on the other hand, enjoy being in the Troupe.

In short, cultivation of the parents needs to occur. At present, there are a small number of parents who are closely related to the Troupe and its activities. Yet very few of the parents go and help in the performances by the Troupe in terms of cooking or even watching the actual performance or cheering on their children. Not many parents go to the performances of the youth and as a result the youth often report feeling that there is no dedication from parents' side.

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Thus, there seems to be a cultural gap within this community. On the one hand, teachers attach high value to the dance and arts of Cambodia. On the other hand, many other Cambodians do not attach high value to the dance and art. It's very important for all the teachers to preserve the dying art of their country, yet too often the parents attach negative value to the dance and entertainment industry. Vichenny recalls her parents telling her things that were no so good about the Angkor Dance, but today she sends her children to the Troupe and places great importance on the Troupe in their lives. Her husband attends every practice.



The troupe has not fully solved this problem yet. There continues to be a lack of volunteers from parent's side who are have the skills to reach out and talk to other parents. The Board itself cannot undertake this tasks because the Board Members lack the time and they all are full time workers too. As a president, Vichenny hopes to solve this problem. She has started the process. She suggests that there is a lack of clarity at the time of enrollment of kids about the expectations that the Troupe holds for the parents. The parents come and enroll their children in the Troupe. They do not have anything at stake: no fees and no expectations. Therefore, the parental involvement stops there. Therefore, the board has asked the staff to put something together which makes clearer the Troupes' expectations from the parents.

According to Vichenny, it is an inbuilt habit of Cambodian culture to bottle up problems and only try to solve them when they get really large. People often wait until the last minute before they start thinking about the solutions. She hopes to reduce this practice.

Experience of the youth:

Vichenny and her husband are very much involved with the Troupe. One of them watches their children practice and both go to all the performances. That is why she feels that her children take the dance so seriously; they respect it, and they are proud of it. She has gone through funny experiences with her children too. She described one incident in which "one day my son told me that he is too tired and he did not feel like going to the Troupe. I aggressively responded you do not want to go. That means you are denying your culture and your identity. My son reacts saying mummy I am just tired and that is the only reason I don't want to go." she laughs...

She also adds that her children feel proud of every aspect of their culture. They bring Cambodian food from home to school for their lunch. They respect this part and enjoy it too. She hears teachers' feedback saying the youth enjoy the food and other children envy them because of the food they bring.

The Dance Troupe is a very good vehicle to boost kids' self-esteem about their own culture. The teachers at the troupe teach them how to be respectful and proud of where they come from.

Parents expect more than from the Troupe. They often want their kids to be picked up, dropped off, and watched. Some parents use the Troupe as, in effect, a baby-sitting service. After dropping their kids off, they go for whatever work they have. The Director had to talk to parents with this attitude. It is like teaching old dog, new tricks. All of this consumes time and energy.

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When Leaders Move

The transition has not been difficult for George. Ruth left as a director, but George did not have many problems taking over. He mentions few reasons:

- ✓ He has had previous experience working and he has been involved with the troupe too. He has known people pretty well. So others could also relate to him easily.
- ✓ For Tim, George being a director is comfortable. They have known each other and been friends for long time. Before George took over, Tim was in a little shock because he did not know much, did not know about what was happening. However, every since, it has been good with him too.

The only difficult thing has been knowing things in detail like looking at grants, budgeting, keeping books and other financial details.

George mentions, "The transition for someone else would probably have been worst..."

Vichenny's words:

Ruth has been wonderful in getting funds and grants. She is very talented and awesome. Vichenny gives whole lot of credit to Ruth for the funding the troupe has been getting every since its inception in 1986. It has been getting recognition and there are many efforts from Ruth to get that money and develop the troupe.

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Vision from the Director- Building New Leadership



There is a very talented student in the Troupe named Peter. He does the traditional dance very gracefully. He likes to mix the traditional dance with modern techniques. He is a very good choreographer too. He has a new way of presenting the dance and others enjoy that way of dancing and can relate to it too. This feedback motivates him to come to the Troupe. His way of choreography is new and this might open up new venues of performance or new ways of being funded. Now with that new combination and innovation, the troupe can perform at the Lowell Folk Festival and Water Festival and can perform at a Boston New Dance Festival as well.

The Director is hoping to find a budget of 1 hour a week that would allow Peter to be paid to work with other students. The Troupe hopes to form a position where he can do that. Then the Troupe can go around and perform. A focus also needs to be placed on supporting and training the next generation to prepare them to lead the troupe. One day all the elder leaders and dancers will no longer be with us and there has to be somebody who is ready to lead the Troupe in new directions. Many other youth show great potential to perform dance and have the capability to carry on this activity. There has to be a way to train them to lead. The Troupe is increasingly trying to have a student-centered approach in teaching.

The future of the troupe is to have fusion of traditional and modern dances standing side by side.

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The President's vision



Board President Vichenny Keo-Sam envisions the future: It is not the end, it is the beginning...

- ✓ An orientation for parents when they enroll their kids.
- ✓ One performance of the Troupe attended by all of parents appreciating the dances by their children.
- ✓ All of us--the board, the staff, the parents, the youth, and the community--have to work together under one philosophy. Having individual opinions and differences will never work. To preserve the culture is a responsibility of no single individual; it is a responsibility of the community as a whole.

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Resources and References

Interviews with

- ❖ Dr. Nina Coppers, Faculty and Program Evaluator with Angkor Dance Troupe
- ❖ Dr. George Chigas, Program director, Angkor Dance Troupe
- ❖ Mehmed Ali, Coordinator, Mogan Cultural Center
- ❖ Vichenny Keo- Sam, President , Angkor Dance Troupe

Newspaper articles from

- ❖ The Lowell Sun
- ❖ The Boston Globe
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