

# KHMER SILVERWARES

by Kong Vireak



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

PHNOM PENH office



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REZUM  
PUBLISHING

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ភ្នាក់ងារច្រោះតុប្បដ្ឋាយ  
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## FOREWORD

In 2004, UNESCO Office in Phnom Penh in close collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts successfully published the “Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Cambodia” aiming at providing readers with a presentation of the diversity of Cambodian culture and arts including performing arts, music, handicrafts and languages. Silversmith technique was also one of the Cambodian artisan skills, which was registered in this reference book.

Silver objects were already found in Cambodia approximately 500 years ago, in the period of King Pongea Yat in the Capital of Udong (the formal Cambodian Royal capital from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries). It is in this area of Udong that a tradition of Master silversmiths still survives today.

Within the framework of UNESCO’s assistance to Cambodian for the preservation and promotion of traditional crafts of Cambodia and in particular for the project entitled “Research and Publication on Silverware”, UNESCO Phnom Penh Office, in close cooperation with the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, conducted a new research on this silversmith tradition as one of the most significant forms of handicrafts in Cambodia.

UNESCO would therefore like to encourage the national institutions to continue to take effective measures aimed at the safeguarding of the Khmer handicrafts and other forms of intangible cultural heritage. We are ready to continue to provide the Royal Government, especially the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and in particular young artists with our assistance in this endeavor for the benefit of future generations in Cambodia.

Once again, I would like to express my special thanks to the researchers and artists for their generous contribution, which made this project successful and hope that this publication will be a key reference for researchers and students in the future.



Teruo Jinnai  
UNESCO Representative in Cambodia

# INTRODUCTION

The Khmers, like many other peoples in the world, exploit all available natural resources such vegetation, metals, and clay to make tools or other necessary objects for use either in religious contexts or for daily life. Some tools or objects can be easily confected by almost every villager, while others need special skills and take a long process to produce them.

Some tools or objects are simply crafted from the vegetation, taken from forests by the villages. As one can observe today, some of those tools even they are not durable, but they can be easily re-made. Many examples of using vegetation to make tools or objects can be found in the Khmer society. One of the examples here is *krus*<sup>1</sup>, the container used for drawing water from well or any other available water sources. The *krus*, instead of using iron or plastic barrel, villagers in the Northern provinces, as I have observed, skillfully weave bamboo strips to make this container. This woven bamboo container is then covered with tree gum to keep water. Another example, I would like to present here is the ladle made of vegetation. In household use and ceremonial use, farmers confection a ladle made of coconut shell tied to a small branch of tree. This ladle is not only the object used in daily life by the villagers; it associates deeply in villagers' culture<sup>2</sup>. In the same time, the Khmer have had also made other tools and wares from durable materials such clay, metals, wood...etc. The production of the later wares demand more sophisticated, skill and specific resources. Those include pottery, lacquer-ware metal wares. Some workshops such pottery making needs resource of clay nearby and the production is fixed to one place. Some others such as silversmithery tended to be a movable atelier and are

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<sup>1</sup> For Sanskrit and Khmer terms, we adopt here a transliteration system proposed by Lewitz Saveros, 1969, « Note sur la transliteration du Cambodge », *BEFEO* LV, Paris, pp. 163-169.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.khmerenaissance.info/resources\\_tools/0024\\_lauche.html](http://www.khmerenaissance.info/resources_tools/0024_lauche.html)

considered as an occupation for the whole family including female members. However, Khmer silversmithery is on alerting points which need special attention in order to help preserving centuries-old tradition which is the aim of this study. Nevertheless, this study will not be able to cover all aspects of Khmer craftsmanship but to focus on silverware and its smithery. Thus focus is to first provide a general history of the use of silver in Khmer society through the course of the time and to document the contemporary existing tradition of silverware making.

Silver has been normally crafted into different types of objects for instance jewelry, utensils (such pedestal dish, tray, cup, teapot and betel set etc.), coins and religious objects including statues, ritual accessories. Researchers have found some silver objects especially jewelries in prehistoric sites in Cambodia, and later the use of the silverwares were richly mentioned in inscriptions as well as some foreign accounts, even though a few actual silver art objects have been found to date. Not mentioning the recent discoveries of silver jewelries in Prohear (Prey Veng), in the proto-historic time, Chinese accounts had given some remarks on the silverwares among objects of beauty and value. The records of Kaing T'ai and Chu Ying (3<sup>rd</sup> A.D) said "[...] gold and silver were used for making utensils and decorated..."<sup>3</sup>. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Zhou Daguan, a Chinese emissary who lived almost a year in Angkor between 1296 and 97, said that "[...] girls carrying gilt and silver vessels from the palace and a whole galaxy of ornaments, of very special design, the use of which were strange to me"<sup>4</sup>. As for information from epigraphy, we can understand that many types of silverware were used in the ancient time for offering to the gods and to the temples. In the same time, these inscriptions permit us to know that they were used for exchanges in large transactions. The bas-reliefs of Angkor Vat, Bayon and Banteay Chhmar temple have depicted many places of peoples carrying in their hand an

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<sup>3</sup> Briggs 1951: 14.

<sup>4</sup> Zhou 1993: 59.



Figure 1: Peoples carrying articles in their hand which are similar to silver pedestal in the present-day. Bas-reliefs of Angkor Vat.

object richly decorated which looks very similar to silver pedestal-dish produced by silversmiths in Koh Chen (fig. 1). In the following period, the information about Khmer silverwares was scarce. During that period, our knowledge on the Khmer silverwares was relied on the indirect sources especially foreign records. Until 19<sup>th</sup> century, we have some reliable information of Khmer silverwares from the records among the first European travelers. In the eyes of those Europeans, they saw that Khmer elites love to serve silverwares in daily life in order to show up themselves. As re-quoted here from Matics who quote from Thomas Wallace Knox, an Englishman who traveled throughout Southeast Asia countries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who calls a special attention to such precious objects that he show serving in the house of Siemrap governor as follow: “[...] and the Governor exhibited his gold betel boxes and other paraphernalia. He told us that all were made by a Cambodian goldsmith in Siemreap (sic) from the gold and silver coins of Hue, the capital of Annam...of entirely pure metal...and they certainly were very elegant in design and finish. We most admired the cigar case... The other articles were a large dish which contained the ‘kit’, a gold betel-leaf and lime holder; a small gold tobacco-box; a silver cup, with cigars and little silver box, made in the form of a fish, containing a perfumed ointment, used by the native noblemen to anoint their lips and nostrils [...]”.<sup>5</sup>

The use of the silverwares seems to play very significant roles in Khmer society in both sacred and profane contexts (we will discuss the presence of the silver and silverwares in following chapter both in the world and Cambodian contexts). The way and how those silverwares were made in Ancient times are little known to researchers. However, the reconstitutions of silverware making processes can be seen, as claimed by researchers, in the contemporary silver workshops. Thus claim is based on the assumption that the techniques of making silverwares have not much different.

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<sup>5</sup> Matics 2002: 2-3.

The silverwares in Cambodia have been considered as masterpieces among luxury handmade objects in Southeast Asia. Those silverwares consist of richly decorated motifs which prove high craftsmanship. However, the study of Khmer silverwares and its craftsmanship to date have drawn little attention from researchers. It seems that researchers have been firstly attracted by the beauty, grandeur and numbers of the ancient temples, the statues, epigraphy, ceramics and kiln sites and other archaeological research, which lead to dim the significance of silverwares as a topic of studies. Another main reason is that the ancient silverwares are a few and scattered in many places which are the obstacles for research purposes. Many silver objects were found using among local people was dated to late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Until in the 1950s, the productions of silverwares turned its course for tourist oriented purposes and quickly rise up. Many silver ateliers and shops were opened and employed many smiths, for instance, atelier of Mr. Chea Plong employed approximately forty workers<sup>6</sup>.

The quick rise of the market and the production of Khmer silverwares were come to the end when Khmer Rouge took the power during 1975 to the 7<sup>th</sup> January 1979. During the dark period of Khmer Rouge, the private ownership was abolished. Silverwares which were kept in Khmer house for occasionally uses were confiscated and put into *sahakar* “communal house” for the reason that the luxury objects such as silverwares were a symbol of feudal and aristocrat which were the enemy of communist ideology of the Khmer Rouge. The productions of silverwares were halted. Some silverware found their way with refugees during 1970’s to some western countries. After the collapse of Khmer Rouge in early January 1979, a new wave of refuge to third countries passed through Thailand was dramatically phenomenal. Those refugees had carried with them every valuable object such as jewelries and selected silverwares remaining from the destruction of Khmer Rouge, to

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<sup>6</sup> Matics 2002: p. 16.

exchange for food or money at border. Another factor to cause the disappearance of Khmer silverwares was when Khmer Rouge cut relation of Cambodia from International world, Khmer Art masterpieces such silverwares became targets for their collection as memory to a country that close to the world and their will be no more tourist mixed with a nostalgia of a Cambodian bygone era. At that time, smuggled trades of Khmer silverwares to the Thai border were busy. In the mean time, during 1980-81, when the international silver price in market meet with a historical rise, a numbers of local dealers were busy to collect silverwares to simply melted down to take silver content and turn them to silver grains for hiding from soldiers and polices. Large quantities of Khmer silverwares were destroyed and for smuggled to Khmer-Thai border with a few exception for some very special objects that they can sale them to antique shop. Consequently, many silver masterpieces and old coins of Udong Court and *piastre Indochinoise* were disappeared. And many old, therefore broken, Buddha statuettes were melted down as silver itself got a better price than artifacts<sup>7</sup>. During that short period, numbers of fine and old Khmer silverwares were drastically disappeared while the revived inferior quality Khmer silverwares become appear on Bangkok markets after 1979. Some survival silversmiths who took refugee to the border camps came to work in silver workshops in Bangkok<sup>8</sup>.

After 1979, the production of silverwares in Cambodia was yet recommenced. The silver as raw material was not available when Cambodia was still close to the international community and under economic sanction. War had continued sporadically at the Khmer-Thai border. It is until 1990 Cambodia was yet open to tourist. No market means any product activity. Thus, skilled job which they had abandoned

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication with Master Chet Chorn and Mr. Khen, silver smugglers during the early 1980's; see also Matics 2002, p. 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Matics 2002, p. 2.

more than three years during Khmer Rouge regime was still inactive. Some silversmiths came to work for salary at dealer houses to melt objects down to take silver content and smuggle to Thai border<sup>9</sup>. A bit later, silversmith villages had recommenced their job inheritance from their ancestors. School of Arts (the former Royal University of Fine Arts) reopened. Former teachers survived from the killing of the Khmer Rouge returned to the school to help teaching. Silversmith section has also reopened while skilled villagers at Kampong Loung and Koh Chen have restarted to make silverwares. But in the beginning, it was not like before war, they produced silverwares just for dealers who only trade to Thailand. The local use was not markedly as the war is just end and country rules by a communist regime. It was until UNTAC<sup>10</sup>, the production found their full activity again when demand of new tourist and UN bodies were remarkable and the demand of the Bangkok market was high. By the way, it is noteworthy that this brief period remarked by a last lost of fine and old silverwares from Cambodia. The incensement of silverware production is not stable when the price of raw material with world stock price. When world silver price augments, silverwares are naturally expensive which to a decrease of craftsmanship. On the other hand, the production of silverwares today is to supply the demand foreign tourists and their big market is in Bangkok. In this case, a problem at the border raised the production decrease. Silversmiths have no work to do. It is noteworthy that for these last couple years, price of silver raw material rises and affect strongly to the rhythm of production. And when garment factory sector booms, some villager-silversmiths have abandoned this skilled job which they have inherited from generations to generations to choose new jobs in garment factory or to be employed in construction worksite in Phnom Penh. Some others find their job in garment factories.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mr. Sok Leng, silversmith in Por Toch village, Kampong Luong.

<sup>10</sup> United Nation Transitional Authority in Cambodia

It is remarked that today less children have learned to shape silver into utensils. Craftsmanship which once has reached its apex and was admired from other such as collectors of Khmer objects of art, faces today an uncertain future.

Silver objects that we find today are not older than 100 years. Most of them were hammering in 1930's to 1950's decades. Therefore, the tradition and skill rooted back thousands years and researchers all agreed that techniques and objects have little changed to the present.

### Previous Research on the Khmer silverwares

However, the first study made by André Silice entitled "Exemple d'art cambodgien modern" which a section focused on Khmer jewelry<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, researchers often unavoidably mentioned a few lines about the silverwares in Cambodia in their studies of Khmer history or art history .etc. A more direct study of Khmer silverware can be found in the book entitled *The jewelry of Southeast Asia* by Anne Richter<sup>12</sup> in which the author integrate Khmer silverwares into her broader study of jewelry in Southeast Asia. Only until 1971, a monographic study on the silverware making in Cambodia was conducted by Mrs. Panh My Huong as a thesis for her B.A in Archaeology in the Department of Archaeology, Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. Unfortunately, 5 copies in stencil form of her B.A thesis, entitled *L'Orfèvrerie Khmère Traditionelle* (Traditional Khmer Jewelry), have been presumably lost during and after Khmer Rouge Regime like many other teaching materials housed at the library of the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. In 2002, a meticulous study on Khmer silverwares entitled *Cambodian Silver Animals: A long Tradition of*

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<sup>11</sup> Silice, André, 1924, "Exemple d'art cambodgien modern", in *Arts et Archéologies Khmers*, vol. 2, N. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Richter, Anne, 2000, *The Jewelry of Southeast Asia*, Thomas & Hudson, London.

*Artistic Heritage* was conducted by Mrs. K. I. Matics<sup>13</sup> published by Chulalongkorn University Press. Her focus, however, was only on Cambodian Silver Animal boxes.

The aim of my study here, as mentioned earlier, is to address the significance of silver used in Khmer Culture and also to document the contemporary silverware making. In order to do so, I have reviewed previous scholarships and conducting field research to a number places in Kampong Luong and Koh Chen villages (Kandal Province), Phnom Penh and in Siem Reap town. The choice of Kampong Luong and Koh Chen is because these places are traditional villages making silverwares. Notably, I would consider these two villages as one region for a simply reason that these locations have important relation with the ancient capital known as *Udong*. Secondly, the choice of Phnom Penh is to understand the continuation of smithery in association with the royal place and the establishment of school of fine arts. Thirdly, Siem Reap is a place where many tourist visit. Therefore, the choice is to understand the relationship of the contemporary silverware making which is presumably for tourist-oriented purposes. During the field research, I have conducted interviews with villagers, training masters, cross-borders silver smugglers and silversmiths.

In this study, I would like to divide into four chapters. The first is to discuss about the exploitation of silver and its use in world and in Cambodian context. Chapter 2 will look more closely on the silver in Khmer society culturally and economically. Chapter 3 will exclusively present the process of the silverware making and traditional knowledge transmissions. The last Chapter will focus on the silverware business for both local and international markets.

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<sup>13</sup> Matics, K.I., 2002, *Cambodian Silver Animals: A long Tradition of Artistic Heritage*, Chulalongkorn University Press, Bangkok.

## CHAPTER I

# SILVER IN THE GENERAL CONTEXT



In this chapter, we will address refining process of silver ore into the silver ready for use. Silver is a white metal, which has been appreciated and used for making different objects by human along centuries. The use of silver shows not only the sophistication of each civilization, but also represents the social status in each society.

The pure silver is a non-reactive metal which endure less chemical reaction when exposed to the acid in the air. In the Chemical element chart made by Mendeleyev, the silver is assigned as an atomic symbol Ag and its atomic number, weight and mass respectively equal to 47 and 107.868. This metal melts in 961.78°C, and is boiling 2162°C. The source of silver be occurred natively as single aspect found in pure condition in the form of small grains or as veins in soil and roc but it is rather uncommon. It is generally found as an alloy in associate with other mineral such as gold, copper, aluminum, lead, zinc-lead or tin. So, silver is consequently a common by-product of the above mentioned metals. The pure silver can be considered when it contains at least 99.9%. Commercial silver circulated in the world market could be refined up to 99.999%. However, their purity is reduced to 92.5% when it is melted down by silversmiths in order to make silverware<sup>14</sup>.

## 1. Silver in the world

Since the ancient time, silver has been known to human beings as a rare and precious metal after gold. The history of world silver production has been developed in 4 phases. The first phase was the production in the old civilization world especially in the region of Asia Minor such as Turkey and Greece (4000 BC-1500AD). The second phase was during the discovery of the new world by the European around 16th century (1500-1875). The third was the new rise of silver production in northern America (1879-1920), and the last was spread to the rest of the world

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<sup>14</sup> <http://periodic.lanl.gov/elements/47.html>

due to improvement of the technique of refinement to separate silver from other minerals (1921-present)<sup>15</sup>.

Archaeological evidences show that silver ornaments were made in ancient Egypt since 4,000 B.C<sup>16</sup>. However, the large scale mining of silver only began sometime after 3000 B.C. in the region of Anatolia (modern Turkey) which was considered as the first major silver supply to craftsmen throughout Asia Minor. It is believed that in the region of Asia Minor in around 2500 B.C., men learned how to extract silver from lead-silver ore. The technique of extracting the silver was then spread to Europe especially to the east European countries. When the Spaniards discovered the New World during 16th century, they were the first to start mining silver in this region. At the time that the silver separation techniques improved, then it started a new history of silver productions in America hemi-sphere. Among the first countries that produce a large number of silver were Bolivia, Peru and Mexico. Notably, between 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the production of these countries represented 85% of world silver products and trades. The remaining production during this period derived largely from Germany, Hungary, and Russia, and smaller amounts from other European countries including Chile, and Asian counties such as China and Japan. Later on, several other countries increased their silver production, particularly the United States of America. This was due to the improvement in electro refining techniques which was easier to separate silver from other base metals from refinery slimes. Thus, the United States became one of the important silver world suppliers. Today, the first 5 largest silver producing countries are Peru, Mexico, China, Australia and Chile.

The value of the silver is likely due to its superior quality and rarity, it has been used in many countries in the world for centuries as in and of itself

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<sup>15</sup> [http://silverinstitute.org/history\\_silver.php](http://silverinstitute.org/history_silver.php)

<sup>16</sup> Punjabhan 2534 B.E, p. 9.

a medium of exchange, and has been minted into coins. Linguistically, there are about 14 languages in the world use the word “silver” referring to both the metal and the currency. For example, in Khmer the term “*prak*” and in French, “*argent*” is referred to both meanings.

Similarly, the objects which were made of silver also show social status. In the ancient time, silverwares had characteristic of store in value as heirloom which each family had to invest to use like money when needed while paper-base money was issue lately. From a general observation of their usage, silver has a ritual characteristic. The ancient Egyptian called it “white gold” while in Europe; silver was associated with the moon and given the name “Luna” by medieval alchemists. The Chinese written characters for silver refer to “brightness” and “purity”. In Cambodia, silver was pair to royal metal, gold. When we found someone made a Buddha statuette from silver, thus, it does not mean that they profoundly believes in Buddhism and to show their wealth but it might attest the ritual characteristic of the metal. As such Gold and silver statuettes and devotional offerings were profusely mentioned in pre-angkorian and angkorian inscriptions.

## 2. Silver in Southeast Asia and in Cambodia

### Silver in Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, it is not a doubt that gold has been traditionally extracted in the region, whereas silver is very poor. The silver mining in Asia have been attested in places such as in Yunan Province (China), Shan State (Present day Myanmar), Philippines and India (with minor contribution)<sup>17</sup>. It is general known that the Shan State mine had produced a quantity of silver about 3 tones a year in between 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>18</sup>. According to Matics, some places such as in Lower

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<sup>17</sup> Matics 2002: 46-47.

<sup>18</sup> Reid, 1988, p. 99.

Mekong Basin “there appears to be recorded production of silver”<sup>19</sup>. However, “[there is] no pure deposit known within the Lower Mekong Basin”, and only 100 grams of silver in lead-zinc ores per tone<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, Matics writes that “during the French period some silver was produced from lead-zinc mines in northern Vietnam”<sup>21</sup>. In the mean time, the report of the French Colonial administration illustrated that they could produce only about 316 kg until 1926-27; and it rose to 1 tone in around 1940<sup>22</sup>. In Thailand at the Nong Phai mine, the silver could be retrieved from lead-zinc ranging from 80 to 300 grams of silver per metric tones of lead ore<sup>23</sup>.

In Southeast Asia, the silver gradually became very important due to the need for making utensils and religious objects. From 17<sup>th</sup> century, the silver coins emerged in the Southeast Asian markets. Interestingly, these coins were eventually melted down in order to finally produce silverwares<sup>24</sup>.

### Silver in Cambodia

What about silver in Cambodia? From where did it come? According to a map made in a recent survey of minerals in Indochina, Cambodia itself does have some quantity of gold especially in the region of Phnom Chi bordering with Kampong Thom and Preah Vihear Provinces. As for the silver, less quantity has been affirmed. According Matics<sup>25</sup>, in a place named Bo Sup Trup (Uddar Meanchey Province), close to Banteay Chhmar temple has some traces of silver mineral in quartz veins. This deposit has been mined since at least from 1877 by using artisanal methods at the

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<sup>19</sup> Matics, 2003: 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Le domaine Colonial Française, 1930, p. 242.

<sup>23</sup> Matics 2002: 47.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

surface; and from 1905 to 1911, a private company started operating underground. A survey made at the mining site during 1961-65 showed silver yields of 3.74 grams to 11.08 grams per tone. Elsewhere in Cambodia, some surveys have been conducted, and showed very little quantity of silver. Thus, has Cambodia had to import silver from abroad?

However, according to the archaeological research, the researchers found the silver used since prehistoric time. Mr. Andrea Reinecke, who excavated an Iron Age site in Prohear (Prey Veng Province), suggests that the silver has likely been imported either from China or from northern Vietnam<sup>26</sup>. Be that as it may, the sources of silver in Cambodia in the prehistoric time and early period remain ambiguous, even though recent archaeological findings from two prehistoric sites in Prey Veng and Banteay Meanchey show a significant number of artifacts made of gold, silver, bronze and beads buried with bodies. For instance, from one of a “rescued excavation site” in Prey Veng, about 90 gold and silver jewelries were found. Among them are earrings, finger rings and bangles.

According to the metallurgical analysis, the gold jewelries found at the site contain high percentage of silver. Moreover, in compliance with the analysis of two gold earrings from necropolis in Phum Snay (Banteay Meanchey province) conducted by Japanese archaeologists demonstrate that they contain a ration of 70% of gold and 30% of silver. The Japanese archaeologists suggest that the mixture of silver with gold was done intentionally. From this evidence, many researchers agree that the ancient people living in Cambodia knew not only silver as precious metal but also had they a better knowledge of how to harden gold jewelries by purposely adding silver.

Subsequently, in 1947, archaeologist Louis Malleret found 1320 jewelries in his archaeological research at Oc-Eo (Mekong Delta), the

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<sup>26</sup> Reinecke, et al, 2009: 40-41.

proto and early historic site. Beside the jewelry, he also found some important remains of some tools suggested to belong to goldsmiths and gold filing. These finding is very crucial to affirm that the local smithery was quite busy<sup>27</sup>.

According to Chinese annals and later mentioned in inscriptions, we tend to believe that the silverwares in the ancient time were profuse, even though only a few silver artifacts can be seen today. According to record of Kaing T'ai and Chu Ying (3<sup>rd</sup> AD), they mentioned: "[...] among the minerals and precious objects mentioned by the Chinese were gold, silver, copper, tin, pearls, coral, ivory, and glass. Gold and silver were use in making vessels and ornaments and paying imposts."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, according to the account of Nagasena, a monk who was sent to the Chinese court in southern Ch'i dynasty (479-501 AD) mentions that "[...] As merchandise, they have gold, silver, silks, [...]. The people of Funan make rings and bracelets of gold and vessels of silver."<sup>29</sup> Subsequently, numerous Cambodian inscriptions mentioned about the use of gold and silver. However, these sources did not mention whether the silver was extracted in Cambodia. Zhou Daguan, another Chinese emissary who came and lived Angkor for a year in 1296-97, also affirmed this. He writes, "No gold or silver is found in this country, to my knowledge, most in demand are Chinese gold and silver [...]"<sup>30</sup>. In the post-Angkorian period, the silver remains a demanding metal in the society as for a means of exchange and for making wares.

Up to this point, it seems clear that the silver has been the second valuable metal after gold in Cambodian society. Similarly, it implied that the silver is not originated in Cambodia but is the imported metal in the

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<sup>27</sup> Malleret 1962: 3-12 and 37-40.

<sup>28</sup> Briggs, 1951, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Briggs, 1951, p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> Zhou, 1993, p. 45.

form of finished objects or lumps of silver for the need of the local smiths. Considering the origins of silver used in Cambodia, we should further adopt linguistic approach by considering terms refer to silver in present-day Khmer language. In Khmer the term for “silver” is widely known as *prak'*. The following is the consideration of this term with anticipation for gaining better understanding of the possible origin of silver imported to Cambodia.

### 3. Khmer terms for “Silver”

The term referred to “silver” in Khmer nowadays is *prak'*, which is an Austronesian loan word<sup>31</sup>. However, according to ancient inscriptions, some other terms were also been used to referred to “silver”; they include the terms *sankū* or *sankūv*, *rajata* and *rupya*. The last two words are Sanskrit terms, and they were notably used mainly in Sanskrit inscriptions. Let us consider these last three terms before turning to discuss the term *prak'*.

The term *sankū* or *sankūv* means “white, whitish, a white metal i.e. a kind of silver”<sup>32</sup>. The last meaning as affirmed by Pou Saveros in her *An Old Khmer-French-English Dictionary* seems not to be known in the contemporary Khmer. However, the term itself is still known and retains the first two meanings. It is now spelled, “*skus* or *skuh*”. The term *rajata* is a Sanskrit word of silver. This word did not appear in inscriptions in Khmer language, but it was often used in the Khmer inscriptions in Sanskrit. However, the term was sometimes appeared in Khmer literature in Middle Period. The last is the term *rupya* which appeared in inscriptions in both Sanskrit and Khmer language; for instance, inscription K. 124 dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century used this term in compound as *rupyabhajāna*, “silver vessel”. Interestingly, the term which was used

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<sup>31</sup> Pou 1992, p. 322.

<sup>32</sup> Pou 1992, p. 472.

in these inscriptions for silver is *rupya* instead of *rajata*. Would it be possible that the choice of the term was done intentionally? In the Sanskrit dictionary, the term *rupya* means both the “silver”, the metal and the “currency” like the current Indian currency which is known as “Rupee”, derived from this term. Let us now return to the term *prak'*.

Even though Michael Vickery, a historian, disagree, many scholars including linguist Pou Saveros, a linguist, agree that the term *prak'* is a loan word from an Austronesian language family, which dominated most of the islands in Southeast Asia<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, Vickery agrees that the term “*mas* (gold)”, used in Khmer nowadays, is the Austronesian term. These two terms appeared in early Khmer inscription around 7<sup>th</sup> century and are widely used to date in Khmer language. Why did the Khmers adopt the Austronesian terms for gold and silver when the silver objects for example were already used since the prehistoric time? Even though the term silver is a loan word from Austronesian family, it is unconvincing to suggest that the *prak'* used in Cambodia in the history originated in so islands. Would it be possible to suggest that the adoption of both terms were strongly influenced by the commercial activities between the islands and Cambodia? Further research need to be done on this topic. However, the presentation here is to show that not only the silver mineral is rare and is considered as valuable metal, has the term *prak'* also borrowed from the island people where there are possibility of silver mining places.

However, concerning the origin of silver in Cambodia, it is still far to reach the answer. A serious research should be conducted in the future. In conclusion, we acknowledge that gold mineral can be found in many places in Indochina and in Cambodia. People of the region have probably exploited gold mine along century ago, but the silver mine is relatively

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<sup>33</sup> Vickery thought that the term also exists Mon-Khmer language term. Cf. Vickery 1998: 444-5.

rare in Cambodia. The discoveries of silver artifacts in the prehistoric sites make archaeologist to give different hypothesis. Mr. Reineker, Dutch archaeologist who worked at the site, suggested that the silver was introduced from South China or North Vietnam<sup>34</sup>. At least in the Angkor period, as mentioned in Zhou Daguan, gold and silver were imported from China<sup>35</sup>. However, the terms for gold and silver which have had appeared since the early historical time to the present are Austronesian loan words. Would possibly the metals be introduced from Southeast Asian peninsular or at least implying that the maritime trade between the Indochina and Southeast Asia islands especially Malay sub-continent make the adoption of these Austronesian term? We have to answer to this question with prudent. However, in the post-Angkorian times especially around 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, a considerable amount of silver were imported to Southeast Asia from China, Japan and large silver production countries such Mexico by Portugal and Spanish traders via Philippines; and this silver was then imported to Cambodia<sup>36</sup>.

#### 4. Uses of silver in the world

As one might know, silver has superior quality of silver over other metals. The silver is less contact with acid in the air; and it is malleable. Due to this qualification, men from the early period have used silver to make jewelries, household utensils, and coinage.

In present day, the silver has been extensively used in industrial sectors. As a metal of best thermal and electric conductor, the silver is used to make electric contacts, printed circuits, solar energy panel, silver-zinc and silver-cadmium batteries, and in making solder and brazing alloys. The silver is also used in some important parts of machinery, spacecraft

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<sup>34</sup> Reineke, *supra*, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Zhou, *supra*, p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Reid 1998, p. 96-103.

and space shuttle. The silver is an utmost importance in photography and is used for making film. Nowadays, the silver is largely used in hospital namely in bactericide and antibiotic medicament. As a metal with less reaction to the air, the silver is used to replace parts of the skull in major surgeries, bracing bones and as dental filling. It is also best to use in mirror and glass production because it has best reflection of visible light but it is poor reflector of ultraviolet. Silver chloride has interesting optical properties as it is transparent; it is then used to cement glasses. Today, silver iodide is used in seeding clouds to produce rain<sup>37</sup>. Finally yet importantly, because of silver ions prevent bacteria and algae buildup, the silver is used as a part of water purification systems to keep water pure and disease free<sup>38</sup>.

Although the silver is stable in pure air and water, it is proven one disadvantage which is susceptible to turn black when exposes to ozone, hydrogen sulfide, or air containing sulfur, which unfortunately is common in the air around us, in the form of sulfur dioxide, a gas emitted from domestic and industrial wastes. However, to clean this discoloring, it is a simple way can be used by applying hot light acidic mixed water or polishing with cotton tissue. As traditional method has been adopted, to clean the silverware, one can use lemon or soak it into hot water mixed with tamarind.

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<sup>37</sup> <http://periodic.lanl.gov/elements/47.html>

<sup>38</sup> [http://silverinstitute.org/water\\_purification.php](http://silverinstitute.org/water_purification.php)

## CHAPTER II

# SILVER IN KHMER SOCIETY



Through the course of history as one can even still observe in the Khmer society today, common people simply use vessels made of burn clay and less expensive metals but are esteemed. The rich families, one can often find them use silverwares in both daily life and in the religious ceremonies. However, the use of silverwares in the Khmer society probably convey meanings not only wealth and nobility but also bears symbols of power and purity. Considering silverwares, people tend to possess them rather not for daily use but store in value objects. For the commoners, the use of these wares reserved only in special occasions such as visits of important people and in religious ceremonies. Notably, some silverware has been inherited for generations. Thus, it is normal when King and royal family dine with silverwares. Sometimes they can even use gold ones. In the present-day, if one would be curious about the silverwares and other utensils used in the royal palace, he or she can visit the exhibition room in *hor samrit phimean* and in famous silver pagoda.

### Historical Context

In ancient time, the use of silverwares can be attested in some sources such foreign accounts, especially Chinese missionaries who visited Cambodia, ancient inscriptions, bas-reliefs, and artifacts found during excavations etc. From the ethnographic study of the use of silverware in present-day help us to understand more of their uses in the past or vise-versa. It is, therefore, believed that the uses of silverware in Khmer society in the past are larger than what we know today. The appreciation of luxury utensils can also be found mentioning in a number of literatures. One of the examples is the fable tales of *Preah Ko Preah Keo* “story on the Sacred Bull and his brother *Keo*”. This story relates about the twin who is a bull and a human. The brother Bull possesses magic power that can regurgitate food delicious food from his stomach serving on gold and *silver plates* to nourish his younger brother. Knowing the secret from the young cowherds, the parents greedily attempt to catch the Bull in order to cut open for luxurious utensils.

Not only in the literature, places where there are ancient temples or worshipping sites, oral stories about the richness of precious utensils (gold, silver or Chinese porcelain) are narrated. As one would see today, villagers can borrow utensils for using in private ceremonies from Buddhist monastery known as *vatt*. It should be noted that the roles of the *vatt* is similar to those of ancient temples.

Such stories seemingly reflect the collective memory about the large quantities of utensils used in the ancient time as richly attested in ancient inscriptions and other foreign accounts. However, to date, the Khmer silverwares are scarce and the written documents related to these objects are limit. As the above mentioned, the silverwares would have been recycled in order to produce any desired objects or used the existing silverwares as the act of religious devotion. For instance, a pious layperson would bring their silverwares such as a bowl, ladle...etc to melt with other metals in order to make alloy for mainly casting new Buddha statue at a newly build *vihaṛā*, worship hall. Another main reason is that in the middle periods, Cambodia was repeatedly attacked by the neighboring states especially the Siam and Vietnam. Consequently, precious objects including those were made of silver were taken as war trophies. Furthermore, manpower of the conquered country was also captured as prisoners of war. Among them were habile artisans and craftsmen. As matter of fact, the knowledge smithery, for instance, was drained from the society. Thus let to degeneration.

At same time, the contact of the peoples although caused by the war shares certain aspects of culture. Although the Siamese, sometime in the past was militarily strong, they adopted many aspects of Angkorian culture. And the Khmer were also influenced by the Siamese. In term of silverwares and smithery, one can find so many similarities in shapes and decorations and even names<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> Further reading Punjabhan 2553 B.E.

## Silversmithery

As the above mentioned, the Khmers craft their tools from different materials to use in daily life and in religious ceremonies. As for some tools, they have simply made from vegetation while others require skills and resources in order to produce them. Pottery making need sophisticated skills and specific clay. For the resource reason, pottery makers are often situated in the place where those resources are available; and the potters habitually do a long-distance trade. On the other hand, some types of smithery particularly the gold and silversmithery are often associated with the court, city dwellers and other big gathering places. This is not an accident. For a simple reason only the well-to-do would be able to afford the expensive materials for the smiths to make the desired objects. To take an obvious example, villages where silverwares are still produced namely Kampong Luong region was once the part of ancient capital known as Udong (17<sup>th</sup>-late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries). Later, when the capital moved to Phnom Penh, some of master gold and silversmiths also moved along with the court and centered not far from the Royal Palace. The place was later known as Phsar Sinhek. Soon after, the place became famous for their silverwares among the local and the foreigners. Among the foreigners, the street, where silverware shops were located, was known as “Silver Street”.

In the following, we will discuss in more detail about silverwares in the Khmer society. Structurally, we would like to divide into 3 sections viz. the Khmer silverware, the silver as store in value, and the silverwares in the court.

### 1. Silverwares and their Uses

In Cambodia, the silver has been crafted into different articles for daily uses which include jewelry, utensils, ornaments, religious objects and coinage. Some of the silverwares, we are studying here can only be known by names mentioning in ancient inscriptions. As for their shapes

and functions we do not have clues for instance the terms *vaudi* ...etc. Some we know their names but we are not certain about their shapes. One of the examples is the term *khal* which was frequently used in ancient inscriptions and has been interpreted as “bowl”. The term itself is not known among the Khmers. However, the term is later pronounced like in Thai as *khañ*. During the field research, I have not found any identification for this “bowl”. And this term is frequently used mainly in the wedding ceremony which is referred to an important object in the ceremony. According to some researchers, the term is referred to bowl holding areca nuts and betel leaves during ceremony performance<sup>40</sup>.

Since the arrival of the French, European objects—luxury as well as cheap objects—became new choices for Khmer elites. However, Khmer silversmiths had also invented or just simply crafted after European models such as cigar box, lighter holder, champagne cooler, spoons and forks, etc. Not to mention more examples, in the following, I tend to classify Khmer silverwares into jewelries, utensils and religious objects.

## Jewelries

Silver jewelries were found in Cambodia since in prehistoric time especially the recent discoveries of prehistoric sites in Prey Veng and in Banteay Meanchey province. The archaeological excavations of above mentioned sites have unearthed many jewelries made of gold and silver. According to the scientific datation of the artifacts in association with silver jewelries from Prohear site in Prey Veng, silver jewelries can be dated to around 200 years B.C<sup>41</sup>. Similarly, the archaeological excavations at the Oc-Eo, a maritime port city dated back to the early century A.D., conducted by Louis Mallet in 1947 had discovered 1,320 jewelries. Most of them were made of gold but silver is the second in

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<sup>40</sup> Ang 2007 : 53 ; further reading Pou 1984 : 115 and Pou 1992 :125.

<sup>41</sup> Reineker et al 2009: 41-42.

number of the object found. Another important finding which could seed some light on our study here is the gold and silversmiths' tools and gold dropped in the workshops<sup>42</sup>. This is not only a clear evidence of the existence of local jewelry industry but also told us of a busy production at that time. It is worth to note that main jewelries were made of gold but silver jewelries rank in second. According to some remarks made archaeologists worked at the site, those gold jewelries contain a high percentage of silver. Similarly, the excavation at Phnum Snay (Banteay Meanchey Province), much gold and silver jewelry has also been found. The Japanese research team analyzed two gold earrings. Interestingly, the result shows a ratio of 70% of gold and 30% of silver<sup>43</sup>. The team interpreted the result that mixed of gold and silver were intentionally done by the smith(s) to make jewelries stronger. This hypothesis had been also suggested by Malleret for those series of jewelries found in Oc-Eo<sup>44</sup>. Furthermore, the use and production of jewelry were also reported by Chinese travelers in the third centuries as quoted above<sup>45</sup>.

After archaeological sources, main information related to ancient jewelries relies solely on the sources of epigraphy and bas-relief which depicted the scenes in the royal palace, noble houses and in the street. However, which metals were the jewelries made from, the study of Khmer inscriptions could answer to this question. Many preangkorian and angkorian inscriptions make frequent reference to gold and silver jewelries made to adorn body and to adorn stone images in temples. Even though, archaeologically, the evidences of such jewelries are relatively few. To date, only a few gold Angkorian jewelries were found. Recently, some angkorian gold statuary jewelries (?), which

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<sup>42</sup> Malletert 1962: 37.

<sup>43</sup> Yashuda Yoshinori and Chuch Phoeurn (Ed.) 2007: 141-142.

<sup>44</sup> Malleret 1962.

<sup>45</sup> *Supra.* p. 8.

are donated by Douglas A.J. Latchford to the Phnom Penh National Museum (Cambodia), have been put on display in the Phnom Penh National Museum (Cambodia). He is co-authors of some books dedicated to ancient Khmer gold and silver jewelries and adornment objects<sup>46</sup>. Similarly, the many literatures of the Khmer middle period attested the gold and silver *jewelries* permeated every aspect of elite Khmer life. Curiously, in the ancient time, the goldsmith work is less known. However, interestingly, some inscriptions mentioned a specific corporation of smiths known as *hemakaṛā*, goldsmith<sup>47</sup>. The term *hemakaṛā*, is convincingly referred to both gold and silversmiths. We will return discuss on this term later in the chapter 3. In this present-day, the Khmers love to adorn their body with gold jewelries than silver ones. However, silver jewelries such as bangles, bracelets and waist chain are still seen popular today. In the meantime, many silversmiths have copied commercial silver jewelries which can be found everywhere at tourist spots in the world in order to supply tourist markets in Cambodia.

The following are some examples of the silver jewelries unearthed from the archaeological excavated trenches. Figure 2 is example gold and silver jewelries found at Prohear site (Prey Veng Province). Other examples of Oc-Eo jewelries, one can find them in Malleret *L'Archéologie du Delta du Mékong: La culture du Fou-Nan (supra)*. Figure 3 is a taken from bas-relief of Angkor Vat. In this image, we can see a boy richly adorned with bangles, earrings and necklaces. Needless to illustrate all of them, the examples of this type can be multiplied. Figure 4 are new silver bangles crafted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>46</sup> Concerning ancient Khmer jewelries, please read Emma C. Bunker, "Splendour and Sensuality in Angkor Period Khmer Jewellery," in *Orientations*, March 2000, pp. 102-13; Emma C. Bunker and Latchford, Douglas, *Adoration and Glory: the golden age of Khmer art*, 2004 and *Khmer gold: gifts for the gods*, Art Media Resources, 2008, Chicago.

<sup>47</sup> Pou 1992, p. 550.



Figure 2: Gold and silver jewelries found in the excavation at Prohear, Prey Veng (Photo: A. Reinecke).



Figure 3: Angkor vat. Bas-relief. Depicting a child wearing richly jewelries.



Figure 4: Silver bangles crafted in the present-day (Private collection)

## Utensils

The uses of silver utensils are among the luxury household articles and seems represent to every aspect of elite Khmer life in the past as well as in the present time. As we mention so far above, Chinese sources have provided that every noble houses and well-to-do families use silver utensils in dining table. However, no detail of articles was enumerated. The silver utensils were, in the ancient inscriptions, largely used in the temples and monasteries. The same Chinese sources had mentioned that in the royal palace, they food with utensils making of silver and even of gold ones. Some old pictures, taken during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, show that Khmer aristocrats are deeply absorbed in the luxury household utensils as seen in the figure 5 and 6. Accounts of European travelers who visited Cambodia late 19<sup>th</sup> century would also the best sources to give proofs<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> *Supra*, p. 3.



Figure 5: Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Khmer high dignitaries. On the table, between the other objects, silver betel set is distinguishable. (Photo Stone conservation Laboratory, Phnom Penh National Museum).



Figure 6: Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Khmer high dignitaries. On the table, between the other objects, silver betel set is distinguishable. (Photo Paul Collard, 1925).

In the Khmer society although silverwares are esteemed, however, not every family could afford. By the way, if not all of available silverwares, we can say that any family can pay for some important utensils which they can use in the welcoming estimate friends and in the religious ceremony (fig.7). Nonetheless, tableware is mainly made from clay and low price metals or even confectioned from vegetation such as *smuk* “box made of palm leaves” etc. All these low price utensils are stored in a cupboard or simply in a large flat basket which is usually in the kitchen. As for the silverwares or Chinese porcelain, they keep safely inside main house or even in their own room. Normally, in the Khmer house, we can see in main hall, where they use as reception, a cupboard fill with priced objects and cult utensils including silverwares such as large bowl, pedestal dish, tray, etc. From early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some western silverware were introduced into Cambodia for the demand of the French and the Khmer elites who live with modern life. Khmer silversmiths have, in the



Figure 7: Silverwares keeping at Khmer houses. (Private collection).

meantime, also crafted some new silver articles by using western objects as model and also have invented new wares to satisfy them.

In this study, I tend to divide Khmer utensils into two groups. The first group is the *traditional Khmer utensil*, which are appeared to be crafted since early period of the Khmer history to the presence. They are such as bowl, pedestal dishes, tray, betel set, etc. The second group is series of utensils which were totally ignored to Khmer society before the coming of the French colonial administration. We suggest here the term *modern Khmer utensils* by opposite to the *traditional Khmer utensil*. The new silverwares were crafted after western model or even newly invented such as spoons, forks, champagne cooler, cigar boxes, etc.

## Traditional Khmer Utensils

As mentioned above, we tend use the term “utensil” here to refer series of objects which are for domestic uses, ceremonial uses and for personal effect. The domestic used utensils are among tableware such as plate, bowl, tray, pedestal tray and dish, cup, kettle, spoons, forks, chopsticks, etc. Some utensils are reserved to use in the private and religious ceremonies such as large pedestal bowl using for keeping lustral water, boxes and containers using in wedding ceremony. As for personal effect articles, we would refer to series of articles which are privately used by anyone daily such as betel sets, container, cosmetic box etc.

In the following, I would like to sub-divide into more detail on the Khmer utensils: tableware, ceremonial utensils, and personal effect objects.

### Tableware

According to epigraphic sources and literature written in the middle period, we can say that Khmer love metal utensils. Bernard Philip Groslier who had time to look more close in his study on Khmer ceramic in Angkor period, was convincingly described that Khmer ceramic was hardly mastered if compare to their neighbors because Khmer prefers to use metal utensils<sup>49</sup>. It is true that metal crafts (goldsmith, silversmith or coppersmith) was well mastered and the Khmer metal wares are far beautiful than product of Khmer ceramic. Again here, according to the Chinese resources especially the account of Zhou Daguan, we knew that silver tableware gained a great admiration. Zhou had devoted a chapter on Angkorian utensils and wrote that “[...] Every person dining in the houses of nobles or rich folk is given silver plates, and sometime even gold ones. At royal banquets a great number of gold utensils are used, fashioned in a very special manner.”<sup>50</sup> Related to the sovereign use of silver vessels, he added that “[...] Then came other girls carrying gold and

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<sup>49</sup> Groslier, B.P., 1981: 9.

<sup>50</sup> Zhou 1993: 59.

silver vessels from the palace and a whole galaxy of ornaments, of very special design, the uses of which were strange to me.”<sup>51</sup>

For the evidence of masterpieces of Khmer metal wares today, one can see even today when we observe Khmer families in the remote area, they still use *phtil khat’* or *phtil sbañ* “copper or brass bowl” to serve water and to use for keeping lustral water in private ceremony (fig. 8). In the remote area, we still observe some houses use *chnam khvan’* or *chnam sbañ* “copper cooker” to cook rice (fig. 9). According to hearsay of aged Khmer people, the use of such object was rather common in their time. Up to 1970’s, the productions of *phtil khat’* or *phtil sbañ* were quite busy and were found in different corners of Cambodia especially the production at Yol Tong village (Bati District, Takeo Province) and Phsar Dek (Ponhealu, Kandal Province)<sup>52</sup>. The production of copper bowl, however, is also the tradition of Koh Chen (Ponhealu, Kandal Province) but copper bowls from Koh Chen are priced for its artistic aspect (fig. 10). But these later are nowadays rarely found in the house of the villagers. On the contrary, we can find those copperwares in luxury hotels used to decorate their hall and at the market stores to display for sale to tourists.



Figure 8: Copper pedestal bowl.



Figure 9: Copper rice cooker.



Figure 10: Working of copper bowl at Koh Chen village.

<sup>51</sup> Zhou 1993: 72.

<sup>52</sup> Delvert 1994 : 265-267.



Figure 11: Examples of silverwares crafted in early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Photo Stone conservation Laboratory, Phnom Penh National Museum).

Let's return back to the silver tableware. It is true that the silver utensils are luxury objects which especially well-to-do people and elites could afford them for daily use. However, the silverwares in Khmer culture has received more extensive role in the Khmer society. Even though, at any price, Khmer families esteem it a privilege and at least afford to pay for some of them for uses. Consequently, the region of Kampong Luong and Koh Chen are still the famous and irreplaceable places for their silver and coppersmithery in Cambodia. We believe that these regions have produced silverwares for many centuries for the demand of upper classes and commoners throughout the country. And today, the villager-smiths have produced silverwares for tourist markets locally and internationally.

Among Khmer traditional silver utensils that are still produced today are *phitil* "bowl for water", *can* "plate", *thas* "trays", *tu* "foot tray", *joen* "pedestal", *joen* "pedestal supported dishes", *tok* "large pedestal", *pan* "kettle sets", *khlan* and *tanlap* "small box", etc. Figure 11 to 19 are a few example of silverware used in Cambodia from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to present-day.



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

Figure 12-19: Older silverwares found in the present-day.

(Photo Phnom Penh National Museum).



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

### Betel Sets (*hip sla*)

In the past, betel-chewing is a habit that was enjoyed by men and women, old and young and incorporated into the daily lives of the Khmers at all social levels. It is very fast that the art of betel-chewing is a part of court life. One can distinguish that betel-chewing has been then becoming an art of hospitality throughout the India, Southeast Asia, and part of China. The custom of betel-chewing required many ingredients among are betel leaf, areca nut, lime paste and other side-spices such as camphor, cinnamon, nutmeg, and tobacco. The ingredients are all kept

in separate boxes, which are then kept altogether in a container made of different materials. In other word, the betel set is a kit of lidded boxes containing chewing ingredients and betel leaves and it become an indispensable utensil for the betel-chewers. As for a simplest one, betel set can be made from woven rattan basket. The less sophisticated ones are from wood, sometime lacquered and inlaid with mother-of-pearl (fig. 20). The sophisticated one is made in copper, silver or even gold (fig. 21). Silver betel sets are rather common and mentioned in many colonial literatures as object of art. In the Royal Palace, the King used gold betel sets. Figure 22 is an example of betel sets. Before discussion



Figure 20: Wooden betel sets on display  
(Private collection).



Figure 21: Copper betel sets.



Figure 22: Betel set: wooden container and silver boxes.

on the utensil using to serve betel-chewing, we would like to take your attention on the custom of betel-chewing in Cambodia as unavoidable. In the following, I would like to digest the betel-chewing in Cambodia in order to highlight the silver utensils used to serve betel-chewing.

Many studies have been devoted on the betel-chewing tradition in Cambodia and in the region up-to-date. One can consult them for further knowledge thus we will not give detail in our study. We cannot, however, avoid consecrating some lines on this subject. The Khmer like other nations in Southeast Asia countries, Indian and Chinese have a habit to chew betel and areca nut. The betel-chewing tradition might have been rooted in the prehistoric time. The betel-chewing becomes an art of living and as symbol of hospitality, friendship and social power as confirmed in many local literatures of each nation. Accounts of western travelers and colonial literatures were also remarked. In Cambodia, we have series of classical literatures classified under the name *cpáp'*, which were kind of moral and ethical literatures purposely to educate people the art of living addressing to all classes. The literature was saying that to invite someone to have betel chewing is considered as an exceptional polite reception in the Khmer society. It is noteworthy to remark that the custom of betel-chewing, since last century, seems being on the wane among elites. Today, one can only see that the betel-chewing is still practiced by elderly people, mostly women in the rural rather than urban areas. It is gradually replaced by tobacco. This tradition change has a great impact on the some smitheries which is skill in producing betel sets such as lacquer smith and silversmiths. Even though, how the tradition is faded, betel-chewing tradition is still playing important role in all private and religious ceremonies in Cambodia. Betel leaves and areca nuts are utmost important materials for confectioning cult accessories and the ready prepared betel leafs are also offered to spirits. The symbolism of hospitality, friendship and power remains firm as one can be seen in wedding ceremony. Betel and areca nut are the must offering and accessory in wedding. Many steps from the pre-marriage to



Figure 23:  
Betel-chewing  
is important  
part in the  
asking for  
marriage  
known in  
Khmer as *silsa*.



Figure 24:  
Betel-chewing  
is important  
part in the  
asking for  
marriage  
known in  
Khmer as *silsa*.

the marriage ritual, the betel chewing is symbolic act of agreement when both representatives of bride and groom exchange their betel to chew. When betel-chewing play important role in society, the utensils used to store betel leaves and the quid must be reflected to the social status and wealth of users (fig. 23-24).

As mention above, to chew betel one needs betel leaf, areca nuts and other ingredients. All of them are kept in one container. . Many boxes are needed, however, to store those ingredients. In general, this set

consist of a tray or a large box known as *hip sla* mean literally "box of areca nut" in which there are 4 or 5 other small boxes used to keep quid, a lime paste container, mortar, areca nut cutter. At home, they have spittoon while on travel, one might carry a small one with. However, as one knows, silver is expensive; thus only rich and elites could afford a complete of silver utensils for preparing betel. Gold sets are reserved for the King and the use in the Royal Palace. The commoners use similar boxes made of brass and copper. Those small lidded-boxes have different shapes such fruit shape and animal shapes geometric shape. Fruit shape and animal shape boxes are the most popular. Every box is full of decoration with flora motifs (fig. 25-30). Some selected ones can even depicted scenes of *Ramāyana* (fig. 31-33). As for animal boxes, smiths prefer to make in the shape of the 12 Asian zodiac animals and a few other mythical animals such as *rajsih*, *gujsih* (fig. 34). Beside 12 zodiac animals in and mythical creatures, silversmiths have also



Figure 25: Silver box:  
Pumpkin shape.



Figure 26: Silver box:  
Bird shape.



Figure 27: Silver box:  
Turtle shape.



Figure 28: Silver box:  
Geometric shape.



Figure 29: Silver box:  
Octagonal shape.



Figure 30: Silver box:  
Round shape.



Figure 31: Silver box depicted Ramayana characters.



Figure 32: Silver box depicted Ramayana characters.



Figure 33: Silver box depicted Ramayana characters.



Figure 34: Silver box: Reachsey.



Figure 35: Silver box: Mouse shape.



Figure 36: Silver box: Bird shape.



Figure 37: Silver box: Duck shape.



Figure 38: Silver box: Cow shape.



Figure 39: Silver box: Elephant shape.

preferred to make in shape of creatures living in the nature around them such as fish, frog, birds, turtle, buffalo etc. (fig. 35-40). They have even made in the shape of wild animals such as deer, goat, elephant, etc. The tradition of making zoomorphic boxes is presumed to be rooted in the Angkorian time as we have found many zoomorphic Angkorian pottery in used places and in series of kiln sites (fig. 41).



Figure 40: Silver box:  
Elephant shape.



Figure 41: Angkorian ceramic lime  
pot (Photo B.P Groslier 1981).

As we can see betel sets left from the ancient time, which are displayed in the National museum and kept in some noble houses, they are among masterpiece of Khmer art objects and made of valuable material such as gold, silver, bronze, copper and at least precious wood, lacquered and inlay with mother-of-pearl. The gold and silver betel sets had been long used as personal attributes and royal regalia. The bas-reliefs of the Angkorian temples depicted many scenes of royal audience, in the house of high dignitaries or in Brahmin hermitages where we could identify men and women holding receptacles which look very similar to silver pedestal dishes used to keep betel (fig. 42-45). In the reign of His Majesty the King Ang Duong, according to the royal chronicles, after



Figure 42



Figure 43

Figure 42-43: Bayon. Bas-reliefs. Depicted scenes of people hold objects which is similar to silver pedestal.



Figure 44



Figure 45

Figure 44-45: Angkor Vat. Bas-reliefs. Depicted scenes of people hold objects which is similar to silver pedestal.

officially reigning, he had ordered to all ladies to have betel sets as her husbands in official audiences<sup>53</sup>. This declaration can proof the tradition of betel chewing and the symbolic of power and social rank. In the same time, silverwares are among utensils demanding in many private and religious ceremonies.

### Cult Objects

In this section, we tend to uncover the use of silverwares in the private and religious ceremonies. It is notably that many of silverwares have double roles—for daily life use and for private and religious ceremonies as cult objects and accessories. Cult objects, it can be Brahmanic or Buddha statues, funeral urn, miniature *cetiya* (funeral sanctuary), cover of holy scripts, silver plate inscribed with Pali formula or even rolling around nylon wire to wear around waist known as *yantra* or *gaṭha*, and cult accessories such *bodhi* tree, etc.

In the ancient time, according to many inscriptions, we can know that many gold and silver statues and cult accessories were crafted and donated to the temples and *aśrama* “hermitage”<sup>54</sup>. A stele inscription

<sup>53</sup> Leclère 1974 (Reimp.), p. 417.

<sup>54</sup> Jeldres et al 1999: 34.

found in Sambor Prei Kuk complex, attests another image of Nandin made of silver made offering to the temple, according to Coedès<sup>55</sup>, this image was placed in the *mandapa* of the tower S2 of the of south group known today as Yeay Poan. The erecting of silver image of Nandin is not accidental choice as mentioned in the inscription, the image represented to Dharma in the age of *Kṛta*. In the early 1983, villagers had accidentally found a *Nandin* statue at Tuol Kuhear (Koh Thom District, Kandal Province), which the art historians have concluded that the statue is dated around 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. This statue is currently housed in Ho Preah Tray (fig. 46) located in the compound of Vat Preah Keo Morokot of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh known as Silver Pagoda among the westerners. The image made of silver alloy of 70-80% of silver. Another one of the most important discovery of Khmer silver artifacts is the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century head of Vishnu that once belong to the Princes of Champassak in southern Laos<sup>56</sup>. Given that the examples in the inscriptions are numerous, we would like to highlight an example of gold and silver images made to offer to the temples which was recorded in the famous stele of Preah Khan dated in 1.191 A.D. The inscription had enumerated 430 gold and silver statues placed in the temple and 20.000 others were placed every corner of Khmer empire in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. An addition to being used for images, according always to the inscriptions, silver was important for ritual and religious activities. The 10<sup>th</sup> century inscription (K.444) permitted us to know that a record (*of temple belonging?*) were written on various materials and kept respectively gold plate in the *kanlon* (temple?), silver plate in the Justice Hall and stone stela in the corporation villages<sup>57</sup>. In later period, we have also known that they made covers of the Holy Scriptures from silver. However, these later were not found anymore.

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<sup>55</sup> Coedès, *IC.*, IV : 4-11.

<sup>56</sup> One can read further in Bunker, Emma C. and Douglas A.J. Latchford, 2008, *Khmer gold: gifts for the gods*, Art Media Resources, Chicago.

<sup>57</sup> Coedès, *IC II*, 64 (B): 21.



Figure 46: *Hor Preah Tray*, Silver Pagoda. Statue of Nandin made of 70-80% of silver.

Silver is also used to make cult accessories. There were also rich evidences stated in the inscriptions. For instance, an inscription (K.754) dated in 14<sup>th</sup> century allows us to know that silver grass known as *bhlāmā* (Impereta Cylindrica) had been confectioned and donated to the temples<sup>58</sup>. The faithful religious and well-to-do can afford, in the context of beliefs, can afford to confection gold and silver cult accessories; thus silvers are seemingly more available. As usual, every private and religious ceremony in Cambodia, one can find many cult accessories confectioned from vegetation such banana trunk, betel leaves, areca nut, coconut and flowers, which altogether, in the context of time and space, the sacred manifest. With the temptation to sustain this sacred (in opposition to profane), men have chosen among imperishable objects. Among the imperishable objects, silver accessories are frequently seen when gold is too expensive and is probably limit to the King. Among silver cult accessories, the *bodhi* tree and lotus flowers are often found. These silver trees are crafted in pair with Buddha statuette seated under the *bodhi* tree as seen in figure 47. Sometimes, we can also find these silver trees placed on the spirit altar at home and in *vihaṛā*. However, it

<sup>58</sup> BEFEO XXXVI, 17 :19.

becomes rare. In the meantime, it tends to be replaced by the imitation of such gold and silver trees made of a bad taste aluminum-paper.

In the Khmer society, one can find many more silverwares used cult objects. As mentioned above, silver is considered not only a precious metal but also with a symbol of purity and luck. Many silver statuettes were made by faithful religious. Those statuettes are today housed in the Phnom Penh National Museum, Angkor National Museum and in the *Maha Kutīn* Unnalom pagoda. Figures 50-53 are some examples. Figure 54 is a miniature *vihaṛa* made of silver. From this concept, the well-to-do prefers to keep cremated bones of their parents and loves in silver urn or miniature stupa (fig. 48-49). The wealthy families can even make them in gold. In the past, the body of deceased King was place in the foetus position in the large urn made of gold or gilded silver plate. As example, the large urn (fig. 54) which is current put in display in the Phnom Penh National Museum of Cambodia, was the Royal Urn of Saint August Body of His Majesty Preah Karuna Preah Norodom Suramrit.



Figure 47: Silver Buddha seated under Bodhi tree made of gold and silver sheets.



Figure 48: Gilded silver funeral urn.



Figure 49: Gold sheet and gilded silver plated on glass Chedey.



Figure 50: Large gilded royal funeral urn of the august body of Preah Karuna Preah Norodom Suramrit.



Figure 51



Figure 52

Figure 51-52: Silver Buddha statuettes housed in the Phnom Penh National Museum (Photo National Museum).



Figure 53: Silver Buddha statues exhibiting in the Phnom Penh National Museum, Buddha Gallery.



Figure 54: Silver miniature *Vihear*, Phnom Penh National Museum.

Beside daily uses, some silver utensils are in role for ceremonies such as lustral bowl and wedding sets. In the practice of private and religious ceremonies, the Khmers use a remarkable number of utensils especially wedding ceremony. The utensils are made of silver or silver gilded copper. These utensils are such as *thanÄranÄbetel box*”, *diep* “lidded receptacle”, lustral bowl, tray to support areca flower, and many other pedestals dishes.

In conclusion, silverware has been rooted deeply in the Khmer culture: in the daily life uses and religious accessories. However, it is worthy to note that silver and silverware have role beyond utensils and sacred metal, but it has also a characteristic of store in value. Since the early period of the Khmer history, silver had been used as mean for transactions and to be minted to monetary coins.

### Modern Khmer Silverware

As mention above, we use the term modern Khmer silverwares in given that term is opposite to the traditional Khmer silverware. We tend to use this term to daub series of silver articles which were rather not familiar with Khmer silversmiths before 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This later objects appeared to be used after the installation of French colony in Cambodia. Frenchmen who worked for Protectorate administration had introduced new so-called luxury objects and quickly been penetrated into Khmer society especially among the Khmer elites and the Royal Palace for which George Groslier lamented for the agony of traditional Khmer silverware<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Further reading the articles published by George Groslier published *Revue Indochinoise, Arts et Archéologies Khmers* I and II, *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* and so on, and the beautiful analytical discussion on the aspect of Khmer arts in Ingrid Muan, *Citing Angkor: The "Cambodian Arts" in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000*, PhD dissertation, 2001, Columbia University.

The new silverwares are spoon, fork, knife, chopsticks, coffee sets, champagne cooler, ice-tongs, cigar boxes, lighter holder, cosmetic boxes, hand bag, cylindrical box to keep camphor or mint for sniff, etc. (fig. 55-62). It is worthy to remark that Khmer has recently use spoon in serving food. Khmer serve meal with their fingers, taking food from trays (wicker or metal) and rice from baskets. In the bas-reliefs in Bayon, several scenes which depicted military banquet (?) show people ate with their fingers. The accounts of European travelers who visited Cambodia



Figure 55: Silver spoon and fork crafted by Khmer silversmiths (Photo Stone conservation Laboratory, Phnom Penh National Museum).



Figure 56: Perfume bottle plate with silver sheet decorated with Khmer motif (Private collection).



Figure 57: Cosmetic box (Private collection).



Figure 58: Cosmetic box (Private collection).



Figure 59: Camphor sniffing tube.

during the 19<sup>th</sup> century can affirm this phenomenon. As for the use of fork, we can still observe until nowadays that many Khmer houses, especially in the rural, do not serve fork in dining. It seems that they are not skilled or have no habit to use fork. However, one can observed until present-day that the production of new silver utensils mention above are somehow limited which reserve for the expatriate and who like an elite lifestyle. The silversmiths have also produced today for the tourist markets. Like other valuable products, silverware has also, in the meantime, faced with the disappearance and new invention with the change of economic, socio-cultural conditions. When tobacco has introduced to Cambodia, people especially city dwellers have abandoned betel-chewing and turned to smoke cigarettes. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use of silver betel set as symbol of prestige is replaced by tobacco and cigar boxes. The elder Khmer people can witness this change.

Today, some new silverware had been invented or simply copied by silversmiths living in the villages and in Phnom Penh. Added to the new tableware mentioned above, we can also see today are new other wares such as box to hold toilet paper, name card holder, mirror and photo frame, cosmetic box, coffee sets, etc. And sometimes, silversmiths have worked to mask cover the water glass with silver and mask cover the whisky bottle for the use in the house of high class people. Moreover, one can observe that when the use of silverwares in the daily life had bee *in the death throe*<sup>60</sup>, silversmiths today had crafted them to supply shops and markets which are then sold to tourist as souvenirs objects. Some commissioned silversmiths have crafted silver tray, cup and trophy and luxury office accessories (fig. 63).

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<sup>60</sup> Expression pronounced by George Groslier then translated to English by Ingrid Muan (2001): 16.



Figure 60: Silver handbag.



Figure 61: Water glass plated silver.



Figure 62: Name card holder.



Figure 63: Silver trophy.

## 2. Silver as Store in Value Silver Coinage

In the world, man, since in antiquity, uses various kinds of rare and precious materials to use as mean for transaction such as cowry, gold, silver, bronze, copper, tin and even iron. Coins were first minted in around 700-600 B.C<sup>61</sup> in the region of Asia Minor. Quite later, after metal coins were minted, Chinese invented paper used as bank notes for larger transactions to replace coins. However, coins are still circulated in the markets today. Monetary Coins were made into different shapes such as round, elongated bar or a rectangular plate, or even in the shape of an

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<sup>61</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver>

insect for example, *prak tñon* took a shape of a tree worm, *tñon* (Fig. 64). The term “silver” in many languages in the world has meaning beyond the metal itself but with the meaning of monetary notes.



Figure 64: *Prak tñon* coin. Here, coin had been modified to make pendent.

We know that Cambodia as well as other countries in Southeast Asia has active international trade since before Christ. This international trade had led countries in the region to know their prosperity which seems unlikely occur in the prehistoric time. Many regions along Siamese gulf and Malay Peninsula became ports and entrepôt for the navigation between India and China and navigation between Kingdoms in the regions. Those ships can navigate in accordance with the seasonal wind and can continue more far to the Asia Minor, Mediterranean region and Roman Empire weather in direct or indirect navigation. The evidences of international trades are seen through the existing of the seaport of Oc-Eo in Mekong delta (Southern Vietnam). The archaeological objects excavated from these sites and along with Chinese accounts can be understood of strong international trade at that time. It raised a question of means of exchange at the time that needs further discussion. Let us turn to the coins.

In 1947, Louis Malleret conducted thorough archaeological excavations in Oc-Eo. Of this research, Malleret found ancient foundations and other archaeological artifacts which were from China, India and Rome. What interest us of the findings are the gold and silver objects which includes gold medals and a number of Roman coins with images of Emperors. Moreover, many other types of seal coins were also found with different images (fig. 65-68), and some have *Devanaḡarī* characters. Similarly, the excavations at Angkor Borei (Takeo province), another archaeological site dated to the same period and linked to Oc-Eo with canal, were also found

similar silver coins (fig. 69). These archaeological evidences clearly show the existence of wide trading systems of the Funan. Moreover, it seems clear that the currency existed, even though we are not sure whether Funan had its own. However, many researchers have thus far thought that Cambodia had used currency only from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The trade at the time was in the form trade an object for another. Punjabhan, a Thai researcher, argues that the local people already had their own currency such as the coins of Funan and *Dvaravati* <sup>62</sup>. Her argument is based on the coins found in Oc-Eo and other archaeological sites in Thailand especially in U-thong where belonged to Funan at the time. Those coins were made of silver, tin and copper by using moulds made of clay or stone. Nevertheless, there only few coins have been found. Punjabhan notifies that there are two types of Funanese coins. The ones that were found in U-thong are thick and flat. They were probably made by the smiths at royal palace. Others were found in villages out side U-thong. These coins are round with round-shape impressed in the center and thinner than the



Figure 65



Figure 66



Figure 67



Figure 68

Figure 65-68: Examples of silver coins found at Oc-Eo.



Figure 69: Silver coins found at Oc-Eo.

<sup>62</sup> Punjabhan, 2534 B.E.: 15.

ones in U-thon. It is believed that these coins were made by the smiths in general. Notably, these coins contain two types of images. The first, on one side depicts images of the Sun and Crescent Moon, and on the other side has the writing in *Devanagari* scripts or image of Garuda holding Naga. The second type depicts on one side image of a conch and the other side depicts a pavilion under which an image of fish is shown. Michel Tranet, who is very interested and has a personal collection of ancient objects of proto-history and early history, conducted study on these objects and published a number of books. He shows his disagreement with researchers with the supportive argument taken from inscription Ka. 40 and had written that Khmers might already have monetary coin system as stated in his book entitled *History of Cambodia: the Establishment of Khmer State* published in 2002 (in Khmer). He argues that the ancient Khmers used gold, silver, bronze, tin and Chinese coins as a means of exchange<sup>63</sup>. On the other hand, Michael Vickery, by using same epigraphic and Chinese annals, had convincingly concluded that Khmers at that time did use no currency of trade. In the daily exchange, people used bartering system but agreed that they used gold, perfume or other valuable objects in larger transactions such paying impost, buying land or buying/redeem slaves<sup>64</sup>. In the Angkorian times, the bartering economy was also adopted according to Chinese account of Zhou Da-guan: “[...] In small transactions barter is carried on with rice, cereals, and Chinese objects; fabrics are next employed, and finally, in big deals, gold or silver is used”.<sup>65</sup> Not mentioning the use of silverwares, it is worthy to note that many inscriptions had talked also of gold and silver content with different measurements in *jyan* (ឡាន), *lin* (លីន) and *pata* (បាតា)<sup>66</sup>. With sign of store in value, silver seems used largely in Cambodia since the ancient period. Were gold and silver used as means of exchange mentioned in

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<sup>63</sup> Tranet 2002: 95.

<sup>64</sup> Vickery 1996, pp. 288-89.

<sup>65</sup> Zhou 1993: 43.

<sup>66</sup> Known later as *jañjin* (ជ័រ្យ័ន័), *tāmliñ* (តាម័ល័ន័) and *pata* (បាតា).

ancient inscriptions just lumps of gold or silver? Does one can see that this is among the first sign of *pre-monetary* in Cambodia?

With convincingly trying to highlight the pre-monetary in Angkor Period, let's find the scenes of markets engraving on gallery wall of Bayon and Banteay Chhmar. Figure 70 taken in Bayon shows a seller weighing the something by using hand-scale. Figure 71 taken in Banteay Chhmar shows a spectacular event in the market, which behind group of people, it presumed that there was a cloth stall. Did they barter or use coins in such market? It is convincing to say so. One is hardly to believe that a kingdom which was once had been vast extension in both economics and politics in Mainland Southeast Asia adopted a bartering economic system. However, one can say nothing unless they find any strong evidences such as coins or the alike. On the other hand, we have clear evidence of coinage used appeared in 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it was probably under the Siamese influence. According to the Royal Chronicle, Luong Preah Sdach Kan ordered the mint coins for use in exchange. The coins were similar to *prak' sleng* made out of gold and silver with an image of Naga on one side<sup>67</sup>. Up until now, however, we have never



Figure 70: Bayon, 12<sup>th</sup> century. Scene depicted market.



Figure 71: Banteay Chhmar, 12<sup>th</sup> century. Scene depicted market.

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<sup>67</sup> Leclère 1974: 268.

found any of those coins. According to ancient achieve found in the Phnom Penh National Museum, we know that there are some ancient coins housed in its reserve. However, there is less study on the ancient monetary in Cambodia beside George Groslier's classic book entitled *Recherches sur les Cambodgiens* published in 1921<sup>68</sup>.

It was until 19<sup>th</sup> century, we have found some ancient coins. Henri Mouhot who traveled to Angkor in 1860 confirmed that he found coins in the Angkor region, which were similar to those, used in *Cochinchina* which was called *prak' naen*. The coin he found was bigger than those of *Cochinchina*. On the other hand, only monetary coins of the reign of Ang Duong that we have better known. After officially reigning in 1953, he had ordered to mint new coins on which one side depicted image of temple, and the other with image of "*han~~sa~~ta* (swan like mythical birth)" (fig. 72). Interestingly, the evidence of coin press was found at ancient City of Udong. The villagers call *pum prak'* (coin press) with a memory



Figure 72: Silver coin minted in the reign of Preah Ang Duong.



Figure 73: Coin press found in a village of the ancient Capital of Udong. This iron press is worship today as *anak ta* known as *neak ta bumbha prak'* "coin press".

<sup>68</sup> Groslier 1921, *Recherches sur les cambodgiens*, Augustin Challamel, Paris.

that this huge iron tools was once used to press coins. Nowadays, the press is considered as worshipping object for villagers (fig. 73). After that the coin production were made during the reign of King Norodom (fig. 74) and was King Sisowath's medail (fig. 75).



Figure 74: Silver coin minted in the reign of His Majesty King Norodom.  
(Photo by Darryl Collins).



Figure 75: Silver medal of His Majesty King Sisowath.  
(Photo by Darryl Collins).

### Silverwares as store in value

As talking in above section, silver has been regarded object of investment. It has been used long time as a form of money and store of value. With this qualification, when it is crafted into articles, silverwares are also bearing this characteristic of store in value. In the Khmer society, silverwares have been long use for transactions. In the ancient time, we have extensively information from epigraphy that in buying land or redeem slaves, one can pay in many form including in silverwares. Thus, Khmer household possess silverware beyond utensils meaning but as their sign of wealth.

In the Khmer society, about 90 percents of the Khmer people are farmers. The rests are people who work in the towns such as government employees, businessmen, workers, artisans etc. They live

mainly in the town and its agglomerations. Every Khmer family especially farmers possesses of land, rice fields, cattle and household materials which are their only visible wealth. Part of crops getting from field is sold or bartered for other goods that they can not produced them such as clothes, table utensils, spices etc. Today, in the most rural area in Cambodia, the bartering economy is still practiced. To this moment, it sounds that, for the sake of familial stability, Khmer families possess no further valuable wealth. How can they do for large spend in case of immediate or urgent needs? In this case, the possession of valuable objects such as silverwares must be important. We knew that the real estate assets such as land, house are the main wealth and family heirloom. This very spectacular characteristic of Khmer family can be highlight here in a short sentence pronounced by upland farmers. They complaint that “people who live in the highland who practice slash and burn are not stable in their life because they possess no land title and even no single tree left for their children. This is different from irrigated rice farmers which posses at least rice field”. If it happens in this way, the Khmer families must do something to invest for the safe of their family. In the past, one can see clear that they have invest store in value objects among them gold jewelries and silverwares are the most frequent. These objects will be bartered against goods that they do not have. Or, they can simply sale out in the market for money. In the daily transactions, farmer bartered their rice crops again fermented fish, salt, spices and household materials. On the contrary, potters, fishermen and artisans barter their production again rice. This trade system even practice today in the rural area. Until very recent when US Dollars were not circulated in Cambodia extensively, people use gold as metal or as jewelry to pay for larger transactions, for instance buying house, car, motorbike, TV etc. They even cut off some part of their necklace, finger ring... for the payment. We are sure that, to the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, every Khmer family may experience this event in their life. This is why we have often seen that farmers had tighten their own belt to buy gold jewelries which one might think that Khmers love to wear gold but the

real purpose is the real familial investment for later use in the case of urgent payment when the system of banking do not widely function.

If we look back to the ancient time, according to the source of Khmer epigraphy, we have rich information on land transaction and redeeming slaves by bartering against valuable objects among them are gold and silver metal, jewelries, silverwares, copperware, and cattle. Gold and silver bartering system had been conducted in two forms: as metal with different weighs and as ready-made wares. Thus this bartering was belief to be practiced in Cambodia until 16<sup>th</sup> century before the first appearance of minted coins in Khmer history. However, silverwares have been used as mean for bartering until recently. Although silver coins were minted, the circulation of such coins was relatively limited because the tradition of bartering had been rooted too deep in the people's life and remains popular within Khmer farmers. So as family investment, silverwares remains most wanted. We can even observe today that most of Khmer families, except most of the city dwellers, have no habitude to keep cashes in home but to convert them into gold jewelries. The farmers are not familiar with bank system. Until about three decades before, the real family investment is to collect any thing with store in value symbol.

In brief, we can see the relationship of silverware in Khmer life with different aspects. First point, one cannot deny of quality and superiority of silver as precious metal. Second point is aspect of art which silversmiths have crafted silverware and its decoration. These two qualifications make silverwares of high value and bearing a store in value symbol until today even banking system had been introduced so far. However, since US Dollars have fluxed Cambodian market and one could spend them at any circumstance, the store in value characteristic of gold silverwares has been faded. This is normal because one country cannot stay with this outdated economic system. But, unluckily, when silverwares bear no more roles in investment value, Cambodia

silversmithery faces with hard condition and activity of production is limit to supply tourist market when local use is ceased.

### 3. Silverware and the Court

In this section, we will talk the relationship of silverwares and the court of Cambodia. We have already known; Khmer considers silverwares beyond the daily use utensils but as store in value things. As metal, silver is second in value to gold, thus it is available to well-off people and high classes such as aristocrats and Royal families. Until now, Royal Palace is major user of silverwares. Besides using silverwares as symbol of prosper and Royal regalia; Khmer King prefers to use silverwares as royal tributes, ceremonial accessories, official decoration, and as highest, diplomatic and honored gifts to bestow on recipients to the officers and foreign delegations and head of state (fig. 76).

In the past time, Khmer aristocrats might have own silversmith working hire well-known silversmith to work in their house to craft silverwares



Figure 76: His Majesty King-father Norodom Sihanouk offered silverware to foreign diplomat.

for the household use and to use as tributes to the King and high ranking officers. In the Royal Place, His Majesty the King possesses his own atelier and master smiths.

The many evidences such as epigraphy, bas-relief, archaeological materials, Chinese annals, old pictures and silverwares exhibited in the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh attest that Khmer King loves deeply luxury utensils made of gold and silver. The description of Chinese envoy during late 13<sup>th</sup> century, Zhou Daguan, could make us believable. He had written that:

“Every person dining in the houses of nobles or rich people is given silver plates, and sometimes even gold one...Then came other girls carrying gold and silver vessels from the palace and a whole galaxy of ornaments, of very special design, the uses of which were strange to me.”<sup>69</sup>

This tradition has continued to present day. European traveler who had visited Cambodia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century said that Khmer King often gave betel boxes to foreigners who visited him<sup>70</sup> and to had awarded gold and silverwares to his ministers. Figure 77 showing when Jacqueline Kennedy visited Cambodia in 1967, Norodom Sihakouk presented her with traditional Khmer gold and silverwares.

### The Silver Pagoda

The deep love of silver in heart of Khmer King and royal family is seen through the building of Vat Preah Keo Morokot, the royal pagoda known among tourist as «Silver Pagoda». This pagoda had been build by King Norodom in 1892-1902 with 5,329 silver floor tiles of 1125 grams each<sup>71</sup>. This pagoda is part of the Royal Palace where today is one of the famous tourist spot in Phnom Penh because of its silver floor.

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<sup>69</sup> Zhou 1993, p. 72.

<sup>70</sup> Vicent 1873: 295 cf. Tho 2008, Udaya 8: 62.

<sup>71</sup> Jeldres and Chajitvanit 1999:34.



Figure 77: Prince Norodom Sihanouk had shown silverwares to Madame Jacqueline Kennedy. (Photo: Darryl Collin)

## CHAPTER III

# KHMER SILVERSMITHERY TODAY



Cambodian silversmithery is believed to be rooted in pre and protohistoric time. Techniques used at this time consisted of annealing, hammering and hand-raised shaping. This technique is known as repoussé-chasing which is a familiar silver crafting technique in many countries in the world. Nonetheless, archaeological silverwares which survive to the present day are rare; however, the discovery in the Oc-Eo of some hammers and other tools presuming as tool used at the workshop of goldsmith and silversmith as well as gold and silver drops found in the soil offer support for the above statement.

A silversmith means a person who primarily works on crafting silver into articles. Thus, if one takes this narrow definition from the word «silver» into account, this explanation does not provide proper meaning to the fact that silversmiths work; thus, historically, in Cambodia as well as many parts in the world, the training and works of silversmiths largely overlap with that of goldsmith's. They craft not only silver but also copper, brass and even gold.

## 1. Khmer Silversmiths

Today, silversmiths in Cambodia can be classified into two main categories—one whose practice in the villages passed down generations and the other refers to those silversmiths who were trained in the Écoles des Arts Cambodgiens (Schools of Cambodian Decorative Arts) and those silversmiths who work alone.

The first group refers to the villages located eastward of the former Royal Capital of Udong in an agglomeration known as Kampong Luong which means royal port and Koh Chen located at the opposite river bank of Tonle Sap. Udong was the Royal Capital from 17<sup>th</sup>-late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many historical building were found on the top of the Royal Collin known as Phnom Preah Reach Troap or Phnom Attaros (fig. 78). When Royal Capital moved to Phnom Penh in 1866, many of the silversmith masters moved

to the new Capital of Phnom Penh and the corporation of silversmiths in region of Kampong Luong becomes provincial artisans. The silversmith corporation who went with the King gathered in Phnom Penh near the Royal Palace in a village known as Phsar Sinhek. This village then became a distinctive market of silverwares of the country and remains so to the present day. Beside these two important silversmith corporation, we also knew that there were some silversmiths, who worked individually here and there in many corners of Cambodia especially in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the silversmiths in Battambang were among skilled artisans in Cambodia. Today, some silversmiths, who originated from Kampong Luong and Koh Chen and from other corners, have moved to Siemreap to find job in the workshops of large souvenir shops. When the Royal Capital moved to Phnom Penh, the series of workshops that once belonged to the old court Oudong were reinstalled in annexes of the new Royal Palace. This royal ateliers expanded and became the Schools of Cambodian Decorative Arts, whose primary purpose was to craft objects for the Palace and to foster new artisans. In 1965, this school was then extended, becoming the Royal University of Fine Arts. During that period, the school had produced many commissioned artisans and artists.



Figure 78: Collin of Attaparassa. Viewed from Kampong Luong.

According to a intense survey of George Groslier, whose received important mandate from the French Governor-General to create the Schools of Cambodian Decorative Arts, he had categorized Khmer artisans into 2 categories—group «A» for those artisans whose their skill have been passed down generation by adopting man-to-man transmission model and group «B» for those who trained in accordance with the curriculum of the school of decorative arts. He had added another group «C» for those artisans who had learned from those in group «B». Group «C» could easily be dissolved into group «A». He had studied carefully on the method of knowledge transmission of each category by observing their workmanship and characteristic of Khmer art formula of ornaments and measurement to standardize them. His series of surveys had been published respectively in *Revue Indochinoise* and in a revue of the researches, on arts, monuments, and ethnography of Cambodia entitled *Arts et Archéologie Khmers*, founded and directed by himself which were published between 1918-1930<sup>72</sup>. In her admirable doctoral thesis, *Citing Angkor: The “Cambodian Arts” in the Ages of Restoration 1918-2000*, Ingrid Muan provide an intensive study of the psychology of Khmer artists and artisans and the restoration of Khmer arts.

George Groslier, whose mandate is to revive Khmer indigenous crafted arts and to stabilize the Schools of Cambodian Decorative Arts, invited odd and end master artisans from different corners of Cambodia to teach their skill and their workmanship in the newly established Schools of Cambodian Decorative Arts. The silver ateliers of the palace became a real class to train new young talent artisan. Once, they have finished their education; they returned to their birthplace to earn a livelyhood and to share his skill with others. Some were employed at some large silver workshops in Phnom Penh or work alone. The Schools of Cambodian Decorative Arts had also opened their own corporation for

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<sup>72</sup> *Revue Indochinoise* (1918-19), *Revue Arts et Archéologies Khmers* I-II (1926), *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* (1929-30), etc.

run a business of art objects produced by the school. The quality of silverwares crafted by the smiths of the school and smiths of the villages were markedly different, especially terms of motifs and workmanship because Groslier had fixed and standardized the Khmer ornament and motif. Those students, once they graduated from school, would find a job in any silver workshop in Phnom Penh, working on commission to supply art objects to aristocrats and the well-to-do. While silversmiths in the villages who have learned and worked spontaneously and repeated ceaselessly from the elders in the villages, they continue to craft ordinary silverwares of all kinds for commoner.

### Kampong Luong-Koh Chen Craftsmen

Not far from former Royal Capital of Udong, lying in the banks of Tonle Sap, there exist several villages skilled in crafting silverwares. On the west bank, there are as the villages of Por Toch and Sanvor and on the east bank, there are Prek Kdam and Koh Chen villages. This area known as Kampong Luong meaning «Royal Port» was the former port of Udong Court. This port had been used for hundred years until the Royal Palace moved to Phnom Penh in the reign of His Majesty Preah Norodom. When the court was at Udong, foreign ships from Portugal, Spain, Japan and France, embarked and debarked their goods and to pay courtesy visit to the King.

Before going further into the topic of the silversmithery tradition of this region, we would like to brief discuss the geo-history of region. Udong had been used a Royal residence and Royal Capital for over a century, at least from 17<sup>th</sup> to 1866, which was His Majesty King Norodom moved Capital to Phnom Penh with the support of French Protectorate Administration. Among archaeological remains and historical buildings on the top of Phnom Preah Reach Troap, we could see many Buddhist monasteries around the hill and a special iron die which villagers still remember that this was silver coin press. It is also noteworthy to underline that many villages occupied in and around Udong are famous in various artisanal

works. Carpenters of this region are among the most famous in Cambodia. A village name Psar Dek of Udong is famous for bronze casting until present-day. As evidence, their workmanship, one can find a bronze statue of His Majesty the King Ang Duong on the horse (fig. 79) at the fork point, which connect the National Road 5 to Kampong Loung the former port of Udong Court, where villagers form a special corporation of silversmith.

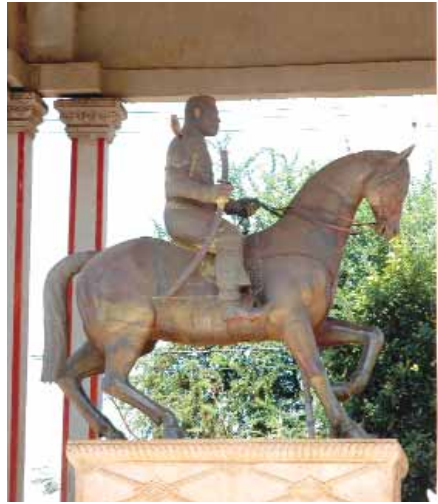


Figure 79: Bronze statue of Preah Ang Duong. Statue was made by bronze casters at Phsar Dek village near Udong.

The Royal Capital is the central seat of power for the country, with various villages specializing in different trades settling around the capital. Similarly, the Royal Palace has corporations with its own specialty forming in the annexes around the palace. The Royal Palace is a miniature or a microcosm of a country. When the country has satellite villages in every corner, the Royal Capital is composed of above "quarters," such as those belonging to the goldsmiths, the silversmiths, lacquer smiths, etc. The aristocratic craftsmen always moved with the Royal Palace. When Royal Palace was installed in new place, King brought with him the corporation of goldsmith and eventually the villages of silversmith. Below, we would like to talk on silvers craftsmanship and their tradition of each place separately—Kampong Loung, Koh Chen, Phnom Penh and Siemreap.

### Kampong Luong Craftsmen

Kampong Luong is a commune located in the about 36 k.m in the Ponhea Lu District, Kandal Province, north-west of Phnom Penh. Kampong Luong composes of 8 villages, but among them only Por Toch village is skilled

in traditional silversmithery and is bustling with activity. Sangvar village consists of about 2 or 3 household who continue silversmithery but, in fact, they have crafted only copper and brass animal boxes.

In Por Toch, villagers crafted silver boxes as a part of their daily routine. Thus every one, men and women, possessed this skill. Since Por Toch village is the center of the commune, the inhabitants identify their village by the name of the commune “Kampong Luong,” which was once the former royal port of Oudong. Every smiths in Por Toch village bears a special skill in crafting silver boxes of animal and fruit shapes (fig. 80). They rarely craft other types of silverwares. To craft silver boxes, one demands a skillful and a great patience because silver boxes consist of different concave and sinuous shapes with most intricate decoration on the surface.



Figure 80: Por Toch village.  
Silver engraving.

### Koh Chen Craftsmen

In the opposite of Por Toch village at the east bank of Tonle Sap, there also exist two silversmith villages, Prek Kdam and Koh Chen villages which are located in the Koh Chen Commune. This area is known as Koh Chen among silverware connoisseur and silverware’s businessmen in Cambodia today.

According to the geo-history of the region, we can put the area as part of Royal Port, “Kampong Luong” even though, in the reality, the region Kampong Luong and Koh Chen are geographically separated by Tonle Sap. It is noteworthy to remark that silversmiths in the Prek Kdam and

Koh Chen villages possess another silversmithery skill. Here, smiths are skilled in crafting big articles with less concave. They craft mainly silver bowl, tray, water jug, kettle, low pedestal dish, high pedestal dish, and wedding accessories, etc (fig. 81). These articles are consisted of geometric shape which is less complicated in hand-shaping if we compare them with those articles crafted in Kampong Luong region.



Figure 81:  
Koh Chen village.  
Silver engraving.

The difference between these two regions which is separated by the river, it can proof the rich tradition of silversmiths in Cambodia.

### Phnom Penh Craftsmen

As we had mentioned repeatedly when Royal Capital moved to Phnom Penh, subsequently, many outstanding silversmiths have moved to and resettled in new Royal Capital of Phnom Penh. They have gathered in a village named Phsar Sinhek located near Royal Palace between Unnalom Pagoda and Veal Preah Men alongside of Preah Sothearos Boulevard. This village has become quickly a new silverware corporation to supply commissioned art objects to the Royal Palace and aristocrats living in Phnom Penh and tourists.

Later from 1950's to 1970's, village of Phsar Sinhek then became a famous spot in Phnom Penh, among the European tourist which was known as Silver Street (fig. 82). When Phsar Sinhek becomes main

silversmith corporation for the new capital, the smiths who traditionally worked region of Luong and Koh Chen were then recognized as provincial silversmiths. Their production then was not considered as masterpieces. But, it is noteworthy to remark that the village silversmiths have preserved their tradition to the present and silversmiths are still busy with making silverwares even though many famous shops had produced and selected silverwares for tourist and users such as Bun Than, Pa Ong, etc.

After 1979, the survived silversmiths who practiced in Phnom Penh before war some have regained their silver work and some other have abandoned it. Today, most of survived masters of silversmiths are too old to continue working. The School of Decorative Arts in Phnom Penh has been reopened and produced some silversmiths. But it very few graduates were able to find jobs in this fields, many return to working on wood or stone sculpting and even painting. This is due to the fact that income earned from working on silverwares is very small while to craft silverware demands a great patience and time. Today, only 2 or 3 among them have continued to work with this skill. The famous one is Mr. Sum Sinoeurn (fig. 83), whose work is exceptional since he received his training directly from his father, master Sum Samay, who is one of the most well-known masters of silversmiths since the 1960's.



Figure 82: Silverware shops along Preah Sothearos Boulevard.



Figure 83: Silversmith in Phnom Penh, Mr. Sum Sinoeurn.

## Siemreap Craftsmen

As stated earlier in the beginning of this section, there are some silversmiths especially from Kampong Luong and Koh Chen region, who have migrated to Siemreap to produce silverware for tourist market. In this case, technique and silver articles are relatively similar to the regions from which they originated. It is, however, the silversmithing in Siemreap is not yet a remarkable production as we have seen in the region near Udong. Today, silver shop owners have hired silversmiths from Kampong Luong, Koh Chen or in other corners of the country to work in their ateliers to attract tourists but they do not have, concrete plan to develop into an actual ateliers focus on the production of silverware. Mr. Chum Thav, a silversmith from Koh Dach village of the Mekong island region, came to Siemreap three year ago to work at Sary Kalyan silver shop. Sary Kalyan and her family come from Prek Kdam and have resettled in Siemreap about ten years before to open atelier and run her business (fig. 84)<sup>73</sup>. He works for Sary Kalyan shop as a demonstration rather than a real production activity. He earns a salary from the owner. As silverwares display in the mirror are not from Kampong Luong and Koh Chen.



Figure 84: Siemreap. Silversmith working in front of silverware shop to attract tourist.

For a while, although some amount of silversmiths have resettled in Siemreap, the silversmithery in this famous tourist spot show no stable market yet and the main supply remains largely from Kampong Luong

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<sup>73</sup> Silver shop named Sary Kalyan located along Commaille Boulevard is one of some small example of double function, atelier and shop, while most of the shops get their silverwares from Kampong Luong-Koh Chen.

and Koh Chen. However, as more and more silversmiths and their families migrate to Siem Reap, the steady supply of tourists will provide a stable market for Cambodian silverware, which in turn may lead to greater growth within this field.

## 2. Knowledge Transmission

As I mentioned earlier, silversmiths in Cambodia are divided into two different groups and the method of knowledge transmission operates differently from one group to another. The first group can be called “villager-silversmiths” who transfer the knowledge of their craft via a man-to-man method, i.e. from parents to children, from generation to generation. Their production operated under a chain responsibility. Any household, men work on preparing silver content and hand-raising stake while women work on decoration and finishing. Beside the family, the pagoda remains the crucial place of training and knowledge transference. The pagoda plays an important role in passing down all kind of knowledge from Buddhism, literature to the craftsmanship. This tradition might inherit from the ancient time when *śrama* play a role of training place.

However, George Groslier had noted that smiths learnt in pagoda were among carpenter, wood sculptor, lacquer, painter, while blacksmith, jeweler, silversmith and potter were always trained outside pagoda. Thus, transference of artisanship is rarely passed out far from their family, village or community. When one smith shares their knowledge to outsider, he/she employs one apprentice for long period without salary and the apprentice do need not to pay for training.

Besides, in Cambodian general perceptions, knowledge of smiths is always linked with black magic or at least one has to be honest and loyal. Apprentices have to prepare accessory to « non-human » master which is known as « *brah bisnukāra* ». Thus the knowledge transference is seen two methods—man-to-man method and schooling method.

## Training of the School of Decorative Arts

When French had installed his colonial administration in Cambodia, the country was so weak. In their frequent treaties on art, education, and preservation, French planners expressed dismay over what they saw as an increasing degeneration of the ancestral tradition. Khmer artists and smiths of art object had produced articles by mixing their motif and style between Khmer, Western, and Chinese etc., which caused great concern among French scholars. The French entrusted Groslier to restore this decadent, mixed and detestable art object by appointing him to organize Écoles des Arts Cambodgiens in 1918. He had invited various master artisans from different corners throughout Cambodia to teach their skill and their workmanship in the newly established, l'Écoles des Arts Cambodgiens, which was only to be an extension of Palace's ateliers. Silversmithery is one of the 6 sections which were recently established. He created a curriculum of the study and helped to formulate a standard unit of measurement and scale for Khmer ornaments. He also designed new objects in accordance to emerging modern sensibilities in Cambodia at the time. His program of formation had been shown in his article, «La convalescence des Arts cambodgiens». The training at l'Écoles des Arts Cambodgiens continued and was further elaborated upon until it evolved into Royal University of Fine Arts in 1965, which had 5 faculties—Faculty of Plastic Arts, Faculty of Choreography, Faculty of Music, Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism, Faculty of Archaeology. As a part of the change from being a school to being a university, the former section of Écoles des Arts Cambodgiens, which focused on sculpting, painting and silverware design, transformed into Faculty of Plastic Arts, which further broken into two separate sections. The programs found in the first section was based upon the curriculum from the old school of plastic arts. Once the students graduated from the first section, they would then study under the second section, which studied the theories of art production. This second section was named: the Faculty of Plastic Arts. Silversmithery was only taught in the first section because it was considered to be a

rudimentary knowledge of Khmer art – not a part of the higher “theories of art production.” The program in silversmithery lasted for 6 years. In the beginning, students who trained in silversmithery had increased successively. The development of a curriculum and the official training of silversmiths as a section within the Faculty of Plastic Arts fostered a name for Khmer silverwares. Art collectors began buying Cambodian silver objects and shops selling Khmer silverware opened in New York, Paris and other international city. This desire for Cambodian silverware lasted until 1975 when Khmer Rouge came to power. After 1979, school of decorative arts reopened with new artists, craftsmen and smiths but it was not a university like it was before. The situation was more similar to when Groslier was trying to establish the school. Similar to other sections, the silversmithery section was created but it had only a couple students. Most of students who gained certification of art in silversmithery neither practiced their skill nor trained new generation of silversmith. Rather, they chose to work as wood or stone sculptors, painters or government bureaucrats. Today, almost no student enrolls in this section, signaling the end of art commission in silversmithery.

### Man-to-man knowledge transmission

Although the official formation of commission silversmithery has reached its end, the knowledge transference under form of family circle and community is still strong. In Kampong Luong and Koh Chen area, we could find many young people practicing this smithery. Different from school training with 6 years program, children in the silversmith villages have learnt their skill day by day when they are free from school. They will become one day a silversmith. In the meantime, some families have sent their children to work at some famous silversmiths in the villages in order to let them learn the skill. The smiths welcomed these children because they do not need to pay monetarily. While the children are providing free labor, they gain knowledge of the craft through hands-on experience. Perhaps one day, they can become a silversmith in their own rights. The knowledge of the craft is thus transferred from one generation to next

generation<sup>74</sup>. Now, there are, however, some negative signs, thus many master of silversmiths in the villages complained of their income especially since their craft requires such perseverance and consumes so much time. What motivates them continue to craft silver objects because they for the value the skilled they have learned from their ancestors and would like to pass it onto the next generation. Unfortunately, many well-off silversmiths push their children to learn other skill and do not want them to follow their path.

### Some famous silversmiths today

In this section, we would like to highlight some famous silversmiths in Cambodia—silversmith trained through the school system and silversmiths trained in the villages. We will discuss their biography and why they gain their reputation among others. In the above chapter, we knew that we have classified silversmiths into three categories—silversmiths who learn in school of decorative arts in Phnom Penh (Royal University of Fine Arts), silversmiths of the villages, whose their knowledge is passed down from their ancestors, and silversmiths have learned from first group but with no curriculum as in the school. In the following, we would like to highlight some of them when each of them has started their training and apprentice in different circumstances.

#### Master Sum Samay (fig. 85)

Master Sum Samay was born in Phnom Penh in 1924 in a silversmith family. His grandfather and his father were silversmiths. He had started his trainingship in silversmithery in the Écoles des Arts Décoratives in Phnom Penh when he had 15 years olds. Later, he became a teacher in this school and had practiced his silversmithery at home. He has crafted

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<sup>74</sup> In our communication with master smiths in the villages, they said that every smith is more than happy to transfer their knowledge to the young generation. They do not need to pay, but silversmiths show their worries when now most of younger villagers have no perseverance and patience. Instead, they work at garment factories and construction sites.

all kinds of articles—from jewelry to tableware and Buddha statuettes. Master Sum Samay had gained his honorable title as great artist in 1993 from Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. He was retired in 1997 and has continued to train some students in his house. It has been about three year since he stopped crafting silverwares due to his age. He transferred all his knowledge to his children. But among them, only Mr. Sum Sinoeurn, who also a teach silversmithery in the Royal University of Fine Arts, continues the tradition. Many types of silverware crafted by Master Sum Samay are housed in the Royal Palace, homes of aristocrats, foreign embassies in Phnom Penh and in abroad. Figure 86 is a tea set that the Master Sum Samay keeps as his last souvenir.



Figure 85: Master silversmith Sum Samay.



Figure 86: Tea box and kettle.  
Last masterpieces of Master Sum Samay.

### Sum Sinoeurn (fig. 87)

Son of master Sum Samay, Mr. Sum Sinoeurn gains his reputation and might be the most well-known commission silversmith in Cambodia today. He has started his training in silversmithery sometime the fall of Phnom Penh. After 1979, he had continued his training at the School of decorative arts in Phnom Penh where his father, master Sum Samay was a teacher. Today, he teaches silversmithery in the School of decorative arts, a section of University of Fine Arts, and he has his own atelier.

Besides teaching at the School of decorative arts, he has many apprentices at his atelier, thus some could run the business on his own and some work as employees in silver shops throughout Phnom Penh. Today, he has crafted mainly commission silver articles. The owners come to ask him to craft masterpieces for their own use or to present to high profile guest. Sum Sinoeurn has told us that some well-to-do Khmer family order silverwares from him to keep as bygone Khmer cultural material especially Khmer oversea. Figures 88-90 are a few examples of his masterpieces. Mr. Sinoeurn could craft all kinds of silver articles such as jewelry, decorative medal, utensil, ritual accessories, devotional objects, Buddha statuette, and accessories for royal ballet dancer. Below are some examples of his masterpieces.



Figure 87: Silversmith, Mr. Sum Sinoeurn.



Figure 88

Figure 88-90: Masterpieces of Silversmith, Mr. Sum Sinoeurn.



Figure 89



Figure 90

### Sok Leng (Por Toch, Kampong Luong) (fig. 91)

Mr. Sok Leng is one of well-known silversmith in Por Toch. Mr. Leng had learnt silvrsmithery from his father when he has 17 years old. He is married to a woman from Kampong Chhang Province. He has taught his wife to craft silverwares. He has two children although none has inherited his knowledge. As a smith in the Por Toch village, Mr. Leng accepts to craft mainly silver article. Every silversmith in his village knows that Mr. Leng is skillful in hand-raising stake of small and of exceptional big size animal boxes. His specialty is in crafting tiny animal boxes, which he produces on his own without taking any commissions (fig. 92-96). By doing so, he makes more profit because he cuts out the middleman.



Figure 91: Silversmith, Mr.Sok Leng (Por Toch village, Kampong Luong).



Figure 92



Figure 93



Figure 94



Figure 95



Figure 96

Figure 92-96: Masterpieces of Silversmith, Mr. Sok Leng.

### Pen Sor (Por Toch, Kampong Luong)

Mr. Pen Sor is also a well-known silversmith in Por Toch village, Kampong Luong. He learned silversmithery in 1979 from his father and the famous silversmiths in the village. He married Miss Khann Sinat of the same village. She learned to craft silverwares since she had 10 years old. As other smiths in the village, he and his wife work as team. He pounds out the basic shape of the object and, after this, his wife continues with creating the intricate designs. Mr. Sor and his wife are proud of their business success. He has gathered some women silversmith and apprentice in the village to work under his control thus he can take over a large work from shop owners in Phnom Penh. Meanwhile, Mrs. Sinath has put silverwares that she has crafted and bought from other smiths in the village to display on sale at her home. Nowadays, after long period of crafting silverwares, Mr. Sor become an expert in crafting big flat copper decorated panel for decorating building such as surface of pediment, decorated hanging lamp and label or logo of company etc. (fig. 97-100).



Figure 97



Figure 98



Figure 99



Figure 100

Figure 97-100: Masterpieces of Silversmith, Mr. Pen Sor.

### Va Kim leng (Koh Chen)

Mr. Var Kim Leng is well-known silversmith in Koh Chen village on the east bank of Tonle Sap. Now, he is 71 years old. His wife, Mrs. Khiev Sukhun alias Heun is also a part of the silverware business. He has 8 children, 5 sons and 3 daughters. All his children have learnt silversmithery from him and now are among active silversmiths in the village. Since he has many children to help him, he gain trust from shop owners in Phnom Penh. Even, his sons and daughters were married and live in separate houses, but Mr. Kim Leng stay as pillar and all his children work under his control. As he is among the well-known silversmiths in his village, he could get many orders from Phnom Penh and distribute them to his children. Mr. Leng has started his carrer since he was young. He could craft all kind of silverwares that are the skill of his village such as pedestal dish, pedestal tray, pedestals lidded bowl, wedding accessories, etc. Every silverware shop owner in Phnom Penh knows him well. He and his children are proud of their carrer and skill. They believe that silversmithery in Cambodia will not fade. One of his son has told that today there has a good sign when many well-to-do Khmer family turn to appreciate silverwares again.

### 3. Silverware Productions

Silversmiths use different techniques to craft silverwares—lost-wax technique, spinning or pressing in a die or mould and hand-raised technique. Hand-raised technique is also known as repoussé-chasing. This technique is frequently used and familiar among silversmiths around the world. Khmer silver craftsmen use this later technique for millenniums and as seen throughout Southeast Asia, this technique has changed little over time. They have continued to craft silver articles in this traditional hand-raised manner. The description of this process had delighted Margaret G. Forsythe in *Arts of Asia*<sup>75</sup>. The little change in

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<sup>75</sup> Forsythe, Margaret G., "Modern Mien Silver", *Arts of Asia*, May-June 1984, p. 75-81.

techniques that has taken place is due to the new introduction of some mechanical tools such as diesel-run rolling mill to replace hand work to make silver plate; however, general process of production has remained the same. This ceaseless continuity of hand-raised technique is probably due to the metal property: silver is ductile and malleable.

As mentioned above, silver can be crafted in three different ways: lost-wax casting technique, spinning or pressing in dies and hand-raised chasing technique. Lost-wax casting technique, which is usually applied in casting bronze or copper, can also be applied to silver. It is rarely used except in the cases where big statues or some Buddha statuette needs to be cast because they are too big and details are too intricate, rendering hand-raised hammering impossible. The use of lost-wax casting could be seen, for example, in a Nandin statue found in 1983 in Toul Kuha, Saang District (Kandal). For the reason of price, on the other hand, to use lost-wax casting technique is not the choice of silversmith when it wastes silver raw material. Moreover, according to the metal fact, silver could turn tarnish and break when cast, explaining why hand-raised chasing is the preferred technique. Hand made silverwares are also far stronger and more beautiful in finishing than spinning or molding. The many steps in the process of hand made silverware require a long time and demand the skills of highly trained craftsmen. The craftsmen tend to work under two basic systems, either for an atelier or at home. However, it is very particular to Khmer silver artisans as we can see two categories of silversmith—simple silversmiths of the villages and well-trained artist. Silversmiths in the villages tend to work as a family or as a team—men work from the beginning to raising stake while women work on finishing i.e. from lac support, filling decoration, polishing and washing. The need for teamwork explains why in the villages, no silversmith is capable of crafting an article alone and who knows complete steps. This is in contrary to the well-trained silver artist from the Écoles des Arts Cambodgiens at Phnom Penh, who work alone. In brief, the work steps of silver artisan are as follow:

1. Preparation of silver raw material
2. Raising stake to shape article
3. Lac support and engraving
4. Finishing

### First step: Preparation of raw silver

Every silversmith prepares silver raw material to make silver content, either plate or bullion. This is very first step of crafting silver article because, in general, no ready-made silver plate is sold on the market. Every silversmith learned this basic knowledge from the first days. In the past, silver was melted from old silver coins and damaged silver utensils to take silver content. Now, they just simply buy silver grains from the market. Before, this first step took times because one was operated manually. Today, this work has been shorten when silversmiths use hand-turn ventilator and even motor one. This step is crucial to silversmiths because it is at this time that they decide the silver to copper and brass ratio of the final product. Today, pure silver grains are available in the market. This step consists of two steps more: melting and laminating.

### Melting

To melt pure silver, as principle, temperature of  $962.78^{\circ}\text{C}$  is needed. The smiths chip silver into small pieces and put them in a vessel. In this step, silversmiths need various necessary tools and equipment such as a forge, bellows or ventilation, crucibles and terracotta disc or iron trough-shaped receptacle.

- Forge: a clay hearth-like built on the ground or raised on 4 stakes to height of someone waist to make silver easy to work and move. The body of the forge is made from clay or from high temperature bricks filled with clay in the center (fig. 101). An average open space in the center is for charcoal. Forge has been attached to a pump, which is needed to halt when melting metal.



Figure 101: Koh Chen.  
Traditional silversmiths forge.

- Bellows: In the past, silversmiths use wooden bellows made from a trunk of tree or from 4 wooden planks. This bellows attach to the forge by a nozzle, which is

buried underground and directly connected to the source of heat (fig. 102). When blown, the charcoal burns brightly, sparking the flame. Today, many silversmiths stop using this wooden bellows and use a hand-turn or motor-turn ventilator. Recently, when a used spare part of a car is easy to find, some silversmiths use a ventilator of car air-conditioner to ventilate their forge (fig. 103-104). Since silversmiths use ventilator especially motor-run ventilator, it greatly reduces time spent

melting the silver. Silversmiths also add fire from above by using a kerosene blowpipe. This blowpipe use to solder metal because it could produce a high fire.



Figure 102:  
Traditional wooden bellows.



Figure 103: Hand turning  
fan bellows.



Figure 104: Motor using in car air  
conditioner is attached to forge to replace  
traditional bellows.

- Crucible: A melting crucible is a round and deep mould in clay in shape of a mortar and resist with temperature (fig. 105-106). There are different sizes. Before, potters in Kampong Chhnang made them for silversmiths. Now, they buy from the market, thus they are imported from Thailand.



Figure 105: Silver crucible.



Figure 106: Copper crucible.

- Disc or trough-shape receptacle: Molten silver is poured into a thick clay shallow round plate disc and is left to cool before hammering or laminating into sheet. Today, silversmiths invent a trough-shaped receptacle use as mold to make silver piece of rectangular shape ready to laminate by rolling mill (fig. 107-108).



Figure 107



Figure 108

Figure 107-108: trough-shape receptacle. In this photo, smiths make cooper plate.

Silversmiths rarely make this silver bullion and keep it in their home unless they have work to do. They melt silver accordingly to what weight they need to craft the articles. Silversmiths leave the melting work, to apprentices. This is a good occasion to learn this basic technique and method of alloying silver and purifying silver. In order to melt the silver, silversmiths place crucible on the charcoal and, in addition to adding heat from above, he use the bellows to get the flames (fig. 109) to a temperature of 961.78°C (fig. 110). When silver is completely melted, silversmiths pour it in a trough-shape mold which has been oiled or wet. Figure 111 is silver bullion made from this iron trough-shape mold.



Figure 109:  
Molting silver.



Figure 110: With help of fire  
above from blow pipe.



Figure 111: Silver bullion  
made from this iron trough-shape  
receptacle.

Today, silversmith use silver grains which are imported from Singapore. Silver grains are already pure. While, according to silversmith in Kampong Loun, silver imported from Vietnam contains some percentage of lead which demand to chase lead out by just simply keeping fire during melting. Doing like this, lead will evaporate. Silver from Vietnam is not preferred by any silversmiths because it will loose weight after melting.

## Laminating

After the melting process, the silver is still not pure as some small debris or even split remains. Silversmiths add a little flux, anneal and hammer many times until the impurity burn away. To do so, silver become more ductile and malleable and ready to laminate. In the past, all process of making silver sheet is worked manually, thus silversmiths continue to hammering silver into appropriate thickness. Today, silversmiths are less concerned on this process as there are several diesel-run rolling mills in the villages (fig. 112). According to a research made by Dr. Matics, these rolling mills were introduced into Cambodia in 1950's when silver workshop in Phnom Penh was prosperous and busy. To have these rolling mills in the villages, silversmiths gain time and could flatten the silver easily. Beside laminating silver for silversmiths, owners of rolling mill produce copper and brass sheets to sale (fig. 113).



Figure 112: Diesel-run rolling mills  
in the villages



Figure 113: Copper and  
brass sheets.

After repeated annealing and hammering, the silver becomes shiny and no longer breaks and the silversmith is able to hammer it into sheet. Today, this process is shortening. Once when silver which was poured into trough-shape mold cool, it is ready to make into sheet. Silversmiths do not need to hammer anymore. Silver is laminated with diesel-run rolling mills in the villages. Silversmiths just give detail of thickness, length and large, etc. Minute later, silversmiths could have a silver sheet

which ready to craft into an article. As usual, silver sheet is kept thicker than the desired utensils to be crafted. For when they shape and raise the stakes, the smiths can cut off only an appropriate part from the sheet for any articles. Sometime, before hammering and raising stakes, silversmiths need to laminate again with a small hand rolling mill which every silversmith possesses one (fig. 114).



Figure 114:  
Hand rolling mill.

## Second step: Shaping

There are many steps and methods of shaping, depending on the type of object to be made; for example, silversmiths in Kampong Luong need to cut silver from paper model of animal or fruit shape boxes. Traditionally, silverwares hammered into a shape. Now, silversmiths in Kampong Luong especially craft silverwares by pressing in a set of negative and positive mold to make shape but hand raising stake is still needed to finish the design.

## Hand shaping

Silver sheet from laminating is then cut into size of the object. Then, silversmiths begin to raise the concave shape by hand with hammers and anvil of many kinds and sizes (fig. 115). This step is called *loeng kpal dek* literally means raising 'stakes' with head of iron 'hammer'. The silversmiths can employ apprentice to do the melting and annealing of the silver.



Figure 115: Hammering to laminate before raising stake.

However, once the silver is ready shaped, it is the sole responsibility of the silversmith. Whether trained at the School of Decorative Arts or in a village, a silversmith only gains the title of a silversmith once he or she acquires the knowledge to raise stakes.

Outside of those silversmiths trained in School of Decorative Arts in Phnom Penh and a few other apprentices of the master of silversmiths, not many silversmiths, especially those in Kampong Luong and Koh Chen, do not have a complete understanding of the craft.. Since they have limited knowledge of silversmithery, many can create only one or two objects. The silversmiths in region of Kampong Luong and Koh Chen needs to work as a corporative so the skilled silversmiths are able to oversee the work. Many of these less skilled silversmiths are the children, relative, or apprentice, including the wife, of the more skilled smith. Many silversmiths, who can not gain their reputation, take over a work from famous and trusted silversmiths in the village and their work will be paid by the first smiths.

Before raising stakes, smiths cut silver into size by using a sample paper or making new paper model, or even model a clay object when they craft an unfamiliar one or new size (fig. 116). Sometime smiths use animal and fruit toys as model (fig. 117). The thickness, weight and size are decided accordingly. These models are kept to use as long as possible that is why sometime we can find model of 12 zodiac animals hang on the wall. A skilled silversmith could shape any unfamiliar objects before or craft an object of any size client request of him. In this step, smiths need some necessary tools, thus two are most important: hammer and anvil of



Figure 116: Silversmith cut silver into size by using a paper model.



Figure 117: Paper models.

various kinds and sizes. Number of hammers and anvils and their forms are numerous, though one can not say how much depending on the sizes and shapes of objects to be made.

- Anvil: Anvil called in Khmer *pratheyay*. Anvils vary according to shape and size. It ranks from a wooden trunk to iron anvils. Iron anvils are also numerous such as flat iron anvil, Greek capital letter gamma « $\Gamma$ » shape anvil and «T» shape anvil (fig. 118). The « $\Gamma$ » is planted in a wooden block while «T» shape thus both end of anvil are pointed and bent. «T» shape anvil is movable and put in a position of 45° when use (fig. 119). These points of anvils are modified from time to time or even smiths need to make new one when needed. When raising shape, smiths place the silver on the anvil and uses hammers of different shapes and sizes to form a specific concave shape of objects. Thus, special hammers are paired with anvils.



Figure 118: Anvils.



Figure 119: Anvil placing for work.

- Hammer: with multiple anvils and hammers, silversmiths can make silver plate into most intricate object. They work with many kinds of hammers. Each hammers bear particular shape (fig. 120-125).



Figure 120



Figure 121



Figure 122



Figure 123



Figure 124



Figure 125

Figure 120-125: Examples of hammers used by silversmiths.

- Soldering flux: Before raising shape of object, some parts of silver are trimmed and with the trimmed silver sheet, smiths bends it to form a rough receptacle. This rough receptacle is then soldered together, using a particular soldering fluid. For complicated articles, silversmiths might make into pieces separately and assemble later, then soldered. Some

animal or fruit boxes are possibly made into pieces first and joined later. Silvering flux known as *trei* is a mixture of silver sandy like silver with flux (fig. 126). Every silversmith and apprentice knows how to make soldering flux. Usually, smiths add a small quantity of copper into soldering flux in order to make flux easier to melt and run well into the join surface. Soldering flux is applied on the joined surface of the article and dried (fig. 127-128). The article is then placed on the fire, causing the silver to turn hot and red. Smiths use kerosene presser blowpipe used by goldsmith to weld silver.



Figure 126:  
Soldering flux.



Figure 127:  
Applying solver flux.



Figure 128:  
Applying solver flux.

## Mold Pressing

Today, silversmiths in Kampong Luong use set of negative and positive mold to press silverware. We can find mold of animal and fruit of different size (fig. 129-130). Mold is made from an alloy metal called antimony (chemical symbol is Sb) which smiths can get from spare car engine parts. Smiths use molds to craft object until it break and recycle them to make new molds. Not every smith could make every kind of mold. However, it is unavoidable to finish shaping by hand because with mold pressing, the concave and intricate parts are not projected enough. Thus, when silversmiths use a mold to craft articles, it is no longer an art, as mentioned by Groslier in his article published in 1930: “as soon as art begins to issue forth from a mold, it is no longer art. One can pour Notre Dame de Paris into a mold and reproduce it a hundred times but we cannot say that the French art of 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries has thereby perpetuated itself”.



Figure 129



Figure 130

Figure 129-130: Animal shape molds.

A silversmith should have many skills. Traditionally, silversmiths were able to produce their own iron tools such anvil and hammer, etc. but now the blacksmiths provide them iron tools. This division of labor and of knowledge is a sign of real danger because now silversmiths no longer have a complete set of knowledge on the art of producing silverware.

### Third step: Chasing a Decoration

There are many steps to decorate silver object. Once object has been shaped, its surface is ready to be decorated with a motif. Silversmiths borrow different method from wood or stone sculptor. Surface of silver need to be incised and pushed from outside and inside to make relief, never take it out.

### Lac Support

Ready-shape object cannot be engraved at once without lac support. Smiths fill the interior of the object with molten lac to support silver surface (fig. 131-132). Lac support is a mixture of molten lac (*Laccifer lacca* Kern), fish oil and pounding clay. The resin provides support and rigidity while the chasing work is being done. Every smith including the one who work only to engraving objects know how to mix this lac support. The ratios of the mixture are 1 kg of resin, 1 kg of pounding clay and half kg of fish oil. Silversmiths have to follow this formula; however, they have to test by making a sample rod out of



Figure 131: Filling lac support.



Figure 132: Filling lac support.

each batch. If it bends without breaking, it is too soft. If it snaps without bending, it is too brittle. Smiths can add lac or fish oil into mixture when reuse until then the mixture bears no more force, cohesion and bend.



Figure 133: Silver articles with lac support ready for engraving.



Figure 134: Silver articles with lac support ready for engraving.

Once the object is shaped, it is filled with mixture of molten lac support and then smiths plant a stick or a piece of wood into mixture (fig. 133-134). If objects are a flat surface, smiths just attach the object on the molten mixture. Planted wooden stick is then inserted into any hole of a wooden bar to support object when smiths start carving (fig. 135).



Figure 135: A wooden stick is attached and inserted into any hole of a wooden bar when engraving.

## Engraving work

Usually, silversmiths the world over use a famous chasing and repoussé technique to decorate object. Silver is a ductile and malleable metal, which makes it easier to render a relief on the surface by punching and blowing with hammer. Engraving silverware is different from wood and stone because no part of silver needs to be taken out. The purpose is to make a relief by punching inward to make a background and to punch outward to form the desired motifs. This process of punching inward and outward is repeated many times to create a relief. Each time, the smiths need to take out the lac support in order to hammer outwards from the inside of the silver object. To do so, the smiths use a special hammer. Then, object is refilled again with lac support and background part is punched again with special punch. Detail motif are engraved with sharpened punches of a dozens types. Each sequence of this process call by silversmiths as *bhloen* means “fire”. Most objects are made of one *phleung* or two *phleung*. But, the most intricate and commission objects might be 7 to 10 *bhloen*. Silversmiths in Kampong Luong-Koh Chen region confect only one *bhloen* silverwares while master silversmiths in Phnom Penh might use multiple *bhloen* (fig. 136-137).



Figure 136:  
Silver article with 2 firing  
engraving process.



Figure 137:  
Silver article with 7 firing  
engraving process.

## Tools and equipments

This step is also required some necessary tools such iron punches, hammers and *ki* (a wooden pedestal made from a board, a bar or a trunk). Before, every smith confects iron punch and hammer by themselves. Iron punches might be hundreds but every silversmith seems know every single punch.

- Wooden pedestal *ki*: *Ki* is wooden pedestal used by silversmiths to support ready-formed objects and make them stable for carving and punching (fig. 138). Some *ki* is a wooden stool or bench, thus the horizon beam has many holes in different angle. Ready-form silver objects, which once filled with pitch and plant in a wooden stick, are inserted in the hole when punching, incising and engraving. This kind of key is seen especially in Por Toch of Kampong Luong region. *ki* could be a block of tree trunk more or less like a wooden mortar size with some hollows to place objects (fig. 139), while flat objects are simply attached to a wooden board. This is seen in Koh Chen region.



Figure 138: Wooden support for engraving called *ki*.



Figure 139: *ki* could be a block of tree trunk.

- Iron punches/chisels: There are hundreds iron punches, which are different in sizes and sharp edges, depending on the type and size of object. Though, silversmiths could not say exact number. Sometimes, smiths have to create a new chisel and punch to design a new work. Figure 140 illustrates a small numbers of chisels and punches. Chisels



Figure 140: Numbers of chisels and punches.

and punches are created by silversmiths and blacksmiths living in the villages. It changes today because most of tools and equipments are supplied by blacksmiths. Blacksmiths living in the silversmiths' villages produce all kind of iron tools such as anvils, chisels, punches, hammers, etc. However, the silversmiths need to modify these tools a little to suit their particular purpose. Chisels and punches are basically classified into 5 types and each type could be different in size. Thus, in principle, there are 49 punches and chisels but in fact, the number varies according to the silversmith's ability. These 5 types of chisels and punches are: sharp edge iron punch used to incise or engrave motif, inward iron punch, outward iron punch, sandy point punch, and sharp edge chisels.

### Decorate chisels

*Taek chlak* is the silversmith's primary tool because it is needed to make a decoration. It is a chisel-like instrument of different forms; some may have a sharp edge, while the edges of others are dull. Silversmiths use the dull edge chisel to trace motif and sharp edged chisels to detail motif of tree leaves, branches, vines etc.

- Straight or bent edged iron chisel: Silversmiths possess of many kinds of straight sharp edged chisels such as:
  - Lining chisel (*tdek khsaera*) is a chisel with straight edge of average sharpness used to punch on silver surface to line out motif.
  - Saw edged chisel (*tdek mukha ranaŕa*): Lining chisel with a slightly notched like edge of hacksaw blade.
  - Bent edged chisel (*tdek sliŕ desa*) can be a chisel with various curves with an edge of average sharpness, used to line the tree leaf motif.
  - Strait edged chisel (*tdek rae*) is used to line the ready-formed leaf into detail.
- A bent or warped edge iron chisel (*tdek krachak/tdek srakar*) is in a nail or fish scale shape used to form fish scale motif or to line circle or sinuous line.
- Fish-egg edged iron chisel (*tdek banÄri*) is punch chisel of circle shape; thus when punch on the surface, it forms a circle motif.

### Inward iron punch

Silversmiths possess of many iron punches thus edge are dull of different shape—square, triangle, rectangular etc. These chisels are used to punch on silver surface to push silver inwardly and to make motif inflate. Each blow displaces the metal, pushing it aside and forming a continuous groove to outline a design or provide a background pattern.

### Sandy punch

Some of inward iron punches consist of rough sandy-like matt surface. This rough point forms a matt surface when punches on the silver metal, thus smiths call this punch as «sandy punch». This tool is of utmost importance to silversmiths. Sandy punch is applied on the surfaces in-between motifs; the motif is accentuated because the background becomes dull. Similar to normal punches, sandy punch consists of different points—square, triangle, round etc. Sizes of the sandy punch

vary because it cannot be as big as needed, especially when working with big articles. When it is too big, the sandy punch does not hammer well on the surface of the silver. This limitation explains the minuteness and time consuming nature of silver craftsmanship.

### Outward iron punch

Once the surface is decorated, the motif is still flat, thus smiths have to punch from interior to push silver outwardly to make surface emerge. To do this, smiths have some special punch, the point of which is round and domed.

### Cut chisel

As usual, decoration on silverwares is a chasing and repoussé. No part of silver is cut away. But sometime, we can find some wares are decorated with on open-work motifs. For this last, silversmiths need sharp chisel of different bent edges to cut out the part, leaving the space open.

### Engraving

The word “engraving” for is not the proper word to describe the decoration work the silversmiths does to render motifs on silverware. Smiths need to beat with help of chisel or punch and hammer by blow by blow against the surface. To do so, silver is displaced but not removed.

After hand raising-stakes and pitch is applied, silversmiths commence engraving motifs on the surface. In the villages where people work on crafting silverwares as a profession, they have a clear division of duty. Engraving is done by women while the men return to work from the beginning again (fig. 141-143). Such division of labor leaves no member jobless. The wives, daughters and nieces of silversmiths are deft in engraving silverwares. Thus this system allows the people in the village to be busy and responsive. The men, who have some skill in crafting silverware, can be employed by the more reputable silversmith. They can either work at the shop of the master silversmith or they can

take the objects home and work on them there. Their works are paid according to two formulas: (1) counting by item when they are most intricate and (2) by weight for the more simple articles. Silversmiths say that women are soft, tender, and meticulous, thus capable of the tiny details needed to do engraving; so women are best suited to work on this end. Lady smiths themselves admit that men are less suited for this type of work but they have no endurance; thus they work only on the masterpieces or commission wares. However, one may argue decoration work is less hard and not exposed to heat and demand less skill thus it is suitable for lady. This line of thinking is in accordance with the well-known analysis of Claude Levis-Strauss, who states that women are generally responsible for the transition from “raw” to “cooked”, from Nature to Culture.<sup>76</sup> Similar to earlier times when men kill the animal, leaving the meat raw for women to cook, the male silversmith leaves a rough product for the women to engrave and finish. In other words, the gendered division of labor found in the current production of silverware in Khmer villages demonstrates the accuracy of this analysis.



Figure 141



Figure 142



Figure 143

Figure 141-143: Women silver engraving.

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Groslier, B.P., 1981, p. 10.

## Ornament Design

Ornamentation on silverware is the result of a technique of chasing and repoussé to form the desired design. The technique which smiths apply on the surface renders reliefs with every blow of the hammer. With every punch, the silver is displaced, drawn in and a motif emerges. Thus, ornaments smiths apply on silver are not as rich as one can apply on stone and wood.

Engraving an ornament on silver surface is done through multiple steps, demanding great skills and meticulous endurance. Silversmiths in Kampong Luong and Koh Chen choose simple motifs which are familiar to their life i.e. motifs that they have seen in nature around them especially flora and fauna, and characters in literature. While “Angkorian” motifs preferred by stone and wood sculptors are rarely used by silversmiths in the villages. Only a few of the most skilled silversmiths trained in School of Plastic Arts of the Royal University of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh, could work with Angkorian motifs on silverware. The famous one is Master Soum Samay.

The craftsman places the chisels and punches on the silver and deftly his hammer blows. Hammer by hammer, the punch pushes the metal aside and forms small indentations in the surface. Tracing is applied when smiths craft low and cheap articles. Masterpieces that are commission art, master silversmiths work on chasing and repoussé repeatedly on the ornament design that the technical term is *bhloen* i.e. fired, and motifs will be chosen among intricate ones. Technical terms of ornaments are also varied from smiths in the villages and smiths trained in the School. Silversmiths in town who trained in the School consider themselves as superior and call the works of the village smiths as “*kpač’ rak’ raya*” means cheap and shallow ornament in contrast to the intricate, deep ornaments in the background and high in relief. According to Master Chet Chorn, retired teacher skilled in classical painting, he has spoken on how silversmiths in Kampong Luong engrave the simple vegetal and floral

motif called “*kpač’ khñuk*”. Today, most of village silversmiths adopt the vocabulary of town smiths. However, when asked for further details of a particular ornament, they cannot provide the names of each ornament even though they work skillfully with those ornaments. They have only what is known as “*savoir-faire*”. Most of ornaments on the silverwares are vegetal and floral motifs, interlace motifs, flame motifs, characters in literature or animal from mythology. Silversmiths rarely use open-work ornament since most of their silverwares are containers.

### Cleansing and Polishing

Silver turn dull-white or milky-white in color when expose to heat. So a final step, cleansing and polishing, is required. Below are the following steps in cleansing and polishing:

- Polishing: Once objects are completely decorated, surface and inner part remains stain with pitch which needs to be cleansed and pitch is removed by heat (fig. 144). Metal surface remains rough, sharp and badly scratched. The silversmiths preliminarily polishes the items. The objects are buffed and grinded against motor wheel attached with sandy paper to eliminate scratch surface.



Figure 144: Removing pitch.

- Acid wash: When everything is finished, objects are soaking in boiled water mixed in sulfuric acid to eliminate impurity and stain (fig. 145). But when articles are soaking in boiled mixture, it turn dull-white resulted from acid.



Figure 144: Removing pitch.

- Cleansing and polishing: Objects have to be cleaned with washing powder and water. Objects are soaking in water solution for a few seconds then washing with brush (fig. 146-147). The objects are then dried in the sun after it is cleaned.



Figure 146: Cleansing and polishing.



Figure 147: Cleansing and polishing.

- Burnishing: Once every step is completed, surface is lacks luster. Silversmiths need also to softly beating the surface when they find that is not enough smooth. Then, smiths take objects to burnish with fine sandy paper and soft tissue by hand or with electric-run motor. Objects are then burnished again with chain of small beads to heighten the lustre of silver (fig. 148).



Figure 144: Removing pitch.

Today, silversmiths use mechanic tools to craft objects. Many small boxes are even crafted in mold. Thus, many hard and time-consuming steps are increasingly shortened and less arduous. Some of these tools are the hand-turned or motor ventilator, rolling mill, mold, polishing motor, etc. Many other tools such as chisels, punches, hammer and

anvils are ready made by blacksmiths. The use of modern tools has both positive and negative consequences. Positive points are that silversmiths gain more time to craft one object. Ladies in the villages who know only on how to engrave object could now go to blacksmith to create their tools. Because of the blacksmith, the ladies have jobs without needing to know how to create tools. In the villages, we find many women engraving silverwares in addition to their other jobs or after working in the rice fields (fig. 149). As negative consequence, silversmiths are less concerned with knowing how to make tools. Thus, in the future, their skill and knowledge can vanish. From learning about the present situation of silverware making in Phnom Penh as well as in villages, we fear that in the future no silversmith will have a complete set of skills and knowledge, thus he will be unable to transfer this knowledge to the next generation.



Figure 149: Women work on engraving silverwares in spared time or after rice field.

## CHAPTER IV

# BUSINESS OF KHMER SILVERWARES



Silverware is very valuable object. Like they were in the past, the silverware can only be afforded by the rich. In this last chapter, we will look into silverware business in the present-day markets. As mentioned earlier in the chapter 2, silver and silverware were used as either exchanged objects for other goods or for making silver statues. Its usage also reflected social status. In the ancient times, Khmers, therefore, kept silverware as valuable objects in their families. Looking at the figure 150 which was carved on the southern gallery of Banteay Chhmar temple depicted men raising necklaces in their hands can be interpreted as jewelry sellers.

Prior to the French protectorate, the Khmer silverware was made only for the domestic use. However, when it was introduced to the Europe, through the French administration, Khmer silverware became tourist products especially for the French. The market expansion leads to the establishment of the school of Fine Arts. The school invented objects according to the markets' needs and some combined the European style and Angkorian motifs.

Subsequently, the Khmer silverwares were made for both domestic and international markets. For the domestic market, the objects were for the royal palace, elites, and French who lived in the country. However, the objects such as bowls and trays for using in the religious ceremonies were still remained in each family. Figure 151 depicts the Khmer silverware which was publicized in many magazines.

The Khmer Silverware has changed drastically especially when compared to with the periods prior to the civil war in Cambodia. The use of silverware among the Khmer is less. Among of the main reasons are due to the increasing price of silver and the influx of numerous objects from neighboring countries made of cheaper metal such as aluminums and other made of plastics. Some of those objects are the copy of the silverware. Moreover, these objects were produced by using molds and often take place in a factory. Therefore, they are a lot cheaper and

almost everyone can buy them. The market for the silverware nowadays can be seen only for the export and for foreign tourists. The large scale of silverware production is only in few villages such Por Toch, Koh Chen, and Prek Kdam (Ponhea Lu district, Kandal Province). Some of silverware smiths have extended their business to other villages and others have moved to Siem Reap province. There are two types of production: the products for middlemen who export them to other countries especially Thailand, and the products for big tourist shops such as in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Tuol Tumpong Market and in the hotels. In conclusion, the silverware markets are local and international.



Figure 150: Banteay Chhmar, 12<sup>th</sup> century. Depicting a scene of jewelry selling.



Figure 151: Advertising of Khmer silverwares by French Administration.

## 1. Local markets

### Private Business

Previously, it was rare that the silversmiths sell the objects by themselves. Earlier silversmiths usually did not have means to buy silver. Moreover, the price of silver is instable. Generally, the silversmiths made the objects according to the order of the middlemen and shop owners who provide the silver in advance to the silversmiths. Even famous silversmiths in Phnom Penh who were trained at the Royal University of Fine Arts did the same. However, some of the silversmiths in Por Toch village now sell silver objects and some other silver coated item at home. The objects exhibited for sale are often small boxes in

form of animals and fruits or other decorated objects most of them made of silver alloy and copper coated with silvers (fig. 152). These objects are for foreign tourists and Khmer living abroad who stop by the place from or to Phnom Preah Reachtroap, an ancient archaeological site. Notably, not so many local people come to the place. It is not certain that tourists who visit the workshop would buy the objects since the price is very high. Beside the sale at home, some people bring these objects for sale at the tourist site at Udong when a ceremony takes place or on the weekend. This small scale business can not financially support their families if there is no order from shops in Phnom Penh. However, visitors can order objects they want.



Figure 152: Silverwares are displayed at the silversmith atelier to sell, Por Toch village.

## Middlemen

Since silversmiths sell silverware to supplement their income, the silverware business is very much based on the middlemen. Most of the silver objects are not owned by the silversmiths. The silversmiths work for the middlemen in Phnom Penh. The middlemen can be categorized

into three types: the middlemen who buy the objects for exportation to Thailand, souvenir shops and shops where silver objects are sold. The place where silverwares are sold is located in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. In Phnom Penh, one can buy those objects in the markets such in Toul Tum Pong, Psar Thmey, Orussey, souvenir shops and silverware shops (fig. 153). Big silverware shops in Phnom Penh are located on Sothearos Boulevard (fig. 154-155), and in other places on Monyvong Boulevard (fig. 156-157) and at the Cambodiana Hotel (fig. 158). In Siem Reap, one can buy those objects at the shops in Phsar Chas (fig. 159), other big souvenir shops and in the big hotels (fig. 160). However, in Siem Reap such as shops located on Comaille Avenue and by the



Figure 153: Silverware stall at Tuol Tumpong market.



Figure 154: Silverware shops along Preah Sothearos Boulevard.



Figure 155: Silverware shops along Preah Sothearos Boulevard.



Figure 156: Silverware shops along Preah Monivong Boulevard.



Figure 157: Silverware shops along Preah Monivong Boulevard.



Figure 158: Silverware shop located in front of Cambodiana Hotel.



Figure 159: Silverware stall at Phsar Chas' market in Siemreap.



Figure 160: Silverware shop "Sary Kalyan" located along Jean Commaille Boulevard, Siemreap.

Jayavarman VII hospital, we rarely see the shops only sell the silverware like in Phnom Penh. The shop owners there are the silversmiths from Prek Kdam. Interestingly, the most of the silverware are bought from Phnom Penh, Po Touch, Prek Kdam and Koh Chen.

## 2. International Market

Present-day Khmer silverware is not as widely distributed as it was during the Sankgum period. The biggest market is Bangkok. Some of the middlemen have business relations with those in Bangkok. They often

provide silver to silversmiths in Po Touch, Prek Kdam and Koh Chen to make silverware for export. Those middlemen request the silversmiths not to make any marks that may identify these objects as being made in Cambodia. Motifs, which can be recognized as the product of Cambodia such Angkor Wat, is also prohibited.

Beside the export to Bangkok, Khmer silverware is sold online, which launched by middlemen, shop owners or tourist companies.

Khmer silverware nowadays is produced for the tourist consumption - not for domestic use. The only international market can be found for these products, which is in Bangkok. These objects are then resold as Thai silverware. One of the silversmiths informed that "the Khmer silversmiths survives due to the oxygen provided by others; the middlemen also depends on the Bangkok market". Therefore, if there is any impact on the tourism or any conflicts between Thai and Khmer, production will decrease. Moreover, the productions of the plastic and aluminum objects also cause the markets of the Khmer silverwares to shrink.

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