

## Fieldnotes of a Column Raising Ceremony: Revitalizing the Wooden House in Cambodia

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# Research Report

## Essai de compte rendu d'exposition

MARY L. GROW

### Fieldnotes of a Column Raising Ceremony: Revitalizing the Wooden House in Cambodia

Many architects working in countries recovering from the devastation of civil war or international conflict are dedicated to revitalizing the built environment. Efforts in new construction, as well as historic preservation, attempt to provide communities with shelter and a sense of place that is connected to cultural identity, local knowledge and historical memory. How this takes place is a valuable inquiry, and the focus of this field report that describes the work of Hok Sokol, an architect in Cambodia who is building and restoring Khmer wooden houses. It explores how the ritual practices of a column raising ceremony are integrated into design and construction, thereby reconstituting a world view and cultural inheritance that were threatened severely during the brutal years (1975-1979) of the Khmer Rouge regime.

I first met Hok Sokol<sup>1</sup> in the spring of 2010, shortly after the Cambodian New Year celebrations of 2554 (according to the Buddhist calendar). Although I was in Siem Reap to explore the vast and remarkable temple complexes of the ancient Angkorian civilization, I also was hoping to see examples of vernacular architecture, particularly older wooden houses that were characteristic of rural Cambodian society a century ago. Set on wooden piles and built from a range of local hardwood, many of these houses were distinguished by artisanal craftsmanship and construction techniques that were tied to long-standing beliefs, rituals and practices of the Cambodian people. I knew that Hok Sokol was committed to preserving this legacy, as evidenced in publications that featured both his research and architectural renderings (Hok 2006; Ross 2003). As we sat together on May 12, 2010, on the veranda of a wooden house he had recently built, he talked with me about his work:

The vernacular architecture of the past is a resource that can guide many construction projects in the future. Cambodia is beginning to come back to life after a very dark time. A lot of building is taking place, but much of it disregards practices that respect the environment, support local craftsmen, and connect to Khmer culture. I'm interested in preserving older wooden houses and in building new ones based on traditional designs and methods that consider these principles. I'm hoping that wooden houses do not disappear from Cambodia. They're an important part of our heritage. (pers. comm.)

Time, climatic conditions and civil unrest, coupled more recently with rapid socio-economic changes, have taken a toll on Cambodia's historic wooden houses. Many have been dismantled and sold piece-by-piece for the resale value of their structural timber and ornamentation. Families building new accommodations often have replaced their wooden houses with Western-style concrete structures that can be air conditioned and built more cheaply because they require less craftsmanship. This trend has raised concerns among scholars, architects and preservationists who wish to safeguard Cambodia's many forms of vernacular architecture and the building practices associated with this legacy. Hok Sokol, a member of this group, has focused on the wooden house, an interest he developed as a student at Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts and has maintained over time as a professional architect and urban planner. Upon our meeting he invited me to visit his latest building project, where a column raising ceremony was scheduled to take place the following morning.

## The Column Raising Ceremony in Spean Chreav

The column raising ceremony I attended was located in the village of Spean Chreav, a few kilometers outside of Siem Reap, the closest urban center. An historic preservation project, destined for modern upgrades, the house was documented thoroughly with photos, drawings and site analysis following its purchase. This archival practice not only recorded the details of the house, but also provided Hok Sokol and his crew with a template for future construction. The house, built with modular parts, was identified as belonging to the *pheah keung* typology, a form distinguished by its hipped and gabled roof.<sup>2</sup> All pieces were numbered and recorded before it was dismantled and moved to a seven-hectare lot where construction was scheduled to begin. A full set of construction documents was used during the project, comprising site plans, elevations, floor plans and details of wall panels, windows and doors.

The client, Darryl Collins, affiliated previously with the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh, financed the relocation and preservation of this house, playing a pivotal role in supporting Hok Sokol's efforts to revitalize wooden houses in the Siem Reap area. An architectural historian with knowledge of Khmer house-building traditions, Darryl shares Sokol's enthusiasm for these houses and has financed several preservation projects, a challenge that has relocated him to Siem Reap and offered him a lifestyle that's been shaped in recent years by this endeavour.<sup>3</sup>

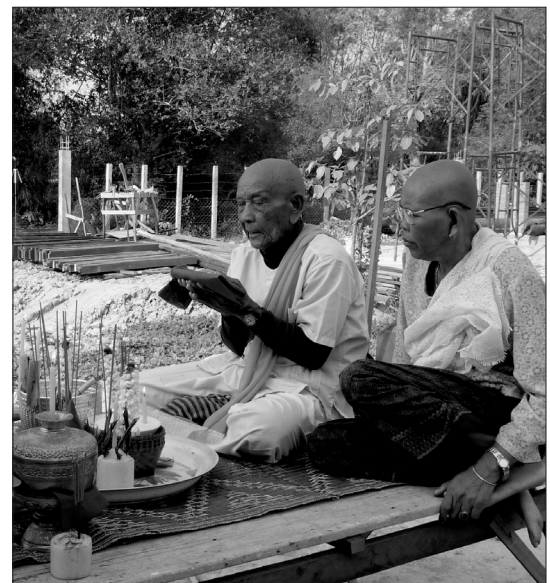
Hok Sokol's historic preservation and new building projects include ritual practices that consecrate the activity and correspond to the ceremonies once associated with the construction of the wooden house. These connect his current architectural practice to an extended legacy of artisanal craftsmanship derived from religious sources and local knowledge. The custodian of this ritual expertise is typically the village *achar*; in this case, a ninety-one-year-old community elder whom Hok Sokol and his working crew refer to as *Lok Kru*, teacher.<sup>4</sup> A layman, attended to by his wife during ceremonial events, Lok Kru is not only trained in Buddhist teachings he learned at the monastery, but also is well versed in the ancient beliefs and practices that revolve around the animist cults and Brahmanic traditions associated with building. Hok Sokol and Lok Kru have worked together over the past few years; both are intent upon re-energizing

building ceremonies by performing them for clients and inviting the general public to attend.

The column raising ceremony (*krōn pāli*) is best understood as part of a constellation of rituals performed at moments during the construction process when the powerful and often unpredictable forces of nature, known as *prei*, need to be recognized and ordered into a human realm. In this realm they can be placated or even transformed, live within a cosmological hierarchy and be further cultivated into the life of a village or settlement. Rituals usually begin when an auspicious site is identified for a house,<sup>5</sup> and continue as trees for lumber are selected and their spirits are respectfully honoured (Huy 2003: 69-70). Groundbreaking, an activity that violates the earth and its many spiritual forces, also demands the ritual expertise of an *achar*. A dangerous act, breaking through the earth is executed with the turn of a spade accompanied by invocations and offerings that recognize the territorial spirits associated with the ancestors, known as *neak ta*.<sup>6</sup> These powerful and invisible entities, if pleased accordingly, are believed to protect those living in the house as they establish themselves on new terrain.

As the fragrance of burning incense filled the steamy air, signalling the start of the ceremony, the assembled guests and I watched Lok Kru, seated upon a small platform representing an altar, bless an array of colourful offerings that included food, flowers and incense, the favourite gifts of spirits who enjoy the sensory realm (Fig. 1). These were crafted into decorative arrangements known as *baisei*, thereby transforming ordinary vegetable

**Fig. 1**  
Lok Kru blesses the offerings and yantra for the column raising ceremony. Photo by author.





matter into refined artistry. Lok Kru continued his invocation, blessing the *yantras*, mystical diagrams he had prepared for the occasion. The *yantras*, drawn on two sets of cloth, one white and the other red, featured the seed syllables of protector, Preah Vessavan, and the guardian deities of the eight cardinal directions of the world. The syllables on each cloth were arranged in a *mandala* designed to ward off evil from all vantage points.<sup>7</sup> Additional *yantras* depicting sacred syllables associated with these guardians, likewise combined Hindu-Brahmanic beliefs with Buddhism, a recognized source of refuge.<sup>8</sup> *Yantras*, when activated by prayers and placed strategically within the house during its construction, are believed to attract prosperity and to protect the house and its occupants from malevolent forces, including fire (Huy 2003: 73-75).

At the construction site, the workmen offered their tray of *baisei* to Preah Pisonkar (Fig. 2), the celestial architect of Khmer building traditions who bestows inspiration and protection upon devotees.<sup>9</sup> On this occasion the tray included the customary food, flowers and incense, and was supplemented the next morning with two pig's heads, a unique form of insurance the crew felt was mandatory during this construction project.<sup>10</sup>

Hok Sokol's workmen hauled the first column to a brick and mortar foundation located in the northeastern corner of the house, a direction identified as the most auspicious (Fig. 3). This column, called the *sāsār kânlaong*, "avatar of the female ancestor," is recognized by Khmer as the dwelling place of the House Maiden (*mneang phteah*), a female deity and guardian of the house (Népoté 2006: 114). A banana tree and sugar cane grasses were tied to the top of this column, symbols of fertility and cultivated crops.<sup>11</sup> Both of these are planted in front of the house after the ceremony, where they stand as a tribute to the Maiden and demonstrate her benevolent power by growing well.

The workmen continued the ceremony by placing a lotus leaf, a red *yantra* and a square of silver leaf at the top of the first foundation, the one belonging to the *sāsār kânlaong* (Fig. 4). Lok Kru blessed this decorated column with consecrated water and invocations as he knelt before it. Finally, he signalled the workmen—balanced precariously on the upper rungs of a surrounding scaffold—to raise it, an activity they accomplished by cranking a pulley strung between the column and scaffold (Fig. 5). Three jubilant cries by all accompanied this celebratory moment.



As the column was straightened to its full height, the workmen joined forces and lifted it skillfully onto its foundation, sealing the lotus leaf, *yantra* and silver leaf within the joint. Working in a clockwise direction, again, the most auspicious, the workmen repeated this process until the four columns spanning the front of the house were in place. They stabilized these with two mid-point cross beams that locked together at the centre in a diagonal groove (Fig. 6). The remaining columns were raised the following day using the same ritual practices and construction methods.

The ceremony closed as Hok Sokol and Darryl Collins joined Lok Kru at the altar where each received a blessing and a white *yantra* for personal

**Fig. 2 (Top)**  
Workmen prepare offerings at the construction site for Preah Pisonkar, celestial architect of Khmer building traditions. Photo by author.

**Fig. 3 (Bottom)**  
Workmen haul the first column to its foundation. Photo by author.



**Fig. 4**

*A lotus leaf, yantra and sheet of silver are placed on the top of each brick and mortar foundation. These offerings are sealed in place as the wooden column is positioned on top of the foundation. Photo by author.*



**Fig. 5**

*The wooden column, decorated with banana tree and sugar cane grasses, is raised by workmen using a pulley system. Photo by author.*

protection. Similar *yantra*, depicting a *mandala* and invocation, were distributed to their friends and family at the site. Acknowledging their relationship as architect and homeowner, Sokol and Darryl offered the decorative trays of *baisei* to the ancestral spirits associated with the column raising (Fig. 7).

## Reawakening Historical Memory

The column raising ceremony plays a critical role in reawakening systems of meaning and order that were once associated with the wooden house and its construction. As a narrative composed of key symbols that systematically activate the world of the spirits and ancestors, the power of nature and the protection of numerous deities, the ceremony, guided by Lok Kru, is well integrated into the construction activity, blessing the house as it is built and preparing it piece-by-piece for future occupants.

During the recent years of civil war, when family members were separated and dislocated from their homes, Cambodians were forced to abandon many forms of ritual life.<sup>12</sup> Buddhism, a primary force for moral order, likewise was violently suppressed. As the dominant Khmer Rouge purged long-standing systems of meaning and order from daily life in their iconoclastic effort to erase the past, they began a radical new era based upon their ill-fated interpretation of agrarian self-reliance. Abolishing money, markets and the ownership of private property, they socially engineered communes and co-operatives throughout the countryside, drastically changing a way of life that revolved around the family (Martin 1994; Ebihara 2002; U Sam Oeur 2005). Constructing a dwelling like the wooden house, and engaging in rituals designed to sanctify and safeguard both the family and their property was forbidden.

By calling upon Lok Kru to conduct a column raising ceremony, Hok Sokol has energized a practice that honours the land and the institution of building a house. Likewise, he has re-established a connection to the ancestors, a recognized source of local knowledge and moral wisdom. Lok Kru is an elder with extensive ritual expertise who exemplifies his role as a teacher each time he aligns the construction activity with consecrated actions based upon a rich cultural heritage. This demonstration of how to build with the wisdom of the past has a generative power that finds expression each time a column is placed on its foundation and provides both structural and spiritual support to the house and, by



extension, to the ritual participants and community. Lok Kru draws upon a mythic past by instructing Sokol and his workmen to secret the *yantras* and other symbolic elements between the brick and mortar foundations of the wooden columns, thereby integrating superior spiritual forces into the house that will offer protection and attract prosperity. This ceremony, comprising prayers, *mandalas*, secret mantras and a construction lore that respectfully names each column, distinguishes the wooden house as belonging to an architectural legacy that is connected intimately to Khmer cultural identity. As an elder who has survived the terrors of the past, Lok Kru is a poignant symbol for moral order and how to maintain it through ritual practice.<sup>13</sup>

The offerings and invocations to Preah Pisonokar also connect Hok Sokol and his workmen to an ancient building lineage that is associated with the divine, a source of creativity, protection and devotion. The prayers and gestures believed to guarantee the security of the construction site and future living environment, revitalize forms of knowledge and performance that were either lost or threatened during the years of an oppressive regime that forbade such activity. Although transmitting this ritual expertise from an older to a younger generation is a valuable way to continue the tradition, by combining it with construction techniques and competencies that literally build the house, the workmen publically demonstrate their artisanal skill and status, finding their place in a social world (Fig. 8).

Column raising ceremonies are transmitted orally and rely upon knowledgeable *achar* to teach others how to perform credible rituals at a specific site. The continuation of these ceremonies, like the wooden houses themselves, was seriously challenged during the tragic events of the past when custodians of ritual knowledge were silenced, and a cultural legacy diminished. By commissioning an *achar* who still remembers and performs the rituals of a previous era, Hok Sokol promotes a respected ceremony that celebrates the building of the wooden house. He also safeguards this knowledge for the future by videotaping and photographing the event. This new archival practice parallels his architectural renderings of the house that document specific building techniques. In the past, this knowledge belonged primarily to an oral tradition, one that was performed by builders on site. As Hok Sokol completes these renderings he shares them with his lead carpenter and workmen. This new way of recording local knowledge and transmitting it



to others is again brought to the construction site, where these techniques, now encoded on paper, are manifested step-by-step as the house rises from its columns.

### Negotiating the Boundaries Between Past, Present and Future

This ceremonial and building activity depends greatly upon the diverse clientele that Hok Sokol has cultivated over the past few years. In Siem Reap, where he has committed his efforts, Khmer, Australian and American clients have sought his architectural expertise and commissioned wooden houses. These clients support his preservation

**Fig. 6 (Top)**  
Workmen lock cross beams in place as they secure a line of columns. Photo by author.

**Fig. 7 (Bottom)**  
Architect Hok Sokol and homeowner Darryl Collins join Lok Kru at the altar to make offerings to the ancestral spirits associated with the column raising ceremony. Photo by author.





**Fig. 8**  
*The wooden house in Spean Chreav four months after the column raising ceremony. Photo by Darryl Collins (permission granted).*

projects and value both the aesthetics of a wooden house and its cultural significance to Cambodia's built environment. They also have the financial means to purchase land and build a house designed by an architect who works with highly skilled craftsmen. While some of their houses have been historic preservation projects, others have been new constructions that rely upon the designs and materials that are characteristic of the wooden house. These clients, however, are not interested in merely duplicating a house from the past, but expect modern upgrades that include indoor plumbing, electricity, septic systems, kitchen and bathroom counters, closets and even landscaping. Such demands require Hok Sokol and members of his architectural firm, HHH Company, to design innovations that are rooted in understanding the vernacular wooden house, while at the same time making it accessible to a current clientele.<sup>14</sup>

Technological advancements, including computers, construction site generators and modern building equipment, have recalibrated a building tradition, challenging Hok Sokol to reinterpret a past legacy in light of an ever-changing present. Skill in negotiating the boundaries between past, present and future is essential if the wooden house in Cambodia is to remain a viable vernacular form.

A century ago, houses such as the *phateah keung* associated with this ceremony were built and inhabited typically by high-ranking officials who had resources that set them apart from commoners (Prak 2006: 76). Still an object of status and wealth for owners today, these houses continue to distinguish occupants, and even builders, both of whom are engaged increasingly in an intercultural exchange influenced by changing lifestyles, market forces and emerging global demands. As a small, yet diverse, number of clients commission these wooden houses one-by-one, the extent of their preservation efforts remains unknown, and may be determined ultimately by the cost of viable land and replacement timber. Although this discussion remains beyond the scope of this field report—which focuses on events of a column raising ceremony—it nonetheless is tied to the on-going construction of wooden houses and to the vibrancy of this preservation movement.

For now, Hok Sokol has been able to revitalize this house-building tradition while keeping it meaningful for those most involved, namely his clients and workmen. The performative nature of ritual practices surrounding the column raising actively involves both of these constituents, strengthening their knowledge and appreciation

of Khmer building ceremonies. Since these rituals take place at key intervals during construction, and progress incrementally until the house is occupied, clients and workmen have time to forge an intimate working relationship with each other and the house, thereby realizing a living tradition that is socially interactive and culturally engaging. Although an international clientele may interpret the specifics of a column raising ceremony differently from Hok Sokol and his workmen (who recognize it as part of their cultural heritage), by choosing to construct a wooden house and to participate in Khmer rituals that protect their home and this legacy, these new clients demonstrate their commitment to maintaining, and even modernizing, an architectural tradition they hope will prosper in the future.

## Conclusion

Wooden houses built on a modular system, typical of those in Cambodia, can be moved from one site to another depending upon the interests of builders and homeowners. Even though Hok Sokol completes a site analysis of each dismantled house, and documents terrain, water sheds and directional orientation, his work with Lok Kru is critical in determining how each house is integrated into its new site, and is cosmically oriented to the landscape and surrounding buildings. Column raising ceremonies are designed and performed to insure that houses are aligned accordingly and infused with auspicious talismans that will please the spirits and ancestors associated with the land, village and house. As columns are set in place and Lok Kru defines a ritual space by invoking divine power and protection, he and Hok Sokol, accompanied by workmen, clients and villagers, publically demonstrate that local knowledge and wooden house construction do not simply belong to the past, but are part of Cambodia's future as communities rebuild and find new ground.

## Notes

My sincere thanks are extended to Hok Sokol and Darryl Collins for generously sharing their expertise and hospitality during my stay in Siem Reap. Our discussions regarding their work contributed greatly to this research. Thanks also go to the Venerable Koen Sakhoen, Sophea Mouth and Sarith Ou for their critical comments. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies and International Convention of Asia Scholars, March 31-April 3, 2011.

1. Following Khmer convention regarding personal surnames, Khmer surnames are listed first.
2. A review of wooden house typologies in Cambodia is extensive and included in M. Giteau (1971: 103-47); J. Népote (2004: 93-156); and Prak Vireak (2006: 66-89). See also, J. Moura (1883: 383-89) for early ethnographic research that explores connections between ethnicity and socio-economic conditions and traditional typologies.
3. In 2006, Darryl Collins purchased his first wooden house, a structure located on Koh Treong, a Mekong River island in Kampong Cham province. Hok Sokol had researched the house during his university studies and urged Darryl to buy it when the family notified him that they wanted to sell. Their joint adventure of relocating 30 tonnes of wooden planks, columns and ornamental carving to Siem Reap forged their current alliance of revitalizing wooden houses.
4. *Lok Kru* is a polite term used when speaking to a monk or an elite person; in this example it can mean honorary teacher.
5. For house-building rites, ranging from site selection to entering the house, see E. Porée-Maspero (1961: 548-628).
6. The term, *neak ta*, is difficult to translate into an English equivalent, but is recognized by Khmer as an omnipresent force. *Neak ta* may be a deity, sacred terrain or venerated ancestors, and also a spiritual force that provides a village

with energy, protection and wellbeing if respected and propitiated accordingly. An extensive analysis can be found in A. Forest (1992).

7. The seed syllables on the *yantras* are Pali-Sanskrit letters that are reduced to a single syllable and represent the essence of Lord Buddha's teachings. When combined with a *mandala* they act as vehicles that carry and contain infinite sacred messages and divine power. I greatly appreciate Venerable Koen Sakhoen's insights regarding how seed syllables are used in this context.
8. The *yantras* drawn by Lok Kru are patterned after the Hindu *mandalas* associated with Angkorian civilization (700-1431 CE). Their corresponding invocations are derived from Lord Vishnu, who is associated with architecture. These beliefs and practices, combined with Buddhism, animism and ancestor cults demonstrate the syncretic nature of ritual practice in Cambodia.
9. Preah Pisonkar belongs to an ancient Brahmanic cult that travelled from India to Southeast Asia and was integrated eventually into Khmer building practices. His image is carved on many Angkorian temples where his six arms hold the tools of the craftsman. In Sanskrit he is known as Vishvakarma, and belongs to the active aspect of Lord Vishnu, the Preserver. Preah Pisonkar is recognized by Khmer as the patron of music and the decorative arts. According to popular belief, he built Angkor Wat. See P. Fabricius (1970: 46-61) for this reinterpretation of his role as a master builder.
10. On this particular occasion, two pig's heads were offered to Preah Pisonkar at the construction site on the day of the column raising as both the foreman of the carpenters and Sokol independently purchased the votive centerpieces. One head is the norm.



11. See an essay with accompanying photos by cultural anthropologist, Ang Choulean (2004: 81-87) for the use of the banana tree and sugar cane grasses during rites of passage for girls entering puberty, a time also marked with fertility symbols.
12. Research on the Democratic Kampuchea regime, and the Khmer Rouge years (1975-79) is extensive and examined critically in B. Kiernan (1996), E. Becker (1998) and D. Chandler (1999). Regarding the suppression of religious groups, including Buddhism, see I. Harris (2007).
13. An insightful discussion about the lack of elders during the years following the Khmer Rouge is explored by E. Zucker (2008: 195-212) and sheds additional light on this dilemma.
14. Hok Sokol's architectural firm, HHH Company, stands for Humble Hanuman House, named after the beloved character, Hanuman, of the Indian epic the *Ramayana*, known as *Reamker* in Cambodia. Hanuman is a monkey who has magical power in mediating between the earthly and heavenly realm and is the faithful ally of Rama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the Preserver.

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