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## Analysis of the Khon Dance and Songkran Festival Conflict Between Thailand and Cambodia on the Registration of Intangible Cultural Heritage at Unesco

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**Abstract:** This article aims to examine the cultural conflict and diplomacy that occurred between Thailand and Cambodia regarding the designation of the Khon dance and the Songkran festival as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Although several studies have discussed cultural heritage disputes in Southeast Asia, there is still limited research specifically examining how UNESCO recognition strengthens cultural nationalism between Thailand and Cambodia. This study aims to analyze how this recognition shapes national identity, political narratives, and bilateral relations between the two countries. This study uses a qualitative approach through document analysis and media discourse analysis using triangulation techniques. Data are drawn and collected from official UNESCO documents, government statements, and media coverage in both countries to understand the historical context and contemporary dynamics that have occurred. The findings indicate that UNESCO recognition can strengthen nationalist narratives and also trigger digital conflicts through the media and public sphere. However, on the other hand, this recognition also opens opportunities for cultural diplomacy and regional cooperation. Claims to cultural heritage are strategically mobilized by state and non-state actors to strengthen national identity and cultural legitimacy. This study emphasizes that intangible cultural heritage plays a dual role as a source of conflict and a means of cooperation, thus requiring a collaborative and inclusive approach in its management in the Southeast Asian region.

**Keywords:** Khon Dance, Songkran, Conflict

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Thailand and Cambodia are historically, politically, and culturally complex countries in the Southeast Asian region that often lead to conflicts over cultural heritage between these two neighboring countries. The Khon Dance and the Songkran Festival, two cultural heritages with important symbols of Thai cultural identity, have been a source of intense debate between the two countries in northern Southeast Asia.

Khon Dance, is a traditional Thai dance theater form derived from the Hindu epic Ramayana (Rittibul, 2022), while the Songkran festival is a traditional Thai water festival that also marks the birthday of Thailand and is one of the most important and cherished festivals of the Thai people and originally connection from India (Agarwal, 2009). On the other hand, Cambodia also has a strong claim to some



elements of the Khon Dance art and Songkran Festival as cultural heritage that is also owned by their country, this is because the two countries have historical and cultural ties that are intertwined since the past.

This debate reached its peak when Thailand decided to nominate the Khon Dance and Songkran Festival as UNESCO-registered intangible cultural heritage in 2018 and 2023, which was opposed by Cambodians who also claimed that the elements contained in both cultures were also an integral part of their country's cultural heritage. Based on the previous explanation, the tension between the two countries is very difficult to avoid. The issues or conflicts over historical, cultural and territorial claims that have occurred between the two countries for a long time are also represented by Khon art and the Songkran Festival. Factors such as nationalism ideology, national identity, as well as domestic and international political interests also play a role in further complicating this conflict. Both Thailand and Cambodia have very strong political and economic interests to fight for the recognition of this cultural heritage, both to claim their national identity and also for tourism and economic development in each country.

Although previous studies have addressed cultural heritage disputes, nationalism, and identity politics in Southeast Asia, most have focused on historical narratives or bilateral conflicts in general, and have not specifically examined the role of UNESCO recognition in reinforcing cultural nationalism and fueling digital contestation between Thailand and Cambodia. Thus, there is a significant research gap in understanding how mechanisms of global cultural recognition interact with local political interests and media discourse in shaping contemporary cultural conflicts.

By further analyzing this conflict through a holistic and comprehensive approach, it can also broaden our understanding of the complexity of cultural dynamics and cultural politics in Southeast Asia in general, as well as provide valuable knowledge about the search for cultural agreement in a complex conflict context between Thailand and Cambodia.

Based on this background, this study formulates the following research questions: (1) How does UNESCO's recognition of intangible cultural heritage influence cultural nationalism between Thailand and Cambodia? (2) How are cultural claims regarding the Khon Dance and the Songkran Festival constructed and debated in media discourse? (3) What opportunities arise from this conflict in the context of cultural diplomacy between the two countries?

## 2. METHOD

In this study, a qualitative approach was used to explore a deeper understanding of the cultural conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over the art of Khon Dance and the Songkran Festival. The use of qualitative research methods enabled the researcher to further explore the complexities and social, cultural and political contexts underlying this dispute (Fossey et al., 2002). Using qualitative research also enabled the researcher to gain a rich discourse from the various perspectives involved in this conflict.

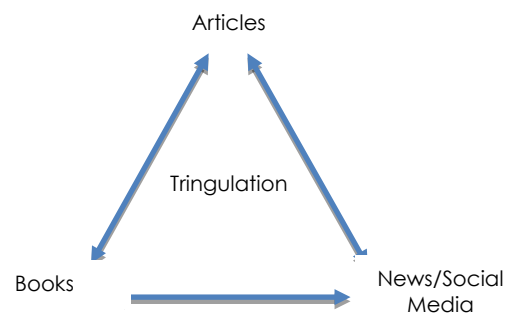
In addition, this study employs Benedict Anderson's theoretical framework of "imagined communities" to analyze how national identity is constructed through cultural symbols and historical

narratives, as well as how this influences cultural conflicts between Thailand and Cambodia. This theory serves as the analytical foundation for understanding how societies imagine their national communities and reproduce identity boundaries through cultural discourse.

First, the data collection in this study utilized sources such as academic literature, books, and news articles. This approach allowed the researcher to get a more comprehensive picture of the various views and arguments related to this dispute. Then at the data reduction stage, it involves organizing, simplifying, and finding ideas from the patterns of data that have been collected. It also involved coding the data, grouping themes, and further identifying the relationships between different aspects of the conflict. This research also used an inductive approach, which allowed new findings to emerge as the research process progressed.

After the data was reduced, it was presented in narrative and visual form through the use of techniques such as conceptual maps. The systematic and clear presentation of the data also allows the reader to better understand the complexity of the cultural conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. The results of the data analysis make it easier to organize the findings in the data presentation, which will provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the research.

Finally, the research will use the data validation technique of triangulation in its application. Triangulation by definition involves the use of multiple methods, sources or theories in order to verify the findings in the research. In this context, data is obtained through various sources such as; scientific articles, books, and public news that are verified against each other to ensure reliability and accuracy in the findings. The benefit of the triangulation technique is that it strengthens the trust in the research results and reduces bias that may arise from one method and data source used.



**Figure 1.** Triangulation Concept (Thurmond, 2001)

### 3. RESULTS

#### ***History of Relations between Thailand and Cambodia***

Broadly speaking, the relationship between Thailand and Cambodia is also very complex and has been influenced by various factors such as; culture, politics, and economics that have also lasted for more than a thousand years. Early influential kingdoms in the region, including the Funan, Chenla, Khmer, Sukothai, and Ayutthaya kingdoms (Raj, 2022), have interacted and engaged in diplomacy,

trade, and military conflicts that have shaped the dynamics of the relationship between what we now know as Thailand and Cambodia.

In the local pre-kingdom era, these two countries were part of one powerful and respected Khmer kingdom in Southeast Asia, and had considerable influence on the development of culture, religion, and architecture throughout the Indochina peninsula. In the history of Khmer expansion, it reached its heyday during the reign of a king named King Jayavarman II in 802-850 AD, who founded the Khmer empire and declared himself a god-king, and consolidated his vast territory into the countries we know today as Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and parts of southern Vietnam (Kamm, 1998).

After a few centuries of the Khmer Empire's strong dominance, its territories began to weaken and eventually gave birth to new kingdoms such as the Sukhothai Kingdom of Thailand and the Ayutthaya Kingdom later on. While most people only see conflict between these kingdoms, there were also periods of intense cooperation and cultural exchange that took place. For example, during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng in Sukothai, there are records of warm diplomatic relations between the Sukothai and Khmer kingdoms, including gifts to each other as well as diplomatic visits.

During the Ayutthaya period, the relationship between Ayutthaya and Khmer also experienced varied dynamics, from peace and cooperation, to open conflict followed by mutual conquest (Bandyopadhyay, 2018). Although war was not uncommon between the two kingdoms, the Ayutthaya kingdom was also not free from the influence of Khmer culture which included art, architecture and Buddhist beliefs. Examples such as the architectural style of temples in Lopburi Thailand, traditional Thai dance styles, Theravada Buddhist traditions, the Sanskrit language commonly used in religious rituals, which also has roots in Khmer culture.

The cultural similarities between Thailand and Cambodia were not only limited to the early kingdoms, but also persisted and continued for centuries afterward until the modern era. In the context of modern history, the two countries were also heavily influenced by the period of western colonialism and nationalism conflicts, which eventually shaped the local culture in both countries, between Thai and Cambodian culture also experienced many modifications that eventually created a uniqueness that was not the same, despite having the same cultural history.

In the end, although cultural conflict is an issue that is often discussed in the relationship between these two countries. However, it is not uncommon for the two countries to agree to partner in order to develop strategic sectors such as trade, tourism, and regional diplomacy that will have a further positive impact on Thailand and Cambodia internationally.

### **Definition of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage**

UNESCO intangible cultural heritage refers to practices, knowledge, expressions, skills and cultural traditions that are perceived to have an important element of value in the sustainability of human culture and are an integral part of the world's cultural heritage. The intangible cultural heritage program itself was established by UNESCO in 2003 as a response to the importance of

preserving and promoting cultural diversity around the world, focusing on the intangible aspects of culture, such as traditional knowledge, performing arts, religious practices, and oral traditions that exist in human culture. It is also a response to the fact that many people in the world do not know how to preserve their precious culture for the future (Hafstein, 2004).

One of the key aspects of UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage is the emphasis on the importance of recognizing, promoting and maintaining the cultural practices of local communities in various countries, which are also part of their group identity. Furthermore, the program aims to raise awareness of the diverse cultural values that need to be safeguarded by all people in the world. UNESCO also underlines that the intervention of many parties will not interfere with the independence of the people who own the culture to express their culture according to their needs (Noyes, 2016).

The UNESCO criteria have explained the culture that can be categorized as intangible heritage and can be registered with UNESCO. First, the culture or element is an intangible heritage referring to the convention written in UNESCO rules. Second, the culture is in dire need of protection due to the threat of its existence despite the efforts of the community, group, individual or country concerned. Therefore, protection assistance from UNESCO must be done immediately. Third, the steps to preserve the culture have been conveyed to the community, group, or individual by the relevant parties. Fourth, the culture has been nominated or received the widest possible support from the community, group, or country concerned to be registered at UNESCO which will help enforce the culture and promote it. Fifth, the culture has been included in the inventory of intangible cultural heritage within the territorial group of the submitting state party. Sixth, in urgent circumstances, the submitting country must have consulted extensively with relevant stakeholders, regarding the listing of its culture (Source: <https://ich.unesco.org>).

From the previous explanation, it can be understood that UNESCO's intangible heritage also reflects an awareness of the value of cultural pluralism and appreciation for the vast cultural diversity that exists throughout the world. This program also indirectly encourages collaboration between many countries in bringing the idea of tolerance, appreciation, and respect for every existing cultural practice. Therefore, UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage program also serves as a builder of intercultural dialogue, understanding, and peace through the recognition of each country's invaluable cultural assets.

### **Cross Opinion about Khon Art Culture and Songkran Festival**

In 2018 and 2023, Thailand has officially registered Khon (Damrhung & Lowell Skar, 2023) and Songkran Festival as intangible heritage to UNESCO. As for the things that the Thai government must prepare are proposals that cover many aspects of these two cultures, starting from their history and their deep cultural values globally. However, Thailand's success in registering these two cultures has also not escaped a lot of controversy, especially from the people of neighboring Cambodia who also feel that they have aspects of Khon culture and the Songkran Festival. Khon is another form of the Lakhon

Kol performance art form in Cambodia which both have roots in the Hindu epic Ramayana, although there are also differences in the interpretation of each story in the two performance arts. Meanwhile, the Songkran Festival is also very closely related to the culture of the Cambodian people, who celebrate the Buddhist calendar new year with the expression of splashing water. Therefore, there is a fear of the Cambodian people losing their cultural elements, if the two cultures have already been registered to UNESCO by Thailand. Below are news snippets of news responses related to this issue.



**Figure 2.** Cambodian Facebook users rage over dance Khon ownership (Source: Nation Thailand)

The social media battles contain many accusations, justifications, insults and diatribes between the two communities of Thailand and Cambodia who both feel they have exclusive rights of culture. The following also includes some of the questions and answers that arise from the cultural claims that occur between Thai and Cambodian communities.

**Table 1.** Discussion on Quora about cultural sharing between Thailand and Cambodia (Source: Quora)

Thailand and Cambodia Relate Question about Culture		Sample Answered by People
1.	I heard some Cambodians say that many Thais don't acknowledge Khmer influence in their culture. Is this true and why is this the case?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Some Cambodians think Thai stole their culture and also their land and use all of them to make Thailand get richer and richer.” “Some Thais think Cambodians cling to the past and aging walls in Angkorwat and try to claim everything to be their own and do nothing for their culture.”</li> </ul>
2.	Does Lahorn Khol belong to Thailand or Cambodia?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“To put it briefly, Khon is a part of Thailand, while Lakhon Khol is a part of Cambodia. It's intricate; during the Ayutthaya Kingdom, Thais took up the traditional Khmer/Angkor masked dance and transformed it into Thai Khon style, incorporating Thai dance moves and costumes. The ancient Khmer</li> </ul>

		dance faded and was nearly destroyed after Siam/Thai attacked Angkor in 1431 and the Khmers transferred the capital away from Angkor."
3.	Should Thailand apologize to Myanmar, Cambodia, and other countries it copied and claimed they made it? The water festival (Songkran) in Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "We don't claim that Siam or Thailand originated the water festival, but we do introduce to the world our version called Songkran, while also acknowledging and respecting the different names it may have in other countries"</li> </ul>
4.	Why did Thailand copy Cambodian culture? Why aren't they creative enough to create their own?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I believe the response is a combination of both and everything from their past. A large portion of Thailand was ruled by the Khmer Empire in the beginning. There resided a few of their well-known monarchs. like the second Suryavarman. Before ascending to the throne, he resided at Lop Buri, which is now in Thailand. Later on, as we all know, he went to build Angkor Wat."</li> </ul>
5.	Why is the Cambodian costume similar to the Thai costume just recently?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Because the popularity of Thai old-style drama, Bupphesaniwas in 2017. Cambodia wedding costumes starts to import Thai costumes for their wedding studios. Here are some list that was advertise from Cambodia wedding studios that bought from Thailand or copied from Thai designers."</li> </ul>
6.	Why does Cambodia claim Thai culture as theirs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The Thai people only guard what is exclusively theirs. Cambodia has made a unilateral claim to it. They are also not the sole assertion. Additionally, they charge Thai people with copying and thievery. Hatred and debate consequently ensued. if you're not convinced. By providing proof, you can demonstrate it. People from Cambodia frequently assert that everything originates in their country and with the carvings of Angkor Wat."</li> </ul>
7.	Why does Thai hate Cambodia?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Being Thai myself, I felt sorry for people who are stuck on outdated, ridiculous ideas, whether they be Cambodian or Thai. I sincerely revere the virtues of heritage, tradition, and history."</li> </ul>

	However, you must first understand that culture can be transferred, embraced, and modified. It is a cultural phenomenon that has existed everywhere from the dawn of humanity till the end of humankind."
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A public discussion on Quora regarding the relationship between Thai and Cambodian cultures reflects complex dynamics rooted in a long history, national identity, and cultural pride across Southeast Asia. Questions such as "Does Thailand acknowledge Khmer influence?" or "Does Thailand imitate Cambodian culture?" reveal a historical tension that remains deeply entrenched to this day.

The responses from users reveal two main perspectives: from the Cambodian side, there is a belief that Thailand has appropriated or imitated Khmer cultural elements—such as the Lakhon Khol dance, classical costumes, or even the Songkran festival—and then presented them to the world as part of Thailand's cultural identity. There is a view that culture is flexible and can evolve through processes of adoption, adaptation, and reinterpretation without erasing its origins. For the majority of Thais, art forms like Khon are not merely a legacy of the past but also part of a long-standing cultural evolution, spanning from the former Ayutthaya Kingdom to the present day.

Through this discussion, it is clear that historical disagreements have contributed to cultural conflicts between the two nations. From the Cambodian perspective, Khmer heritage is a symbol of national identity that must be preserved and claimed as their own, while for the Thai public, this shared culture has become integrated and has formed a unique new identity for Thailand. Several statements also referenced historical events, such as the Ayutthaya invasion of Angkor in 1431 or the reign of King Suryavarman II in the region that is now part of Thailand, which are often used as the basis for each side's cultural claims. This demonstrates that history is not merely viewed as a record of the past but also as a tool to legitimize national identity and current nationality.

Furthermore, the discussion also revealed quite strong emotional sentiments, ranging from pride to stereotypes. Some Cambodians accuse the Thai people of "stealing their culture," while some Thais view Cambodia as being too fixated on the past and unable to innovate. However, amidst the debate, there were also more moderate and reflective voices emphasizing that culture is a living entity that is constantly evolving, changing, and being modified throughout human history. From an academic perspective, this phenomenon is intriguing because it demonstrates how regional cultural heritage has become a arena for negotiating meaning and ownership within the digital space. It also demonstrates how cultural nationalism can manifest in a new form—digital nationalism—where platforms like Quora serve as a medium for the public to assert their identities in relation to other nations.

Therefore, the discussion on Quora is not merely an online debate about who is imitating whom, but also a reflection on how the two nations interpret their cultural heritage amidst modernity and globalization. This indicates that cultural relations between Thailand and Cambodia are still colored by the remnants of historical rivalry,

yet simultaneously open up an opportunity to understand that Southeast Asian culture is actually shaped by a long process of exchange, adaptation, and mutual influence.

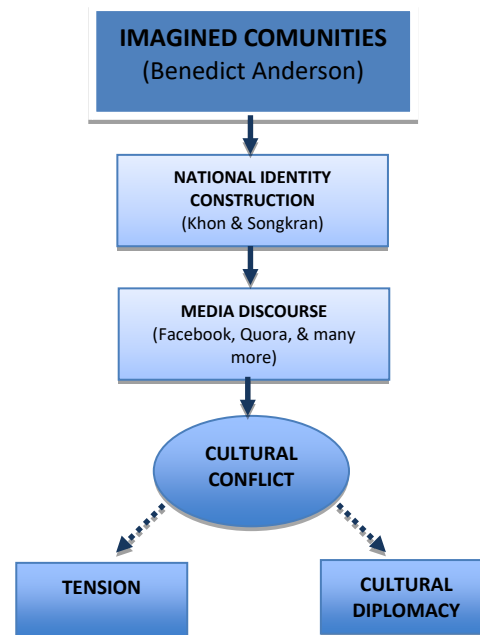
### **Imagined Communities and Cultural Nationalism in the Thailand-Cambodia Conflict**

Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community" provides a relevant theoretical framework for understanding the cultural conflict between Thailand and Cambodia, particularly regarding the Khon dance and the Songkran Festival. Anderson (Anderson, 2020) argues that a nation is not a natural entity, but rather a social construct "imagined" by its people, in which individuals feel they are part of a community even though not all of them know one another. This sense of belonging is shaped through symbols, practices, culture, and a shared historical narrative.

In the context of Thailand and Cambodia, cultural heritage such as the Khon dance and the Songkran Festival serves as a crucial symbol in fostering and reinforcing national identity. When a country registers these cultural elements with UNESCO, they cease to be merely regional traditions and instead become representations of a specific national identity. This process can inadvertently transform cultural heritage into political symbols that reinforce imaginary boundaries between "us" and "them."

Furthermore, the development of digital platforms further reinforces this phenomenon by enabling broader participation in the formation of national identity. Online discussions, such as those found on Qupra and other social media platforms, demonstrate how communities actively engage in defending their cultural claims, often by referencing specific historical narratives. This aligns with Anderson's own view that national values are continuously reproduced through communication and collective discourse, including digital media.

Therefore, the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over cultural heritage can be understood not merely as a struggle for ownership but also as a manifestation of competing imagined communities. Each country seeks to assert its cultural legitimacy and historical continuity, which ultimately reinforces cultural nationalism. Nevertheless, since these identities are inherently constructive and dynamic, there remains an opportunity to foster a more inclusive understanding of shared cultural heritage in the Southeast Asian region.



**Figure 2.** Diagram Imagined Communities and Cultural Nationalism in the Thailand-Cambodia Conflict

### Thai and Cambodian Ignorance of Collective Culture

The lack of knowledge among Thai and Cambodian communities about the concept of intangible cultural heritage registration with UNESCO can be a source of problems or misunderstandings and conflicts related to the ownership of the art of Khon Dance (Thailand) or also known as Lakhon Kol (Cambodia) and the Songkran Festival. In traditionally-minded societies, especially in Southeast Asian countries with rich cultural heritage such as Thailand and Cambodia, the concept of cultural ownership is generally understood only in a local or national context. Therefore, when an aspect of their cultural heritage is officially registered with UNESCO, people have the perception that this confirms exclusive rights to the registered heritage.

In fact, in the context of UNESCO itself, intangible heritage registration does not seek to assign exclusive ownership of cultural heritage to the submitting countries. On the contrary, the purpose of cultural registration is to recognize the importance of cultural heritage globally, promote cross-cultural ideas, and encourage its preservation and sustainability for the general benefit of humanity. Therefore, registration with UNESCO should be more wisely perceived as an attempt at international recognition and support, rather than a claim to exclusive ownership of a culture (Eichler, 2021).

Furthermore, the lack of understanding of this concept may lead Thais and Cambodians to continue to worry about losing control of the art of Khon or Lakhon Khol and the Songkran Festival if it is registered first by a country other than their own. This could certainly result in a defensive or nationalistic reaction that would complicate the dynamics of the relationship between the two neighboring countries. Furthermore, there is a misunderstanding that could be

exploited by certain parties who have certain political and economic interests with the aim of worsening relations between Thailand and Cambodia.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that, the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over a claim of ownership over Khon art and the Songkran Festival is a reflection of the complexity of cultural, historical, and political dynamics in the Southeast Asian region. Although Khon art and the Songkran festival have deep roots in both countries, the lack of understanding of the concept of intangible cultural heritage registration with UNESCO has led to tensions and misunderstandings that have only complicated relations between Thailand and Cambodia.

More specifically, this study finds that UNESCO's recognition of intangible cultural heritage serves not only as a form of cultural preservation but also significantly strengthens cultural nationalism between Thailand and Cambodia. This is clearly evident in the emergence of narratives of "exclusive ownership" constructed by each country and reinforced through media discourse and digital discussions. Furthermore, cultural claims over the Khon dance and the Songkran festival are built upon differing historical interpretations, which in turn trigger identity contests in the public sphere, particularly on social media and digital platforms.

It is equally important to highlight the significance of public education regarding the objectives and implications of cultural registration with UNESCO, as well as the role of open dialogue and cooperation between the two nations, to focus on resolving this conflict. The responsibility of both nations lies in promoting a full understanding of the concept of intangible cultural heritage registration at the global level.

Furthermore, this article illustrates that behind these conflicts lie opportunities for cultural diplomacy, where shared cultural heritage can serve as a bridge to strengthen bilateral and regional cooperation. Therefore, these conflicts not only create tension but also open the door to more productive cross-cultural dialogue.

The hope is that, once the cultural conflict between the two countries is properly resolved, Khon art and the Songkran festival can serve as a medium for cross-border cooperation and promote peaceful stability in the Southeast Asian region.

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