Documenting an endangered Cambodian musical tradition: Unexpected findings on the provenance of the British Museum's "Asset 1380796001"

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ABSTRACT

The Cambodian Jew's harp *angkuoch* can be found both among the majority Khmer people and some ethnic minorities, across several Cambodian provinces. Before the 1970s, playing and enjoying *angkuoch* was a popular local pastime in village communities. However, various social and cultural shifts in Cambodia over the last half-century, including the Khmer Rouge genocide (1975–1979), mean that *angkuoch* is now highly endangered both as an instrument and as a performance practice. In 2020, the author led an international project team to document the process of *angkuoch*-making in two rural village communities in Siem Reap province. Funded by the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme of the British Museum, the project was carried out in collaboration with partner organisation Cambodian Living Arts and local artists and instrument-makers. This article reports on one specific aspect of the fieldwork: the unexpected and incidental discovery of the likely provenance of 'Asset 1380796001' in the British Museum collection, an *angkuoch* of a previously unknown maker, donated to the museum in 1966. The project team is now working with the British Museum to include in its catalogue this new information about the instrument. This article describes and reflects on these circumstances and outcomes, not only in as much as they advance historical knowledge about *angkuoch* and *angkuoch*-making, but also more broadly in terms of their relevance to fieldwork documentation approaches, the ethics of collaborative ethnography, and the intersections between intangible cultural heritage (music) and material knowledge (musical instruments) in the context of a museum project.

Keywords

Cambodia, documentation, endangered ICH, endangerment, fieldwork, material culture, museums, music, musical instruments, Southeast Asia

In January 2020, an international project team[1] undertook fieldwork to document the making of the musical instrument *angkuoch*, as it is practised in two rural village communities in Siem Reap province in northern Cambodia.[2] The focus on documenting the *angkuoch*-making process aligns with recent calls in ethnomusicological scholarship to attend to instrument-making, not only music-making, in efforts to document and safeguard endangered musical traditions (e.g. Howard, forthcoming). In the early design phase of the project, partner organisation Cambodian Living Arts conducted a scoping study that identified a handful of *angkuoch* makers in Siem Reap province. Acknowledging that their knowledge was rare and wishing to share it with others, three *angkuoch* makers – BIN[3] Song, KRAK Chi and CHI Monivong – expressed keenness to document their knowledge and skills with the support of the research team. In the spirit of UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Urgent Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the project worked in tandem with these artists to preserve existing knowledge of making *angkuoch* in its social and cultural context, for the benefit of present and future generations. The project was funded by the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme of the British Museum (UK) and financially and practically supported by UNESCO (Cambodia).

A suite of collaborative outputs report on the core research and documentation outcomes from this project. These include a video documentary (Grant, Thon and Say 2020), a bilingual project booklet (Grant and Song 2020) and a digital project repository containing nearly four hundred documentation files about *angkuoch*-making, including photographs, audio and video recordings, interview transcriptions and field notes (Grant and Song 2020). The scope of this article is narrower than these outputs. It explores and critically reflects on a specific aspect of the fieldwork, one that was incidental to the project's documentation aims, yet that ultimately proved particularly important in museum and organological terms. This importance lies in the fact that it led to the identification of the likely maker of the sole *angkuoch* in the British Museum, an *angkuoch russey* (bamboo *angkuoch)* donated to the museum in 1966 without attribution of the maker. In this way, this article exemplifies the 'deep-seated interdependence between tangible and intangible cultural heritage' (Neyrinck, Seghers and Tsakiridis 2020, 63) and is situated in what Neyrinck and colleagues term a '"third space": a space where museums and safeguarding ICH intertwine' (2020, 63).

After providing some background information about the *angkuoch*, this article describes the circumstances leading to the unexpected discovery about this specific instrument. It then reflects on the significance of that discovery, not only in terms of advancing socio-historical knowledge about *angkuoch* and *angkuoch*-making, but also in relation to intersections between intangible cultural heritage (in this case, a musical practice) and material knowledge (a musical instrument) in the context of a documentation project, and broader practical and ethical considerations about approaches to documentation and safeguarding. It is hoped that these more general insights may be informative for ethnographers, museum workers, intangible cultural heritage researchers and other scholars and artists working across diverse contexts.

Introducing Cambodian *angkuoch*

The folk musical instrument known as the 'Jew's harp' (also jaw's harp, mouth harp, trump or *guimbarde*) is found in many countries and cultures around the world, from Vietnam and China to Turkey, Austria and Italy (Fox 1988b; International Jew's Harp Society 2017; Wright 2001). The origin of the name, and of the instrument itself, remains unclear to scholars, though it is believed to be an 'extremely ancient instrument' that may have originated in Asia, perhaps China (Fox 1988, 22, 49). Under the Sachs-Hornbostel system of musical instrument classification, the Jew's harp falls under the category of idiophone, specifically a plucked linguaphone (Miller and Williams 1998), as within a narrow frame it features a vibrating tongue that is plucked by the player to create the sound. However, in Cambodia, the instrument is classified as an aerophone (a wind instrument, *kroeung phlomm*), because the instrument's frame is held between the player's lips, with players blowing (*phlomm*) across the vibrating tongue and altering the shape of their oral cavity to change timbre and pitch (Miller and Williams 1998, 161, 166).

The Cambodian version of the Jew's harp is called the *angkuoch*, and it is historically found in several provinces both among the majority Khmer people and some ethnic minorities (Keo 2005). There are at least three types of *angkuoch*. *Angkuoch russey* is made from a flat strip of thin bamboo between around eight and 20 centimetres long, with a *lamella* (tongue) cut or glued in the middle. *Angkuoch daek* is made of iron, with an outer frame of around 10–15 centimetres that houses a vibrating curved tongue. A third type is the *angkuoch ksae*, made out of bamboo with a string attached to the tongue that the

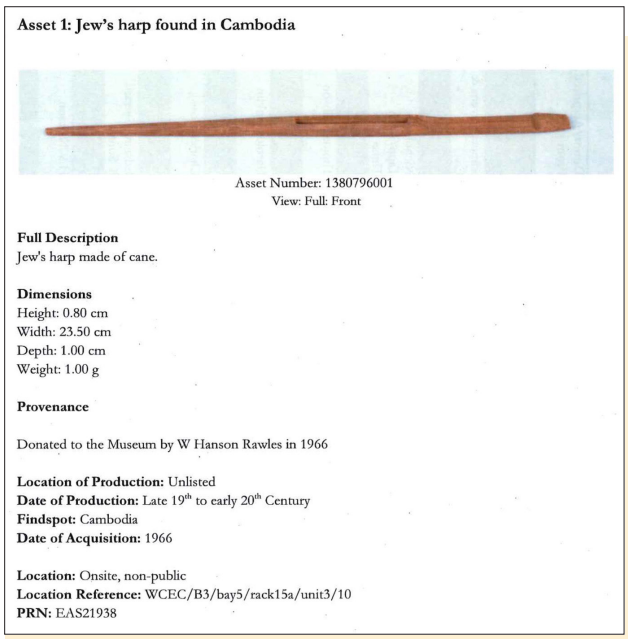
player pulls to vibrate it (Keo 2005).

Before the Khmer Rouge era (1975–1979), playing and enjoying *angkuoch* was a popular local pastime in village communities. Considered a folk instrument, traditional social functions of the *angkuoch* included as a rural pastime, as a way for young men to communicate and flirt with young women, and as an accompaniment to simple folk songs (Libin 2014). Players and makers of *angkuoch* were (and still are) typically boys and men, though there appear to be no cultural restrictions on girls or women playing or making the instruments. Some sources refer to children playing the instrument for amusement or while herding cattle (e.g. Khean, Dorivan, Lina and Lenna 2003; Libin 2014). The *angkuoch* is only rarely used in ensembles, usually being too soft to be heard over other instruments.

Social and cultural shifts in Cambodia over the last half-century, including the devastation of the Khmer Rouge genocide in the 1970s, mean that only a handful of people still know how to make and play *angkuoch*. Even nearly a quarter-century ago, Miller and Williams wrote that the *angkuoch* 'today it is no longer popular, and few people know how to play it' (1998, 204). While *angkuoch russey* is sometimes still found in village contexts and is produced as souvenirs for tourists, *angkuoch daek* is almost non-existent in contemporary public life, and it is unclear whether there are any living instrument-makers who know how to produce *angkuoch ksae*.[4] There is also very limited scholarly knowledge available in either Khmer or English about the instrument; key sources that specifically refer to *angkuoch* are cursory (such as those few mentioned above: Keo 2005; Khean et al. 2003; Libin 2014).

Asset 1380796001

The British Museum has only one *angkuoch* in its collection: 'Asset 1380796001', an instrument by an unknown maker.[5] According to the museum's catalogue entry, the donor was a certain W. Hanson Rawles, of whom nothing more is known than that he donated this asset to the British Museum in 1966. For fieldwork, the project team had sourced a printed copy of this catalogue entry (fig. 1), with the idea that it may be used as a solicitation device to encourage project participants to discuss the features of the *angkuoch* and how they are made (or might have been made at the time). Given the scarce information available about this specific *angkuoch*, the research team did not expect that participants would necessarily be able to provide information about its provenance, although we realised that this was a possibility.



Asset 1: Jew's harp found in Cambodia

Asset Number: 1380796001
View: Full: Front

Full Description
Jew's harp made of cane.

Dimensions
Height: 0.80 cm
Width: 23.50 cm
Depth: 1.00 cm
Weight: 1.00 g

Provenance

Donated to the Museum by W Hanson Rawles in 1966

Location of Production: Unlisted
Date of Production: Late 19th to early 20th Century
Findspot: Cambodia
Date of Acquisition: 1966

Location: Onsite, non-public
Location Reference: WCEC/B3/bay5/rack15a/unit3/10
PRN: EAS21938

Figure 1
Catalogue entry for British Museum Asset 1380796001. (British Museum 2020a)

When the project team showed the copy of the catalogue entry to the brothers CHI Monivong (b. 1990) and CHI Chen (b. 1988), *angkuoch russey* makers from Srah Srang Khang Choeung village, the brothers reflected that the instrument seemed to bear strong resemblance to the unique style of an instrument-maker called MONG Koeuy (ca. 1937–2012) from nearby Preah Dak village, who was a prominent, prolific and publicly engaged bamboo *angkuoch* maker in Siem Reap province in the 1950s and 1960s. They particularly referred to similarities between Mong's instruments and the asset photograph in terms of the instrument's shape, thickness and length, as well as a characteristic node near the *lamella* of the instrument. Chen stated that the thick 'top notch' of the instrument, and its thick head and body, made him believe that it may have been made by Mong. Monivong reflected that the style of the asset appeared to be the same as the one taught to him by his father Krak Chi, who in turn was taught by Mong in the 1990s. The brothers suggested that the project team go to Preah Dak village to try to find Mong's family (see Figure 2).

Three of us (author and project leader Grant, project research assistant and interpreter Say, and videographer Thon) did so a few days later, asking for directions to the family's house along the way. Our unannounced arrival

Figure 2
Angkuoch player Chi Chen talking with the project team about the asset. Srah Srang Khang Choeung village, Siem Reap province, 7 January 2020.
Photo: THON Dika. Used with permission.

was graciously met by Mong's daughter KOEUY Leakhena and her mother LAV Mech, Mong's (second) wife. When we showed Mech and her daughter Leakhena the photo of the British Museum asset, they became emotional, telling us they recognised features of the instruments made by their husband and father (respectively), which he had once sold widely to local and foreign tourists. Leakhena later told us (see Figure 3):

> When I first saw this photo [of the British Museum *angkuoch*], I was very excited. I never knew my father's craft had been promoted internationally. Even locally, some people do not even know about it, so I had not thought it was very prized. Seeing this *angkuoch*, I miss him. To my family, the *angkuoch* symbolises my father. (interview with author, 9 January 2020)

Mech and Leakhena invited us to return a few days later to meet their son and brother (respectively) KOEUY Reatha, son of Mong Koeuy, and himself a bamboo *angkuoch* maker and player (see fig. 4). Like Mong's wife and daughter, his son Reatha also believed that the asset bore strong resemblances to instruments made by Mong.[6] Reatha identified several specific similarities between the apparent features of the asset and his father's instruments, including its 'round' head, its absolute measurements and the relative measurements of its parts. He and the project team could discern in the catalogue photograph a carved 'breast' on the *lamella* of the asset, which, according to

Figure 3
Koeuy Leakhena (right) and Lav Mech (left) talk to the project team about the British Museum catalogue entry for the *angkuoch russey* in its collection. Preah Dak village, Siem Reap province, 9 January 2020.
Photos by the author.

Figure 4
Siblings Koeuy Leakhena (left) and Koeuy Reatha (right) with their mother, Lav Mech (seated), wife of *angkuoch* maker Mong Koeuy. Preah Dak village, 17 January 2020. Photo by the author.

Reatha, was both an innovation by Mong and a unique characteristic of his *angkuoch*. According to Reatha, Mong's own father had instead put wax on the *lamella* to serve the same acoustic function; only Mong Koeuy carved the breast into the instrument itself. For this reason, Reatha believed the asset was made by his father rather than his grandfather.[7]

Reatha also recounted to the project team some information about his father's *angkuoch*-making and life (interview with author, 17 January 2020). Mong had begun to learn to make *angkuoch* from his own father when he was around 10 years old. As a boy, he had sold the instruments to tourists at the nearby temples, along with coconuts and other things. Later, as a young married man, Mong worked as a farmer and carpenter. Mong married his second wife, Lav Mech (b. 1945), during the Khmer Rouge era (a forced marriage under the regime); he began selling *angkuoch* again soon after the fall of the Khmer Rouge (1979), and the income supported their children through school. Mong passed away in his late 70s in 2012. Four of his sons, including Reatha, continue their father's tradition.

Who made British Museum Asset 1380796001?

Several indicators – but not all – point to Mong Koeuy as maker of Asset 1380796001. Chi Chen and Koeuy Reatha both stated that Mong Koeuy often etched four (or not more than five) parallel lines on the body of his instruments, but this marking is not discernible on the asset from the catalogue photograph. Reatha proposed that a physical examination of the asset may reveal this marking; alternatively, Mong may not have included this marking on this particular instrument.

Notably, two project participants from outside Mong's family – the brothers Chi Chen and Monivong – corroborated the view that Mong (or a direct family member of his) likely made the asset. The brothers' artistic lineage to Mong would seem to equip them well to recognise distinctive features of Mong's *angkuoch*, and their lesser vested interest in Mong's creatorship is an important factor in triangulating information provided by Mong's family members.

If Mong Koeuy were its maker, this would date Asset 1380796001 to the mid-20th century – sometime between the late 1940s and its donation to the British Museum in 1966. This is somewhat later than the date of production provided in the catalogue entry, 'Late 19th to early 20th Century' (British Museum 2020a). Mong was already making *angkuoch* as a young boy in the late 1940s and early 1950s and selling them locally to tourists at local markets and temples, so his instruments would have been in local circulation for a potential acquisitor, such as W. Hanson Rawles, to encounter.

It is feasible that Rawles acquired the *angkuoch* directly from the young Mong Koeuy sometime before or during 1966. However, if Rawles had known that Mong made the asset, then, even if he did not make note of Mong's name, he arguably should have been able to provide the British Museum with more precise information about the asset's 'Findspot' and 'Location of production', and more accurate information about its 'Date of production', than is represented in the British Museum catalogue entry (though this assumes that Rawles donated the instrument to the museum with some form of accompanying statement). Alternatively, Rawles may have acquired the instrument indirectly – from a local market, perhaps, or as a gift – in which case the vague catalogue entry information about the asset's date and location of production could either be Rawles's best guess, or the museum's.

Given that *angkuoch*-making skills and techniques were (and still are) typically intergenerationally

transmitted within a family, an alternative explanation for the museum's recorded date of production for Asset 1380796001 – late 19th to early 20th century – is that the asset was made by Mong Koeuy's father or grandfather. While this would address the date discrepancy, it seems to contradict the information provided by Reatha about the differences in *angkuoch*-making technique and style between Mong and his father (Reatha's grandfather), as well as overlook the plausibility of W. Hanson Rawles encountering one of Mong's instruments in circulation, mid-century. The relative merits of either argument – that the asset was made by Mong Koeuy or by his father or grandfather – hangs, at least to some extent, on the accuracy of the date of production in the British Museum catalogue entry. On the balance of available evidence, it seems most plausible that Mong Koeuy made Asset 1380796001.

Reflections

The fieldwork circumstances and outcomes outlined in this article give rise to some practical and ethical considerations with possible relevance for intangible and tangible cultural heritage fieldworkers and researchers across contexts. In this closing section, I reflect on what I view as the most salient of these considerations. I also offer my reflections on the importance and implications of the new information generated by the project about British Museum Asset 1380796001.

The findings reported on in this article, as well as the broader documentation project in which they are situated, fall at the intersection of intangible and tangible cultural heritage. They also exist within the 'third space' in safeguarding heritage that falls at the intersection between museum and intangible cultural heritage activities (Neyrinck, Seghers and Tsakiridis 2020). The tangible is of course represented by the physical objects, the *angkuoch*, that are in some sense the primary object of inquiry. However, the knowledge and skills of living *angkuoch* makers (and players) are orally transmitted through the generations, a characteristic of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003); moreover, instrument-making emphatically serves the end of instrument-playing. In these senses, although the project may be narrowly conceived as relating to material cultural knowledge, it ultimately advances the documentation and safeguarding of *angkuoch* as a living musical tradition. All three core project team members (author and ethnomusicologist Grant, intangible cultural heritage expert SENG Song and ethnomusicologist Patrick KERSALÉ) brought to the project expertise in intangible (rather than tangible) cultural heritage. Even though the project sought to document *angkuoch*-making rather than *angkuoch*-playing, the project team conceived of the project primarily as contributing to efforts to preserve and promote *angkuoch* as a living musical practice. In this regard, the decision of the project team to pursue the inquiry into Asset 1380796001 represented a step outside of our area of main expertise (namely, intangible cultural heritage). However, the upshot of this decision – the discovery of new information not only about the asset itself but also about its likely maker, his typical instrument-making process and some socio-historical context to *angkuoch*-making, *angkuoch*-makers and the musical practice of *angkuoch* in the early to mid-20th century – all advance the documentation and safeguarding of the intangible cultural practice of *angkuoch* as a musical tradition. This reflection could perhaps be generalised as follows: moving outside of a predefined scope in a documentation or safeguarding project can lead to discoveries that ultimately enrich the project outcomes in ways directly aligned with its aims.

As this project exemplifies, documentation and safeguarding projects sometimes lead down surprising pathways. The discovery of contextual social and organological information about a particular museum object was not the primary aim of this project (which was rather to document in depth the *angkuoch*-making process as it is currently practised by instrument-makers in Siem Reap province). In many ways, it was serendipitous that project participants Chi Monivong and Chi Chen presented to the project team a possible line of inquiry about the object. It was also opportune that the project team, on a tight fieldwork schedule, was able to create the time to pursue those leads, as well as access the (admittedly modest) resources required (such as funding for local transportation to the village where Mong Koeuy's family lived and for small gifts of thanks for the family). Perhaps another useful resource was the keen curiosity of the research team about the leads. This curiosity manifest in us being prepared to explore the unforeseen, to diverge from the narrowly defined project aims and our carefully planned fieldwork schedule. In addition to a willingness to move outside immediate areas of expertise, then, a general exploratory approach can evidently be an advantage in documentation and safeguarding projects – not least because, as in this case, pertinent or valuable lines of inquiry might only become evident in the course of a project.

In mid-2020, on request of Mong Koeuy's son Reatha and with his input, the project team submitted to the British Museum's Department of Asia a dossier,[8] comprising a six-page summary document and 15 associated files (photographs, video recordings and field notes), envisaged as an appendage to the museum's catalogue entry for Asset 1380796001. The document and associated files make the case, outlined above, for Mong Koeuy (or his father or grandfather) as the likely maker of the asset. The museum's operations and staffing were significantly disrupted throughout the second half of 2020 and into 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and at the time of writing (mid-2021), the dossier was still being processed by the British Museum. However, the museum has expressed its in-principle willingness to append the information in the dossier to the catalogue entry for Asset 1380796001.

Making public this project finding via the museum catalogue and in other ways (including via this article) is important for at least two reasons. First, it enriches the extremely limited contextual knowledge about this object. Since Asset 1380796001 has exclusively represented *angkuoch* in the museum's collection (until its acquisition of instruments made in the course of this project), disseminating the new findings about this specific instrument via the open-access online catalogue will expand the internationally available information about *angkuoch* in general, now and into the future. In turn, this contributes to the documentation and safeguarding of *angkuoch* and *angkuoch*-making. To further broaden the representation of *angkuoch* in the British Museum collection, the author purchased two instruments made for and during this project, using funds from the museum's Endangered Material Knowledge Programme grant. The makers, Bin Song and Chi Monivong, gave explicit permission that the instruments be provided to the museum for its collection. Thus, one *angkuoch russey* and one *angkuoch daek* were accepted into the museum's collection in late 2020; the respective catalogue entries (with photographs) are available online (British Museum 2020b; 2020c.) Chi Monivong's *angkuoch russey* (Museum asset number 2020,3017.1) comes with the following 'Curator Comments' that make the historical link between the *angkuoch russey* donated to the museum in 1966 and this new one:

> This angkuoch was made by CHI Monivong, the son of angkuoch maker KRAK Chi. KRAK Chi learnt his craft from MONG Koeuy (d. 2012), who may have made the instrument already in the British Museum's collection (As1966,11.5). (British Museum 2020b)

Second, as museums around the world strive to redress past questionable (or plainly unethical) practices (Murphy 2016), adding this new information to the catalogue will finally duly acknowledge the likely maker of the object, Mong Koeuy, more than 50 years after the British Museum acquired the instrument. As Mong's son Reatha made clear to the project team during fieldwork, such an acknowledgement is understandably important to him and his family, as indicated by these fieldwork notes that research assistant SAY Tola and I recorded:

> I called Ta [Mong] Koeuy's son KOEUY Reatha to confirm his name and his brothers' names [...] Reatha asked whether his father could be credited for being the maker of the instrument in the British Museum [...] I said that the project leader (Cathy) would relay his request to the British Museum. (Say Tola, fieldwork notes section 2(i), 15 January 2020)

> Reatha told me that some years ago, there were Japanese and German researchers and [...] journalists who came to take footage of his family (including his father) making Angkuoch, but he did not know how those people used those materials. He told me that this is the reason he wanted the project team to make sure that his family is credited for their knowledge about Angkuoch and for the instrument in the British Museum. (Say Tola, fieldwork notes section 2(vi), 15 January 2020)

> I explained to Reatha and his family that I would contact the British Museum to ask about the possibility to update their catalogue entry for the 1966-donated Angkuoch, to append the additional information he had provided about his father. I promised him that the project team would be in touch in due course to inform him of the outcome of that correspondence. (Catherine Grant, fieldwork notes section 1(v), 17 January 2020)

Recent good-practice procedures of museums ensure careful documentation, wherever possible, of the provenance and donation circumstances of items to their collections. This project highlights the moral, as well as scholarly, importance of those good practices. While the project team always hoped and intended that this project would make an important contribution towards

documenting and safeguarding *angkuoch*, this ethical advance in acknowledging the knowledge and skills of a historical *angkuoch* maker is arguably no less important, even if unplanned.

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ENDNOTES

1. Project team: Australian music researcher Catherine GRANT (Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, Griffith University, Australia), cultural expert SONG Seng (NGO Cambodian Living Arts, Cambodia), research assistant SAY Tola, videographer THON Dika, project manager EN Sormanak and French ethnomusicologist Patrick KERSALÉ. SONG, SAY, THON and EN are Cambodian.
2. *Documenting the instrument and instrument-making of Angkuoch, Cambodian mouth harp*, Small Grant 02 of the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme of the British Museum (https://www.emkp.org/documentingcambodianmouthharp/). Fieldwork took place 31 December 2019 to 21 January 2021.
3. Throughout this article, following convention, the surnames of Cambodian people are given first and are capitalised for clarity on first appearance and in the acknowledgements, references and endnotes.
4. In the early feasibility and scoping phase for the documentation project reported on in this paper, limited to Siem Reap province, the collaborating arts organisation (Heritage Hub of Cambodian Living Arts, based in Siem Reap) and local team members were successful in locating living makers and players only of *angkuoch daek* and *angkuoch russey*.
5. In 2020, during the course of this project, the British Museum updated its collection catalogue; in the revised catalogue entry, this asset is identified by Registration number As1966,11.5. No image of the asset is yet provided in this revised entry. For the purposes of this article, we refer to the asset by its identification number, as per the catalogue entry, and associated details that we used during fieldwork in January 2020.
6. Reatha reflected in detail, and on video recording, on the catalogue photograph of Asset 1380796001 and its similarities with – and some differences from – his father's typical style and technique. The video recording is publicly available as an asset of the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme project at https://www.emkp.org/documentingcambodianmouthharp/.
7. Further detail about these claims, and further evidence in support, are contained in File 02 (Field Notes) and Folder 03 (Interview Transcripts) of the dossier submitted to the British Museum (see final section of this article).
8. *Summary: Dossier relating to British Museum Asset 1380796001 (Cambodian Angkuoch).* Author: Catherine GRANT. Contributors: KOEUY Reatha, KOEUY Leakhena, LAV Mech, CHI Chen, CHI Monivong. Collaborators: SONG Seng, SAY Tola, THON Dika, Cambodian Living Arts (Cambodia).

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