



K-Pop to K-Pop

How Korean Pop is influencing the Return of Khmer Culture Marsha Widyatmodjo

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What prompted you to study this genre of music?

Last January, my Cambodian friend visited me and we talked about many things; including our favorite music genres. My friend mentioned he liked my country's, Indonesia, music because of its unique style in comparison to other Southeast Asian music. He considers that Indonesian music has an identity. I didn't understand the depth of that statement until he showed me the video of the hip-hop song, **"Time to Rise"**, by **VannDa** featuring **Master Kong Nay**. Even though I didn't understand the lyrics, I could pick up the instruments and style that in my opinion was quite influenced by **K-Pop (Korean-Pop)**. He supported my observation and explained that Cambodian musicians are now trying to experiment with a wide range of musical genres to rediscover their identity. This movement is mostly apparent in the Cambodian hip-hop industry. Hip-hop is a global music genre that enables the artist to send a message to a wide audience through its expressive flow and storytelling. This music is a vehicle to spark attention and even action from those who listen to it.

Back in the 1960s, the "K" in K-Pop actually referred to **Khmer-Pop**. At that time, Cambodia was known as the "Emerald of Asia," celebrated for its vibrant cultural life and flourishing music scene. Influenced by French melodies yet deeply rooted in Khmer tradition, the music of that era reflected the beauty of Cambodian life and the country's path toward modernity. Songs about romance and daily joys dominated the airwaves, and discotheques were common. Iconic singers became national treasures. Unfortunately, many of these artists perished under the **Khmer Rouge** (1975-1979), and with them, much of their musical legacy.

Today's artists are trying to rebuild that legacy from scratch. They face the challenge of creating something new while still honoring the music and cultural identity of the past. Hip-hop, in this context, serves as a revival, not just of music, but of cultural pride. By mixing global genres like hip-hop, K-pop, and electronic music with traditional Khmer influences, young Cambodian musicians are making music that resonates with both local and international audiences. Artists like VannDa are leading this movement, using the universal appeal of hip-hop to put Cambodian music back on the map.

In a way, this genre becomes a mirror of Cambodia itself: a country with deep scars, trying to heal through creativity and rediscover its voice in today's world.



[Click here to watch Marsha's Artivism presentation on YouTube](#)

What were your take-aways from your research and how can they be applied in today's society?

I found that it is very important to understand "silence" and "invisibility" when imagining resistance under such rigid political situations and harsh consequences. The Cambodia experience proved that even the smallest act of resistance is still resistance. Just because things don't appear like how we expect them to appear, that doesn't mean that it's not relevant or it's not worth considering. This is especially important in current times when a lot of great conflicts and violence that occur all around the world are seen as it is, where a lot of people seem like they don't even bother to question how things came to be. This normalization of violence under the justification of whatever is believed to be normal legitimizes many direct forms of violence.

By questioning and paying attention to the little things, the least that we can do is be empathetic and stand in solidarity with everyone that is affected by violence, and to not be silent when something is clearly wrong.