



Discourse
from the end of the line
December 2009

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Roo, Mexico viewed from
southwest. Kite aerial
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FROM THE EDITOR

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It's really nice to see that friends of the Drachen Foundation stay dedicated to their pursuits and continue to update us with their progress. In this installment of *Discourse*, Sarah St. Vincent revisits Cambodian kitemakers and Oscar Frey continues his use of KAP on Mexico's Yucatán peninsula.

Shelly Leavens visits the World Kite Museum and comments on the Museum's commendable oral history project. Historical kite enthusiasts will appreciate Dörte and Frank and Schulz's research on the Franco-Scandinavian weather station of early 20th Century Denmark, while I offer a related piece on a replica weather kite in the United States.

Japanese kites are well represented in this edition as we gain insight into the personal kite journey of Aomori's Tokuko Sato. From Switzerland's Iqbal Husain comes a highly informative article about Japanese *ehon* with kite images.

Finally, American Afghan Basir Beria shares his kite running experiences with fighter kite champ Chuck Lund. So we do our kite running around the world: from Mexico to Washington State, to Japan, to Denmark, to Switzerland, and to Cambodia. Enjoy the voyage!

Scott Skinner
Board President
Drachen Foundation

Discourse is published on the Drachen Foundation website several times a year and can be downloaded free at www.drachen.org (under "Publications").

FROM OUR READERS

You did a wonderful job, making this issue a little kite-wonder. Beautiful articles, nice characteristics on the authors and very, very well readable.

DOUWE JAN JOUSTRA
The Netherlands

Thanks for sending me the Drachen publication. It looks great. Like the typeface and wonderful photos.

KATHLEEN PRECIADO
USA

With the Newsletter and *Discourse*, I feel like I have been touring the world. Japan, Cambodia, Holland, Australia, Blue Hill, Germany, Washington, China, Vietnam, England, Mexico and even exotic California!

The lead story was about kite performance art. I am always interested in Hargrave. What evidence is there that the three cell boxkite was a failure? I am tempted to build a model. It is not clear which is the front end. I would think the superposed twin cells would go in front. It is similar to the Sauls Barrage Kite, except the two cells are stacked vertically instead of arranged horizontally. The recent kite does not follow the Hargrave pattern of two longerons down the center. The Weather Bureau kites used four longerons in the corners, as well as two on the centerline, but they were flown in 90 mph winds. The standard US rectangular boxkite uses just four longerons in the outside corners. I could see a three cell version with four longerons. That would

require a way to keep the superposed cells in alignment. ...

Sugoroku – Gotta get one for Friday night games at Caroline's. The game board should be laminated to protect it from food and drink. Maybe little plastic kite icons to move around. I must wait until I get one to see how it works.

Looking forward to more Vietnamese kites. The picture of the wingtips is intriguing, want to see more.

GARY HINZE
USA

Editor's Note: *Sugoroku* will be featured in the Ehon Book Exhibit at Seattle's Cullom Gallery in 2010. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to purchase one of the books. Sign up for notification at www.cullomgallery.com.

The Drachen Foundation is beginning a survey of Vietnamese kites with assistance from the country of Vietnam, the ASEAN Kite Council, and Orlando Ongkinko of the Philippines. There will be more!

Thank you for the opportunity to have my trip published. It was fantastic to work with the children all along Argentina and it was a privilege to share it with Drachen! I also enjoyed the other articles!

MARIA ELENA GARCIA
Argentina

Yesterday I looked with great pleasure through the new edition of *Discourse*: Congratulations.

WALTER DIEM
Germany

CONTRIBUTORS

OSCAR FREY
Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

Oceanologist and whale researcher Frey has used kite aerial photography (KAP) to study whales since 2004. For the last three years, he has used KAP in the national parks and natural protected areas of the Yucatán Peninsula.



Keith May

IQBAL HUSAIN
Castelrotto, Switzerland

Iqbal Husain was born in Pakistan in 1955, but moved to England with his family at age 11. He graduated from the University of Aberystwyth, Wales and later the London School of Economics. In 1986, he moved to Switzerland.



Bas Vreeswijk

SHELLY LEAVENS
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A University of Washington graduate with an M.A. in Museology, Leavens brings her experience in collections management, community-based organizations, and oral history to her new position as Collections Manager at Drachen Foundation.



Kate White

CHUCK LUND
Tacoma, Washington

Lund is the Fighter Kite Coordinator for the Washington State International Kite Festival and was one of the founders of the North American Fighter Kite Association. He is a former fighter kite champion and World Cup holder.



Eileen Pilcher

TOKUKO SATO
Fujisaki, Japan

A member of the Japan Folk-Craft Society, professional kitemaker Sato's mission is to educate people inside and outside of Japan about traditional Tsugaru kites. She has worked internationally in 43 different countries.



George Peters

CONTRIBUTORS

DÖRTE AND FRANK SCHULZ
Buxtehude, Germany

Dörte (not pictured) and husband Frank have been frequent contributors to historical kite workshops in Germany and the Netherlands. They have helped sustain a showcase for historical kites at the annual Fano Kitefliers Meeting.



Dörte Schulz

SCOTT SKINNER
Monument, Colorado

A former Air Force instructor pilot, Drachen's board president has flown and designed kites for three decades. Skinner's military training created the structure for him to express himself as a visionary kite artist.



Jose Sainz

SARAH ST. VINCENT
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Originally from Pennsylvania, St. Vincent earned a B.A. in Asian studies at Swarthmore College and an M.A. in East Asian studies at Harvard. She is currently a second-year law student at the University of Michigan.



Stephen St. Vincent

KAP IN THE YUCATÁN PENINSULA, MEXICO

Article and photographs by Oscar Frey



Oscar Frey

Kite aerial photography (KAP) has allowed me to widen my perception of the earth and has provided me a new approach to document natural resources and phenomena in a nonintrusive manner.

In November 2006, as I was attending a conference to present my results on KAP applications to studying humpback and gray

Sunrise at the Pyramid of the Seven Dolls, Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico. Fall equinox, September 22, 2009.

whales, I was introduced to a group of scientists that work at the Marine Resources Research Center in Merida, Yucatán. This group described to me the richness of the natural resources found in the Yucatán Peninsula and pointed out locations with

potential conditions for using kite aerial photography as a surveying technique.

From that moment, I started testing KAP in the Yucatán Peninsula. I explored the area in search of sites and species of interest to be photographed from above, especially within natural protected areas and national parks where KAP could provide a different perspective of the natural habitat, its geographical context, and the effect of human activities over it.

After surveying the area over the years following, I found that the Yucatán Peninsula offers great conditions for KAP in a wider extent. Its geographical features – such as having a flat topography and a wide continental shelf, and being surrounded by the ocean waters of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean – provide unique oceanographical conditions and wind patterns that can be used for KAPing purposes. In addition, the Yucatán Peninsula has a great number of national parks and natural protected areas that host a very interesting blend of subjects to photograph from a kite. Three of them have really drawn my attention: the pre-Columbian Mayan ruins and archeological sites, the colorful landscapes in the vast areas of coastal lagoons and islands surrounding the peninsula, and the annual arrival of the largest fish on earth, the whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*).

During the summer of 2009, I went back to the Yucatán Peninsula with two purposes: to document the whale sharks, and to photograph the Mayan pre-Columbian city of Dzibilchaltun and the archeo-astronomical phenomena that occur at this site on the fall equinox of September 22nd.

DOCUMENTING THE WHALE SHARK

There is a whale shark population that

gathers in large numbers to feed during summer months in the offshore waters of the Yum Balam Marine Reserve. This reserve is located on the eastern side of the Yucatán peninsula and it includes terrestrial and marine environments surrounding Holbox Island, Contoy Island, and Isla Mujeres, Quintana Roo, Mexico. Here, from May through September, the whale sharks gather to feed on massive plankton blooms, which occur over the shallow continental shelf as a result of the upwelling currents and the mixing of the Caribbean waters and the waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

In this area, fishermen have developed eco-tourist activities to use the whale sharks as a resource. They take tourists to swim with these amazing and inoffensive sharks. This does not mean that sharks are safe from the negative impact of human activities around them. So it is important to collect data that can enhance management strategies to protect the sharks' environment and population. Kite aerial photography has the potential to provide valuable information and documentation for that purpose.

In July and August, I explored the Yum Balam Marine Reserve to test KAP and document the whale sharks, the coastal lagoons, and the islands. The purpose was to experience wind conditions at the coast and in the whale shark observation area offshore. I tested different kites, rigs, and cameras in order to determine the potential applications of KAP in this vast area.

The documentation of the whale shark at the Yum Balam Reserve became a very interesting and completely different challenge than documenting other pelagic species like the humpback or gray whales. The main difference is that whale sharks do not need to come to the surface to breath. They come to the surface to feed on shoals of zooplankton, and when that happens, it



Oscar Frey

ABOVE LEFT: A 24 foot whale shark feeding over the shelf waters of Holbox Island. A school of herring is riding along, just visible in the lower left beneath the water's surface. ABOVE RIGHT: A whale shark posing for the cameras. This particular shark showed a curious behavior, as if he seemed to be attracted by the red color of the kite's reflection (not shown) on the ocean surface. BELOW LEFT: A 34 foot whale shark found feeding on the surface. BELOW RIGHT: Drop shot over a whale shark. There are three ridges on the shark's back, of which the center ridge is most visible in this photograph.

is very easy to observe them and track them. So it is the perfect moment for documentation to take place.

I used three different rigs with three different cameras:

- A light weight rig customized for the Olympus Tough 8000
- A medium weight rig built for the Coolpix 5000 with a 7.7mm fisheye lens
- A heavy duty rig built by Brooks Leffler for the Nikon D50 and customized to fit also the Nikon D90, both used with a 10.5mm fisheye lens or a 35mm lens

I used different Rokkaku and Flow Form kites during this expedition:

- A 9 foot long Rokkaku designed by Reza Ragheb, a 7 foot long Rokkaku designed and built by Mike Jones, and a 6 foot long Rokkaku designed and built by José Sainz
- A Sutton Flow Form 16 and a Sutton Flow Form 30 modified as a Christian Becot design with a window placed on the front portion of each of the side keels

The rig, the camera, the kite, and the line to be used were chosen depending on the wind conditions during each field trip and the application purposes.

I verified that the main difficulty in photographing the whale sharks with KAP is finding the appropriate wind conditions at the same time and place where you found the sharks on the surface. Most of the times, either it rained and the plankton would go deeper (and so would the sharks), or on clear days, by the time the wind picked up in the afternoon, the sharks would be already submersed.

To raise the camera over the whale sharks with the use of a kite was a real challenge. Basically, we needed several variables to

interact simultaneously: the presence of whale sharks on the surface of the ocean, sunny or fair weather, enough wind speed to lift the camera, the right kind of kite and line, and – very important – a knowledgeable captain to maneuver the boat while the experiment was taking place.

The first challenge was to adapt to the variable wind conditions found in the area. The wind close to the coast was always much stronger than the wind conditions found offshore, so using different cameras and kites was the key to successful results. I never knew what wind conditions we would find offshore, even if the winds on shore or close to shore were good enough to lift almost any camera you would like.

I used a methodology developed in previous years for KAPing gray and humpback whales in a nonintrusive manner. The goal is to lift the camera from a 27 foot fiberglass boat without using the drag of the boat as a lifting force, just using the wind, and to maneuver the boat to stay upwind from the whale sharks in order to project the kite and camera over them and document them from above.

The results were very satisfying and surprising, even though I never had enough lifting power from the wind to lift the bigger rig with the Nikon SLR. The light and medium weight rigs performed very well at low altitudes with the Olympus and Coolpix cameras. Something really interesting was that the whale shark would be attracted by the shadow of the kite and the colorful reflection over the ocean surface when we used the red Rokkaku. This behavior made the documentation easier.

In conclusion, kite aerial photography has proved to be a nonintrusive technique useful in documenting the behaviors of the whale shark on the ocean surface. It has the

potential to provide valuable information about this species and its relationship with humans for scientific and social studies, as it has done with other protected species in Mexico such as humpback and gray whales. It is important to continue testing KAP to document whale sharks at the Yum Balam Reserve in the future, with the purpose of providing information that could enhance its protection and management strategies.

DOCUMENTATION AT THE ANCIENT CITY OF DZIBILCHALTUN

I began testing KAP over the ancient city of Dzibilchaltun, a pre-Columbian Mayan city that dates from 400 BCE and was abandoned in 1600 CE. This archeological site is located 10 miles north of the city of Merida and 15 miles south from the coastline of Puerto Progreso. Its proximity to the ocean provides good wind conditions for KAPing most of the year. So it became my favorite site to practice KAP and develop applications for archeological purposes.

Every visit to this special site has been very different and the photographs speak for themselves. Panoramic views of this ancient city show the beautiful lushness of the natural environment surrounding the Mayan ruins, and the geometrical arrangement and spatial distribution of the pyramids in harmony with the environment.

A perfect orientation of the structures is very evident from the aerial perspective. The center of the city is the *cenote* of Xlaká, which was the main source of fresh water for Dzibilchaltun. The cenote is an oval-shaped pond with pristine emerald waters and blooming lilies floating on the surface. The pyramids and other structures distribute towards east, north, and south in a radial symmetrical pattern around this pond. Clearly, this was the center of the ancient city. The main square is located in the

quadrant northeast from the pond. It is limited by four structures and has a chapel in the middle built during the Spanish conquest.

The most important building in the city is a particular pyramid at the far east of Dzibilchaltun. It is called the Pyramid of the Seven Dolls or the Observatory. It is located at the end of the *Sac-be* (ancient sacred white roads), which connect the main square of the city with this pyramid. The Observatory is a solar calendar which marks specific dates around the year through different projections of its shadow. On specific days of the year, the rays of the sun pass through the pyramid at sunrise and project over different structures in perfect alignment to indicate seasonal changes, such as the beginning of the spring and fall at their respective equinoxes.

I have been documenting this pyramid with KAP since November 2006, mostly in the afternoon when the winds from the shore pick up. The photographs show the relationship of this pyramid with the sun dial along the *Sac-be*, the beautiful untouched jungle surrounding the pyramid, and its harmony and perfect orientation. The photographs were used by archeologists to determine the state of the pyramid and its restoration to anticipate future damage from weathering. But I wanted to test a different application – I wanted to document the archeo-astronomical phenomenon at the spring and fall equinoxes.

I visited the site repeatedly, and I could not find any wind at sunrise on those dates in past years. So in order to solve that problem, I decided to test the use of a helium balloon to lift the rig. On September 22, 2009 we inflated a balloon with 6 cubic meters of helium and lifted my rig at sunrise, bearing a Nikon D90, to document the Pyramid of the Seven Dolls, the



Oscar Frey

September 22, 2009, 7:31 am. Note the projection of the pyramid's shadow over the structure in front of it. The solar ray passes through the pyramid and projects a beam (see arrow) that aligns with the middle window of the structure.



Oscar Frey

Another view of the Pyramid of the Seven Dolls at Dzibilchaltun, Yucatán, México, photographed with a Nikon D50 and a 35mm lens.



Oscar Frey

The pre-Columbian Mayan city of Dzibilchaltun, panoramic view towards the east from the main square. Note the chapel built in the center by the Spanish colony.

projection of its shadow, and the rays of sunlight passing through it.

The results were more than satisfactory. Its aesthetic and scientific value came to light and, as I said before, the photographs speak for themselves. The photographs show that the projection of light that passes through the pyramid during sunrise at the equinox is perfectly aligned with the structure in front of it. It lasts exactly 60 minutes, proving that the Mayans not only had the concept of the solar system, they also had the concept of the hour as a fraction of the rotation of the earth.

CONCLUSIONS

The documentation of the ancient city of Dzibilchaltun and the documentation of the whale shark are two contrasting examples of the richness of the Yucatán Peninsula and its favorable conditions for kite aerial photography. I hope to inspire other KAPers around the globe to survey this area and discover the beauty of its national parks and natural protected areas and the warmth of its people.

Future applications of KAP in the Yucatán Peninsula are very diverse. They include the possibility of taking stereo photography of the Mayan ruins to update cartography records, documenting the breeding area of flamingos at Rio Lagartos and Celestun, documenting the erosion processes and sediment transport along the shoreline that surrounds the peninsula for protection management, and monitoring the aggregation of whale sharks to enhance conservation strategies.

Editor's Note: An unprecedented – but very worthy – second grant was awarded by the Drachen Foundation Board of Directors to the National Institute of Anthropology and History/National Park of Dzibilchaltun for KAP of the site by author Oscar Frey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the National Institute of Anthropology and History. Special thanks to Diana Trejo, Director of the National Park of Dzibilchaltun, Yucatán, México and to the archeologist Rubén Maldonado for providing permits and authorizations to practice KAP repeatedly since November 2006, and for closing the park for such purposes.

A very special acknowledgement to the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas and the Director of the Yum Balam Reserve, Quintana Roo, Mexico for providing the authorization for KAP activities to take place at the whale shark observation area and Holbox Island during summer 2009. Special thanks to Francisco Remolina and Rafael de la Parra for their assistance and for believing in KAP as a valuable tool to document the whale shark in Mexico.

A special acknowledgement to Dr. Jorge Euán, director of the Laboratory of Remote Sensing and Geographical Information Systems at the Marine Resources Research Center in Mérida, Yucatán, for his interest and support for the application of KAP on different lines of research in the Yucatán Peninsula since November 2006. Thanks to Andrés Maldonado for his friendship and assistance during long and repeated field trips to Dzibilchaltun and for assisting me in the laboratory of image processing.

Thanks to Juan Ávila for his help with the boat operations and logistics, for his patience during long hours, and for the humorous spicy Caribbean ceviche moments.

Thanks to Alejandra del Castillo and Luca Sambuca for their friendship, support, sincerity, and the perfume of their Mediterranean cuisine.

A very special acknowledgement to Keith May, Nancy Ambé, and Gustavo Grageda for their friendship, dedication, patience, and support in the development of all KAPing activities at Holbox Island in July and August 2009.

My most gratitude to The Drachen Foundation for opening their hearts to me and introducing me to KAP. I am especially grateful to Alison Fujino and Scott Skinner for believing in me, for their assistance, prudent advice, and personal dedication in helping me develop the KAP Whales Project in Mexico since August 2003. Thanks also to José Sainz for his advice on maneuvering kites, building the whale Rökkaku, and sharing tequila moments.

A very personal acknowledgement to Brooks Leffler and Peter Bults for their dedication in designing and building rigs customized for my SLR cameras and needs.

And not least important, I want to thank Mike Jones for designing and building the Rökkaku kites that I have been using in the Yucatán Peninsula under extreme conditions the last three years.

THE FRANCO-SCANDINAVIAN METEOROLOGICAL STATION AT HALD/VIBORG, DENMARK

Dörte and Frank Schulz



Viborg Archive

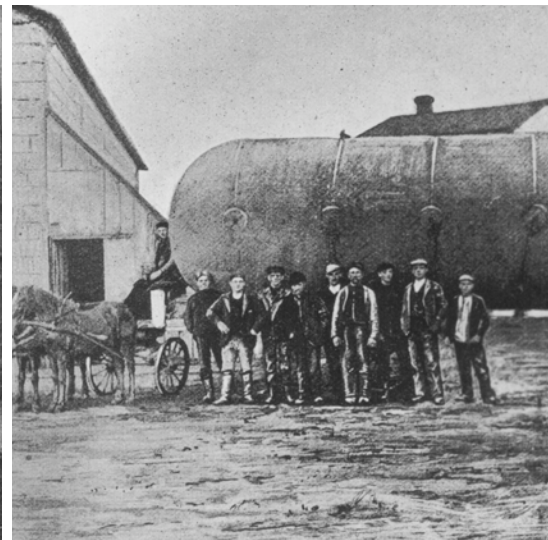
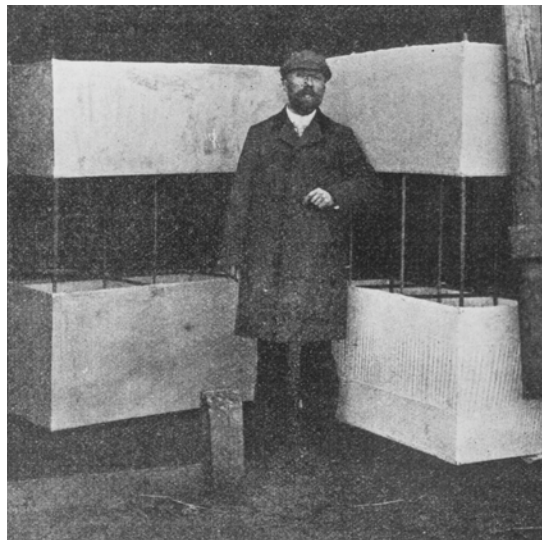
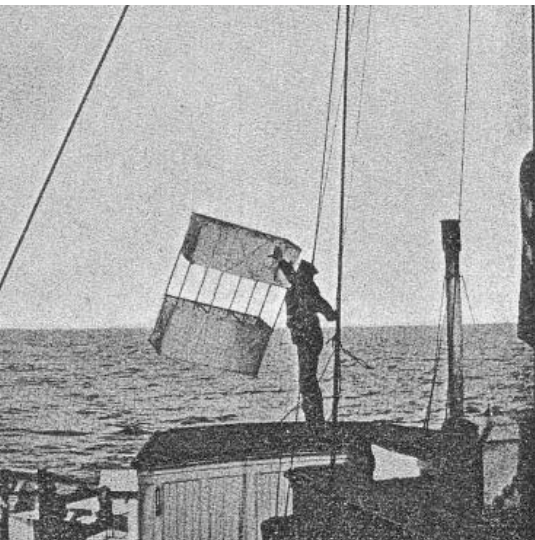
A photograph of the station from the local historic archive in Viborg, Denmark.

As everywhere worldwide, so too in Scandinavia were the upper air strata being researched at the beginning of the twentieth century with the aid of kites. The goal of this research was to explore the more exact nature of these strata and to obtain knowledge of weather and climate.

At a meeting of the Meteorological Society in Berlin in 1901, it was decided to found a meteorological station for the research on the upper air strata upon the suggestion of Frenchman Teisserenc de Bort. The placement of the station was so chosen that the sea, with its specific weather conditions, would not be far away, and also so that observations could be made independent of ships.

The small village of Hald, near Viborg, in Denmark was selected as the location. The intent was to make as many valid meteorological measurements as long lasting as possible, with the help of kites and balloons.

This plan was successfully inaugurated by 1902 with the help of many contributions. The construction of the station was begun in the spring of 1902, and as early as July 1902 it was in business. The considerable money needed for the realization of the station came from, among others, Teisserenc de Bort, who gave 50,000 francs from his private fortune; from the Danish state participating with 14,000 francs; diverse bequests from Denmark at about 24,000 francs; and from Sweden, providing 28,000 francs. The land upon which the station was to be erected was also a gift,



Teisserenc de Bort

Photographs from the report "Travaux de la Station Franco-Scandinave de sondages Aeriens a Hald 1902-1903" by Teisserenc de Bort. LEFT: The war ship "Falster," from which several flights were taken. MIDDLE: Station captain de Bort. RIGHT: A gas balloon.

provided without cost by local chief hunting ranger Krabbe.

Teisserenc de Bort became the director of the station. Also assuming leadership roles were H. Hildebrandsson of Sweden and Adam Paulsen of Denmark, who was appointed by the Danish Meteorological Institute. Altogether the station employed about thirty workers. Among them were carpenters for kite construction, meteorologists, and mechanics.

There were seven buildings on the station. There was a rotatable observation and winding tower, a balloon hangar, a kite workshop, an office building, a machine workshop, a laboratory, as well as, of course, the house for Director Teisserenc de Bort. The station also had a gas container and an automatically driven kite winder.

A total of 311 flights with kites and balloons were carried out from July 10, 1902 to May 13, 1903. For the kite flights, Hargrave or modified Marvin kites, from 3.3 to 8.2 square meters in size, were used. The aim was the longest possible flight with correspondingly long diagrams or sketches. The longest of these flights was an uninterrupted 26 ½ hours. The average altitude for flight was 2500 meters. The highest flight, 5900 meters, was a record at the time. On account of the frequent very long and high flights, the material loss was correspondingly high.

In order to keep the cost of lost or damaged kites as low as possible, the station administration offered a reward for the return of torn kites and lost instruments. For the return of a kite, a reward was promised of between 5 and 10 Danish kronen.

As a complement to the balloon and kite flights from the station, flights were undertaken from war ships. A total of 15

flights from the “Falster” and the “Loeveroem” took place.

There were surprises – positive as well as negative – for the workers at the station. As early as November 1902, shortly after the beginning of operations at the station, the strongest ever registered storm swept over Jutland. On account of this storm, several of the station’s houses were partially or heavily damaged.

Also in November 1902, Vladimir Koeppen and Richard Assmann visited the station in Hald. With this opportunity, Richard Assmann presented his friend Teisserenc de Bort with the Red Eagle Order Second Class, in the name of Kaiser Wilhelm II, for his work in meteorology.

Altogether 311 kite flights were made in just the first year of the station. Fifteen more were made from ships. Of course, a number of balloon flights were also made from Hald.

The gas needed for the balloons was brought by horse-drawn cart from Viborg. Often young boys repeated a typical prank: after the cart driver, Fritz Langvad, had filled the balloon, these kids from the town poked a hole in the covering with a needle. This resulted in a slow loss of gas during the trip to the kite site. After Fritz Langvad had arrived at the station, the loss of gas was so great that he had to go back once more to get new gas.

When the station was closed as planned in the summer of 1903, all buildings were auctioned off and dismantled. A few of the buildings, including the former residence of Teisserenc de Bort, were reconstructed and are standing in the village of Dollerup, a few kilometers from their original location. There they serve to this day as homes, completely renovated and converted.



Frank Schulz

A few of the buildings from the meteorological station, including the former residence of Teisserenc de Bort (left), are standing today in the village of Dollerup, a few kilometers from their original location.

The owners of the houses today interestingly know nothing of their history. Only after we had shown them some newspaper clippings during our visit were they enlightened.

In addition, a stone monument was not finished until 1938, after a number of complications, through the efforts of the director of the office of tourism. The stone exists today and stands on the Heide near the town of Viborg. On the upper plate of the monument is the name of the station, and on each of three stone posts is the name of one of the three directors:

Teisserenc de Bort, Adam Paulsen, and H. Hildebrandsson.

A paper on the work of the Franco-Scandinavian station at Hald was published under the title "Travaux de la Station Franco-Scandinave de Sondages Aeriens" ("The Work of the Franco-Scandinavian Station in Air Observations") by Teisserenc de Bort. Reports from H. Hildebrandsson and A. Paulsen are also contained in the paper.

Translated by Robert Porter

CAMBODIAN KITEMAKERS

Article and photographs by Sarah St. Vincent

In the past, all Cambodian people are very sorry, because of the Khmer Rouge. They made Cambodia – for the whole world, they made Cambodia into the “killing field.” And now...I want to make the whole world know about Cambodia. Today it’s not the same as [during] the Khmer Rouge rule. Because the Khmer are the people that can...meet many people from other countries, who come to Angkor Wat temple. And Cambodia – my people – was the first united state in Southeast Asia.... We were a center of culture – good culture, like *khleung ek*. So I want to use *khleung ek* as one material to disseminate all the good of Khmer culture, and of Khmer civilization.

From 1975 to 1979, Cambodia was a killing field. But now Cambodia is a civilization field. A *civilization* field. Like in the past. In the past, especially the time of Angkor.

– Sim Sarak

Over a thousand years ago, according to the legend, a Cambodian trickster hero invented the first musical kite while imprisoned in China. Having run a popular noodle stand outside the palace walls in Beijing for several years, Thun Chhey had gained a reputation for his audacious sense of humor and startling feats of intelligence. When the king and his ministers finally decided to investigate this eccentric (and possibly treasonous) foreigner by appearing at the noodle stand and ordering soup, Thun Chhey insisted on feeding the king his first taste of Khmer noodles by hand – so as to make note of the sovereign’s first reaction to dish, he said – and then laughed. “Who is this man,” he exclaimed, “who has the face and breath of a dog? How I wish I could look upon my own countrymen again. My king, for one, has a face as round and handsome as the full moon – nothing like this mongrel here.”

The trickster, of course, was promptly thrown into prison, where he began to assemble a strange object from dried leaves, a few stalks of bamboo, and a long strip of rattan. The night before he was to be executed, he tied a string to the object, slipped it through the narrow window of his cell, and allowed the wind to carry it over the city. The rattan vibrated in the breeze, making an eerie humming sound, and the king woke from his sleep to find what appeared to be an enormous black bird hovering ominously overhead. Summoning his ministers, he cried, “That Khmer devil! Let him out! I know this is his doing. Send him back to his country before we’re all cursed.” Ever since that day, Cambodians retelling the story will proudly say, Cambodia has been able to boast



Sarah St. Vincent

ABOVE: A family in Kompong Speu province during the harvest season. The third child from the left is holding a *pao* kite. BELOW: A kitemaker with a crude but typical *khleng ek* (minus the musical *ek* reed) in Kompong Speu province.

about outwitting China – while the Chinese have struggled in vain to make a kite as beautiful and melodious as Thun Chhey's.

The Thun Chhey story, which thousands of Cambodians of all ages and backgrounds can recite from memory, appears at first to be a simple tale, part origin myth and part classic trickster narrative. Woven into the story, however, are threads that still recur in Cambodian kitemakers' discussions of their art form, particularly when they seek to explain the importance of reviving kitemaking and kiteflying following the devastation of the Khmer Rouge era. From September 2004 to July 2005, with the help of a generous grant from the Drachen Foundation, I traveled through eleven Cambodian provinces asking a simple question: Why kites? Why, in the wake of a genocide, economic devastation, and continuing poverty and political turmoil, were so many families and communities rediscovering these traditional playthings and recasting them as a matter of national importance? Part of the answer was the beauty, variety, and unique construction of the kites themselves, but – as in the Thun Chhey story, and as in Sim Sarak's discussion (above) – kites were also increasingly viewed as proof of Cambodia's cultural resilience, historic might, and continuing pride in its national heritage, as well as an important strategy for community survival in difficult times.

As most Cambodians are acutely aware, the Khmer kingdom ("Khmer" and "Cambodian" are interchangeable terms for both the language and the people) was once the greatest empire in Southeast Asia, encompassing much of modern-day Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. In the twelfth century, at the height of the kingdom's spectacular power and wealth, Cambodian kings ordered the construction of what is still the world's largest religious site: Angkor

Wat, a Hindu temple hewn from sandstone by Khmer laborers and slaves, a sprawling complex where every wall, window, doorway, and corridor was carefully sculpted into a work of art. Today, the silhouette of this temple (endlessly painted, photographed, sewn onto flags, and printed on t-shirts) continues to remind Cambodians that theirs was once a country of unparalleled prowess and grandeur. Yet by the thirteenth century, the kingdom had begun to crumble, its borders eroded by a long series of brutal wars with the Thais, Chams¹, and Vietnamese. Angkor Wat was abandoned and gradually reclaimed by the jungle, and until the French came, it looked as though the country would vanish entirely, swallowed by its enemies. The French, however, established a protectorate over Khmer territory, drawing official maps with fixed borders, and Cambodia – a land of farmers and fishermen – became a kind of colonial afterthought, overshadowed by the much more populous and restive Vietnam.

In 1953, thanks to a young but cunning King Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia regained its independence and enjoyed what its people, in hindsight, regard as a golden age, a time when peace prevailed and traditional arts flourished. Unfortunately, Sihanouk adopted a policy of persecuting and assassinating Cambodian leftists, who fled to secret jungle camps on the eastern border and sought the patronage of North Vietnam. This leftist movement gained a flood of new recruits when the American bombing campaign on the Cambodian-Vietnamese border began in the late 1960s. The bombing gradually spread to include most of the country, killing thousands of civilians and prompting hundreds of thousands more to flee from their rural villages to the safety of major towns and cities. In this climate of chaos, violence, and mass displacement, many young Cambodians chose to join the leftist

rebels in the jungle: thus, the Khmer Rouge movement was born.

When the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975, they evacuated Cambodia's cities at gunpoint, causing a massive reverse migration from urban areas to the countryside and creating what has been described as a national prison camp. From 1975 until the beginning of 1979, the country's borders were sealed, with no Cambodians permitted to leave (aside from a handful of high-ranking Khmer Rouge officials) and very few foreigners permitted to enter. The Khmer Rouge executed anyone affiliated with the former government or royal family and anyone suspected of having an education, including doctors, teachers, nurses, judges, officials, and businessmen. Cambodians who survived this policy of summary execution became slave laborers, and during the three years, eight months, and twenty days of Khmer Rouge rule – a number nearly every Cambodian knows by heart – a quarter of the population died, with many perishing due to starvation or disease. In the process, as singers, dancers, craftsmen, monks, and scholars died, many of Cambodia's most prized cultural traditions disappeared.

The genocide and its aftermath took a devastating toll on Cambodian kitemaking, a craft that had been passed down among male relatives and neighbors for hundreds of years. When the Khmer Rouge came to power, most expert kitemakers were elderly men, few of whom survived the hardships of the labor camps. Families that had been split apart by death and dislocation during the American bombing campaign and Khmer Rouge genocide fragmented further when Vietnam invaded Cambodia and swept the Khmer Rouge from power in 1979, as many fled on foot to refugee camps along the Thai border or crisscrossed the country in hopes of finding their former

homes intact. Many resettled in villages other than the ones in which they had been born, next to neighbors with whom they had no prior connection. The majority of my interviewees – adult men who survived this era and went on to become kitemakers – still live in communities other than the ones in which their parents and extended families lived before the war. This separation of family members, combined with the deaths of elderly expert kitemakers and the presence of landmines in many areas where kites were once flown, meant that few children learned how to make traditional kites. By the 1980s, the art form had largely vanished.

The tide began to turn in the early 1990s, when Sim Sarak, an expert in copyright law at the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, began to notice children flying simple kites (known as *pao* or “pocket” kites) in Phnom Penh. In 1994, Sarak and his wife, Cheang Yarin, both of whom spoke fluent French, met a film producer from Dieppe, France, who mentioned that an international kite festival was regularly held in his city. Intrigued, Sarak approached the Minister of Culture and Fine Arts to propose a national Cambodian kite festival in Phnom Penh. Cambodia's first post-genocide elections had recently been held under United Nations supervision, and as Sarak later observed, the country was experiencing a brief window of political stability, although government troops continued to battle the Khmer Rouge in several provinces. The minister acquiesced, and Cambodia's first kite festival was held in December 1994.

It would be difficult to overstate the impact that this festival, which is now held biannually in Phnom Penh, has had on Cambodians who remembered how to make kites but had little reason to do so in the aftermath of the genocide. Traditionally,



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ABOVE: Three kitemakers (including one woman) assembling a kite in Kep City, Kampot province. BELOW: Mao Nom, an 82-year-old kitemaker in Takeo province.

khleung ek, which bear some resemblance to a bird of prey seen from below and usually include a rattan strip (*ek*) that produces up to seven humming tones when it vibrates in the wind, were flown over a village's fields at night to frighten animals away from the crops. Constructed primarily from bamboo and paper, they often take weeks to assemble and are typically too large and delicate to transport easily. At up to two meters tall, they are also too unwieldy to be flown alone. Prior to the Khmer Rouge era, village men would often gather in groups of five or more to fly them. After the genocide and Vietnamese invasion, when village cohesion was very weak and most survivors suffered extreme poverty, even the few adults who remembered how to make *khleung ek* often lacked the motivation or capacity to construct them. The kite festival, and in particular the organizers' decision to hold competitions within each province in order to select kites for inclusion, changed all of this. Men who knew how to make kites could share their knowledge with one another, and competed enthusiastically to represent their provinces when the national festival was held in Phnom Penh.

My goal in traveling to Cambodia and interviewing kitemakers in different areas of the country was to learn what these men and women's lives were like: their personal histories, their roles in their families, the type of work they did, and – most importantly – why they were devoting so much of their scarce time and resources to making (and teaching others to make) *khleung ek*. Sarak and Yarin have documented the 27 most common Cambodian kite styles in their excellent book *Khmer Kites*. I sought to record the stories of the people who are making these kites and thereby rescuing an art form that was very nearly lost. Most of the men and women I interviewed lived in poverty, although a few were members of the

country's nascent middle class. Many were struggling in the face of a severe drought, and some were openly pessimistic about Cambodia's prospects for long-term peace and development. Yet, nearly all of them viewed kites as a source of national as well as personal pride, and were eager to share their knowledge of the art form with an international audience. Many of them retold the Thun Chhey story to illustrate how kites had previously helped Cambodians triumph over adversity while displaying their ingenuity and artistic talents. Some even expressed hopes that making kites for international customers might someday become a viable and much-needed source of income. Nearly all emphasized that kitemaking and kiteflying provide an important way for families and community members to bond in difficult times.

Below are excerpts from the interviews, most of which took place at the kitemakers' homes, often in full view of their families and a crowd of fellow villagers.² The lack of privacy meant that I was unable to collect extended biographies, as I had initially hoped, but many interviewees spoke more or less freely about their kites and their lives, both before and after the war. Most were elderly, and few – if any – had taken part in an interview before. (The Phnom Penh residents I interviewed were probably more familiar with the interview format from newspapers and television news programs, which may explain their focused and comparatively detailed answers. These interviews were also much more private than those that took place in rural villages.) Nearly all of the interviewees expressed excitement about the possibility that Cambodian kites might someday become well-known in the US. It is my hope that these interviews will serve as a resource for anyone interested not only in modern Cambodian kites, but also in contemporary Cambodian culture in general.³

KRONG NGUON LY, AGE 57, PHNOM PENH

My name is Krong Nguon Ly, and I was born in 1957. I first moved to Phnom Penh in 1970, after the revolution began, and this is where I learned to be an auto mechanic. The most important thing in my life is my job, but for entertainment, I enjoy making and flying kites more than anything. I have a brother in the United States who also knows how to make them.

When I was growing up, the happiest times were always during the harvest season, which also happens to be the windy season. When my great-grandfather was seventy and I was twelve, he saw that I enjoyed flying kites, and he decided to teach me how to make them. At that time, lots of old men liked to fly kites because they had little else to do; some children knew how to fly kites, but only a few could make them. My great-grandfather taught me to make all kinds of kites, including a special kite that has a rudder instead of a tail – a design that can only be found in Kompong Cham province. We usually flew our kites at night after the harvest season. Some people tried to fly kites before the harvest season had ended, but this was usually not a good idea since the kites' tails could get tangled in the fields. The village is quite different now, because it has more houses, better roads, and a higher standard of living. Also, not many people fly kites anymore. There's only one other person in my hometown who learned to make kites from our great-grandparents' generation.

In 1970, I stopped flying kites, because the revolution came and everything changed. Life definitely improved after 1985. I married my wife in 1993, right before I started joining the national kite festival. She's from the same province but a different village, and she's an elementary school teacher. She also tutors in the afternoon to

supplement our income. Fortunately, she doesn't mind that I like to make kites. She says that's up to me.

We have three sons, ages twenty, seventeen, and fifteen. I taught them all how to make kites, although the youngest one is the most skilled and can even make small khleung ek. I wanted them to learn how to make kites because it's a part of Khmer tradition. I'm worried that in the future, no one will know about this part of our culture, so I want to pass it on to my children.

I love making kites, but I wish I could advertise them somehow, so I could sell them and earn some money for my family. I agreed to this interview because I hope people can learn about my kites and order them from me. I've taken part in the national kite festival since the mid-1990s, and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts has also sent me to festivals in France three times. In France, I was happy because although I didn't think foreigners liked kites, I discovered that they like our kites very much. One reason I think kites are so important is that they can make us happy and help us to have good relationships with one another.

MINH SOPHAT, AGE 64, PHNOM PENH

I was born in 1941 in Prey Ta Phem village, Kompong Speu province. I originally came to Phnom Penh when I was seventeen or eighteen years old, and this is where I was reunited with my family after the Vietnamese liberation in 1979. That's why I live here now.

I began learning to make and fly kites when I was eight years old. There were some old men in my village who knew how to make kites, and at first I would only watch them, but then I started bringing them small gifts and in return they would teach me. I'd also



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LEFT: One of Minh Sophat's kites. He has pioneered the use of colored foil imported from Thailand as a decoration for Cambodian kites. RIGHT: *Chor pha-nov*, the fruit whose sap once was (and occasionally still is) used as a glue when constructing kites.

help them roll up the kite line. It's funny: when I was a child, only old men flew kites, but now that I'm an old man, only children want to fly kites. Today, those old men's descendants still live in my hometown, but I've never seen them make a single kite. People in Cambodia rarely fly kites anymore; I think very few people still enjoy it. But I respect and admire the old men who are famous kite fliers. I wish I could return to my village and have a special kite-flying event or ceremony to honor the old men who taught me, but this is impossible since I don't have the money.

Although I graduated from high school, I never studied at the university. Instead, I became a marine. I loved my job, and I used to fly kites when the boat was sailing quickly.

For three years and eight months of my life, during the Pol Pot regime, I suffered. I destroyed all the photos that I had taken with American colleagues when I was in the marines, because if the Pol Pot soldiers had found them, I would have been executed immediately. Because I kept this secret, I am still alive today. During that time I became a farmer, like everyone in Cambodia, and I did not have anything to eat. It's difficult to talk about that time in Cambodia because it would take a lot of time to discuss. I cannot describe it in only one day. It made the Cambodian people sad. My parents and four of my siblings died, and I know they were killed by people who lived in our village. The reason I don't want to go there now is because it makes me angry. I really don't want to take revenge on them, but even though I once owned many fields and coconut trees in my village, I decided I should not go there anymore.

I resumed making kites in 1979, after the Vietnamese freed Cambodia. This was when my children were still young, and one day I

tried to fly a kite but it went into the lake, and my son cried. That's what reminded me that I wanted to make kites. When my youngest son was a child, I taught him how to make kites. However, he is a student now, so I don't force him to keep learning to make kites.

Today I am old, and I have nothing to think about except kites. My life is not important. When I was young, all I thought about was getting a good job to support my family, but kites are one of the most important things to me now. It's especially important because I think Cambodians ignore this part of their culture. My family and my neighbors sometimes criticize me, saying, "He's an old man – why does he like playing with kites? Is he senile?" But kites are so important to me that if someone invites me to a meal, or to have tea, my response is always no because I prefer to make kites.

Sometimes children come to me and want to buy a kite, but Cambodian children are very poor, so I let them pay just 100 riel, or 2,000 riel, or 5,000 riel [about \$1.25]. Some of the children just want to fly kites with me. In the past, people always had farms or land, at least eight or ten hectares, but now they have nothing because they have to pay school fees for their children. Even if the children are from poor families, I still fly kites with them, because promoting kites is so important to me. A few times, the Department of Cultural Development invited me to come and teach schoolchildren to make kites, perhaps 200 students altogether. I enjoyed teaching them.

Although making kites is an important part of my life, I sometimes feel that kites are useless. I seldom earn money from them, and many of my relatives tell me that kitemaking is pointless because it cannot help me support my wife and my family. I



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ABOVE: Song, his wife, and villagers who gathered at Song's house in Kompong Speu province to watch our interview. Song described this type of kite, with its unique spur-shaped additions, as a "crown kite," and claimed to be the only kitemaker in Cambodia who knows how to make it.

BELOW: Kitemaker stenciling Angkor Wat onto a kite in Kep City, Kampot province.

wish I had a market for my kites, so I could sell them and earn some money. But I am grateful to the [Cambodian] kite museum, because sometimes they buy my kites, and they encourage me to participate in the kite festivals. I'm also very glad that we now have a book about Khmer kites, so the younger generation can see how these kites are made. I want the next generation to know about this part of their culture.

SONG, AGE 67, KOMPONG SPEU PROVINCE

I am a farmer. I live here but my homeland is in Takeo province. I used to watch my father make kites, and he also taught me how to make them. My brother could make kites too, but he died. Therefore, I am the only one left in my family who knows how to make them. I like flying kites because I heard from my father that he always made and flew kites because it's our tradition. I think this kind of kite does not exist in other countries.

Unfortunately, because of the Pol Pot regime, I stopped making kites until around ten or twenty years ago, but I still remembered how to make them. I taught my children how to make them, too. The kite-flying season begins in December and continues until May. We can fly our kites at night as well as during the day. Sometimes, I decorate my kites with lanterns [and fly them at night]. If the weather is good, I will fly them alone.

If I want to fly kites, it means that I want to relax. Sometimes I'm so busy flying kites that I forget to have lunch.

Song's wife (joking): I am very angry with him because he does not help me very much at home – he only helps me a little bit and then he goes and flies kites in the field. I will have prepared the meal already but he says, "I am too busy flying kites."

Sometimes at night he doesn't sleep well because he's listening to the kite's sound, and when the kite falls down he goes out to bring it home. So it's not good for my sleep! He always disturbs me. He's always thinking about his kites. But this is okay because when I scold him, he can't say anything in response because he knows he's the one who made a mistake. Our neighbors have a big house, but we still have a small house because he always prefers flying kites with the children instead of working in the field.

Song: I got married when I was 21 years old. I met her because it was fate.

Song's wife (joking): If I knew he liked flying kites so much, I wouldn't have married him. You see? He doesn't have any white hairs, but my hair is all white! I let him fly kites in the field, but I am afraid his kite will fall down on the house, and we won't have enough money to fix it. Luckily, the kites always fall down in the field.

Song: I am very happy to talk with you. Making kites was not a good activity many years ago [probably during the Pol Pot regime], but now it's good so I am very happy. Now there is only one other kitemaker here; I am good at making kites so I am the best kitemaker in our Kong Russey village. Of course, there are many kitemakers in Cambodia but not all of them are good at making kites. My happiest time is when I'm flying kites, and if the people love flying kites, that also makes me happy.

KONG CHHENG, AGE 57, SIEM REAP PROVINCE

Nobody in particular taught me how to make kites – I learned how to make them by watching the old men, and then I tried to make them myself. At that time, I was around ten years old.

Today the children enjoy flying kites, but



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LEFT: Kong Chheng with a 50-year-old ek reed at his home in Siem Reap province. RIGHT: Tong Baty with her baby at their home in Kampot province.

their parents usually do not want them to fly kites very often, because they want the children to help them do work at home. Even my own family does not enjoy making or flying kites. My children have their own work to do, and they say, "How much money can you earn from kites? It's a waste of time." So I don't often go to fly kites. If I'm free, I'll fly them, but I don't tell my family about it. If they hear the ek's sound they get angry with me and say, "You go to Phnom Penh every year [for the festival] but you still have nothing to eat. So why do you love the culture so much?"

I want to give the ministry some suggestions about kites. Don't say if a kite falls down on the roof of someone's house, then it's not good luck, because last year I paid 20,000 riel and 100,000 riel for that. [His kite fell on the house of a superstitious neighbor, who destroyed the kite and then had a blessing ceremony to dispel any bad luck, at Kong Chheng's expense.] The ministry should promote the truth about this on TV, and tell the teachers to educate everyone about it. If a car runs into someone, we don't burn the car. Because of these superstitions, the children are afraid to make kites.

TONG BATY (FEMALE), AGE 22, KAMPOT PROVINCE

I was born in the Year of the Dog [1982], and now I'm married and just had a daughter ten days ago.

My father didn't teach me how to make kites, but I learned how to make them by watching him. And that was what I wanted to learn about, so I learned how to make them. I learned how to make kites when I was seventeen or eighteen years old. I can make a whole khleung ek, and I can make the ek reed too. My reeds can only make two or three sounds. If I want them to make

more sounds, I ask for my father's help.

Khmer kites are very important to us, but if there were no kite-flying festival in Phnom Penh, Khmer kites would be lost. It's good to promote Khmer kites to the younger generations. Most of the girls in the countryside are afraid to go to the kite festival in the city because first, they're female, and second, they are afraid of men in the city.

When my daughter grows up, I'll teach her how to make and assemble kites. It's really not difficult to do. It takes a day to assemble the body and secure it with thread. After bending the bamboo, we have to sew the plastic [or paper] onto it. Then we make the string and the tail. And then we fly the kite to test it. After flying kites, we tie them to a stake and keep them flying over the fields at night. We enjoy listening to their sounds.

Khmer kites are very important to Cambodians, like the other arts. They will be even more important to us if we support them continuously. We will lose our Khmer kites if people don't like flying them anymore.

1. The Chams are a Malay ethnic group who once claimed much of the mountainous territory that now forms the border between Cambodia and southern Vietnam. They also controlled some parts of the lowland; Kompong Cham, a provincial capital in central Cambodia, translates literally as "Cham city."

2. These interviews were translated contemporaneously by Cheang Yarin or Nong Piseth, tape-recorded, and then transcribed and translated again by Piseth. I am extremely grateful to both of them for their assistance, and also to Sarak, Hang Sovann, Roeung Sareth, Khlok Sarun, and the late Pol Phan, all of whom devoted hours to locating and helping me reach interviewees. (Hang Sovann, in particular, provided daily assistance in coordinating this research.) The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts generously provided logistical support for each of the research trips.

3. Transcripts of the interviews are on file with the Drachen Foundation; the interview tapes are on file with the author.

KITERS' VOICES, PRESERVED STORIES: ORAL HISTORY AT THE WORLD KITE MUSEUM

Shelly Leavens



Shelly Leavens

Kay Buesing at the World Kite Museum with her interviewing guide and recording equipment.

What is it about kites that encourages *innovation*? Or perhaps, what is it about innovative and creative people that draws them to *kites*?

Part of the answer to these questions lies in the archives of the World Kite Museum (WKM), in Long Beach, Washington. Director Kay Buesing and volunteer Patti Gibbons know better than anyone where these answers can be found – through the stories of the WKM Oral History Program. By recording and then disseminating the oral reminiscences of people from the international kiting community – mostly fliers, builders, and organizers – this program helps preserve, celebrate, and broaden recognition of kiting's rich social and cultural history.

Oral history is often thought of as serving museums and their public by providing research archives full of multilayered material. However, due to the nature of how oral history engages the museum community during the process of interviewing and dialog, it is just as much about the people involved as it is about the subject matter of their stories. Therefore, it is important to start this story from the beginning, with Kay and Jim Buesing.

KAY AND JIM BUESING

Kay Buesing grew up in Wisconsin, and as a child, flew kites every March. With degrees in English, Theater, and Education Administration, Kay worked as a school teacher for 30 years. Kay and her husband Jim had a long tradition of giving each other toys for Christmas. One

year, Kay decided to give Jim a two-line SpyroGyro and, unbeknownst to them at the time, it became the catalyst for forming lives devoted to kite flying and promoting kiting in the world.

The Buesings started visiting kite shops in Seattle and Portland, and in the process of meeting the people who ran those shops, the horizons of kiting opened considerably. Kay recalled from the early years, "a favorite was a Nantucket Kiteman cotton star, a flexifoil, and I could always fly deltas." She then attended a kite-making workshop in 1983 where she labored over her first Cody kite. It wasn't long until Kay and Jim helped open the first kite shop in Long Beach. They were still both working full time, but kiting on Long Beach was becoming increasingly renowned and their commitments began to shift.

The combination of a growing interest in kiting and a home in Long Beach found Kay engaged in the first Washington State International Kite Festival (WSIKF) in 1982. "I was hooked," she said. "The people, the beautiful kites, the outdoors were wonderful. That year I did a little of everything, spent morning to night on the beach." The next year Kay joined the WSIKF planning committee, and for the next ten years was either the coordinator or the chair of the committee.

Over time, Jim became one of the best long-line launchers while Kay organized multiple successful WSIKF weeks. Both found such a deep love for kites and the kiting community that in 1987 they founded the World Kite Museum and Hall of Fame, where Kay has been the volunteer Director for the past 22 years.

THE WORLD KITE MUSEUM

What started out as an offbeat idea became

a successful institution with the world's largest public collection of Japanese kites outside of Japan (the 300-kite Checkley Collection), as well as host to the Kiting Hall of Fame.

"What about a kite museum?" said Jim's friend Lawrence Lessard (who was full of crazy ideas and said it half-jokingly). Jim took the notion seriously. He set out to acquire space for exhibits and a collection, and in 1987 found a small house in Long Beach to accommodate a small operation. Thus WKM was born.

The good idea caught on and very quickly WKM began to grow out of its space. The museum decided to try to build a new museum on State Park land, but capital funds were hard to come by and the deal fell through. In 2004, WKM bought a renovated fitness center and currently calls this space home. It is conveniently located only a couple of blocks from the famous beach, as well as new timeshare condos – which has been a boon to the museum's visitorship over the last year.

WKM hosts kite making workshops and free school programs, providing opportunities for designing, building, and flying kites, particularly around Asian New Year celebrations. The biggest event of the year for the museum is WSIKF and the annual auction, held on the same weekend. The kite festival began as a Long Beach Merchant's Association event and has over the years moved into the realm of the museum, which aims to continue increasing its responsibility for the festival in the future. The first WSIKF had only seven participants and an Edmonds College experimental kite flying team. This past summer, 400 registered fliers and hundreds of spectators from all over the world descended upon Long Beach, making it one of the most prominent kite festival in the US.

The museum now has about 400 members, 15 key volunteers (not including the Board), and one paid full-time administrative employee. Kay hopes to soon have the ability to hire a Development Director, who would fundraise to hire a new Executive Director. After 22 years of daily devotion to WKM's operations, Kay indicates that she would love to see new leadership in the museum soon.

GETTING THE ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM STARTED

"Oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. And in giving a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making."

– Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*

Since WKM is about, and run by, members of the kite community, it is an ideal place to integrate a community-based oral history program. Over the years, Kay had attended several museum conferences, where she first learned about oral history. She decided to seek an intern to start the program in the summer of 1995. Patti Gibbons, from the University of Washington's Museology Graduate Program in Seattle, agreed and found herself immersed in the kiting world.

Kay had conducted three interviews to test the waters, so there was a jumping-off point for Patti to begin. The initial goals of the project were three-fold: to recruit volunteers in diverse regions of the country, perhaps even abroad, to record local kiting and kite personalities, and to tell the story of organized kiting. Patti spent the first part of her summer "reading every book on the shelf" to learn as much about kites as possible, while Kay compiled a list of names for narrators. Patti recorded some interviews at WSIKF that year as well as traveled to the Berkeley Kite Festival and to Monterey to

capture even more stories.

Patti interviewed approximately twenty of the narrators represented in the WKM archive, of which there are now more than 70. As she recalls, there was a sense of urgency to record oral histories from kites that were seminal to the art and sport, but were retiring and aged. Back at school after her first summer at Long Beach, Patti decided to take on the project as her Master's thesis work and soon developed a set of protocol for WKM based on oral history best practices. She continued interviewing in the Seattle area and after graduating from the museology program returned to the museum to continue the work. Though she has since moved back to her hometown of Chicago, she is still involved in the program by writing down kites' stories for the world to share.

"VOICES FROM THE VAULT"

Patti writes for the quarterly article series, "Voices from the Vault," in *Kiting* magazine. In 2002, she sent her first pieces to then-publisher Mike Gillard, who featured her story about Bob Price in the Spring 2003 issue. She recently drew oral histories from Masaaki Modegi and George Ham for articles in the Summer 2008 and Spring 2009 issues, respectively. About her writing, Patti says, "I try to create a nice, fun portrait of the fliers and hit upon their hallmarks and overall contributions to organized kiting using pretty much just the information from their oral history interview. I also like to shine light on a sampling of the fliers' quirky or whimsical sides because I think it helps make their personal stories a little more colorful and sweet."

ANALYZING PROGRAM DETAILS

Patti's work developing materials for the WKM oral history program paid off, since

Kiyomi Okawa



Patti Gibbons



Dinesh Bahadur



Eileen Pilcher

Scenes from the international kite world. ABOVE LEFT: World Kite Museum in Long Beach, Washington. ABOVE RIGHT: Kay Buesing with Charlie Henderson at the 2003 AKA Convention. BELOW LEFT: Patti Gibbons with Corey Jensen in Monterey. BELOW RIGHT: World renowned kite personality bill lockhart (1926-2009).

the museum is still using and following her guidelines today. "This collection is the world's only oral history collection that focuses exclusively on kites." This statement, made in WKM's *Oral History Manual*, was true in 1993, and it is most likely still true today. However, there are multiple kiting organizations and kite museums around the world, eight in Japan alone, and whether or not they have started oral history projects in their own countries is unknown.

The *Oral History Manual* also notes that the prominence of the narrator is important when selecting who will participate in the program. It begs the question, what is "prominence?"

History scholar Jean Gandesbery writes, "Just as formal history illuminates the contexts of well-known historical events and circumstances, oral history, with its emphasis on personal statement, illuminates and lends integrity to 'ordinary' lives," which we often find revealed as quite extraordinary after all. The relativity of "prominence" is certainly illuminated by WKM's oral history program in that if you asked the next person walking down the street who Stormy Weathers was, they would probably look at you like you were crazy. On the other hand, many would know the name of the late Francis Rogallo, inventor of the Rogallo wing, a precursor to the hang glider. This is the beauty of oral history. It is an equalizer, honoring each person who chooses to share a bit of themselves for the recording.

Kay noted that for WKM, focusing on prominence gave the program more visibility and allowed the archives to be used for publications since the names were recognizable in the kiting community. The level of prominence of the narrator is not always on the national or international level, but is sometimes more regional or

even localized to the Long Beach area, particularly for those who have been involved in the WSIKF. Carol Knopski and Tom Sisson are examples.

Collecting the history of the festival is good practice for the museum, but also holds personal significance for Kay, since she was a part of the organizing committee from the very first year.

Kay wants to continue to honor those locals who have made the festival happen, but also wants to continue expanding the program to include more international kite fliers. She also wants to revisit interviews, such as Tal Streeter, who has been a prominent kite flier and author since the early 1970s and continues to work with kites in new, innovative ways today. She most recently wrapped up an interview with Jing-Fei Li, a visiting female scholar from China who attended this summer's kite festival and brought several new Chinese kites with her to fly and donate to the museum.

The WKM oral history program uses a traditional cassette tape recorder and hour-long interviews, thus providing the listener with topic-focused interviews versus life histories. While the interviews may be short, the documentation makes the archive strong. As a result of Patti's research, the museum uses standard oral history forms and protocol, including a pre-interview, copyright release, a full verbatim transcript, and the always-essential thank you letter. About one third of the collection has been transcribed. Despite their physical accessibility, Kay notes that no-one from the public, outside of Patti herself, has accessed the archive for research or even just out of curiosity. One reason behind this may be that the project is not accessible on the WKM website and has not been publicized outside of the articles in *Kiting*.

THE FUTURE OF KITING ORAL HISTORIES

While accessibility is an attractive aspect of oral history as a genre, it has also proven itself as a research methodology with an authentic and personal edge, and one that can be used effectively in historical writings. The intimacy of the narrative and the immediacy of the voice shine through in each of Patti's articles. "Voices from the Vault" is an example of how oral histories can be brought down from the dusty archive shelf (all too often the grave of incredible stories), and be given new life on the pages of a widely read periodical. For a community museum like WKM, it is exactly the kind of use their rich collection deserves.

While WKM has collected and continues to collect many diverse perspectives on kiting, there is much more work to be done to capture kite personalities, artistry, science, and events through voices and stories. In addition to making the archive accessible on the web, the program can be expanded to include video oral history and even strive to utilize cutting edge applications of oral history, such as an interactive online map, that can be used to connect geography with virtual stories.

Ultimately, and on the simplest level, it is the kilters themselves and the messages they share that make the WKM oral history program so worthwhile. Listening to the voices of those who are no longer with us can be a truly powerful experience.

"Kites are one thing that knows no gender gap, or age gap...there are very few things left in our culture that all ages can do together – kiting is one of them. I blame my granddaughter more or less for getting me interested in kiting."

– bill lockhart, Jan. 25, 1926 - Aug. 8, 2009

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TSUGARU KITE

Tokuko Sato

INTRODUCTION BY SCOTT SKINNER

American kite enthusiasts were introduced to Tokuko Sato at Bill Lockhart and Betty Street's Junction International Kite Retreat. Sato-san was a frequent presenter and participant, and she demonstrated the beauty and intricacies of the Tsugaru Dako. But it was her infectious spirit that made us all fans: playing baseball for the first time (in high heels and black velvet), giggling at George Peters' blow dart smacking into a target, or sneaking back into her classroom to "correct" students' mistakes. She was an energetic dynamo, open and ready to teach and learn about kites.

Annually, Sato-san has hosted groups of foreign kite-fliers at her Aomori, Japan home, a testament to the pride she has for her town's culture, history, and art.

This article, in her words, tells of her path to becoming one of the few female kite masters of Japan.

HISTORY OF THE TRADITIONAL TSUGARU KITE

Japan is a long island from north to south. There are different kite cultures within the country, and each culture adopts their geographical condition beautifully. Is there any country other than Japan that has such diverse kite cultures in one country?

The Tsugaru Dako was born in the most northern part of Honshu Island (the biggest and main island of Japan), which is under snow half of the year. Japan's Sengoku period –

from the middle of the 15th century to the beginning of the 17th century – was a time of social upheaval and political intrigue. The Tsugaru region was controlled by the Tsugaru clan. The Tsugaru chief and his team had to live in Edo (old Tokyo) when the Edo Period began. While living in Tokyo, they learned traditional Japanese painting, and when they finished serving time, they came back home with the new skill.

After that, the famous Japanese woodblock print artists Hokusai and Kuniyoshi became well-known in Japan. The Tsugaru people added their regional touch to the art themes Hokusai or Kuniyoshi created, and that was the beginning of Tsugaru painting.

Back then, Tsugaru people loved reading the book of Chinese legends, “Suikoden” and “Sangokushi.” They adopted them on paintings and called it “Tsugaru Painting.” Tsugaru people loved the painting style, and it became a part of their culture. Tsugaru clan families took those paintings into their lives as family portraits.

Hirosaki Castle was made for the Tsugaru clan and is well-known for the world’s biggest cherry blossom festival. During the Tempo period (the early 1800s), the Tsugaru clan flew about 40 to 50 big Tsugaru kites from the castle. The definition of “big” kites back then was about 97cm x 68cm (roughly 3 x 2 feet). All of them had a hummer that created loud and powerful noises up in the air. These kites are depicted in a local historical book.

After people saw the kites up in the air, the number of kite lovers increased. People learned Tsugaru painting and added new methods here and there. They created a community of Tsugaru painters, and some became famous. Tsugaru painting was born from teamwork over many decades. It was not created by one artist. It should be called

mingei (people’s or teamwork painting).

WHAT IS A TSUGARU KITE?

If a kite doesn’t fly, it’s not a kite.

Tsugaru people have said from generation to generation: Tsugaru kites are the kind you fly with Siberian winds that blow hard during the winter. Tsugaru kites are not the kind you run with. I think that’s the golden rule for all kite fliers.

You control a Tsugaru kite in the air by holding and twisting the kite string. It makes a loud humming noise and you feel the vibration in your whole body. After the kite string is tied to a heavy object, you start the party on the snow. We spread tarps to make a party room. We thank family and friends for their hard work, and we invite strangers as well. We all enjoy flying kites while we party outside on the snow.

The flying height for a Tsugaru kite depends on the kite size. We enjoy looking at the paintings up in the air, but if too high, no one can see them. So kites have to fly at a height where you can enjoy the paintings. The paintings are of historical fighting scenes. We talk about the history, admire each other’s work, and think about our ancestors.

People cook special regional food and bring it to the party. This is our main fun activity during the severe winter. Everybody from kids to adults look forward to kite flying day. This is a Tsugaru tradition that has been passed on from generation to generation. We need to keep this tradition alive and pass it on to future generations.

Bamboo can’t grow in Aomori.

We use cypress wood for Tsugaru kite spars. Three prefectures are famous for Japan’s



Tokuko Sato Collection

Sato-san (in red jacket) at the 5th Tsugaru Kite Festival.
The biggest kite is about 8 tatami mats (one tatami is
3 x 6 feet). They use a giant kite line and winder and
hemp ropes for the kite tails.



Tokuko Sato Collection

Sato-san's magnificent apple warehouse kite. Many people have suggested she register the kite with *The Guinness Book of Records*. The kite is collapsible with special hinges.

three biggest forests, and Aomori prefecture is one of them. We have a big cypress forest. Cypress is also called *hiba arborvitae*.

Temperatures in Aomori are low, so bamboo can't grow there. Our ancestors were clever to use cypress instead of bamboo for the kite frame. Cypress is flexible like bamboo, cheap, available year-round, and light weight. On top of that, cypress has a beautiful grain and smells great.

Water makes washi paper strong.

Handmade *washi* paper is used for the Tsugaru kite sail. Washi is great because it gets stronger when the paper absorbs water from the air or when the paper gets moistened. It helps make the pigment spread slowly so the painting looks natural.

For Tsugaru kites, we don't use one big sheet of paper. We use two, three, or four sheets of paper depending on the size of the kite. All sheets of paper are attached with *nori* paste, a Japanese glue. But when we look at a Tsugaru kite, we don't notice the seams. That is the kite makers' technique called *noribari* or *urabari* skill.

The Tsugaru kite is for enjoying humming.

There is a hummer on the top of the kite that we call *bumbu*. The word came from the sound of the hummer in the air. The *bumbu* makes a different sound from every kite artist. Making *bumbu* requires great skill.

The Tsugaru kite needs weight on the tails.

The Tsugaru kite has two tails. We use bundles of dry straw to make the tail thicker. In the Tsugaru area, people have used straw for folk crafts ever since the Jomon period (Japanese prehistory, 14,000 to 4000 BCE).

We make several different tails depending on the size of the kite. Traditionally, a grandfather makes a kite for his grandchild and he braids straw for the tails.

The Tsugaru kite is for enjoying paintings.

Tsugaru kite paintings show fighting scenes from the Sengoku period. Painters capture the tense moment when two samurais stare at each other. Tsugaru paintings never have bloody scenes or decapitation. Staring at each other with great tension conveys the story to others.

The Tsugaru kite can sway in the wind.

We play with Tsugaru kites by flying different ways. Swing the kite line right and left and, at the same time, pull it down. As soon as the kite flies down, pull the line right and left and send the kite back up in the air. People love to see that motion. I always get a big applause.

HOW I STARTED MAKING TSUGARU KITES

During the winter time, kids fly kites in the snow. My husband, Jinya, remembers when his father took many neighbors to the river to fly a big kite. The kite was almost the same size as a house door. Kite flying day with Jinya's father became an annual activity for everybody.

Jinya's father died at age 78. Three years after his death, I heard this story for the first time. I was very moved and something awakened inside me. I wanted to put myself in the same scene as Jinya's father. I wanted to share happiness with children.

Soon after that, I found an article in the newspaper about a kite workshop in Hirosaki city. At that time, people's consciousness of traditional Tsugaru kites was very low, almost zero. After World War

II, kite flying was prohibited and no one made traditional Tsugaru kites. The kite workshop was sponsored by Hirosaki city, Hirosaki chamber of commerce, and the local newspaper to revive and promote our traditional kite culture.

The kite workshop was a yearly event. I participated four years in a row and was fascinated by the Tsugaru kite paintings, their strong *sumi* strokes, and their coloring method.

I had a strong connection to the region's history. I was born in Hirosaki city. My grandmother used to tell me the story of my great-grandfather, who was a master of the spear and trained the Tsugaru clan. Until my younger brother was in elementary school, the whole community treated us in a special way like VIPs.

ABOUT MY TSUGARU KITE MASTERS

I am a member of the Japan folk-craft society. The society has a chapter in each prefecture. I am in charge of the Tsugaru kite in our chapter.

One of the founders of the society was Teisan Soma. He was well-known for being a master of Tsugaru kite painting. He taught a famous Tsugaru kite painter, Hikoe Yoshitani. My master was Mr. Yoshitani. I learned everything from him.

I took Tsugaru painting lectures from Mr. Yoshitani every day. Until midnight, Mr. Yoshitani and I had passionate discussions about Tsugaru painting and folk-craft. Mr. Soma also gave me lectures whenever he had time. Both of my masters were generous, honest, serious, and warm.

Mr. Yoshitani used to tell me that his early kites were not good enough. My mother had one of his early kites and she kept it in

a storage room for a long time. She gave me the kite and I still have it. Since Mr. Yoshitani was ashamed of his early work, he repainted the same theme and gave it to me as a gift.

Mr. Soma knew he had cancer and he was dying. He told me that if he passed away without completing his last kite theme, he wanted me to finish it after his death. Back then, I was still new to the kite field and it was clearly a joke. Right before he passed away, he gave all his research to his oldest daughter. His will was to publish what he had researched. Twenty years after his death, in 2007, we published his book during the JKA annual kite festival to honor him. The title was *Tsugaru Kite Painting*.

I am very fortunate to have met great Tsugaru painting masters. I learned many different methods, and I could choose what I like as my style and develop it from there. What I learned from my masters has guided me in my professional life.

TSUGARU KITES: AMATEUR VS. PROFESSIONAL

People say that the Aomori kite group is one of the biggest, second only to Tokyo in number of members. A big difference from other kite clubs is that Aomori kite people belong to an independent group. The majority have no teachers to follow. They are self-taught and proud of themselves to have kites as a hobby.

That is totally fine, as long as they make kites at home. Unfortunately, the reality is different. They sell their kites cheap because they are not professional kite makers. People who buy the kites in souvenir shops think they are made by a professional Tsugaru kite maker. When people fly it, it will break easily. That's dreadful.

There are many Tsugaru kite enthusiasts in



Tokuko Sato Collection

Sato-san painting kites in her studio, Aomari, Japan.

Aomori. However, they have no idea about Tsugaru kite history, which makes me worry about the future of Tsugaru kites.

THE FUTURE OF TSUGARU KITES

It has been about 40 years since I've entered the kite world. My passion started right after I joined the kite workshop. My kite life has been great so far.

The strong point for me is that I can send a message or teach something through kites. I always think about what I can tell people using kites. When I think back on the past, I have introduced Tsugaru culture inside Japan, and I have introduced Japanese culture with overseas.

The kite world is big and deep. And social networks through kites are also big and deep. Almost every society welcomes kite activities because the kite is a symbol of peace. Kites have strings that connect the world with peace. "No border in the sky" – that is my favorite saying.

In December 2010, we will have a bullet train to Aomori that will bring many tourists. Right now, the Tsugaru kite is seen only as a toy, but it's possible that Tsugaru kites will become cultural assets in the future. The Tsugaru kite represents our land and culture. We Tsugaru people need to have positive consciousness of what our culture is all about.

We have already lost Tsugaru masters. What we can do at this point is convey the right information about Tsugaru kites and Tsugaru paintings to the next generation with passion. I have been told several times that my Tsugaru painting doesn't look like it's done by a woman. For me, there is no man or woman in the world of Tsugaru kites. There is only me, totally fascinated by Tsugaru kite painting.

When the whole painting culture has been passed on to the next generation, the origin could be forgotten. Fortunately, I can utilize my female point of view to express warriors' hair style, hair movement, hand movement and feelings in the paintings. I love being in the world of Tsugaru kites and I would love to keep painting *musha-e* (paintings of fighting warriors) with my passion.

Translated by Kiyomi Okawa

BASIR BERIA'S KITE SECRETS

As told to Chuck Lund



Eileen Pilcher

The author (right) with Basir Beria, and from left, Basir's older daughter Mogda, wife Homira, younger daughter Marjan, and son Masir. The author spent time with Basir at the 2009 Washington State International Kite Festival. Basir and his family live in Los Angeles, California.

In most Afghani families, who plays with kites?

Mostly males play with kites beginning around five or six years old – once they know their right hand from their left. From there, it is all ages to include Grandpa. Kite running begins when the child is old enough to chase down a kite that's been cut from the sky.

Who teaches the art of kite making?

Some secrets and techniques are shared, but everybody who builds learns by self. Building is rewarding. However, about 50% of the fliers purchase their fighting kites. Kite runners, of course, get their kites for free.

What is the typical flying environment for Afghani kites?

Anytime and anywhere – no regulations. The majority of the fliers can be found in cities because they are the population centers where more competitors will be found. Flying is done anywhere space allows, from the tops of walls and roof tops to the city streets.

On occasion, there will be a special time and meeting place established. This is most likely for the better fliers and community champions and allows for more spectators and wagering.

Basir explained a particular battle he watched between two champions that lasted many hours and into the dark. When it became too dark, the champions considered the battle over for the day. They came close together and "jiggled" their lines to uncross and brought in

the kites without cutting the lines. They fought again the next morning and the war was over in a couple of hours.

How is manjha made and are there “secret formulas” for the paste and glass?

Basir spent about two hours explaining this to me and showing examples of various lines. Basically, Indonesian manjha is glass-coated string. And yes, there are some secrets involved – actually, quite a few. Since I was trusted with them, they will remain secrets. But consider this bit of information: neon glass tubes crushed for common manjha have six edges to each microscopic piece. Heavy bottle glass has 18 edges and crystal 28 edges to each microscopic piece.

It is a secret, how to turn large pieces of glass into microscopic sized pieces of glass. And another, how to separate the three or four grades of glass for actual use in making manjha. It is very time consuming. The rice glue even has secret ingredients and preparation techniques. Basir can tell from the smell of the line if the glue is a quality product.

Quality manjha will bend without cracking. Making line that will do that involves significant skill, knowledge, experience, patience, and time.

Quality manjha costs about \$400 or \$500 per spool. Mid-grade is about one-tenth that, and inexpensive manjha is about one-tenth the cost of the mid-grade.

Do fliers use any protection on their fingers?

Novice fliers may wear finger protection in the form of a shaped and wrapped leather piece, or even the fingertip of a leather glove. Experienced fliers never wear protection because it is so important to be

able to feel the line. This is even more important when the kite is flying out of sight and the flier determines direction and controls the spin and movement of the kite by line feel.

Does the flier manage his own kite line or does he fly the kite while an assistant manages the line?

The better fliers who can afford it have spool holders. Spool holders are considered experts at what they do: they control the line's tension and assist in right and left movement. Spool holders can release line in an instant and recover line almost as fast. In serious competitions, only the spool holder may talk to the flier.

Are women and girls starting to fly kites?

Before the invasion in 1977, there were a few well-known female fliers. Presently, in the United States there are some female fliers, but they a distinct minority. Few now fly in Afghanistan.

If not, do they have a similar pastime?

Afghani women have their own fun. One example is called the “Samank” or “Cemanak.” This is when a number of women get together – anywhere from 50 or 60 to even 200 – and prepare special food in a giant pot. They sing over the food and use the opportunity for fun and joking. Boys are allowed until the age of 11, but no men.

In a typical “tangle” how far away are the kites being flown? Is this one measure of kite fliers’ skills (flying very far away and still being able to maneuver, or like in India, risking a larger amount of manjha)?

The pleasure of fighting is partly in the winning, but more so the pleasure is found in flying skillfully, regardless of the amount

of time it takes to score a point or cut a line. An example from Basir was another fight between two village champions that had gone on for over four hours. It was getting dark and the kites were out so far nobody could see them. The fighters agreed to bring them in and continue the next day. To do this, they positioned themselves close to each other, bringing the crossing or cutting point of the lines nearly parallel. They then crossed over one another to free the lines and reel them in. This particular fight continued the next morning and was over in less than an hour. If a flier had to purchase (rather than make) high quality Afghani manjha, it would be very expensive (about \$400 per reel), and it is unlikely that losing it would be a sign of skill or daring.

Flying on a long line takes more skill because you cannot see the kite and you have to understand and control it by the feel of your fingers. Most battles are won or lost with the kite in sight, so it is only with highly skilled fliers that battles last so long as to have huge amounts of line off the reel.

The lowest you see kites is 200 yards. Usually there are 2,000 to 6,000 feet of line on a spool. It is a measure of a kite flier's skill to maintain control with long lines. There are many tricks, movements, and techniques (cobra, rapid pull, instantaneous release, etc.), and they are for the most part more difficult with very long lines.

Of course, there are considerable wagers on championship contests.

What are some Afghani terms used in kite flying?

"Sharty" means "top" or "champion of the area." "Shirt o panear" [phonetic] is a friendly-sounding phrase that is sung when a victor cuts another's line. A close interpretation is "cut you like a cheese."

"Jiggling" means to bring the two kites down to where their lines cross.

Many thanks to Mogda Beria, Basir's older daughter, who was the interpreter and spelling assistant many times during our conversations.

JAPANESE PICTURE BOOKS

Article and photographs by Iqbal Husain



Iqbal Husain

TOP LEFT: Fig. 1, Matching volume of books with a kite on the left cover. BOTTOM LEFT: Fig. 2, Another matching volume of books with a kite on the right cover. RIGHT: Fig. 3, Two sets of volumes, both with matching covers, showing kabuki actors depicted inside a kite.

I have loved books since the age of 11. Firstly as a means of learning and then later as an art form. My first contact with books arose from the necessity of learning English as a second language and then much later, as a teacher, books in turn became an essential part of my job. As an adult, my passion for Asian arts made me purchase a variety of beautifully illustrated books to further my knowledge about artworks that particularly interested me. However, it was the world of Japanese kites that led me directly to the Japanese picture book.

After my initial contact with the Japanese world of kites, I became interested in collecting Japanese prints with kites. From there, it was a natural development to also start collecting Japanese woodblock printed books with kites – that is, Japanese picture books. At the very outset it became apparent that Japanese picture books are far rarer than Japanese prints, and consequently much more difficult to acquire, both in terms of the quantity available and the price sought by dealers for these books. A particular problem for me was and is that I am only interested in a book that has a kite image in it. Very often, only a few pages with images are displayed by a seller in their catalogue or on their website, and these page may not contain a kite, but there may be other pages of the book that do, of which I am not aware. In addition, books by well-known artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige often command prices that are exorbitant and beyond my reach. A book with a single image of a kite may be readily available but is sold as a complete set of three books.

Despite these difficulties, I have persisted, and my perseverance has been rewarded by a collection, which – perhaps not as comprehensive as some other collections – is nevertheless varied and representative of the world of the Japanese picture book, and somewhat unique in that it focuses on books with kite images. It includes books from the 1700s up to the 1950s, including most of the major artists of early genre such as Utamaro, Hokusai, and Hiroshige. Above all, it is a collection that gives me great personal joy and satisfaction.

For me, a Japanese Picture Book is a thing of beauty. It is the collective work of several craftsmen: the publisher, the artist, the block carver, the paper maker, the printer, and a writer. It is clear that their collective production is a labor of love. These books

were made to be picked up and touched, leafed through, held in the hands, and to be viewed from a natural distance, whether sitting or lying down.

The act of picking up one of these books and thumbing through it is a very a visual and tactile experience. The tactile experience often precedes the visual. Many of the Japanese picture books made during the Edo period are printed with a simple plain cover, sometimes embossed with a repetitive design, but more often with no design whatsoever. Therefore the first contact with these books is tactile. The paper, after years of handling, is soft and warm to the touch. You can feel the age of these books and the mind wonders as to who handled these books before myself during the Edo period and in what surroundings.

The fact that Japanese books are read by opening the book from the right, the back of the book, also creates a feeling of expectation different from that of handling a western printed book.

When you open the book, what very often strikes the eye is the importance given to the design and image as opposed to the text, which is often there only as a complement. Sometimes there is no text and the books are pure picture books. The images often evoke a personal emotive response. The eye follows the image and the mind tries to interpret. To me, passionate as I am about Japanese kites, this is as good as it gets.

Initially for this article I had wanted to give a brief overview of the different types of books in my collection. However, it soon became apparent that the field and variety of the genre is so vast that I would barely skim the surface and probably end up by being at best superficial and at worst confusing, given the necessary restraints of

time and space of this article. Therefore I have decided to concentrate on only one genre of the books in my collection, namely books that are called *gokan* (literally, bound books, and in general, extended picture books).

Gokan books belong to the type of Japanese pictures books known as *kusazoshi* or *kuzazoshi* (illustrated storybooks, or generically, various books), a term that covers various genres of popular woodblock printed illustrated literature during the Japanese Edo period (1600-1868) and early Meiji period (1868-1912). In its widest sense, the term *kusazoshi* includes a wide variety of styles but in the narrow sense it may refer uniquely to *gokan*. Learned scholars of the field tend to categorize *kusazoshi* as “cheap literature produced for the common people.” *Kusazoshi* were distinguished by the color of their covers: *akahon* (red books), *kurohon* (black books), and *aohon* (blue-green books). *Akahon* were mainly picture books for children. *Kurohon* and *aohon* contained heroic tales, ghost stories, and romances. Although *gokan* covered all these fields, generally they were longer works, published from around 1807 until 1888. *Gokan* are essentially the final development of the Edo-period *kusazoshi*, popular texts that rely heavily on illustrations to tell the story.

Often lacking the charm and simplicity of other Japanese picture books, the subtle wit and play on words, at times heavily over-illustrated and preposterous in their plots, they nevertheless enjoyed an enormous plebeian popularity during the Edo and Meiji period that surpassed all other genres of illustrated picture books. Their sheer quantity alone is a testament to this.

One interesting aspect of *Kusazoshi* often neglected is that they were also read out loud. Sometimes after dinner the whole

family, including maids, would gather around a brazier and these books were read aloud. Grandmothers would explain and decipher the complexities of the plots for their children and nephews. Children read these books to mothers for practice, and mothers read these books to children for pleasure.

An important aspect of *gokan* is the inclusion of the calligraphic text (which was primarily Kana) in the illustration, wrapped around the images. This script is cursive script, literally translated as “grass” script, a style of Chinese calligraphy that in modern translation means “sloppy script.” Cursive script is faster to write than other styles, but also harder to read. Most Japanese today who can read standard or printed forms of Chinese characters may not be able to comprehend this script at all.

The early writers of *gokan* books adapted kabuki plays to this format, aimed at all who were enamored of kabuki, especially women. These books depicted the popular and famous kabuki actors, such as Ichikawa Danjuro VII who made his debut during the 1810s. His followers could see him depicted on the front covers of these books and follow the action through both words and pictures. These books specialized in kabuki-type vendettas and struggle for house successions, and brought theater into the hands of the average reader.

Themes of the *gokan* included classic novels such as *The Water Margin* and *The Tale of the Genji*. They covered popular samurai heroes in impossible endeavors, taking on everything that the writer’s imagination could throw at them – demons of the underworld, supernatural mythical creatures, saints, and sinners – and against all odds, heroes always emerged triumphant. Stories of enduring romantic love were also a popular theme.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Iqbal Husain

All the major writers, poets, playwrights, and illustrators of the period used the gokan as a means of expression for their artistic endeavors. The leading illustrators of the period, Hokusai, Toyokuni, Kunisada, Kuniyoshi, and Yoshitoshi, all participated in the production of gokan and contributed considerably to their popularity and success. For example, the poet and writer Ryutei Tanihiko adapted the well-known and well-loved *The Tale of the Genji* and became a household name. He published his adaptation, *A Country Genji*, over a period of 14 years and 156 volumes. The first volume alone sold more than 10,000 copies. He eventually had to cease publication after the Tenpo Reforms of 1842. The Tenpo Reforms were a series of government reforms introduced to reform the increasingly disorganized military, economic, agricultural, financial, and religious systems and clean up local politics. Their aim was also to cleanse “domestic uneasiness,” which led to the arrest of many prominent political figures and writers, who were seen by the authorities to promote and encourage decadence and lower moral standards.

LEFT: Fig. 4, A rare cover sheet for a set of gokan volumes with a vividly decorated kite. MIDDLE: Fig. 5, A black and white illustration on the inside of a cover with a yakko kite and reel. The yakko kite is one of the most popular kites in Japan. Yakko were foot soldiers that used to precede the procession of a ruling Lord on the march. RIGHT: Fig. 6, The inside of a gokan cover illustrated with calligraphy and two kites in color.

Gokan writers did not strive for beauty and perfect form in their writings, but rather for popular acceptance. One single edition of a volume sometimes sold more than 20,000 copies, with a deluxe edition published for the more well-off. These books are so often of interest today because they provide a unique insight into the life, customs, and interests of the ordinary people of the time. For me as a collector, this revolves around kites. The depiction of kites in gokan illustrations clearly indicates the interest in kites that permeated all levels of Japanese society during the period in which they were produced. Its use by writers and illustrators of the time is iconic.

The techniques used to produce gokan books were the same as those used to produce single sheet woodblock prints.

Each page was cut into a woodblock and printed by wetting the block with ink and pressing a sheet of paper against the block. For multicolor printing, several blocks had to be carved, one for each color. The Japanese used vegetable colors for printing until around 1860. This is one reason why still today the colors of some books are so vibrant. The other is that these books are printed on Japanese *washi* paper that is the result of a very laborious process of papermaking. In general, it is superior to western papers in durability and purity. It is acid-free and thus has helped to preserve the books over such a long time period.

The size of gokan is referred to by the term *chūhon*, similar to the modern B6 (8.5 by 11 inches) size of paper. They were published in the sewn format. The single pages were folded at the fore edge and kept together with a string using four or five binding holes.

These books have black and white illustrations, with the early outer covers being plain or black and white but mainly color after 1810. The covers are usually printed on stiffer paper and sometimes involve the use of lacquer. The rest of the book consists of thin, translucent, pliable Japanese *washi* paper and often the images on the back pages show through the front.

The starting page of a Japanese book is what westerners would consider the last page. Text is read not from left to right, but from top to bottom. Most volumes are made up of pieces of folded paper bound together, and each piece of paper is known as a *cho*.

Most gokan are published as two matching volumes bounded together, as illustrated in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2. Even if the story line was continued for an extended period over many years, the volumes were usually published as two matching sets.

Nevertheless, I have seen some illustrated gokan volumes that have had nine matching covers which, when laid out together, make one continuous illustration.

Perhaps some of the most rare books for me as a collector of kite-related gokan books are five illustrated books, each of which depicts a kabuki actor painted on a kite. All five books have matching covers. However, inside these books there is no illustrated scene with a kite. Four of these books are shown in Fig. 3.

The gokan books were usually sold as a set of volumes that were covered by a folding sheet. Only a very few of these survive today, given the age of these books. I am fortunate enough to have one of these sheets with a kite on it (Fig. 4).

On the other side of the illustrated cover (the first page of the inside of the book), there is usually a black and white illustration (Fig. 5) that serves as a backdrop to descriptive text or a short poem. Sometimes the illustration inside the cover is in blue and white and more rarely in other colors, as illustrated in Fig. 6 with a rectangular Edo kite and another Yakko kite. In one of the books I have, the blue and white illustrations extend to four pages with a wonderful double page illustration of a kite (Fig. 7).

One of my favorite prints is a well-known print, sometimes illustrated in modern day kite books when describing Japanese kite prints. It depicts a wonderful detailed kite with a meditating or praying personage painted on the skin (Fig. 8). The kite is tied to a kite reel and conveys the sense that it is ready for flight or has just flown. Looking at the kite in a meditative gaze is a priest, who could well be a toy. To the right, almost in front of the priest, is a wooden toy pigeon wheel that in turn stares at the priest.



Fig. 7

Iqbal Husain

Fig. 7, A double-page illustration of a large, detailed kite, which, despite the cramped scene, evokes great drama.



Fig. 8

Iqbal Husain

Fig. 8, A black and white print of a detailed kite with a meditating personage, observed by a traveling priest who seems to be resting in contemplation.

A sad aspect of collecting Japanese picture books today is that many are broken up, their pages torn, and sold individually. As Dan Mackee states, "One of the greatest (and bitterest) ironies in the Japanese print market at present is the fact that because Westerners assume that their pictorial art must be in two dimensions – that books are merely practical and flat pictorial surfaces 'art' – the picture book is relatively ignored while plates from picture books sell easily. The result of this ignorance has been the destruction of one book after another, and by the time the general market wakens to the value of complete books, it may be too late to find many of them still whole."

Despite what Dan Mackee has written, I believe that there are still many Japanese books that remain on the market to collect. One reason for this is that some forms of them were printed in prolific quantities to meet the huge demand for them. This was partly due to their popularity, partly to the large population of Edo Japan, and last but not least to the development of lending libraries during the Edo period. This in turn led to some 90% of the Japanese population being literate by the late Edo period, which in turn stimulated demand.

New collectors should not despair. There are still old collections coming up for sale and the internet has made it much easier for dealers and collectors to meet and transact business, no matter what part of the globe they may reside in. I for one am still hopeful and in search of books that are missing from my collection, which I know are out there and may one day become a part of my collection. Funds permitting, of course!

I would like to conclude my observations with a quote from one of the most noted experts in the field of Japanese books, Dr. Roger S. Keyes. He has eloquently summed up in words why I have come to love

Japanese picture books and why they give me so much pleasure. He writes, "When I look at them carefully, they deliberately direct my attention to states of mind that increase my sense of joy, reverence for life, and appreciation, expand my awareness, stretch my intelligence, and deepen my capacity for human feeling."

A SHORT AND SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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A GRUND KITE FLIES OVER U.S. SOIL

Scott Skinner



Scott Skinner

For video of this Grund replica's maiden American flight in Callaway, Nebraska, please visit the Drachen Foundation YouTube channel at:

www.youtube.com/drachenfoundation

For more on weather kites:

"Weather from Kites" in *Popular Mechanics* (June 1926)

www.tinyurl.com/weatherkites

"Go Fly a Kite!" from the Environmental Science Services Administration (1970)

www.drachen.org/pdf/GoFlyaKite.pdf

Could there be a more appropriate place to fly a modern replica Grund kite than Nebraska? When it comes to American weather kites, Nebraska occupies an almost forgotten place in their development: the factory that manufactured US Weather Service kites was in Dexter, Nebraska, and one of the last kite-operating weather stations was in North Platte.

So, when it came to choosing a place to make the maiden US flight of this Grund replica, Callaway, Nebraska, was an obvious choice. But how did a Grund kite find its way to this tiny Nebraska town? Like a lot of kite stories, this is another tale of friendship, passion, and more than a little luck.

GRUND KITE CAPTAIN WERNER SCHMIDT

I'm not sure when the kite-bug hit Werner Schmidt and Achim Kinter. But it was a particularly virulent form, maybe "Kite H1N1." It infected many but stayed in its purest form in these two German friends. Werner was already heavily involved in historical kite replicas, having made a near-perfect Hargrave box kite that he flew in New Zealand in 1990. Achim was beginning an apprenticeship with his friend when I met the two of them in Fano, Denmark, in 1991. Interested in all things kite-like, I was drawn to their high level of craft, their research skills, their attention to detail, and to the beauty of their finished product.

What I didn't know at the time was that in those years Werner was beginning a serious pursuit of the kites of Lindenberg, Germany. The Berlin Wall came down on my wife's

Ben Ruhe



Sabine Kinter



Scott Skinner, except as noted

ABOVE LEFT: The Lindenberg Observatory on its 100th anniversary in 2005. ABOVE RIGHT: Grund kite captain Werner Schmidt. MIDDLE LEFT: Achim Kinter. MIDDLE RIGHT: Four Grund replicas in Fano, Denmark. BOTTOM: A new addition to the Callaway, Nebraska landscape.

birthday, making it easy for me to remember: November 9, 1989. Its fall was quickly followed by Werner traveling to the Lindenberg Observatory and finding everything he could about its kite-flying history. To the benefit of kite fliers the world over, what Werner was able to save was substantial: actual kite frames, mostly destroyed kite sails (that were still invaluable for replica-making), and documents detailing the activities of the observatory.

Werner, Achim, and a chosen group of historical kite enthusiasts were instrumental in celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Lindenberg Observatory in 2005. Displayed in the Balloon Hall were replicas of documented weather kites used at Lindenberg: Hargrave, Lamson, Schirmdrachen, Hamburg-Diamond, and Grund. The highlight of the celebration was the build-up of a giant Grund kite. Over five meters tall, yet amazingly lightweight, the kite dwarfs all but the most profound contemporary kite developments.

Since 2005, Werner and Achim have worked together to produce a number of Grund replicas. Commissioned by The Drachen Foundation and myself, the team made two kites for flying in the United States. One, residing in Seattle/Tieton, is waiting for its maiden flight. Bob Umbowers has been tutored by the Schmidt-Kinter team and will likely get the chance to supervise a flight this spring. I was tutored by the pair in Fano, Denmark, where we put together four kites. In every process, I took a new role so that I could remember everything when I would have to do it myself.

My kite found its way to Callaway, Nebraska and the 19th Annual Kite Flight this September for its maiden American flight. Supervising a crew of avid Nebraskans, I

followed the verbal instructions of Werner and Achim (and the written ones made by Bob Umbowers), and we successfully put the kite together. For kite fliers used to contemporary kites, the sight of the dedicated toolbox and parts for kite assembly was a bit disconcerting, but not at all unexpected when you consider that these kites have over 500 pieces. The gathered team had the kite completely put together in about one hour. These kites routinely flew in extreme wind and weather conditions in northern Germany, so with the Callaway winds hovering around 10 mph, I decided to wait until the next day to try the maiden flight.

With winds between 15 and 20 mph and reasonably steady for Nebraska, we decided to fly the Grund on an overcast Sunday. With help from AKA Regional Director Don Murphey the kite was walked to a launch zone and then easily coaxed into the air. As much power as I had felt from the kite in the heavy winds of Fano, here in Nebraska the kite was a kitten! It flew for about five hours in varying winds and provided an interesting backdrop to the family kite fly.

The Grund kite flown in Nebraska is a testament to the sophistication of scientific kite flying at the beginning of the twentieth century. But it's also a lasting tribute to two kite-making friends – Werner Schmidt and Achim Kinter – who have shared their passion for history, science, and kites. The Drachen Foundation sends a gracious thank you to these two kite-making masters.



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