THE SERPENT'S TAIL
A Brief History of Khmer Classical Dance

Prumsodun Ok
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In memory of Chheng Phon, Chea Samy, Soth Sam On,
and all the teachers who devoted their lives to our ancient lineage.
For all practitioners of *robam*—past, present, and future, all over the world.

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PREFACE

As a practitioner of Khmer classical dance, I belong to a lineage of artists more than 1,000 years old. I practice an art form developed as a prayer in movement for rain and fertility, one that symbolizes the highest in Khmer notions of beauty and identity. Consequently, *robam kbach boran*, or the "dance of ancient gestures" as we say, can be seen in Khmer communities in Cambodia and throughout the world, where it is practiced, performed, and celebrated by students young and adult, amateur and professional, of Khmer heritage and not alike. The art form embodies "the highest quality of beauty," as my teacher Sophiline Cheam Shapiro describes it, is a uniquely Khmer contribution to the larger fabric of our shared humanity.

As a classical dancer, I also inherit a legacy of immense loss. From 1975 to 1979, a group of radical communists known as the Khmer Rouge took hold of Cambodia. They initiated a ruthless genocide that killed an entire third of the country's population, including a tragic ninety percent of Khmer artists. They left the art form and all it represented vulnerable and endangered in a decimated society. It was my teacher's teachers who would rebuild the art form and the spirit of our people from the ashes of war, genocide, and trauma.

Nearly forty years after this devastation, Khmer classical dance has been revived to new heights. But even in Long Beach, California—where I began writing this text, home to the largest Khmer population outside of Southeast Asia—the effects of this conflict can still be felt. I often wonder where the art form, Khmer people, and Cambodia would be today had it not been for this violent disruption in our history. This is a question on the minds of my peers and teachers all across the globe, one that can be especially harrowing when considering the many ways that dancers carry knowledge, history, and memory within our individual bodies.

Born and raised in the diaspora amidst this narrative of loss, I have always sought the living majesty of my tradition and culture. And, while growing up, I was often disappointed to find few textual materials available. Who were the women in these black and white photographs? What were their lives like? What can they teach us? We may never know as, before a few decades ago, no records written by dancers themselves are known to exist. No books, no essays—not even a single note.

These realities can create a feeling of disjointment for the contemporary practitioner, especially with the pressures of time, distance, and politics at play. Realizing there is much repertoire that I do not know in my state as a "young master" (again, in the words of my teacher)—much repertoire that I will probably never know and perform—and thinking about my students and their students, I recognized a need and urgency to firmly connect the dots.

The dances that we perform now and in the future may not always be the same, the values and realities around us always changing, but we, as Khmer classical dancers, can and must trace our lineage to the dancers throughout history and the spirit that animated their practice. For it is only with knowledge and understanding of the past, with the blessings of

those who came before us, in a sense, that we can envision higher possibilities for art and humanity.

What follows is my brief interpretation of the history of Khmer classical dance. It draws upon personal experience and academic sources, anecdotes from my teacher and family, photographs and videos, and news articles and personal analysis. I use mythology and literature, oral and embodied storytelling, visual and performative art, social psychology and linguistics to illuminate my artistic heritage as I see it.

As the tradition's history has not been recorded by a practitioner in such a manner, I find it most meaningful to write with my presence known. I am artist, scholar, critic, Khmer American, and citizen of the world in the year 2018; all these facets remain in the text and emerge when they have the power to enlighten. Through this, I hope to demonstrate the continuities between Khmer dance of the pre-Angkor and Angkor periods to Khmer classical dance today. And, in doing so, defy the pressures of war, nationalism, and commercialism to pass this cultural legacy on to a new generation of dancers and audiences. Throughout the text then, I address issues of historical and political contestation head on with the belief that only real and honest dialogue can lead to peace, understanding, and renewal.

Therefore, let us begin as we do in classical dance: by invoking and thanking those who came before us.

I hold a deep gratitude for my teacher Sophiline Cheam Shapiro who has written the magic and knowledge that is Khmer classical dance into my body. To her husband John for his continued support and mentorship. To her teachers Chheng Phon, Chea Samy, Soth Sam On, Menh Kossany, and Proeung Chhieng who passed on this gift to her.

Thank you to my teachers Penh Yom, Charles Boone, Jeanne Liotta, and Brook Hinton who have forever impacted my life, including my mentor Oguri and brothers Sherwood Chen and Claudio Valdés Kuri. Thank you to Toni Shapiro-Phim, Paul Cravath, and the other scholars who have dedicated themselves to documenting this tradition, as well as Saveros Pou, Michael Vickery, David Chandler, Ian Mabbett and more for enlightening our world on Khmer history. Thank you to Rosemary Candelario, Priya Srinivasan, Roger Nelson, and Trent Walker for their energizing guidance, suggestions, and support in refining this work. And to Kent Davis, Reinhart Zieger, Noel Hidalgo Tan, and countless others for access to photographs.

Inexpressible gratitude to and reverence for the spirits of the teachers no longer living. And lastly, and very importantly, to Lok Ta Moni Eisey—the ultimate teacher spirit, the first human to receive knowledge of the arts in our tradition. May you all bless me and guide me on this journey of sharing Khmer classical dance, reveal to me and to our world the path of light.

Sadhu!

STARTING FROM THE BODY, A LIVING LIBRARY

Teaching a student at the Khmer Arts Theater. Photo: Morn Sopharoth.

When you look at a Khmer classical dancer, you will find a strong aesthetic of curves. There is an arching in the back, a bending in the knees, and a curling of the toes. In the arms there is a hyper-flexing of the elbow and the fingers are flexed back in an extreme curve often mistaken for double-jointedness. Moving slowly, lower body grounded but upper body more fluid, this gives the dancer a serpentine impression.

This is significant as, before the introduction of Hinduism and Buddhism, our ancestors practiced ancestor worship and animism. The latter is the belief that the land, water, mountains, and other natural phenomena all have spirits. And the serpent, in this cosmology, was especially important because it symbolized a bridge between heaven and earth. In its fluid, curvilinear movement, it mimicked the flow of water and conjured the image of rivers cutting through the land. To invoke the serpent in the body then, was to reach out to heaven and channel the deliverance of water and its ability to nurture life. So significant was this power that images of serpents feature prominently in Khmer art and we, as a people, trace our mytho-historical origins to a serpent race known as *neak* (Sanskrit: *naga*).

The translation of the serpent into the human form points to the transformation of nature in artmaking, and you can think of the dance form as a stylization of the natural world around us and that of our own human behaviors. For example, the four primary hand gestures in Khmer classical dance are *changol*, *lea*, *chib*, and *khuong*. Respectively, these represent tree, leaf, flower, and fruit, indicating the cycle of life and further connecting the Khmer classical dancer to the worship of nature.

These four gestures, along with others, are used in varying combination to each other and to bodily positions to create a limitless vocabulary with which dancers express ourselves. Through the use of these gestures and other qualities such as line, shape, weight, and angle, and dramatic elements of character and costume, dancers transform into gods and goddesses, animals and demons alike. We express the fullest capacities of the human experience, including love and joy, sadness and anger, fear and jealousy, and so much more. Today, the four main character types in Cambodia are known as *neang* (female), *neay rong* (male), *yeak* (demon), and *sva* (monkey). There are others of course, but they appear less frequently in dramatic works known as *roeung*.

With this in mind, we can now begin to trace the linkages of Khmer dance through history.

SACRED ROOTS I: THE ORIGINS OF KHMER DANCE

Dance has always held a great significance in the cultures of Southeast Asia, as indicated by bronze funerary drums featuring images of dancers excavated in Cambodia and throughout the region. The earliest inscriptions mentioning Khmer dance however date to the sixth century of the Common Era,[1] and early epigraphy tells us that dancers, besides their ancient association with funeral rites, were offered to both Hindu and Buddhist temples as *kñum vrah rapam* (servants of the sacred dance).[2] Their primary responsibilities were to perform sacred choreographies believed to invoke the fall of life-giving rains, thus ensuring the fertility and prosperity of the land and the people.

So valued and integral was the art form that dancers came from the full spectrum of Khmer society. Both women and men, they were likely trained in the homes of nobility and royalty and later offered as acts of devotion and merit making. This ritual function of the dancer was so potent and omnipresent in the Khmer belief that even King Jayavarmann I (r. 657 – 690 CE) and King Yasovarmann I (r. 889 – 910 CE) were noted to be skilled dancers.[3] Certainly, in the Khmer conception, a ruler whose form was a vessel for the gods and ancestor spirits, whose body was capable of channeling the flow of essential waters, would have been a righteous and efficacious one.

As further evidence of the dancer's elevated place—and that of singers, musicians, puppeteers, and other artists—they were often listed in temple inscriptions immediately after the officials who founded the temple.[4] They boasted Sanskrit names compared to the mundane Khmer names of other "slaves"[5] and some were able to amass a large amount of property[6] and "even had their own slaves."[7] This celebrated, high social status is only appropriate for a group of people who are seen as nothing less than semidivine, living bridges between heaven and earth.

Chinese emissary Zhou Daguan, who visited the Khmer capital of Yasodharapura in 1296 CE (now known as Angkor), noted that the best musicians were sent to the palace to perform during the *ngai lan* which took place during New Year festivities.[8] George Coedes translates this to the Khmer *thngai ram* or "day(s) of dancing"[9] whereas Peter Harris—translating directly from the Chinese text—transcribes the term as *ailan*, explaining that it was "a dance that selected female dancers perform daily in the palace."[10] Taking clues from other descriptions of the event however, Eveline Porée-Maspero has suggested that the ceremony is compatible to the contemporary practice of *laeung neak ta*; she believes it was "a performance in which the dancers became possessed by the territorial spirits of the kingdom for the purpose of obtaining rain."[11]

Other inscriptions noted the *utsava* or "festivals" of which part the offering of and performance by dancers took place. These festivals were staged four and sometimes five times a year and were referred to as *mahotsava*(the great festivals) and *pañcotsava* (the five religious festivals).[12] Khmer linguist Saveros Pou has likened the former to the contemporary *mahaosrab*, a festival in which the king would make performances and games available to the public inside the palace.

Inscriptions also indicate that dancers performed *rpam*, short dances now known as *robam*, as well as dramatic works from the *Jataka* (a collection of stories retelling the many incarnations of the Buddha).[13] Given the historical dominance of Brahmanism at the Khmer court and evidence for dramatic performance since the sixth century, Paul Cravath has suggested that Hindu works of narrative nature were performed as well.[14] Certainly, when at the twelfth-century temple of Banteay Samre, whose lintels depict scenes from the *Jataka* and the *Reamker* (the Khmer version of the Hindu *Ramayana*), whose ornamental panels feature dancers in a variety of poses, it becomes easier to believe that dance drama was a highly developed art form during the Angkor era if not before. Drama, storytelling, and narrative art, in fact, are carved all over the temples of the ancient era.

Reflecting the Khmer religious practice of syncretism, these dances and dramas—and the practice around them—possessed a prominent, foundational character of indigenous spiritual belief, that is, animism and ancestor worship. Further evidence for the dance's potent native roots are the fact that the earliest Khmer language inscriptions, which date from the seventh century, all use "the ancient Khmer root *ram*, which transforms to [*r*]*amam* or *rapam*, an identical term used consistently in modern Khmer."[15]

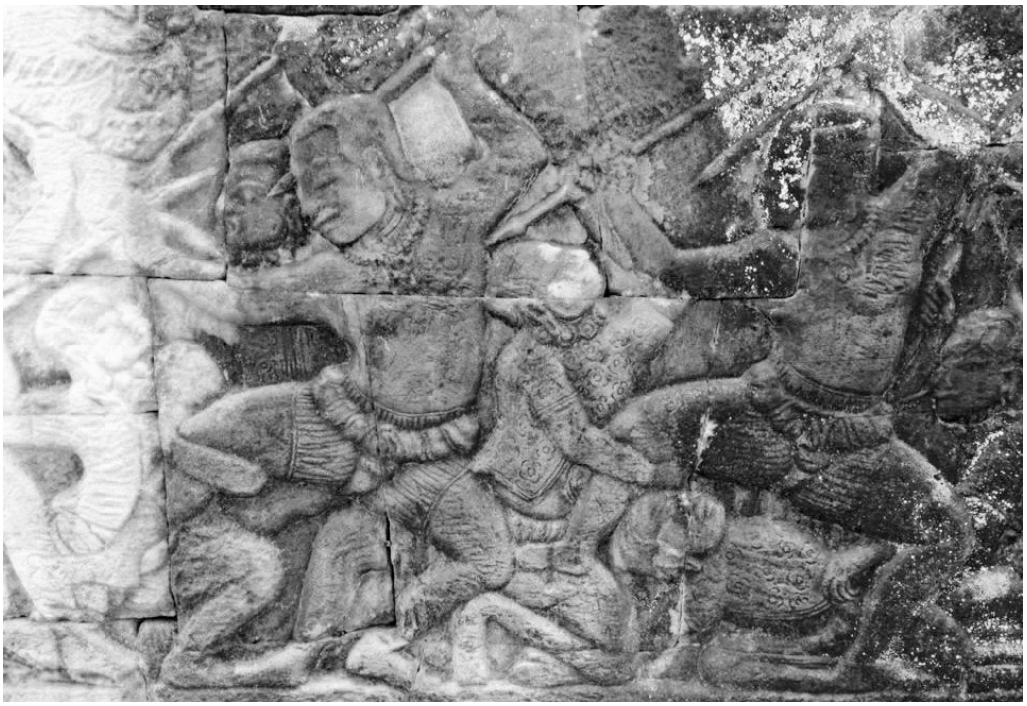
The most vivid evidence of Khmer dance in this period, and sometimes the most overlooked and misunderstood, are the thousands of figures carved into relief at the temples of Angkor. Some scholars posit that these figures were modeled after the dance form itself—an idea which I believe too.

The sculptors carved images of gods and kings, goddesses and human dancers, scenes from daily life and history, and Buddhist and Hindu tales alike. In dialogue with the larger sphere of Khmer art and culture, they rendered the arched backs, flexed fingers, and curvilinear postures of their dancing peers to bring these scenes to life. What results is the documentation of an aesthetic value and quality that can still be seen in the body of the Khmer classical dancer today, from the centered, strongly uplifted torso to the angular relationship of the arms and hands to the figure's body. The sculptors captured formal qualities from the gentle curling of the toes to the deep smile that today's most skilled of Khmer dancers are able to express.

Scholars such as Paul Cravath believe the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*, as carved onto the walls of Angkor Wat, is an actual depiction of *khaol*, or male masked dance.[16] He believes the performance was enacted during coronation ceremonies to assert the king's role as the central force presiding over the kingdom and the cosmos it represented, whose harmonious control of these forces produced the *apsara*, celestial dancers, themselves. Cravath notes that Thai dance experts believe this ritual was introduced to Thailand by way of Khmer artists, where it was known as the *len dukdamban* and performed as late as the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868 – 1911).[17]

Indra, wielding a *vajra* (thunderbolt), sits on the three-headed elephant Airavata. The way he is seated is still used today in martial dances of the repertoire. Notice the flexed fingers of his left hand, the height and angle of his right arm and hand, and the parallel angles on the left side of his face and the left side of his torso—all formal qualities recognizable in the dancer today. Banteay Srei, tenth century. © CEphoto, Uwe Aranas / , via Wikimedia Commons.

A dancer, dressed as a demonic figure, amidst an ensemble of dancing women. Notice the strong arch in the back which creates a powerful sense of lifting up. With legs spread wide apart and arms spread wide and high into the air, hand wielding a club-like weapon, the dancer demonstrates the same energy and posture required of *yeak* or demon roles today. Interestingly, this is the same gesture Ream Eyso makes as he rips through an ensemble of *tevoda*. Terrace of the Elephants, Angkor Thom, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.



This form of leveling, and the gesture of grabbing the leg during combat, can still be seen in contemporary works of the repertoire such as *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* and the *Reamker*, as well as in the Thai version known as the *Ramakian*. Bayon, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Dancers in various postures are carved into spade patterns that frame the doorways throughout the temple of Banteay Samre. The lintels of this temple depict scenes from the *Reamker* and the *Jataka*, perhaps indicating them as sources for performance. Twelfth century. Image: Prumsodun Ok.

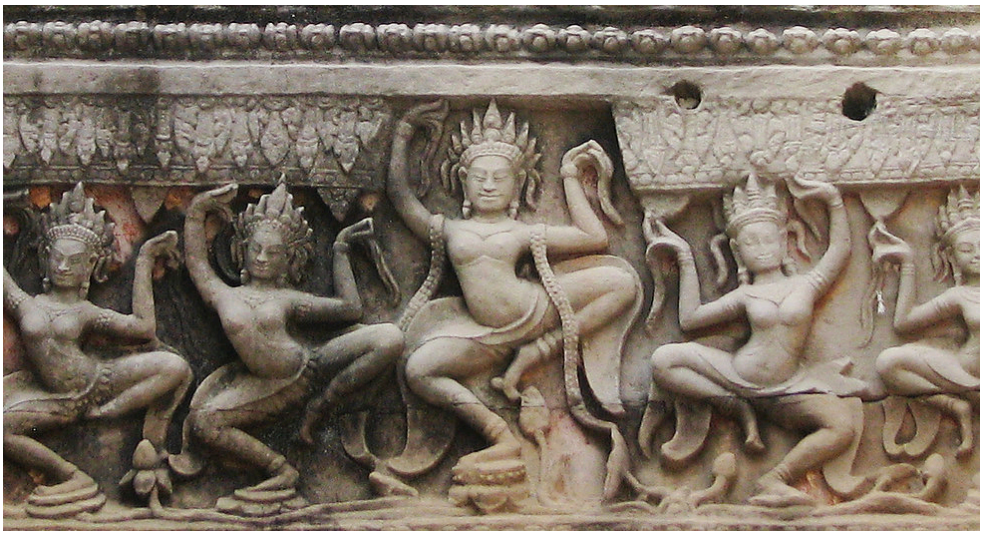
Dancers carved onto a door panel at the temple of Pre Rup. The left arm is in the *stuoy* gesture. Combined with right arm in front as depicted, the gesture means "great" or "beautiful" or "wonderful" in contemporary practice. Tenth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Churning of the Ocean of Milk at Angkor Wat. Notice the flying figures above Vishnu—they kick their legs back and up into the waist just how Khmer dancers suggest flight today. Twelfth century. Photo courtesy of Kent Davis, Devata.org.

Ironically, the images of dancers proper—celestial women known popularly as *apsara*—are less dynamic than those from narrative reliefs and ornamental door panels. One pose boasted by the *apsara*, that of flight, with one leg kicking back up and into the waist, is still in use in Cambodia and known today as *deav*. The other, much more prevalent, is a pose indicating the actual act of dancing—one that is the source of both confusion and inspiration for many of today's practitioners, scholars, and audiences. With the ball of one foot on the ground and that leg deeply bent, the dancer kicks the other knee high into the air and tucks the foot of that knee in towards the prior leg. What results is a difficult, if not impossible, gravity defying posture suggesting highly animated movement, one that seemingly breaks from Khmer dance conventions today.

But there are two reasons for this.

First off, these figures, often small in scale, are identical to one another. They appear side by side in a cookie-cutter fashion, creating a lively decorative motif. The extreme angles in their legs reflect the limitations of sculptors tasked with rendering the most dynamic image in a rigidly frontal art form. As an example, the many images of female *tevoda* (celestial deities) at Angkor Wat feature fully frontal bodies with the exception of feet turned dramatically ninety degrees. Furthermore, to achieve a sense of softness in the hard weight of stone, Khmer sculptors depicted hands and fingers with an often relaxed and delicate grace. Therefore, in the way that a painting or photograph will never be its subject but rather a transformation of it, this recurring image of dancing women is a dramatic visual stylization of the actual reality. For those skeptical of this idea however, there is no arguing that this posture is more or less executed by performers of *neay rong* (male) and *yeak* (demon) roles today, altered to conform with contemporary taste if you are so to believe.



Yogini in pose denoting dance at Preah Khan. Twelfth century. By McKay Savage from London, UK (Cambodia '08 - 165 - Preah Khan) [CC BY 2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

A Tibetan *yogini*. Notice the crown and garment flowing around her body, similar to the crown and garland around the Khmer image. Also, notice the flower pedestal that both figures dance upon. Image source: https://thuptendhargyeychoeling.weebly.com/nectar-for-the-ear/ceaseless-blessings.

Second, and more importantly, I believe the motif is a direct borrowing from tantric iconography of the *yogini*, supernatural women associated with trees, animals, graves, and sexual rites whose dancing on corpses represented transcendence over ignorance. For the most part, there are no sculpted corpses below these dancing images we call "*apsara*" today, but at Angkor Wat, which served as temple, observatory, and mausoleum, it can be said that they dance on the tomb of the king himself.

David Gordon White defines *tantra* as:

"That Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways."[18]

In other words, unlike ascetic traditions that believe spiritual transcendence is only possible through a disconnection from the materiality of a corrupting body and world, tantric practitioners saw divinity in all aspects of life. Using their bodies and drawing upon

their natural environments, they created songs and dances, sculptures and temples, texts and rituals to speak to, appease, and mirror the gods of heaven. Tantric practitioners used "*Mantras*, *Mudras*, visualization and fire-sacrifice (*homah*)" to create "a new and more powerful means of attaining Buddha-hood but also, as in the Saiva case, [to enable] the production of supernatural effects (*siddhih*) such as the averting of danger (*santih*), the harming of enemies (*abhicarah*), and the control of the rain (*varsapanam* and *ativrstidharanam*)."[19]

We know clearly that tantric ideas pervaded all levels of Khmer society during the Angkor era. Zhou Daguan, for example, described the king as wearing "a crown of gold like those worn on the head of Vajradhara,"[20] or the "Holder of the Diamond,"[21] thereby connecting the ruler to Vajrayana or tantric Buddhism. This is further evidenced by iconography of tantric deities such as Hevajra and *yogini* in the form of bronze statues, as well as in stone relief at the Khmer temple of Vimayapura (now in modern day Thailand, known as Phimai). Furthermore, according to a stele inscription at Wat Sithor, "a Mahayana Buddhist scholar and tantric expert became the Guru of King Jayavarmann V (r. 968 – 1001) and was engaged by him to perform frequent fire-sacrifices in the palace for the protection of the kingdom."[22] Zhou Daguan even described a tantric deflowering of virgin girls by Buddhist and those he mistook as "Taoist" priests:

"I have heard that when the time comes the monk goes into a room with the girl and takes away her virginity with his hand, which he then puts into some wine. Some say the parents, relatives and neighbors mark their foreheads with it, others say they all taste it. Some say the monk and girl have sex together, others say they don't. They don't let Chinese see this, though, so I don't really know."[23]

Although the sexual union of this account sounds more like racist imaginings fanned by "the distorting lens of Chinese doctrines"[24]—as the girls were between seven and nine years-old amongst noble families and eleven at the latest amongst the poor—this ritual echoes tantric practices in the larger cultural sphere. In India, for example, sexual rites involved the mixing of liquor, menstrual blood, and semen that was then consumed in order to grant practitioners with magic powers.[25] We do not know if Khmer *tantrika* drank these ritually potent fluids exactly as their Indian counterparts had. However, the esoterically sexual nature of tantric practice was indeed known in Cambodia. Zhou Daguan recorded another ritual that took place at Phimeanakas, this time with the indigenous Khmer element of the *neak* fulfilling the sexual role of the *yogini*:

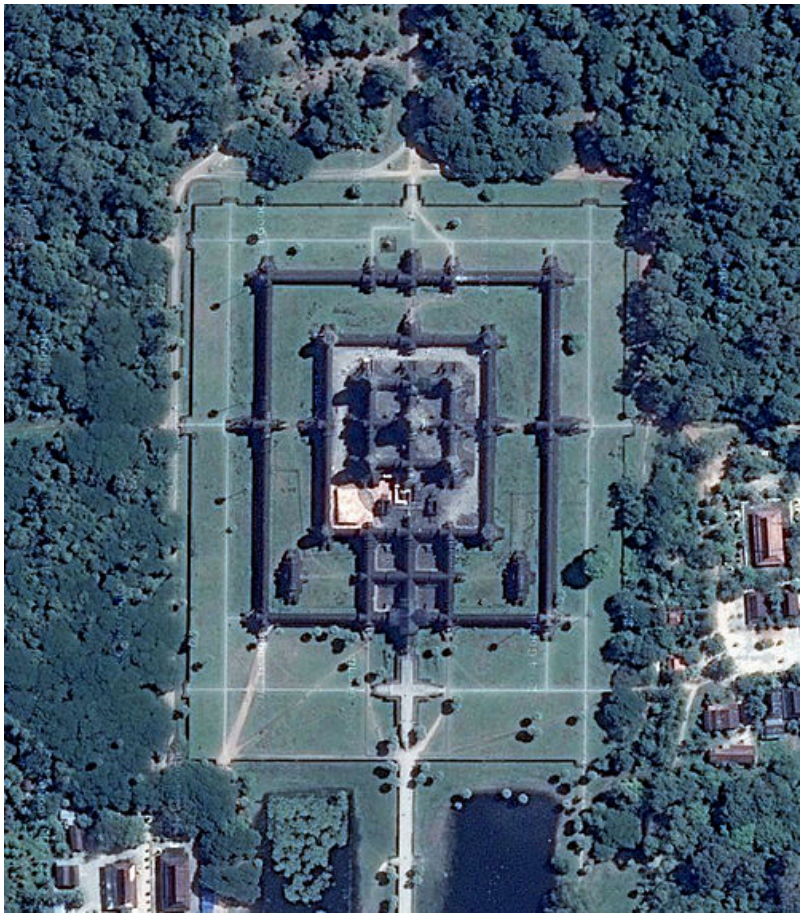
"All the local people claim that in the tower lies the spirit of a nine-headed serpent, master of all the soil of all the kingdom. Every night he appears in the form of a woman with whom the king sleeps and then unites . . . If, one night, the spirit of the serpent does not appear, the king's death is at hand. If the king fails to keep his appointment, some tragedy befalls the nation."[26]

It is possible that this ritual existed long before Zhou Daguan's visit, as evidenced by a ninth-century inscription which describes "Dharani [Goddess of the Earth] . . . as wife of King Yasovarman and as such 'full to overflowing with virtue, pleasure and wealth.'"[27] That said, the conceptual foundation of these tantric rites—in which the union of masculine and feminine energies regenerate all of life—made their way into the ecstatic practice of Khmer dance. And today, centuries later, two distinct works strike me as especially tantric

in nature and are therefore traceable to the Angkor period if not before. They are both regarded as the oldest and most sacred works in the canon and are performed in the *buong suong* (prayer) ceremony to induce the fall of rain.

Sacred Roots II: Two Rain Dances

Robam Tamng Buon is considered by some to be the oldest Khmer classical dance. Beyond the introduction and closing melodies, it consists of four dances each with four verses of singing that are in turn followed by musical sections. The numeric play of four in the work's structure gives it its name, which means, "All Four Dances." This four-by-four structure evokes the image of a balanced square and *yoni* for me, an image that in turn evokes the *mandala* after which temples like Angkor Wat are modeled. This is not farfetched as a birds-eye view above the temple reveals the mountain-like central towers with their surrounding walls to take the same form as a *yonilinga*. And, just as ritual fluids were poured over these abstractions of the feminine and masculine principle to inspire fertility, Angkor Wat and other temples were watered with rain from the heavens, it falling first upon the tip of the central towers and flowing out to sanctify the entire kingdom. The dancers in *Robam Tamng Buon* then are like the central and highest tower of a conceptual temple (the serpent, after all, is a common phallic symbol). Their bodies, dancing in the center of a sacred choreographic structure, reach out to the gods for life and deliver it to humanity.



Bird's-eye view over the twelfth-century temple of Angkor Wat. Image: ©2015 CNES/Astrium, DigitalGlobe, Cnes/Spot Image, Map data ©2015 Google.

Yonilinga surrounded by *linga* carved into the riverbed at Kbal Spean. These waters flowed down to Angkor—notice the similar shapes of Angkor Wat above and the *yonilinga*. Eleventh to twelfth centuries. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

The dancing in *Robam Tamng Buon* is intensely slower than usual, with each dance bleeding into one another like light bleeding into the sky at dawn. On the surface, it may appear that the work merely depicts pairs of gods and goddesses who "*pralaing lo leng*," who play with and tease one another. But their joyous courtship is nothing less than a symbolic union of masculine and feminine energies, a harmonious image of heaven given shape and form in the human realm to inspire the divine order and creative power of the prior into the latter.

Finally, the last lyrical section of *Robam Tamng Buon*, *Melim*, is almost exactly the same as a melody used solely for flight in the contemporary repertoire. In this section, the dancers are likened to beautiful *kenar* (Sanskrit: *kinnara*), creatures who are half-bird and half-human. In India, these creatures were identified with the shape-shifting *yogini* who, possessed with the power of flight, met their *tantrika* lovers in open-air temples much like Phimeanakas. That ancient Khmers would have understood the *yogini* and *kenar* in this manner is evidenced by the *yogini* of Banteay Chhmar who "have third *vajra* eyes and hold flowers with outstretched, feathered arms and stand astride on Garuda legs."[28]

With Zhou Daguan's account of how only musicians came to the palace to perform during the *thngai ram*(according to Cravath's text), with knowledge of the king's sacred lovemaking that took place at Phimeanakas inside the palace compound, and with awareness of a stele recording dance ritual found at this same temple (to be discussed later), perhaps it can be argued that dancers were in fact the serpent-*yogini* women who appeared nightly to make love to the king. Indeed the dancer, whose body served as a

vehicle for the gods and territorial spirits, would have been a most potent, strategic, and efficacious agent to unite with. Whatever the case, this song of flight—a desired power (*siddhih*) of the tantric practitioner—further indicates the dance's tantric roots and sets the scene for the other performance work that I hold to originate during this era.

That second dance, *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, is a dramatic work that illustrates the creation of rain to speed its fall in our world. It is an expression of what Ian Mabbett and David Chandler describe as "cosmological thought," in which "[a]ctions or objects in the profane, physical world are thought to influence the invisible, transcendent world when they imitate its structure."[29] This is a way of seeing the world that is alive in the many dances and cultural practices of Cambodia, and one not out of line with David Gordon White's definition of *tantra*.

In the story, three students of a powerful ascetic named Lok Ta Moni Eisey (who may or may not be the same as the ultimate teacher spirit of Khmer dance) end their studies and compete in a contest where they must collect morning dew for him. Instead of waking up early to collect individual drops like her male peers Vorachhun (Prince of the Earth) and Ream Eyso (The Storm Demon), Moni Mekhala merely leaves her *sbai* out overnight, lets it soak up dew, and wrings the water into her glass. She presents her glass first and wins with this clever strategy.

Proud of all his students, Lok Ta Moni Eisey transforms each of their glasses of dew into precious prizes. Vorachhun is given a magic dagger, Ream Eyso a diamond axe, and Mekhala a diamond ball that radiates a brilliant light when she holds it. Covetous and jealous, Ream Eyso decides to steal the jewel from Mekhala. He first kills Vorachhun before pursuing the goddess through the clouds and the two engage in battle: Moni Mekhala's diamond ball unleashing lightning and Ream Eyso's axe cutting through air and clouds creating the sound of thunder. Mekhala blinds Ream Eyso and avoids further violence by escaping into the clouds. The union of their unleashed energies, of lightning and thunder, of feminine and masculine, of good will and bad will, creates rain, falling upon the earth to bring Vorachhun back to life. Rejoicing his revival, Mekhala and Vorachhun join the other gods in dance. They form a *makar* (crocodilian sea monster) as they fly through the sky, delivering life-giving water to the world.

According to Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, Vorachhun represents the earth, Ream Eyso's passionate anger the fire, heat, and light of the sun, and Mekhala the water—all essential elements in an agricultural society.[30] Each character is associated with a color as well: *kheav* (blue) for the goddess of the ocean; *chheam chruk* (pig's blood), a rich burgundy, for Ream Eyso; and *meas* (gold) for Vorachhun. It is interesting to note that blood-colored items are attested in ancient Khmer epigraphy through the Sanskrit word *rudhira*.[31] And although green or brown are colors that we associate with the earth today, it is important to note that gold and yellow conjures a rice field ready for harvest and their association with earth is also a convention of tantric Buddhist iconography. Ratnasambhava, for example, is a *jina*, a victorious aspect of the Buddha, who is associated with the earth and depicted with gold skin.[32]

Furthermore, tantric relationships to the Khmer story become stronger when we realize that the *vajra*, from which Vajrayana or tantric Buddhism takes its name, means both diamond and thunderbolt and respectively represents indestructible nature and "irresistible force."[33] In its form as diamond, the *vajra* was associated with the color blue and represented water in tantric iconography much like the Khmer goddess of the ocean and her jewel.[34] Indeed, the dual meaning of *vajra* is mirrored in Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso who are feminine and masculine expressions of a single teacher's heritage and the lightning and thunder of a single rainstorm. The goddess, associated with the diamond nature, is the "passive but persistent victor" whereas Ream Eyso represents the thunderbolt nature in his "role as destroyer of life, a doer and initiator."[35] Musicologist Curt Sachs, who "classified fertility dances as rain charms," further reveals the tantric nature of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* by interpreting the dance as "a courtship dance that ends in sexual union . . . The male is exhausted and the female continues on her way."[36] This interpretation is supported by the fact that the *vajra* as a thunderbolt was often a "thinly veiled" symbol for the penis amongst tantric practitioners.[37]

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Both *Robam Tamng Buon* and *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* exist in the modern Thai repertoire but I believe they are specifically Khmer in origin. Dhanit Yupho, in the 1952 book *Classical Siamese Theatre*, writes that the melodies of *Rabam Si Bot* (Dance of Four Songs) "are understood to be very old . . . are infer[r]ed to have come down from the days when Sukhothai was the capital of Siam."[38] This seems unlikely however when examining these dances with scrutiny.

First off, the name Sukhothai is derivative of Sukhodayapura, as the Khmer city was originally known. There is evidence that the first Thai king of Sukhothai was educated at Lavo in the Khmer fashion and adopted Khmer cultural forms—a pattern that we will see amongst other early Thai nations.[39] There is further evidence that the first queen of Sukhothai may have in fact been Khmer and that this king's rule was only validated with the authority of the Khmer king at Angkor.[40]

More than anything, this assertion reflects modern Thai attitudes for Sukhothai as:

"Luang Wichit Wathakan (1898 – 1962), an influential nationalist and popular historian in modern Thai historiography, though now highly criticized and discredited by counter-official-nationalist discourse academics, is most responsible for the nationalist emplotment of Thai history and the idealization of Sukhothai. He constructed two contrasting paradigms of Thai rules: Sukhothai as an ideal, pure Thai-Buddhist society and culture, and Ayutthaya as a destructive, declining, degraded era, contaminated by Khmer culture and ideology."[41]

Secondly, Yupho says the work is also known as "The Great Dance."[42] This for me conjures the *mahotsava*, the "great festivals" staged by Khmer kings of Angkor. It is not unlikely that the "great dances" were performed at their "great festivals" by *pedanataka* (groups of dancers) who sometimes numbered in the hundreds according to Khmer and foreign sources.[43]

Thirdly, the work employs a great deal of Khmer in its lyrics with varying degrees of success. In some instances in which Thai follows Khmer, like the third and fourth verses of *Phra Thawng*, there is a clear loss of alliteration and rhyme that breaks the poeticism of the music. Interestingly, there are fifth and sixth lyrical verses in the dance that do not appear in the Khmer versions. They display this disjointed quality as well and break with the sacred numerology that is the inherent structure of the Khmer version. It is my hypothesis that these were added in a later period as Thai dance increasingly evolved into an entertainment of the royal court and into a symbol of Thai nationhood. Phya Anuman Rajadhon, for example, stated in the introduction of the same publication:

"In its original form dancing was '*Rabam*' . . . Since the '*Rabam*' is a set of dance-movements with no connecting theme, it has been considered less interesting than the dancing of other kinds, and has not therefore been very popular [in Thailand]. Thus, even though the '*Rabam*' has been retained it was made to approximate its rival by taking the dancers to represent mythological characters like Mekhala, Ramasun and Orajun."[44]

This explanation for the development of dance drama and *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* is not sufficient however. And, in fact, the four-by-four *mandala* structure of *Robam Tamng Buon*—nothing less than a symbol of cosmic omniscience and the creative power of the universe—is mirrored in many aspects of Khmer art, architecture, and religion. For example, King Jayavarmann VII commissioned towers of the four-faced Lokesvara at the Bayon in the form of his smiling face. This play on fours can be seen in the four purification ponds believed to cure pilgrims of disease and rid them of sin at the temple of Neak Poan as well. Each pond respectively represented the elements of water, earth, fire, and wind and were believed to internally balance these forces within the body of those who entered them.

It is my belief that *Robam Tamng Buon* serves the same purpose as the purification ponds: *Preah Thaong*, explained below, is associated with water; *Balut*, a little bit heavier in its melody, with earth; *Sarabarong*, a little bit lighter with a twisting and rising quality, with fire; and *Melim*, in association with *kenar* and flight as mentioned earlier, with wind. Just as these ponds were supposed to balance these elements within the body—healing, curing, and ridding of sin—the dances balanced these elements in the bodies of the dancers and the world they danced for. In a sense, *Robam Tamng Buon* can be seen as a purity of water, earth, fire, and wind and purification by these means as well. The order in which they appear indicates a cycle of life which starts with a cosmic, primordial ocean that touches the earth that sprouts flowers and forests, which are then burned causing smoke to rise to the heavens and return to their oceanic source in the form of rain.

While presenting this idea to dancers of the Sophiline Arts Ensemble during a trip to Cambodia in August 2014, Neak Kru Sophiline noted that *Robam Tamng Buon* is always performed with twelve dancers and thus breaks the play of four-by-four which would require sixteen dancers. There are very specific reasons for this however.

The very last verse of *Melim*, the final dance, are: "*Pralaing lo leng, thlai euy mul maitrei, tevea krop reasei, sain sokha*." In other words, "Playing and teasing, oh precious ones full of

compassionate love, gods of every *reasei*, so very tranquil." It is important to note that *reasei* literally means "path" or "level." In Khmer culture, however, people are believed to *mean reasei* or "have *reasei*." The implication then is that we as human beings possess a level of vital and essential life forces that can rise and fall at certain points of our lives, and thus dictate our earthly circumstances.

Reasei is derived from the Sanskrit *rashi*, the twelve cosmological directions of Vedic astrology that are each associated with a part and force of the body. This last line suggests qualities of fullness and completeness in the lyrics and it is interesting to note that the word *mul*, which I have translated as "full" above, literally means "round" or "circular" in Khmer. In this, the image of a Vedic astrological chart, sometimes depicted as a circle with twelve congruent segments, is conjured. This last line then, is a nod to tantric conceptions of the universe as a body and the body as universe. It is expressive of an overarching tantric idea that takes multiple artistic and material forms, one which perceives "holy sites as an internal *mandala* identical with the structure of the practitioner's body."[45]

Tying these sacred landscapes, universal directions, vital life forces, essential elements, and cosmo-human bodies with *Robam Tamng Buon* further, it is interesting to look at a tantric rite that was used to induce possession in young girls and boys in China. In order to seek the advice of ancestor and territorial spirits, of whom the young children served as vessels for, the tantric priest was instructed to:

"Then, with his hand forming a *Mudra* he touches and thus empowers the five parts of his own body and then with the same *Mudra*he touches the girl's head, her mouth, his heart, and his navel visualizing in these the symbols of fire, water, earth, and wind respectively."[46]

Again, as with Indian tantric practices, we will never know if this exact ritual took place in Cambodia. However, its essence—the body as a vehicle in the state of spirit possession, a universal and human body made of and balanced by the four elements of water, earth, fire, and wind—clearly exist in Khmer tantric beliefs and can be associated with *Robam Tamng Buon*.

To further demonstrate the connection of *Robam Tamng Buon* to the elements and argue for the dance's genesis at the Khmer courts of Angkor and perhaps before, let us examine *Preah Thaong* (Thai: *Phra Thawng*), the name of the first melody of *Robam Tamng Buon*. In Cambodia, Preah Thaong is none other than a colloquial name for Kaundinya—a brahmin who is father of the Khmer lunar dynasty. He is associated with the kingdoms we now know as Nokor Phnom (Funan) and later Chenla, both Khmer polities before the Angkor era.

Setting sail from either India or an Indianized state in the Malay peninsula, guided by a dream, Preah Thaong sailed into unknown waters. He is confronted by Neang Neak, daughter of the king of the *naga* (serpents), and both sides go to war. Preah Thaong finally shoots an arrow into the bow of the *naga* princess's ship and she surrenders herself when realizing its magic nature. Preah Thaong demands that she marry him, she agrees, and he clothes her naked form. The two can only be properly wed in the subterranean domain of

the *naga* so Neang Neak, taking her true serpent form, has Preah Thaong hold onto her tail as they travel into the abyss. The creatures of the water world sing for the bride and groom in celebration of their union. And, after their marriage, the two return and the *naga* king sucks up a sea to reveal a most fertile land for them to rule: Kambujadesa, which we now know as Kampuchea or Cambodia.

Hang Thun Hak, one of Cambodia's pre-eminent artists and a prime minister before the Khmer Rouge regime, has stated that the *Preah Thaong* melody is the oldest melody in all of Khmer dance. He states that, according to Khmer tradition, the melody was brought from the depths of the ocean by the brahmin himself; it is the song that the *naga* race sang in commemoration of the wedding.[47] Listening to the Khmer version of the melody, and the melody that proceeds it—which is almost exclusively used for journeys by sea—a maritime quality is especially conjured for me in the vocals and beating of the drums. This makes Hang Thun Hak's words hard to argue and further ties the dance to water and *Robam Tamng Buon* to the four elements of a cosmic *mandala*.

That said, the essence of Hang Thun Hak's claim—the dance's and music's root in this narrative and the society that produced it—grows harder to dispute when considering the story's influence on the larger sphere of Khmer culture including wedding tradition and dress. For example, Preah Thaong clothed his wife with a piece of cloth now known as a *sbai*, which is worn today by Khmer dancers of female roles. Also worn by brides, it is held by a groom as he follows behind his bride in the final rite of a Khmer wedding: one that mimics Preah Thaong's and Neang Neak's descent into the primordial ocean.

Thaong then, may possibly come from the Khmer word *taong* meaning to "hang onto." This is mirrored in the way that amulets and pendants—usually of gold, precious stones and metals, wood, teeth, or bone, materials and objects of great religious, spiritual, and social value in ancient days—are today known as *p'taong*. Possibly a corruption of *preah taong*, they hang onto the serpentine chains that wrap around the wearer's neck. Preah Thaong's name then can mean "His Sacredness Who Hangs Onto." His mundane and functional name—functional as in, associated with a defining narrative action and therefore easy to remember and pass on in oral storytelling—is only mirrored by the way his wife has come to be known in everyday Khmer as Neang Neak which means "Serpent Lady." As mentioned in temple inscriptions, she was actually known as Saoma—a lunar deity, or a plant or root that was squeezed in Vedic ritual to procure *amrita*, a nectar or elixir believed to grant immortality. This transformation of *taong* to *thaong* is supported further by how Sanskrit *mekala* (belt) now survives as *mekhala, vina* (harp) as *pin*, and so on.

As one last point, it is important to note that *thaong* is conventionally taken to mean "gold," thereby creating a clear relationship to the Thai word *thawng*. Whatever the case, all roads lead back to Cambodia. For *kampu*, from which our mythological father takes his name, is nothing but a Pali word for "gold." Although Preah Thaong is most commonly associated with the Sanskrit name Kaundinya, Peter Harris notes that: "In Cambodian mythology, Kambuja was named after the founding ancestor, Kambu, an Indian who arrived by ship, married the daughter of the local serpent king, and founded a dynasty with her. This myth may explain the story of the Cambodian king's nightly coupling with a serpent spirit."[48]

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When we are young, we are taught in an oversimplified linear fashion and consequently understand our world in the same manner. And often, in our history texts, a monumental Buddhism is cited as a factor that brought about the fall of an oversimplified and nostalgic Hindu Angkor. It would be hard then to associate the Khmer Buddhist story of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* with this cultural legacy. This is further compounded by the fact that we have a "complete blank" in Old Khmer literature which Saveros Pou accounts for:

"Unlike short official texts which could be easily engraved on stone, the main literary works would have been copied down in large manuscripts made of perishable materials such as paper or palm-leaves, easily destroyed by the elements or through wars and battles accompanied by looting."[49]

To further complicate the issue, to my knowledge, for such an important drama, there are no known depictions of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* on the reliefs of Angkorean temples. However, this is not enough evidence to disassociate the dance drama from the era, as despite being father and mother of the Khmer people, to my knowledge, no images of Kampu and Mera are actually known to exist either—not from the Angkor period nor from the eras of Chenla and Nokor Phnom before.

We do know however that Angkor was a religiously diverse society in which multiple forms of Buddhism held a place inside and outside of the palace. Even the thirteenth-century *Treatise on the Various Foreigners*, a Chinese text, "mentions three hundred dancing girls responsible for offering food to the devoutly worshipped Buddha" at Angkor.[50] So if we look closely then, we can find that *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, as we know it as a dance drama, has its origins in the Khmer dance tradition. Before I illustrate this though, it is important that I share a differing opinion.

Dhanit Yupho, again from *Classical Siamese Theatre*, notes that the drama, "from ancient times . . . has served to introduce longer performances."[51] Yupho's words hint at the dance work as a form of pure entertainment, one pre-existing more recent artistic creations of greater relevance to the Thai people. This is in contrast to the drama in Cambodia, which, approximately two hours in length, is the climax of dance offerings during the *buong suong* ritual. Yupho then contradicts himself by stating, "The words of the songs are from the version of the '*Ramakian*' [Thai version of the *Ramayana*] composed by King Rama I, and the instrumental music for the dance was originally chosen for them by the Prince of Nakon Rajasima."[52] King Rama I, who began his reign in 1782—only 170 years prior to Yupho's writing—hardly makes it into what we would call "ancient times."

He adds further, "There is also a minor addition to the story which says that, in fact, Ramasun [Khmer: Ream Eyso] wanted for himself only the person of Mekhala. As for the gem, he had been ordered to take it to Phra In [Indra], the king of heaven."[53] This re-framing of the narrative, which posits Moni Mekhala as a thief who stole the crystal from Indra, is indicative of a cultural transition in which men were increasingly seen as more righteous, moral, and superior. Today, in Thailand and Cambodia, this male-dominant

philosophy is structurally enforced through Theravada Buddhism. And in September 2015, for example, "rebel" female Thai monks made headlines as:

"Thailand's top Buddhist authority bars women from becoming monks. They can only become white-cloaked nuns, who are routinely treated as domestic servants. Many here believe women are inferior beings who had better perform plenty of good deeds to ensure they will be reborn as men [in order to attain enlightenment]."[54]

This sentiment is hardly the case of the Khmer version of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, which more readily reflects how the "Mahayana branch of Buddhism practiced in East Asia [and formerly in Cambodia] has historically ordained women."[55]

In fact, the dance drama demonstrates a clear relationship to *Robam Tamng Buon* and tantric Buddhist ideas and practices. The dance is performed annually during the New Year in an elaborate propitiation ceremony known as *buong suong* to induce the fall of rain. As mentioned earlier, this is known as *varsapanam* and *ativrstidharanam* in the tantric conception. Further, as mentioned above, Neak Kru Sophiline has associated Moni Mekhala with water, Vorachhun with earth, and Ream Eyso with fire. This is a traditional association and I would add that the *tevoda*, the minor characters of the story who exist solely in the skies of heaven and symbolize clouds in the dance, represent wind. These characters then represent the four essential elements and sacred directions of a cosmic *mandala*, all surrounding the central figure and knowledge of Lok Ta Moni Eisey. In this regard, the story represents the chaos and conflict that ensues as power shifts to a new center.

Although Moni Mekhala can be found in the *Mahajanaka Jataka*, where she is "a daughter of the gods . . . appointed guardian of the sea by the four guardians of the world,"[56] she plays an almost minor and "obscure" role by restoring the shipwrecked protagonist to his destination.[57] This is in great contrast to Moni Mekhala in the Khmer dance drama—who is none other than goddess of the sea and master of lightning, the chosen leader of her teacher's lineage, a feminine triumph in a masculine-dominated universe. This powerful image of woman and womanhood has a clear place in the pre-classical and classical societies of Cambodia, from the commanding statue of the Lady of Koh Krieng to Neang Neak, female master of the land, to the thousands of *tevoda* and *apsara* and *yogini* flanking temple walls. Furthermore, from history, we know that Queen Indradevi was celebrated as an educated woman who aided her husband in administering the kingdom. It was she who composed the stele at Phimeanakas, which celebrated the life of her deceased sister Queen Jayarajadevi. In addition to this, "Chinese writers praise[d] the women of Cambodia for their knowledge of astrology and government and say the women of the royal family sometimes held high political posts, including that of judge."[58] Finally, as larger testament to the relative importance of Khmer women, the whole of Khmer society was matrilineal: evidenced through the word *me* (mother, master, leader) and in the fact that Jayavarmann II was only able to unify the nation in 802 CE through a series of marriages.[59]

So who is Moni Mekhala? Apparently, she comes in multiple manifestations throughout the world. Just like how other stories have been shared and localized, imbued with new meaning and transformed to fit the cultural values of each community and time, her story has undergone the same process. *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* is a mixture of both indigenous and external narratives, character types, landscapes, and mores, shaped to fit the needs of the local, in this case Khmer, people.

Take, for example, the Khmer dance drama of *Roeung Kailas*, in which the daughters of the king of heaven descend upon our world using *sbai* that allow them to travel between heaven and earth. While bathing in a river, the *sbai* of the youngest sister is stolen by a prince and her sisters are forced to leave her in lonesome abandon. At this moment, the smitten prince approaches her and woos her, offers her the *sbai* and the chance to return. But she chooses to stay and be his wife.

In Japan, this archetypal narrative is given life in the popular Noh play *Hagoromo*. In it, a *tennyo*—a celestial woman—descends upon the human world using the magic of a *hagoromo* or feathered plume. While bathing in the river by moonlight, a fisherman steals her powerful garment. She begs for its return, feeling her power and divinity drain from her being due to the human's possession of the *hagoromo*. He agrees to return it on the condition that she reveal to him the sacred dancing of heaven. She does so after receiving the feathered plume, and disappears into the mist of night.

In both Cambodia and Japan, there are variations upon this story. They are in fact an example of how Buddhist *jataka* mixed with local cultures and evolved into singular expressions taking the form of dance, theater, literature, and more. Even today, these stories continue to be adapted and given new meaning and life. The Japanese anime series *Ayashi No Ceres* is but one example.

In the case of Moni Mekhala, we find many similarities in tantric Buddhist stories of Mahasiddha Mekhala from Tibet:

"In Devikotta, an elderly widower was burdened with [two] unmarried daughters. It wasn't that bad, but the [two] girls were infamous for their playfulness and mischievous tricks. Eventually the girls were married into a fisherman's family, and miserable their husbands were. Finally, the younger one suggested that they run away, but Mekhala, for the first time spoke wisely to her sister, 'You know, I suspect that we deserve what we get. We bring it on ourselves. I hate to tell you this, but we're going to have to stay – it isn't going to be different anywhere else because we take ourselves with us.'

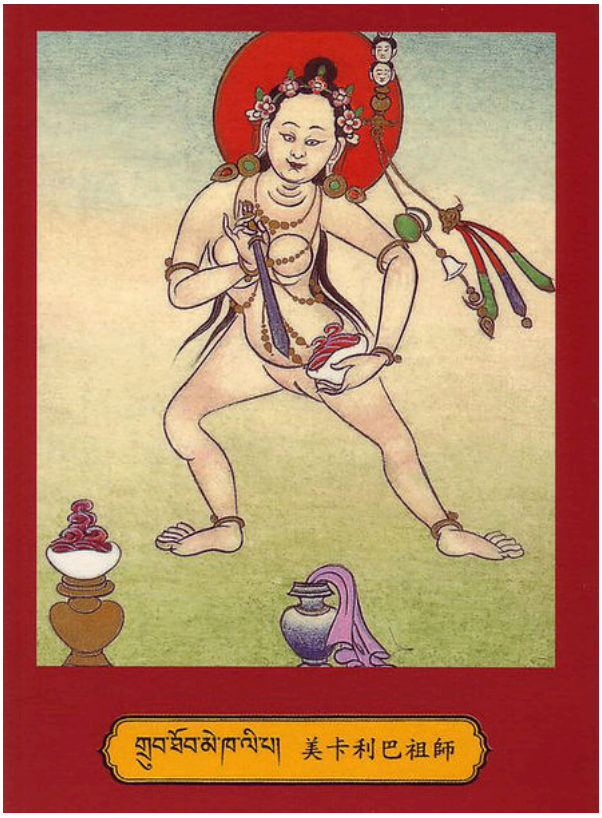
At that very moment, the *guru* Krsnacarya passed by with 700 *dakas* and *dakinis* in attendance. Impulsively, the sisters threw themselves at his feet and begged for his instruction. Krsna gave them initiation and instructed them in the Vajra Varahi path that unites vision and action.

The [two] sisters meditated diligently for [twelve] years and successfully attained their goal. They then decided to visit their *guru*and seek further instruction. When they found him, they humbly prostrated themselves and walked about him in reverential circles. The *guru* received them kindly, but it was quite obvious he did not know who they were. The sisters then said they were the [two] unhappy married sisters that he initiated [twelve] years ago.

The *guru* then bellowed, 'If I gave you initiation, then why haven't you brought me any offerings!' In reply, the sisters said they were at his service and asked what the *guru* would like. Krsnacarya said 'Your heads!' Without any hesitation, the sisters pulled a sword of pure awareness and decapitated themselves and as they made their offering to their *guru*, the severed heads sang a beautiful song for their *guru*. Krsnacarya then replaced their heads perfectly and the sisters came to be known as the Headless Yoginis.

In gratitude, the sisters knelt before their *guru* and touched his feet in reverence. No sooner had they done so than they attained Mahamudra-siddhi. For many years thereafter they worked selflessly for the benefit of all sentient beings and were assumed bodily into the Paradise of the Dakinis."[60]

Miranda Shaw recounts a slightly different version worth noting in which the *guru* did in fact know who the students were but wanted to test their devotion. In addition to singing for the *guru* the sisters also "danced away and devoted the rest of their lives to liberating others."[61] Nonetheless, taking these two versions of the tale of Mekhala's ascent as a *mahasiddha*, or a tantric practitioner who "embodies and cultivates the '*siddhi* of perfection' . . . who through the practice of *sadhana* [ritual meditation], attains the realization of the *siddhis*, psychic and spiritual abilities and powers," we will note striking similarities to the Khmer image of Moni Mekhala.[62]



Mahasiddha Mekhala. Notice the size of the two heads, compatible to the crystal of Moni Mekhala. Image source: http://www.thenon2.com/en/knowledge/mahasiddhas/6-mahasiddha-mekhala-"-elder-severed-headed-sister".

First off, we will see Mekhala's association with water. In the Tibetan version, she is married to a hopelessly poor fisherman. Whereas, in the Khmer version she is goddess of the seas and caretaker of the ocean, an integral force in the creation of rain. Secondly, there is her association with dance—Moni Mekhala is often described as dancing with the *tevoda* in the skies of heaven, sometimes nearly forgetting her obligations in the *Mahajanaka Jataka*. Thirdly, the playful and "mischievous" Mekhala of tantric Tibet is mirrored in the Khmer dance drama by the way Moni Mekhala teases and taunts Ream Eyso in the face of his violent threats. Finally, they have similar relationships to men.

Mekhala of Tibet, although eventually married, seems to return to her unmarried state by leaving her husband for a life of ritual meditation. In Cambodia, despite the flirtatious advances of Vorachhun and Ream Eyso—the prior in honest play and the latter in a devious attempt to own her power—Moni Mekhala refuses to give them her jewel. The *mahasiddha* and goddess are therefore single women in the pursuit of transcendent knowledge. In one culture, the attainment of this knowledge is symbolized by a decapitated head. In another: a radiant gem. These things, both round in form, are gifted to the women by their teachers. One emits knowledge in the form of sound whereas the other emits it as light. In both cases, the gifts are fashioned from offerings made to the teacher.

In this sense, both Mahasiddha Mekhala and Moni Mekhala serve as images of a devoted student. They echo tantric Buddhist Vajrasattva who was depicted in Cambodia, an "esoteric aspect of the *bodhisattva* Samantabhadra . . . commonly associated with the student practitioner who through the master's teachings, attains an ever-enriching subtle and rarefied grounding in their esoteric practice."[63] Likewise Mahasiddha Mekhala and Moni Mekhala successfully complete their teachers' tests—one ascending from a human to divine state as a result and the other, already divine, being the chosen leader of her teacher's lineage. A case in point, when I recounted the Tibetan version to Neak Kru Sophiline, without hesitation, she said, "It's a story about the master-apprentice relationship. Mekhala cutting off her head is a symbol of conquering her ego as a student."[64] She does so out of respect to her teacher, for the sake of her own growth, and for the illuminating and liberating power of his knowledge.

When we analyze their names, this point becomes especially clear in the Khmer version. First off, the difference between a *mahasiddha* and a *moni* (Sanskrit: *muni*) may not be much at all. Secondly, Mekhala literally means "girdle" or "belt" and in the tantric concept it was made of finely filigreed bone, tying its wearer to the *yogini* and to funerary rites.[65] In fact, the *mahasiddha* are a special class of *yogi* and *yogini*: those who have perfected their knowledge and therefore have attained a divine state of being. Moni Mekhala, when spelled as Mani Mekhala, on the other hand is often translated as "girdle of gems" or "jeweled belt" and Khmer artists have made a point to describe its radiant qualities in the dance drama. To avoid repetition they instead refer to it as *khimkhat*, an antiquated Khmer word for "belt," thereby revealing a localization and vitality of imported tantric concepts. In addition however, the goddess's name can also be interpreted as "Mekhala, of Moni [lineage]." A case in point is that Ream Eyso's name, derived from the Hindu figure of Parashurama (addressed later), can mean "Rama, of Isvara" and therefore

"Rama, of Shiva," as "Khmers have always called [the] god Siva: Isvara, Isvar, Isur (modern pronunciation /isoo/)."[66] And, when we look at things this way, we realize the Khmer drama of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* is also the story of competing religious sects.

In the Tamil Buddhist epic *Manimekhalai*, written during the sixth century of the Common Era, this competition between Buddhist and a diversity of Hindu cults becomes especially evident. In the story, a dancer and courtesan named Manimekhalai renounces palace life after her father's death. Alongside her mother Madhavi, she devotes herself to a life of austerity in accordance with Buddhist values and avoids the advances of Prince Udayakumara with whom she is karmically bound (they were lovers in their past lives). At the end of the story, Manimekhalai reveals the shortcomings of Jain, Shivaite, Vishnuite, and Brahmaite logic and in turn celebrates the teachings of the Buddha in a treatise on how to reason towards ultimate reality.

Before this however, she is aided by the goddess Manimekhala who once saved her shipwrecked ancestor and for whom she was thus named after as an act of gratitude. It is the goddess who transports Manimekhalai to the island of Manipallavam where she learns of her past life by touching a pedestal with the Buddha's footprint on it. There, the heroine also discovers a magic bowl called "Cow of Abundance" which allows her to pass out a never-ending supply of food to the poor. It is worth mentioning that this precious gift emerges from a pond, mirroring the way Moni Mekhala's crystal was fashioned from water. When we look closely at the story then—which begins in Puhar with a festival in honor of Indra, a story in which the ocean is an ever-present force, a story of "women of such great virtue that they have the power of making the rain fall"[67]—the Tamil goddess becomes completely synonymous with Khmer conceptions of Moni Mekhala:

"Manimekhala, the goddess of the ocean . . . [d]escended from heaven like a ray of light . . . the solitary and distant goddess, endowed with immense wisdom and knowledge of all things past and future . . . declaim[ed] the Buddha's praise . . . Manimekhala, the goddess of the ocean, like a glittering jewel . . . who in her heavenly form is as brilliant as lightning . . . Manimekhala, the divine protectress of the immense ocean, whom the whole world worships."[68]

The story also details the immense power of Manimekhala in the tragic fate of Puhar. Distraught by the death of his half-*naga* child, "the Chola king Neduvil Killi . . . neglected to celebrate the annual festival in Indra's honor, which provoked the god's fury. The sovereign of the gods then summoned Manimekhala, the sea goddess, to order the sea to swallow up Puhar."[69]

This scene is significant as it mirrors other South Indian images of a violent and powerful ocean. For example, the *Puranas*—known to Khmers alongside the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* since the sixth century[70]—record the story of Parashurama (Rama of the Axe) who battled with the Hindu god of the ocean Varuna. Defeating the deity, he fought back the disastrous onslaught of the Arabian Sea and invoked the Naga King to fertilize the newly safe lands of Konkan, Malabar, and Kerala.[71] Parashurama's war against the *kshatriya* is mentioned briefly in Danielou's translation of the *Manimekhalai*, but it is most significant to note here the narrative element of a fight between an ocean deity and an axe-

wielder which is the climactic height of the Khmer drama. This process of adaptation, appropriation, and competition is especially significant in the Khmer context when considering Emile Senart's examination of the tenth-century inscription of Wat Sithor:

"'The *purohita* is the Brahmanic priest of the house of the king . . . Is it the intent to suppress this position? By no means, but his duties will be modified. He will become 'versed in the knowledge and letters of Buddhist ceremonies', he will bathe the image of the Buddha on festival occasions, he will replace hymns with Buddhist teachings, the Vedas with Buddhist chants."[72]

We must also note that Varuna is considered a god of the western seas. And, like the Hindu deity, Mazu of the South China Sea, and Nyai Roro Kidul of Java's Southern Sea, Manimekhala is described by Sylvain Levi as "precisely associated with a locality."

"Her original residence was at Puhar, in the port, where the great river of the South, the Kaveri, empties itself and which was one of the great centres of traffic between India and the islands of the Archipelago. She had her temple, her cult and her festivities at Kanchi (not far from Madras), the holy city of Buddhism in the south of India. She is one of the numerous deities, 'the guardians of the sea,' but her proper domain is that region of the ocean which extends from Cape Comorin to the marvelous El Dorado of the Far East. Beyond this zone of the earth and water she is unknown. The *Jatakas* in which she appears and plays the role which agrees so closely with her local functions could not have been imagined except in Puhar or Kanchi."[73]

Levi's conclusion of localism (and not necessarily location) is accurate for in the *Shilappadikaram*, of which the *Manimekhalai* is a sequel, Manimekhala is the "goddess who has long been the protectress of [the protagonist Kovalan's] clan."[74] She co-exists in the story alongside a male god of the ocean, who may possibly be Varuna. In the *Shilappadikaram*—which is not a Buddhist story—Kovalan, consumed by his passion for the dancer Madhavi, abandons his wife Kannaki. Fate has him and the dancer split however and the story mentions Madhavi's conversion to Buddhism after her lover's death as well as Manimekhalai's renunciation of court life as it closes.

Interestingly, a tenth-century Buddhist inscription from Beng Veang in Cambodia mentions two female ancestors of the temple's founder:

"[T]he eldest was named Madhavi, and her sister Kunti. The daughter of Madhavi became the wife of the fortunate [King] Rajendravarman; her elder brother the heavenly Vasudeva was skilled in the art of dance. He who made the Law prosper built this tiered tower for the Muni . . . Kunti, named Kumara, skillful in the art of dance, was made the head of the family. Here, to *Jina* [were presented] without cease, music, dances, and songs."[75]

Madhavi, the Buddhist Khmer court woman, may have possibly been named after the Madhavi of lore, or at the very least could have had an awareness of her as they belonged to a shared cultural sphere. Of this, Monious notes: "The *Manimekalai* is not simply forward-looking but also outward-looking, imagining and defining a Buddhist community through space and time. The boundaries of that reimagined space extend not only to the borders of Tamil-speaking southern India but also to the distant shores of Southeast Asia."[76] Note further that offerings were made to a Buddhist *jina*, to the Muni (Khmer: Moni, an epithet of the Buddha here), so perhaps we can say then that the *Shilappadikaram*, *Manimekhalai*, and the goddess Moni Mekhala were known to Khmer people by the tenth century CE.

Khmer contacts with Indian traders and priests however, who sailed through the goddess's domain, probably make this a much earlier reality. Even today, Khmers with Indian-like features, for example, are referred to as *kon Khling* which literally means "Kalinga child." This reference to the eastern Indian kingdom conquered by Emperor Asoka (r. 269 – 232 BCE) reveals pre-Common Era contacts between Khmers and peoples of the Indian subcontinent, a fact that is only supported by evidence of oceanic trade between the peoples of Taiwan, Philippines, and mainland Southeast Asia as early as 3,000 BCE.[77] More pertinently, David Chandler notes: "Trade between prehistoric India and Cambodia probably began long before India itself was Sanskritized."[78]

Nonetheless, Levi's "El Dorado of the Far East" is a reference to ancient Indian descriptions of Suvarnabhumi (Khmer: Sovannaphum) or the "land of gold." Many of the *jataka* describe Indian traders who sought riches in this land, including the shipwrecked Prince Mahajanaka who was saved by Moni Mekhala. Suvarnabhumi's exact location is the subject of much scholarly and nationalist debate but so famed was this land that Ptolemy, who lived during the first and second century CE in Alexandria, described an "Aurea Regio" whose "city of Thina, or Sina, was . . . the capital city of the country on the eastern shores of the Sinus Magnus (Great Gulf, the Gulf of Thailand), at that time the kingdom of [Nokor Phnom]. The main port of this kingdom was Cattigara Sinarum statio (Kattigara the port of Sinae)."[79]

Scholars such as George Coedes and Albrecht Dihle believe that Kattigara was none other than a Nokor Phnom city located in present day Óc Eo in Vietnam, which is derived from the Khmer name Or Kaiv (crystal canal).[80] The association of Suvarnabhumi with Nokor Phnom is hard to argue when considering findings at Or Kaiv of Greek, Roman, Indian, and Persian artifacts contemporary to Ptolemy's time.[81] Furthermore, archeological findings reveal that Nokor Phnom was the oldest Indianized state in Southeast Asia which possesed "sailing ships up to fifty meters long which had four sails one behind the other, carr[ying] up to seven hundred men and transport[ing] a thousand metric tons of merchandise."[82] Its city at Or Kaiv "eventually controlled much of the earliest international trade route through South East Asia."[83] Finally, it is important to note that the name Kambuja, which first appears in fifth-century Chinese records describing tribute made in the first century,[84] is but another name for Suvarnabhumi or Sovannaphum itself. For quite literally, the name Kambuja—from which Kampuchea, Cambodia, and Cambodge are derivatives—can be translated as "born of gold" and Kambujadesa as literally "land of gold."

Records indicate that Nokor Phnom gave to China gifts in the form of exotic animals, musicians, and translations of Buddhist texts.[85] The Chinese historians in turn noted the significant relationship of dance, water, ocean, and ritual for their southern neighbors:

"Whatever the status of the deceased, the body is wrapped, carried to the shore of the sea or of a river accompanied by the sound of drums and by dances, and then burned on a pyre set up by those present. When a king's body is burned, the bones spared by the fire are put in a golden urn and thrown into the sea."[86]

Chinese and local sources also trace the origins of Nokor Phnom to Kaundinya and Saoma, figures that (as priorly mentioned) Khmer people now know as Preah Thaong and Neang Neak. This is most important when we consider the union of man and serpent-woman in the *Manimekhalai*:

"King Killi . . . clasped her to him, his eyes delighted in the beauty of her limbs, his ears echoed to her sweet words, his mouth tasted the savor of her saliva, and his nose breathed the perfume of her body. He trembled at her touch and he, who had so often been amused at the sight of kings' backs fleeing from his invincible spear . . . now stooped before a woman and rendered her all the small services she desired of him. Then, at the end of the month, she suddenly vanished without a trace . . . This charming woman is the daughter of Vasamayila, the wife of Valaivanam, the valiant sovereign of the Serpent People, the Nagas . . . Never again will [King Killi] see this woman like a liana in flower. Her son will return to [him] alone."[87]

This story bears striking similarities (and differences) to Khmer mytho-historical accounts. First off, the association of King Killi with a spear is significant as by certain accounts, Preah Thaong was guided by a spear or javelin and not a bow.[88] Secondly, *Preah Thaong Neang Neak* does not end happily ever after either. In some retellings Neang Neak wants to return to the ocean after the golden egg she gives birth to is buried in the west at the furious shame of her husband.[89]

The *Manimekhalai* further details the conversion of the *naga* races by traveling merchants:

"'His eyes red like fire, the Naga chief then prostrated himself at the feet of Shaduvan the merchant, considering him a sage, and asked him, 'If we cease to drink palm-wine and to eat meat and fish, how can we maintain this life which, according to you, resides in our body? Explain to me the principles of your religion so that we can observe its rules for the rest of our lives . . . We have plundered all the goods [traders] carried, their cargoes of precious aloes and sweet-scented sandalwood, their bales of cloth, their precious objects—gold, diamonds, and rubies—and other booty of shipwreck. You may take all these things away. Anything among our possessions which is of some value to you is yours.'"[90]

By some accounts, in line with the story of Shaduvan, Neang Neak tried to rob Preah Thaong. Furthermore, she was sometimes described as being naked the way that the *naga* peoples were depicted in the *Manimekhalai*. In addition, in the glossary accompanying Alain Danielou's translation, *Kadamba* is both defined as a "seaside oak" and "an empire beyond the seas, conquered by Shenguttuvan: probably Champa (modern day Cambodia)."[91] It is important to note that the word *kadamba* was used in ancient Khmer inscriptions[92] and that in modern Khmer accounts, Preah Thaong arrived upon Kok Thlok, the "land of *thlok* [trees]" and it is inside such a tree that he first finds Neang Neak. Danielou's association of Champa with modern day Cambodia is not completely incorrect, as an inscription of Cham provenance traces the king's lineage and legitimacy to the Khmer king Isanavarmann I and further through him to Preah Thaong and Neang Neak.[93] [94]

I am not suggesting here that the Khmer creation myth was wholly brought from India as:

"The indigenous complex of moon, water, and serpent mythology that assumed Indian names (the name [Saoma] is Indian) . . . has deep and strong autochthonous roots . . . *naga*, is not an Indo-European word; it was incorporated from the pre-Aryan vocabulary of people for whom snakes, water and earth had special sanctity, and these people were linked culturally with the many inhabitants of Southeast Asia."[95]

Cravath further elaborates that the *Manimekhalai* was "undoubtedly evolved from other [non-Indian] traditions—including Southeast Asian—for the purpose of dynastic legitimization."[96] The Pallava king Nandivarman II, then the youngest prince of Kambujadesa for example, was brought to the Indian subcontinent to rule after the previous Pallava king died without leaving an heir to the throne in the eighth century.[97] Whatever the origin of this mythological motif however, these narrative commonalities reveal a robust economic, religious, and cultural network established between pre-Angkorean Cambodia and the kingdoms of India. And, when we add tantric Tibetan conceptions of Mekhala with the intertwined stories of the *Manimekhalai*—of a converted race of snake people, of an ocean goddess who destroys an entire city, of Buddhism's competition with other religions—we find powerful connective resonances with the Khmer story of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*. The presence of the brahmin-*naga* princess narrative in Cambodia therefore meant the presence of the goddess Moni Mekhala in the country as well. In the dance drama, perhaps not by coincidence, Moni Mekhala herself is likened to the movement of a snake in the way that she *pen pot* (twists and turns in circular curves). This association is further grounded by the way that lightning, of which the goddess is master, whips and lashes through the sky like a luminous serpent descending from the heavens.

Seventh-century painting from the Ajanta Caves in India depicting a scene from the *Mahajanaka Jataka*. By Meister des Mahâjanaka Jâtaka [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

Moving along then, there is clear cross-cultural evidence for the existence of both Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso from Brahmanic and tantric Buddhist traditions in Cambodia. The Vajrayana school of Buddhism, or tantric Buddhism, developed by the sixth or seventh

century of the Common Era (although tantric texts were produced as early as the third century).[98] And given that the *Jataka* have been dated to the fourth century BCE [99] and knowing that seventh century CE paintings from the Ajanta Caves clearly illustrate images from the *Mahajanaka Jataka*—and that certain Khmer sculptural elements are "directly borrowed from the period that encompasses the last caves of Ajanta and the first caves of Ellora"[100]—it becomes especially clear that elemental ingredients for the genesis of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* as a dance drama were already in place as the *Jataka* and other Buddhist stories became localized amongst the sea-faring and goddess-worshipping[101] pre-Angkorean Khmer people. They syncretized Hindu and Buddhist beliefs according to early Chinese sources,[102] during a time when "trade between India and China was intense [and which] one of the principal components of the trade was Buddhist religious objects."[103]

If it was not initially choreographed during the era of Nokor Phnom—of which a sixth century CE inscription indicates "a literary basis for dramatic performance existed"[104] and of which time Parashurama was sculpted in youthful grace by Khmer artists—it may have possibly been developed by or during the time of Angkor, a society with a strong dance and dance drama tradition that continued to revere the feminine. The probability that narratives of Moni Mekhala were filtered, synthesized, and evolved into *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* at Angkor is especially strong, since tantric priests of Brahmanic and Buddhist creeds competed for the patronage of the king and royal family there. King Yasovarmann I, for example, built monasteries "for sects that honored Siva, Visnu, and the Buddha."[105]

This competition resulted in syncretized rituals where different sects appropriated and repurposed one another's teachings. The Sanskrit word *vajra*, for example, "[w]hen used in Buddhist literature . . . usually is defined 'diamond' or 'adamantine.' It can also mean 'thunderbolt,' although this definition of *vajra* is more associated with Hinduism."[106] As a possible example of this appropriation and competition, Moni Mekhala substitutes Varuna in battle against the Hindu axe-wielder in the Khmer dance drama. Varuna's name is likewise important: Phirun, his Khmer epithet, is the poetic word for rain. And the god is generally, like the goddess, associated with water. The ocean god's mount symbolic of water and fertility, the *makara* (Khmer: *makar*), is the creature that Moni Mekhala, Vorachhun, and the *tevoda* form as they dance through the sky at the end of the Khmer dance drama.

As another example of this creativity in rivalry, it is possible that the name Vorachhun may be derived or inspired by Parjanya, a Vedic god "who is the personification of the rain-cloud . . . Closely associated with thunder and lightning, [who] inspires vegetation and produces fertility in cows, mares, and women."[107] Verses from the *Rig Veda* note how Parjanya, "freely flowing with luscious drops, places his seed in the plants as an embryo . . . The sap of life quickens in every creature when Parjanya refreshes the earth with his seed."[108] In other words, he is a rain god closely associated with the earth, described as a fierce warrior and often associated with frogs and plants which indicate his presence through water. Parjanya is also one of many Aditya who take turns shining "as the Sun-God . . . As Parjanya, he showers down rain."[109]

Could this be another possibility for why Vorachhun wears gold? And why would the sacred dance drama start with a solo by a relatively minor character such as the prince? And why, in the traditional version, does the battle between Vorachhun and Ream Eyso take place *after* the latter's climatic battle with Moni Mekhala? The best explanation is that Vorachhun is not a minor character. Thematic elements and dramaturgical choices suggest that he is, is related to, or is inspired by, Parjanya, whose name means "rain cloud." Linguistic evidence drawn from old Khmer epigraphy demonstrates how the interchange of *ja* and *sa* can happen, as exemplified by the words *virendravijaya* and *virendravisaya* which Pou translates as "a most powerful victory of Indra."[110] Vorachhun's battle with Ream Eyso then, is an intention of the artists who brought him to life through dance and song, the breaking of the *varsa* or "rain cloud" against a mountain reflecting the cosmic union of earth and wind (cloud, sky) and releasing the fall of rain and fertility. Therefore the name Vorachhun may also bear a direct relationship to the contemporary and popular Indian name Varshan which can mean "falling of rain" or "Lord of Rain."

That an ancient Vedic deity could be known, sublimated, or repurposed in ancient Cambodia should not be surprising, and can be evidenced by the Vedic deity Varuna (Khmer: Preah Phirun), "a sky god . . . who by the time of the *Rig Veda* . . . had developed into a god whose primary role was watching over the deeds of men."[111] David Chandler, recounting a Khmer folk tale explaining the origin of the *konlok* bird, reveals the continuity and resilience of this Vedic purpose when an *arak tevoda* (guardian spirit) flies to heaven to report the crimes of an abusive mother to Varuna.[112] Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Moni Mekhala, in yet another similarity to her fellow water deity, assesses the virtue of men before saving them from peril at sea.

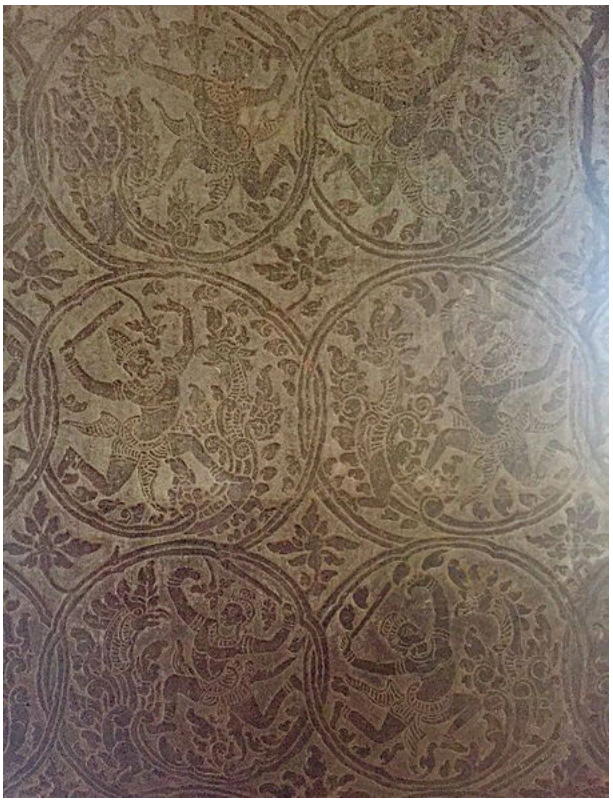
That said, competition between cults also led to other directly confrontational artistic expressions such as the *yogini* depicted at Vimayapura. There, they do not dance on just any corpses—they dance and "trample on the corpses of Hindu and Vedic deities that symbolize the passions, prejudices, and misconceptions the cult adherents leave behind."[113] At Angkor Wat, where decorative motifs contemplate the generative balance between competing forces, Hindu and Buddhist confrontations can be seen in the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*, where the *asora* wear crowns and earrings that conjure tantric Buddhist iconography. Conflicts are further manifested in images of warring *teavea* and *asora*, predators and prey, and in a decorative pattern that shows two birds colliding and spiraling into one another, creating a whole with two halves that conjures the symbol for *yin* and *yang* as well as the way Mekhala and Ream Eyso *chhvat chhveal* (circle) in the choreography and poetry.

Indeed, the competition resulting from religious diversity at Angkor was strong for, after King Jayavarmann VII's Mahayana Buddhist reign, many art works of Buddhist nature were destroyed by Jayavarmann VIII and his Hindu followers.[114] Speaking of this, David Chandler has noted "it is likely the thirteenth century, one of the least recorded of the Angkorean centuries in terms of datable inscriptions, was marked at Angkor by a serious religious upheaval or by a succession of upheavals, which had political causes and effects as well."[115] It would not be wrong then to assume artistic consequences of this. *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, after all, is the story of warring religious cults and their

respective *vajra*, an *astra* or type of "weapon operated by throwing," which the rivals precisely do at the climatic height of the drama.[116]

A Tibetan *thangka* painting of Mañjushri, *bodhisattva* of transcendant wisdom, illustrates striking similarities in headdress and earrings to *asora* depicted at Angkor Wat. Image source: http://www.virtualvinodh.com/wp/vajra-ananga-manjushri-the-buddhist-kamadeva/.

Asora in the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk* at Angkor Wat. Notice their five-crested frontal diadems and earrings that tie them to tantric Buddhist iconography (see Mañjushri and Mahasiddha Mekhala above). Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.



Tevea (gods) and *asora* (demons) bracing for combat on this decorative relief at Angkor Wat. Notice how the interlinked loops around them—which end as birds and signify flight—help to suggest speed, turning, and motion in the air. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Predator and prey, man and nature, at Angkor Wat, opposing forces again linked by circles. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Decorative relief at Angkor Wat, with bird-like creatures who *chhvat chhveal*, collide and spiral into one another. This spiraling bird motif appears again at the Bayon. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Composed before this backlash though, a stele found at Phimeanakas relays that Queen Jayarajadevi, fearing for the life of her husband Jayavarmann VII who was on a campaign against Champa, staged a ritual for his safe return. This same queen "charged her own dancers to perform and to give representations drawn from the *Jataka*."[117] While we do not know which of the stories were performed, the evidence above indicates that *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*—again, if not already choreographed and performed before this—may also have took its genesis at this historical moment.

In the goddess's capacity as caretaker of the ocean and protector of travelers, *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* would have been a special priority for Queen Jayarajadevi. Although Angkor was further inland, the ocean and the rivers remained important geographical and cosmological points as they continued to bring visitors, traders, and enemies to the people. Supporting this, Mabbet and Chandler have noted that "[l]uxuries and curiosities from the whole of the known world converged upon the capital by barge and cart."[118] Furthermore:

"The Khmer sources for [a twelfth-century] Cham victory refer to a surprise naval attack, sending up a fleet up the Tonle Sap to the Great Lake. This illustrates the importance of shipping, for naval warfare as well as commerce; the Khmers, long accustomed to navigation on the Lake and the great waterways that seamed their territory, were not backward when it came to war at sea, and in one twelfth-century war against the Vietnamese it was claimed that they sent a fleet of 700 vessels round the coast."[119]

Furthermore, oceans figure in both the founding stories of the Khmer people; they manifested in the life-giving ocean of milk in stone carvings at Angkor Wat, were symbolized in the form of *baray* and moats surrounding the temples, and took the form of bathing ponds such as Sras Srei inside the palace compound at Angkor Thom (which features a *naga* race looking over it). The horse Balaha—an incarnation of the Buddhist deity Lokesvara with whom King Jayavarmann VII identified—is also depicted delivering shipwrecked sailors into the healing waters of Neak Poan. The king fashioned himself in the image of the gods at Neak Poan and Bayon to assert his authority; his queen was also known for fashioning portraits of herself and family members in this manner,[120] and likely had the same impetus when she brought certain works of the *jataka* to life when Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism seemed to prevail over the historically dominant Shivaite and Vishnuite cults. These latter two were precisely symbolized in Ream Eyso, who wears the color *chheam chruk*, which is not far off from the Sanskrit *pingala* (brown, dark red color of Shiva) of old Khmer epigraphy.[121] More importantly, in his manifestation as Parashurama, he was an incarnation of Vishnu who received his powerful axe from Shiva. These two gods, in a more peaceful image, "sometimes shared the same cult, since the dawn of history, under the figure of Hari-Hara."[122]

Hindu and Mahayana cults would become subsumed however with the rise of Theravada Buddhism after the thirteenth century CE, which for the most part "rejected Mahayana 'innovations' such as tantric practices."[123] The austere religion propagated by Jayavarmann VII's son Tamilinda rejected "the oppressive burden of maintaining the god-king religion of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism."[124] The dance drama of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* then, whose heroine is both a tantric and Mahayana Buddhist figure, would therefore have been choreographed before Cambodia's peaceful "Theravada revolution"[125] which only occurred after the thirteenth century. Iconographic evidence seems to confirm this fact as, from my observation, relief carvings from Jayavarmann VII's reign and as early back to Angkor Wat include flying *apsara* whose elbows touch their feet that are kicked backward into *deav*—Moni Mekhala's signature gesture for flight.

Finally, the ritual significance of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, will allow for us to place the drama before the thirteenth century by examining ideas from two of Saveros Pou's essays:

"The success of Mahayana under [the reign of King Jayavarmann VII] seemed to entail a growing Tantric tendency as illustrated by the cult of Hevajra . . . a deity who at times was assimilated with Siva, the former being consorted with *yogini*-s and the latter being the lord of the *yogi*-s. This assimilation reinforced the affinity between the two creeds and consequently fostered the part of magic therein, at least amongst popular practice. We could even further assume, fairly safely, that this swollen tantric trend fitted well into the everlasting magic of animism, and eventually increased the dimension and the potentiality of magic practice in the life of ancient Khmer."[126]

"Mediaeval Cambodia was a Theravadin country, deeply steeped in 'faith' in the Buddha's teaching, or *saddha*. The new religious system did not wipe out the Brahmanic legacy, as some authors have misleadingly said . . . nor did it rule out some beliefs and practices inherited from ancient Mahayana. The old heritage, as it were, stood firmly in the background of Khmer society, up and down the country. At its highest level, it was maintained . . . at the court, where it supplied the ritual for ensuring the welfare and prosperity of the state, because Theravada could not offer anything appropriate."[127]

Neak Poan. Notice the horse Balaha on the left. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Notice the flying *apsara* on the right, their elbows having the impression of touching their feet in this Angkor Wat relief. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

In short, both Khmer and Thai sources confirm that *Robam Tamng Buon* and *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*are among the oldest dances. They are crucial to the *buong suong* ritual, a kingly obligation with origins in the pre-Angkor and Angkor periods. Based on cross-cultural literary evidence which illustrates the interlinked narratives of *Preah Thaong Neang Neak* and *Moni Mekhala*—which may explain why these two dances are always performed together—we know the necessary elements for their creation was in place since the emergence of Cambodia's first founding myth. The relationship between the dances are solidified further in their tantric conception, through themes of water, earth, fire, and wind, and in the generative competition and union of masculine and feminine energies. This latter idea is echoed in other rituals of the Angkor era and in iconographic themes at Angkor Wat, as well as in the larger sphere of Khmer culture and politics including religious competition at various Khmer courts.

That said, the pre-Angkor and Angkor periods were times in which dancers and artists occupied a most beautiful role and function in their society, times where the art form was conceived as nothing less than a mirror of heaven. Executing sacred choreographies, dancers spoke to the gods, acted as vessels for the spirits, and prayed for the rain that gave people life. Beyond their roles as mediums, they were also carriers of stories and performers of them, court entertainers, and, in such a case as the latter, were likely a part of the king's harem. Nurtured and sustained inside and outside of the palace at temples and the homes of nobility, and amongst the people, they were living gifts charged with ensuring the spiritual and agricultural prosperity of the nation.

This sacred foundation and the movement form borne of it is commonly thought to have been destroyed, Khmer cultural linkages to this era "broken," when the Siamese army sacked Angkor in 1431. This notion is gravely incorrect however. So long as Moni Mekhala continues to toss her crystal in the four cardinal directions—as she does today in honor of the Catummaharajika who charged her with caring for the ocean—the goddess illuminates the cosmos with the power of her omniscient knowledge and connects Khmer classical dancers to our ancient, living roots.

KHMER DANCE AFTER ANGKOR

In the popular imagination of today, of both Khmers and Thais alike, Angkor was completely razed in 1431 and the entire court, which included dancers, musicians, priests, and administrators, was carried off to the city of Ayutthaya. Many people believe it is at this moment that Thailand receives Khmer influence, which then gave rise to the newly formed nation's art and music, language and literature, religion and court ceremony, and of course, dance. The cultural transmission that occurred as a result of this event is very real of course—texts, songs, dances, and people were indeed taken to Ayutthaya. But the monolithic fall of Angkor and Cambodia is not. Breaking this romantic historicalization is but one of the ways that I can, and will, establish a bridge between Khmer dance today and its ancient roots.

First off, by some accounts, Angkor actually fell into Ayutthayan suzerainty in 1351. And, for almost a century after, the city continued to remain a prosperous economic and cultural center in the region. That said, shifts in political centers were already starting to take place, ones that reflected a preference for the riverine areas of Ayutthaya and Phnom Penh as they were more conducive to trade with China.[128] This shift is evidenced by a branch of Ayutthayan royalty who set themselves up in Phnom Penh in 1409.[129] As this transition "was accompanied by so few supposedly Angkorean activities (such as stone temple construction, grandiose inscriptions, and expanded irrigation works), authors have often spoken of decline [in Cambodia] where change and transformation would be more appropriate terms."[130]

Secondly, and very importantly, we must not look at the kingdoms of Angkor and Ayutthaya in the way that we understand our countries today. Nations in mainland Southeast Asia have been described as *mandala* kingdoms, with the king's power radiating from the center of his capital.[131] His authority was strongest close to the center and weaker as it got further away. As a result, some people and regions were subject to multiple kings and their customs at once. Thus, there were no clean borders at this time, or not in the way that we tie a homogenous ethnicity or race to them today. The reality in point is that people were politically and culturally bound by geographic proximity more than ethnicity. A modern example of this scenario are the Japanese American soldiers who fought against imperial Japanese forces in World War II, even when their families and community members were unjustly displaced into internment camps in the United States.

A case in point, to this day, Thai scholars dispute the ethnicity of King U Thong, the founder of Ayutthaya. Some believe he is Chinese in descent while others believe that he was a prince of Lavodayapura (also known as Lavo or Lopburi).[132] In other words, he may have been Khmer. What is for sure though, as Thai linguist Wilaiwan Khanittanan has argued, is that he was educated in the Khmer fashion at Lavodayapura, bilingual in both Khmer and Thai, married a Khmer princess of Lavo, and "seemed to have wanted to make Ayutthaya the center of the empire, replacing Angkor Thom, the Khmer center."[133] This statement suggests a sense of historical and cultural continuity to the Khmer legacy in the king's perception, one not out of line with the way he adopted Khmer styles of kingship,

including hierarchical *reachasap* (Thai: *ratchasap*, royal language), ceremonies, art forms, and culture.[134]

Wilaiwan notes that Ayutthayan society, since its beginnings—as an outpost of the Khmer city of Lavo, and then as its own capital—was a multicultural society with villages for the many diverse ethnic minorities such as Chinese, Vietnamese, Mon, Arabs, and more. Khmers, although always mentioned with these ethnic groups, were never mentioned to live in Khmer villages because "Thais and Khmers of Ayutthaya must have been living side by side . . . because the Thais could speak their language at the time."[135]

Wilaiwan notes that there are "more than 2,500 Khmer-derived words in Thai" as a result[136]—more than those of Tai origin itself—of which words like *phleng* (music), *chamreang* (song), *len* (play), *rabam* (dance), *rabeng*(game), and *praleng* (dance overture) point to Khmer artistic traditions and performance conventions that were adopted.[137] Names for musical instruments such as *khluy*, *tro*, *ranat, pi*, *chhab*, and *chhing* help indicate some of the Khmer instruments adopted, while words like *phlom* (blow), *dom* (hit), *changwak* (rhythm) and *chaleang* (sing) indicate the adoption of performance techniques.[138] Beyond this, all Sanskrit and Prakrit words make it into the Thai vocabulary by way of Khmer, as well as words dealing with function (to be, if, can, or, by, because), emotional expressions, names of plants and animals, and more. All of this, along with changes in pronunciation, word structure, grammar, and syntax of the Thai language, have led Wilaiwan to posit the notion of a "Khmero-Thai" language.[139]

What I infer then is that Ayutthaya was a Khmero-Thai society and culture as well. The basis for this is evident before the emergence of a Thai nation state as "every account of Thai cultural and artistic history finds room for a 'Khmer period', reflecting the extension of Angkor's presence to the west, in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Eventually there were groups of Khmers not only in the north-east of Thailand but in the Chao Phraya valley [where Ayutthaya was centered]."[140] Supporting this, Chandler notes how Michael Vickery has illustrated that there later "came to be a mixed Mon-Khmer-Thai aristocracy, which provided some of the rulers on both sides; such a one was Baña Yat [Khmer: Ponhea Yat], who led Khmer forces against the power of Ayudhya in the fifteenth century. 'The conquest of Angkor was not so much an international war as a conflict of rival dynasties for control of mutual borderland.'"[141] David Chandler states further of this history:

"Phnom Penh (and other capitals nearby) and Ayudhya . . . were newly established trading kingdoms, respectful but perhaps a little wary of the idea of Angkor. By the 1400s, Ayudhya and these Cambodian cities looked to each other rather than to a brahmanical past for exemplary behavior. Until the end of the sixteenth century, moreover, Phnom Penh (or Lovek or Udong) and Ayudhya considered themselves not separate polities but participants in a hybrid culture. The mixture contained elements of Hinduized kingship, traceable to Angkor, and Theravada monarchic accessibility, traceable to the Mon kingdom of Dvaravati perhaps, which had practiced Theravada Buddhism for almost a thousand years, as well as remnants of paternalistic, village-oriented leadership traceable to the ethnic forerunners of the Thai, the tribal peoples hailing originally from the mountains of southern China. Throughout the fourteenth century and much of the fifteenth, the official language common to both kingdoms was probably Khmer . . . Brought into contact with each other through wars, immigration, and a shared religion, the newly established Thai and Khmer kingdoms blended with each other and developed differently from their separate forebears . . . The Thai would have learned from the Khmer, and vice versa, to a large extent via defectors and prisoners of war."[142]

The Khmers who were taken to Ayutthaya in 1431 then were not entering a foreign land but rather a place where their language, religion, traditions, and administrative systems were already valued, in place, and further adopted. Even more, they would have been met by fellow Khmers in all strata of society—from the royal family to nobility to traders to the most common of commoners to slaves. The dancers who were brought to Ayutthaya, along with those who were already in residence due to the city's relationship with the city of Lavo, would have performed works that were undoubtedly Khmer in origin and approach as these were the foundational values of Ayutthaya.

Interestingly, there is a 1688 account of dance at the court of Ayutthaya by Simon de la Loubere that can help us establish those linkages:

"The *Rabam* is a double Dance of Men and Women, which is not Martial but Gallant . . . These Dancers, both Men and Women, have all false Nails, and very long ones of Copper: they sing some words in their dancing, and they can perform it without much trying themselves, because their way of dancing is a simple march around, very slow, and without any high motion; but with a great many slow Contortions of the Body and Arms, so they hold not one another. Meanwhile two Men entertain the Spectators with several Fooleries, which the one utters in the name of all the Men-dancers, and the other in the name of all the Women-dancers. All these Actors have nothing singular in their habits . . . The *Cone* and the *Rabam* are always call'd at Funerals, and sometimes other occasions; and 'tis probable that these Shows contain nothing Religious, since the *Talapoins* [Buddhist priests] are prohibited to be present thereat."[143]

Cravath has noted that Coedes interprets these "Men-dancers" as "female dancers costumed as men."[144] He then adds further:

"In seventeenth and eighteenth century Thailand the term *robam* referred to a genre of dance derived from the ritual dance[s] executed by the *rmam*, or dancers of Angkor, and Coedes believed that the *robam*—performed in the palace exclusively by women playing the roles of both gods and goddesses—was originally 'a spectacle of pure dance given on the occasion of royal ceremonies,' particularly 'those ceremonies designed to hasten the coming of the rainy season.'"[145]

The royal ceremonies indicated by George Coedes may very well be the "other occasions" mentioned by la Loubere. But I would like to offer my insight as a practitioner to further demonstrate the connections of this type of performance with that of dance performed at Angkor.

First off, this "Double Dance of Men and Women"—"gallant" and "very slow" with "a great many slow Contortions of the Body and Arms" and "nothing singular in [the dancers'] habits"—conjures the unison and harmony of *Robam Tamng Buon*. The playful interaction between masculine and feminine contingents, at the core of the tantric *Robam Tamng Buon*, is made evident in the account by "two Men" who entertain "the Spectators with Several Fooleries" and "utter in the name of all" the male and female characters. Without question, these men were clowns. Their responsibilities were to contextualize the performance for the audience, a role that can still be seen in the shadow puppet theater of Cambodia and Indonesia even today. Often of mundane and folk stock, these comic characters served to translate the royal language, culture, and drama for an audience of lay people. This is significant as Saveros Pou has noted the offering of puppeteers in temple inscriptions

during the time of Angkor.[146] And, during that time, inscriptions indicate that clowns—sometimes noted in the Sanskrit term *bhanta*[147]—were offered alongside dancers as well.[148]

La Loubere then notes the dance genre's performance at funerals. This association of the dancer with funerals has existed long before Angkor and continues into our present day in Cambodia, with the prior mentioned funerary drums, images of dancing *yogini*, *Reamker* performances during the funerals of "eminent abbots,"[149] and dancers accompanying the funeral urns of kings and performing at their funerals in our modern era. Ironically, and very importantly, it is la Loubere's mistaking of the dance form as secular that reveals its true religious nature. He mentions that there were no Buddhist monks present, but whom he was referring to were the monks of the Theravada Buddhism that came into vogue throughout Cambodia and Thailand around the thirteenth century.

Robam, as developed in Cambodia, even with its Hindu and tantric Buddhist overlays, was largely animated by ancestor worship and animism. The dancers themselves were seen as efficacious mediums between the gods of heaven, spirits of the deceased, and our human world; they were also associated with possession. Today, the only priest of any sort during dance ritual is known alternatively as an *achar*, *tep robam*, or *hmathav*, who is responsible for calling forth the spirits of teachers no longer living, those of the characters of the dance, and that of the gods. He initiates each rite of the ceremony before an altar of crowns and masks that does not feature images of the Buddha. Therefore, it is the older cultural and spiritual legacy of these performances, and the conventions of celibacy prescribed to monks of Theravada Buddhism that best explain the absence of monks who were "prohibited" to be near dancing women.

With all of this in mind, la Loubere's account reveals an art form unquestioningly derivative of Khmer dance and performance, one with the latter's movement quality, character types, dramatic devices, performance culture, and spiritual roots still visible more than 200 years after the fall of Angkor. This is not surprising given the reverence of which Khmer art and culture was given during that time, of which the Khmer-style palace and Wat Chaiwattanaram built by King Prasat Thong (1630 -1656) are examples.[150] Of course there were Khmer, Khmero-Thai, and Thai innovations that took place in Ayutthaya, something mirrored in the fact that, whether they were of Thai, Khmer, or other heritage, the people of Ayutthaya, in their latter days, came to only speak the precursor to the modern Thai language. Whatever the case, aesthetic, linguistic, religious, and historical evidence makes clear how Thai court dance branched from the Khmer artistic legacy, of which some Thai practitioners and people continue to look to today even. This said however, the tree and roots from which Thai dance grew did not die as the latter took life.

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It is said that the victors of war write history, and the story of Khmer dance after the 1431 sacking of Angkor will make us more aware of this fact. Furthermore, it will make us question the limitations of academic methodologies which—developed in our post-printing press age, in a time when the written word is deemed more credible than its oral

counterpart—can serve to delete cultures and practices that are ephemeral, embodied, and passed on orally. Khmer scholars have noted that the court chronicles "give virtually no clue as to the form, content, or importance of music and dancing at the court of post-Angkorean Khmer kings."[151] And Boreth Ly has said, "The scarcity of written sources makes it very difficult to establish a historical link between ancient and contemporary dance."[152] Allowing ourselves the use of logic, Khmer oral accounts, and the evidence available to us however, it is only clear that Khmer classical dance has been continually practiced in Cambodia since its inception.

There are little extant written records that describe dance from the fifteenth to eighteenth century. This then, along with the popular, romantic, and emotional imaginings of Angkor's downfall, have led many to believe and perpetuate that the tradition was carried off in its entirety to Ayutthaya. But the lack of writing is not conclusive evidence for this claim. Paul Cravath has noted that "[a]s precedent, we should note that Zhou Daguan in the thirteenth century never mentioned court or temple dancers either, although we know from other sources that there were hundreds."[153]

Taking a step back to Angkor before its sacking, Jayavarmann VII was known to have offered more than 1,615 dancers total to the temples of Preah Khan and Ta Prohm alone, this alongside 1,622 more that were installed at other temples, and not counting those already in residence at the palace and those patronized amongst the elite in homes and possibly schools before they were offered as acts of devotion.[154] The aesthetic characteristics of Khmer dance as we know it today have even been depicted in carvings of daily life at Angkor Wat and the Bayon as well. Therefore, as mentioned before, dance in Angkor would not have been just a court or noble tradition. Rather, it was a philosophy given shape and movement that permeated and animated all levels of Khmer society.

B.P. Groslier makes this fact clear:

"The inscriptions [during the Angkor period] allow for no doubt on this matter: the dance and music . . . were an integral part of the Brahmanic and Buddhist ritual observances both at the Royal mountain-temples, and in most provincial fanes . . . [I]nstruction in these arts formed part of an upper-class education, while even humble slaves acquired proficiency in these artistic pursuits."[155]

Detail of procession of King Suryavarmann II at Angkor Wat. Notice how the dancers on the left have been caught mid-gesture, with the upper hand releasing a *chib* into a *lea* and the lower hand turning a *lea* into a *chib*. This is still done by dancers today. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

The image of Ayutthayan forces successfully rounding up every one of these dancers and artists seems especially unlikely then. As opposed to the ethnocide in the popular imagination—King U Thong merely wanted to shift the center of the empire; more than some Ayutthayans were Khmer; war as a practice was not for land but for human labor[156]—it seems even more unlikely that Khmer classical dance was completely uprooted from the people that gave it life. With this in mind, it is important to note Chheng Phon's statement that "when Angkor was captured, some dancers went to Ayutthaya and some came to the new Cambodian capital with the king."[157]

These people carried with them an intact cultural heritage with its unique customs, values, and traditions. As an example, between 1585 and 1588, Diogo do Conto witnessed a harvest festival in which "numerous boats go about the lake gathering the rice with merry energy, dances and musical contests."[158] The image of Cambodia as a society without art and culture becomes even harder to imagine then, especially since these things, much like dance, were deeply tied to the ways the people observed, understood, and constructed the world around them. Through Diogo's account we see that the arts, connected to harvest like *robam* was connected to rain and the rainy season itself, was integrally tied to the livelihood of the people and their rhythm of life.

Thus, it cannot be hard to believe Samdach Chavea Chhuon, the leading expert on Khmer dance in the 1930s, when he says:

"There always existed a more or less significant troupe of female and male dancers at the court of the various kings. Furthermore, the worshippers in certain monasteries where manuscripts of the *Ramayana* were

preserved formed troupes of male dancers from among the monks' students to amuse themselves and the children, and the choreographic tradition had been preserved in part by this method."[159]

This claim, a prime example of oral history that can be deemed as not credible, is supported by a French observer who wrote in 1910:

"In the large monasteries . . . troupes not only of women but of young boys dressed as women, or men with the costumes that we see on female dancers today [*khaol*], never ceased presenting the most easily performable plays and dancing the steps and mimes of the past."[160]

But let us look at more examples from the period we speak.

According to Paul Cravath, Saveros Pou has "isolated a version of the [*Reamker*] evolved by a number of talented poets during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."[161] Through a linguistic analysis of the work, she notes that the poets had re-worked the traditional Indian epic into one that was Buddhist in character. She writes, for example, that:

"Surely, after the introduction of *Ramayana* to Cambodia (the fifth century), many characters could have been reshaped by the ancient Khmers through the sheer process of natural adjustment. Later on, Theravada introduced to Khmer people, and taught them, a new system of moral values that brought about many changes in society, in attitudes, and in behavior. Therefore it was bound to remodel Ram and the other characters, too, along the lines of Buddhist tenets, at least as they were understood by the Khmer folk . . . The main protagonist in the epic, the royal prince of Ayodhya, was made to resemble Prince Siddharta. He was explicitly called a '*bodhisattva*' . . . If we add up these different aspects of Ram's behavior, we find behind them a firm and steadfast motivation made of *metta* (friendship), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (altruistic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity), which together form the foremost and most sublime tenet of the Buddhists, called *brahmavihara*, of blissful state of mind. This analysis illustrates the most important and effective contribution of Theravada, which taught an austere way to reach the ultimate goal of blissful arhatship. In practical terms, it took care of the epic characters held sacred and rid them of those passionate, disorderly, turbid, and violent features that are commonly found in human beings."[162]

Most importantly for us, Pou's study reveals that "the structure of '*Ramakerti I*' reveals it to be unquestionably a work meant for recitation in theatrical performance."[163] Citing Pou's study as well, Chandler notes how the work's "language is often terse, and the development of the action is occasionally obscure . . . partly because the poem has come down to us as a series of fairly brief episodes, each suitable for mime (with the verse to be recited) and geared to a performance by dancers or leather shadow puppets."[164] He adds that the poem's "high artistic polish . . . would be difficult to associate with a period of intellectual decline."[165]

The *Reamker*, or the "Glory of Rama," is how we know the Khmer version of the *Ramayana* today. It details the epic drama of Preah Ream (Prince Rama) who, after being exiled from the kingdom he was meant to inherit, must live in the forest with his wife Neang Seda (Sita) and brother Preah Leak (Prince Lakshmana) for fourteen years. After Neang Seda's abduction by Reab (Ravana), the demon king of Langka, Preah Ream and Preah Leak journey to rescue her. With the aid of monkey generals and kings, bears, *krut* (*garuda*), and a host of other beings, they locate Neang Seda and defeat Reab. Neang Seda is then forced to prove her fidelity to her suspicious husband through a trial by fire—in other words, by jumping into a pit of fire. The princess emerges unscathed and the happy couple returns to

the kingdom where they are welcomed as king and queen. Things do not end so happily ever after though.

Through the devious trickery of a *yeakanei* (female demon), Neang Seda is exiled into the forest while pregnant (Preah Leak was actually supposed to kill her on the orders of his brother). She bears a child who is then duplicated through the magic of the ascetic with whom she stays, and it is the proud boys who, by defeating Preah Ream's most powerful monkey general Hanuman, connect the paths of the king and queen once more. Amongst a happy retinue, Preah Ream asks Neang Seda to prove her purity once more before returning to the kingdom. She agrees and asks that if she has always remained faithful to her husband that she be taken back to the earth from which she was born. And so she was, taken by the land.

As it was very likely performed in Cambodia before and during the time of Angkor, as evidenced by iconography and inscriptions describing daily recitations of the work from the sixth century, this story may have once had strong Brahmanic significance. However, with the introduction of Theravada Buddhism, it increasingly became a moral tale exploring issues of leadership, uncontrolled desire, faithfulness and more, one which modeled appropriate images of husband and wife, man and woman, and inclusive of, to take after Saveros Pou, "indigenizations." David Chandler further highlights the significance of the reworked poem:

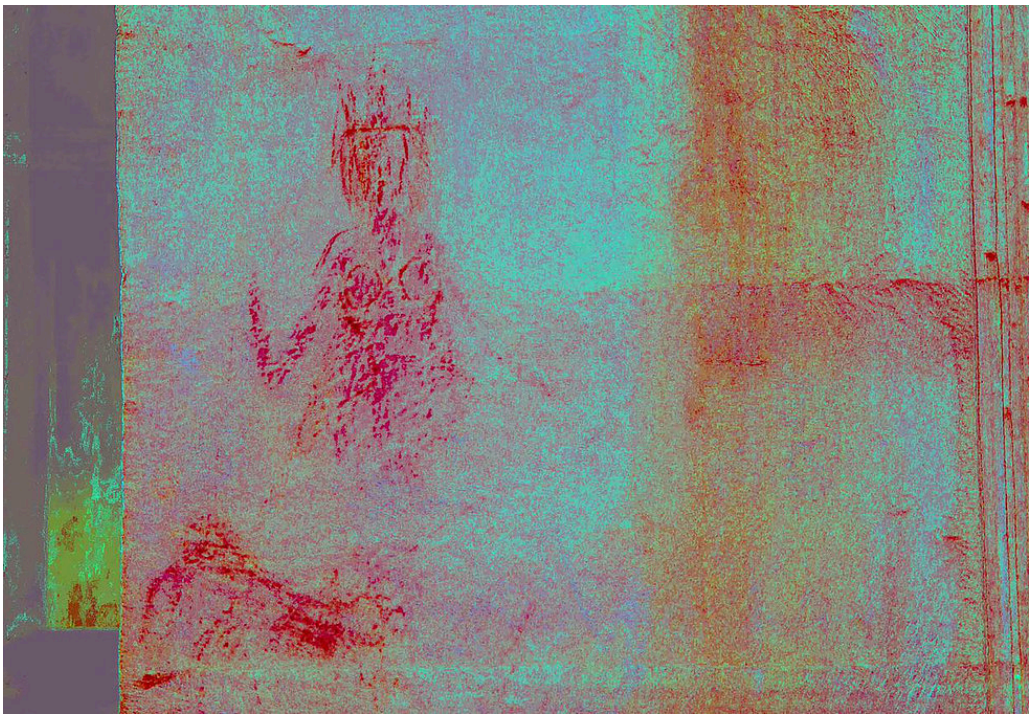
"An excellent way to enter the thought-world of seventeenth-century Cambodia is to look at the *Reamker* itself . . . Although its characters inhabit a recognizably Indian, brahmanical world (as well as half-mythical kingdoms far away, it seems, from Southeast Asia), their behavior, language, and ideals are very much those of the Cambodian people who assembled to listen to the poem or to watch it enacted by dancers, poets, and musicians. These additional dimensions resemble the way in which medieval and Renaissance painters in Europe depicted Greek and Biblical figures wearing European clothes."[166]

The existence of such a text in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, one made for dramatic performance, supports a history of continuity that has been passed on through body and spoken word amongst Khmer people. And, given the way in which Khmer temples of the Angkor era were centers of religion, learning, and administration—places by which Khmer kings established and centralized their authority over a vast empire—it would have only made sense that the public came into contact with temple dancers during the process of worship, learning, and acculturation. The prior mentioned French account then, although much later in time, illustrates the manner in which temples continued to serve the same function from the time of Angkor into our modern era. It demonstrates how the art form would have been sustained by the people themselves, whether they were former dancers and teachers of the palace, dancers connected to the homes of elite families, or monks and village folk.

Given the presence of dance in popular society, it would only make sense that the kings had their own forms of ceremonial art and entertainment as well. And, recently in 2014, Noel Hidalgo Tan published an article supporting this. In it, he shares paintings, often faint and hidden, that have been rediscovered at Angkor Wat. Featuring images of boats, architecture, and celestial deities such as *apsara*, many of them are red in color. Many are

considered to be graffiti but there are some that are detailed and believed to have come from King Ang Chan I's restoration of Angkor Wat when "Theravada Buddhism had become the dominant religion."[167]

Musicians in a *pin peat* orchestra in a wall painting at Angkor Wat. Sixteenth century. Image: Noel Hidalgo Tan.



Female figure. Angkor Wat, sixteenth century. Image: Noel Hidalgo Tan.

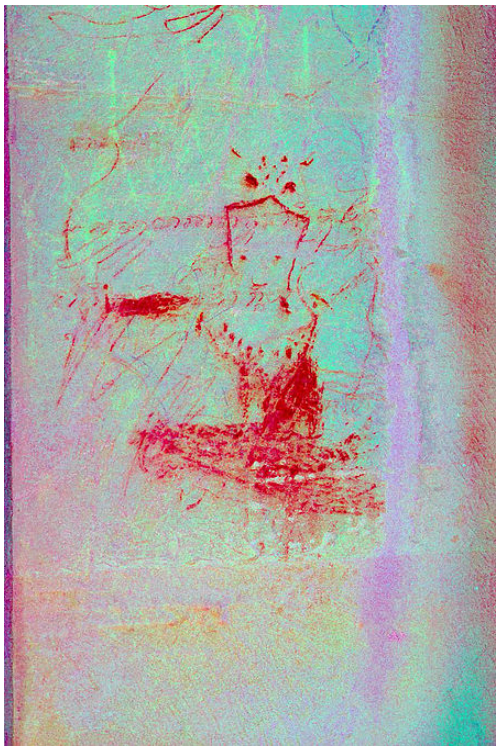


Figure in regalia. Angkor Wat, sixteenth century. Image: Noel Hidalgo Tan.

Figures, perhaps dancing, before a boat. Notice how this image conjures the image of the harvest festival described by Diogo do Conto. Angkor Wat, sixteenth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

These paintings, created between 1528 and 1566 during the reign of the king, serve as an invaluable testament to the endurance of court culture after the fall of Angkor. In one image what seems to me as topless female musicians play in a *pin peat* orchestra. They conjure the image of female music ensembles carved onto the reliefs of Angkor, even despite the differences in dress and instrumentation. Although the image—with indiscernible figures in the background—does not clearly illustrate dance, the presence of such a sophisticated musical ensemble can only indicate that of dance as well. After all, dance, which only requires the human body, is an art of primacy that is readily more sustained and created than paintings which require pigment and surface, sculpture which requires stone and chisel, and today, films which require film, cameras, processing chemicals, and projectors.

Concerning this image on a final note: it certainly debunks the notion that music did not exist because there are no written records of it. And now, employing our logic, can you imagine a palace with musicians where no dancing takes place? If the people have the time, skill, and resources to fashion sophisticated instruments, would they not have the ability to dance? Because the body—medium in its act of dancing, instrument in its act of singing, narrator in its utterance of words, person, character, and storyteller with all of these elements together—requires minimal material resources to generate dance, drama, and performance.

The human body is a total theater.

Female attendants carved onto a sixteenth-century bas-relief at Angkor Wat. Notice the depictions of *sbai*. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

That said, the value of the "*apsara*" or *tep apsar*, and by extension, their earthly counterparts, was certainly not lost amongst post-Angkorean Khmers considering the many depictions of celestial women in these paintings. Their importance can be recognized in the literature of the time as well, when Reab compares Seda to the *apsara* and when the latter descend with Indra's wives to help Seda deliver her child.[168] And, despite no mentions of dance, we do know that "great numbers of women still surrounded the eighteenth-century kings Ang Ton and Chetta V."[169] No one would argue that these women would have been part of the kings' harems. And, using our logic once more, they probably did not just sit around all day doing nothing either. That would be too costly for a kingdom mired in domestic and international struggle. Neak Kru Sophiline shared with me an anecdote from Chheng Phon that reveals the role of the artists at this time, one that is the case before and after them, and one that mirrors the role of the *apsara* of Indra's heaven in the *Reamker*: "The dancers were servants of the king. The kings can change but the dancers still served the king."[170]

The reality is that they would have been valued for the entertainment and ceremonial purposes of the king, who "presided over a series of partly brahmanical, partly Buddhist, and partly animistic ceremonies that . . . defined the boundaries of his merit and the limits of the agricultural year and were closely related to the success or failures of their harvests."[171] Thus, in their acts of dance, music, song, and performance, the dancers would have executed sacred works integral to securing the well-being of the land, people, and nation as their predecessors had done. In fact the dancer, whose body was seen as a medium between heaven and earth, would have been a most appropriate and powerful one to unite with. And Khmer harems of the modern era, of which the dancers were a part of, are but vestiges of the nightly ritual at Phimeanakas required of past kings.

Therefore it is my belief that dancers continued to perform in all levels of society as they had during the time of Angkor: in the palace, at temples, in the homes of elite, and amongst the people alike. Although civil war and strife during that period has left us with little written records, this history has survived to this day in the dancer's body, from teacher to student, teacher to student, and by word of mouth.

Khmer oral accounts of artistic and historical continuity, which can so easily be negated in today's culture of the written word and "hard evidence," is only supported by the findings of these paintings—paintings of which my late father once alluded to during my teenage years. I remember watching a documentary about Angkor with my family, centuries after the paintings and a decade before Tan's rediscovery of the images, when my father said, "The temples used to be painted." The fact of the matter is that Khmer people, even of humble roots like my father, have carried on our history, traditions, and culture into the modern day in an embodied and largely oral fashion; these things have remained intact despite a destructive legacy of war and the methodological limitations by which people and institutions "officially" construct, erase, and break our history and that of others.

The denial of the continuity of Khmer dance to its pre-classical and classical roots then is actually a reflection of a colonial and imperialist mindset, one in which Henri Mouhot's "discovery" of Angkor—or as we would say today, *columbusing* of Angkor—allowed for the

French to assert their power by painting Khmers as a people disconnected from our past. This is a prominent strategy in contemporary Thai nationalist policy, and one that pervades the Khmer mindset when we choose to view the post-Angkor period as a "dark age." The fact of the matter is that dance remained alive and present in the courts even into the modern era of Khmer dance history, marked by the reign of King Ang Duong (1841 – 1860).

When the king arrived from the Thai court of Bangkok where he had been in exile (or held hostage), it is said that "he found classical dancing on the verge of total disappearance."[172] And today, King Ang Duong is often credited as being the savior of Khmer dance and culture, as well as the nation itself. However, with closer scrutiny of this history, we will find that the prior statement was probably not the entire case.

First off, in subsequent examples, dancers were granted the opportunity to leave court with the death or transition of a monarch. Any low numbers that King Ang Duong reports on his arrival may be a reflection of this custom. Those who left would have probably contributed to the rich popular tradition that existed outside of the palace. And when we look at things this way, we can understand how August Pavie's account in the 1880s—only twenty years after the king's passing—mentioned dancers at the palace, troupes of provincial governors, as well as traveling groups.[173] It is very likely that a cycle such as this had existed for generations, one in which retired palace dancers enriched the popular sphere of dance while those in the popular sphere, with connections to the court by way of their teachers and families, were offered to the palace as well. Very importantly, we must note that dancers serving the elite performed in a more stable environment than those of the court:

"At the same time, it seems likely that certain continuity persisted at the capital among the bureaucratic elite who, along with the Buddhist *sangha*, were the curators of Cambodia's literate traditions. Several inscriptions at Angkor from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries record the careers of important officials whose graceful rise to responsibility contrasts sharply with the jagged sequence of events related by the chronicles."[174]

Secondly, and just as important, Trudy Jacobson has made note of King Ang Duong's vested interest in negating the rule of his predecessor:

"The Cambodian chronicles written after Ang Duong came to the throne depict Ang Mei as a lesson, bitterly learned, in the consequences of women exercising direct power in the political arena . . . Historians ascertain their information from written records; the problem, however, is that the Cambodian sources for this period were written in the courts of Ang Duong and his descendants, in whose interests it was to represent Ang Mei as an ineffectual ruler."[175]

Before the king's coronation, the Khmer throne was occupied by his niece: Queen Ang Mei, who was installed by the Vietnamese. The queen inherited her role during troubled times, one in which the Khmer nation and people came under the subjugation of Siam and Vietnam, and was constantly in danger of being subsumed by either. The latter initiated a brutal regime to "decambodgienniser"[176] the country by destroying Theravada temples and enforcing Vietnamese clothes and language and more, so as to erase Khmer history and

identity, and therefore Khmer sovereignty.[177] Such oppressive violence resulted in a rebellion and the unpopularity of Queen Ang Mei amongst the people.

All of this—along with her near forced marriage to a Vietnamese prince and rumors of her affair with a Vietnamese official—made the queen an easy scapegoat for the destruction and ruin Cambodia faced during this moment in time.[178] King Ang Duong, not happy that his niece refused to abdicate the throne in his favor, made a conscious decision to devalue the contributions of Queen Ang Mei in order to assert his own authority, power, and validity to the point that "the reign of Ang Duong is a 'golden age' in Cambodian history."[179] Any mention of the dance's near extinction by King Ang Duong then is actually a reflection of the king's political erasure of his predecessor, one with a precursor in the destruction of Buddhist images following the reign of King Jayavarmann VII and subsequently in the Khmer Rouge's destruction of pagodas built by King Ang Duong himself.

At the end of the day, we know clearly that Khmer dance survived intact into the modern era because the king sought the "old teachers' advice in purging the dances of 'unsuitable' material that had been added over the years," some of which may have reflected Vietnamese influence.[180] And, when we understand the ways in which the art form is ultimately carried by practitioners—and not the sovereigns who sponsor them—it becomes easy to see how Khmer dance can survive such a history of war, destruction, and civil strife. In fact, anyone who thinks that Khmer dance was lost after the fall of Angkor should consider a subsequent example from history.

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, an estimated ninety percent of Khmer artists died of disease, starvation, execution, and malnutrition. The remaining masters and dancers—in an environment of devastation, without the patronage of royalty, under the oppression of a second communist regime—immediately worked together to revive the artistic tradition. Within two years, a new generation of dancers was already performing around the world. Today, nearly forty years since they began their efforts, Khmer artists have pushed dance to new heights.

Given all of this, it is my firm belief that Khmer classical dance has always existed in Cambodia. I liken my argument to a method of *karuda* (deduction) based on the teachings of the Jain prophet Jinendra "on whose teachings Buddhist logic rests," expounded to Manimekhalai so that she may reason her way to the ultimate truth and reality of existence.[181] Aravana Adigal, a Buddhist teacher, provides the heroine with an example of *karuda* (Khmers use the same words for "reason," "example," and "conclusion" today):

"Given fact (*paksha*): There is fire on the mountain.
Reason (*hetu*): Because smoke can be seen.
Example (*udaharana*): As in a kitchen.
Particular case (*upayana*): It is the mountain that is smoking.
Conclusion (*nigama*): There is no smoke without fire."[182]

From our particular place in time, we may not be able to see the fire of Khmer dance in the post-Angkor era. But we are left with adequate smoke on temple walls, in oral stories, in the written accounts of foreigners, and more. For Khmer poets of the Middle Period demonstrated a vitality of their dance form's ancient foundation in the *Reamker,* describing "*nagas*, swaying with dancing movements"[183] and referencing "hand movement[s]" in their words.[184] These literary works, carrying on Khmer "indigenizations" from the Angkor era—Agni, the god of fire rides on a rhinoceros instead of a ram—mentions:

"A person of prowess . . . the divine goddess who protects the great ocean. She is powerful and has a host of attendants thronging round and sea dragons and *nagas* in great numbers . . . the sea-goddess has been extremely kind to the unnumbered sea dragons; she protects them and the *nagas* and the fish. She is mistress of all waters, of all rivers and lakes, countless myriads of them. Creatures of all regions and thoroughfares have lived together quite happily, maintained by the goddess, their patron."[185]

This universal reverence of Moni Mekhala clearly echoes her power and descriptions in the *Manimekhalai*, and therefore point to a continuous tradition of worship. The Khmer poets demonstrated their long-standing understanding of the goddess in the story of the buffalo Dubhi, whose "two horns were like pikes, pointed like the mighty weapon of Isur." He attacked the ocean causing "reverberat[ions] like thunder through all the ten directions" and Mekhala "tricked" him "into a mood of ignorant confidence" to eventually challenge and be killed by Peali.[186] In this literary work that has always used frame tales to contrast and foil characters and narratives, one must wonder about Dubhi's relationship to Ramaparamasur, Paramasur, Ramesur—who we know today as Ream Eyso. Regardless, a case can be made that tantric resonances of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* were still palpable in post-Angkor Cambodia, when the poets likened Seda running away from Preah Ream to "Mekhalla when she tantalises Ramesur in the heavens."[187]

With all of this in mind, it is hard to imagine that *robam* ever ceased to exist in Cambodia. The fact is: the fire of Khmer classical dance has stayed burning since it was first lit and continues to burn in our dancing hearts and bodies today.

We should note that King Ang Duong merely redefined the artistic tradition in a manner that is more recognizable to people of our time. First off, he separated male and female dancers into separate troupes and commanded that they each be able to enact dances and dramas without depending on each other.[188] This has resulted in the modern female tradition we associate with the royal court today and the modern all-male masked tradition of *khaol*, which is associated with villages and only performs excerpts of the *Reamker*. Secondly, he covered the half-clad bodies of the dancers with heavy costumes. This decision reflected an interaction with “modern” French values as well as the conservative ideas of the Thammayut branch of Theravada Buddhism, which was developed by both Thai and Khmer monks in Bangkok.[189]

Some believe that this new costuming was an imitation of the Siamese court[190] while others have said, “It’s not Thai. It’s Buddhist.”[191] Given how misunderstandings of the dancing images of Angkor have caused some contemporary scholars and others to deem

Khmer dance a “broken tradition”—an erroneous mindset of: dancers only strike one pose in the reliefs so that is probably all that they did, there are no written records of dance or music after Angkor so it did not exist—we must now analyze the stark differences in costumes displayed by relief carvings and those worn by dancers today to further establish Khmer dance’s linkages to its native roots.

Sacred Transformations: The Khmer Classical Dancer's Costume

Anyone who looks at the costumes of a Khmer classical dancer today will notice it is strikingly different from those of many of the figures depicted in Cambodia's pre-classical and classical art. The heavy, tight fitting costumes of sequins and gold thread is almost at odds with the barren minimalism of Angkor-style dress. In fact, the costumes worn by dancers today are known as the Chaktumok style, taking their name after the era upon which they came into vogue. Although they became the standard with the ascension of King Ang Duong at a time of Thai political eminence, they actually have their prototypes in Khmer art and fashion, which can be seen in the sculptural evidence available to us.

Before we trace the roots of the modern Khmer classical dance costume though, it is crucial to do some visualizing:

Your country has been completely ravaged by war. Libraries have been burnt. Buildings of all sorts collapsed. All that is left behind are advertisements—images of hotel suites, of nice cars, of models wearing fashionable clothes. Now imagine that an alien race discovers your nation in ruin and these advertisements are all they use to construct an image of your entire culture and society. Imagine the alternatives that they would not see, the types of bodies and beauty and communities that existed alongside these images—the sheer diversity of your people that they would miss!

This is not completely synonymous with Cambodia. However, somewhat similarly, although dancers of the Angkor era very likely dressed in the manner depicted on temple walls, we cannot allow ourselves to think that that is all they wore. A case in point is that only images of women striking a singular, conventional dancing pose are considered *apsara* or *yogini*. With closer scrutiny though, we know that a greater breadth and richness of dance from the time can be seen in narrative and ornamental relief carvings. As another example, we know clearly that there were male dancers during that time but they rarely, relatively, were depicted as "dancers" or are interpreted as such in the iconography. Instead, what we have are images of male figures in the act of dance.

On a final note to this, there are more than 1,000 female *tevoda* carved onto the walls of Angkor Wat. Although there is a clear body type that they all feature, each figure has a singular presence with differences in facial expression, ornamentation, and stance. And, when looking at these women, I get the feeling that the sculptors are just barely tapping the surface of the clothing and jewelry of their time. This fact is made clear by the words of Emma C. Bunker and Douglas A.J. Latchford in the book *Khmer Gold: Gifts for the Gods*:

"The Khmer also created superb secular jewelry that is almost completely unknown to scholarship and the wider world. The most spectacular pieces are flexible gold necklaces made to resemble jasmine-flower garlands . . . Such necklaces are not included in the representations of jewelry on the various Khmer sacred stone and bronze images, and do not appear to have been produced in any other contemporary Southeast Asian cultures, although imitations have appeared on the art market recently."[192]

That said, we do know that King Yasovarmann I offered “a great number of beautiful [women] dancers . . . [and] a great number of handsome, mature men skillful in dance and the other arts, well dressed and adorned with ornament” during the Angkor era.[193] And we know that their costumes were of great value, as indicated by this inscription from a Buddhist temple dated 982 CE:

“Those who, having no other desire than to squander their own wealth, plunder the fields, the golden ornaments and precious stones and all that the founder has given to the farmers, to the dancers and the musicians, will see terrible punishment in hell.”[194]

Finally, a particularly telling piece of epigraphy reflects the ageless interconnectedness of heaven and earth as manifested through dance, jewelry, and iconography in the Khmer conception, revealed through the word *samastabharana*. Pou defines this Sanskrit term as "adorned fully in ornaments," a composite of *sama-asta-abharana* which describes a dancing Shiva "adorned in a *sangvar* (or jewelry) all over his body."[195]

With this in mind, let us now examine the Khmer classical dancer's costume from head to toe.

The most important part of a Khmer classical dancer’s costume is the crown or *mkot* (Sanskrit: *makuta*). Crowns (and masks) are venerated in the tradition, as they are believed to hold the spirits of deceased teachers as well as that of the characters of the dance. They are usually worn last to complete a dancer’s transformation from human to deity, elevate her or him from the mundane to the divine world.

Today, in Cambodia, characters of spiritual and political maturity wear what we call a *mkot sruoch*, a pointed crown that is reminiscent of a *chedei* or Buddhist stupa. In fact, during my beginnings as a dancer, my older brother once told me a story of a man who fell asleep before a temple. The man had a dream that giant, dancing figures rose from the earth with the temple towers on their heads. When this man woke up he immediately began to realize the movements and costumes that he saw, thus beginning Khmer dance. Although this is probably not how Khmer dance began, there is some truth to it of course.

A stone *chedei* at Preah Khan, installed into the temple during the post-Angkor era of Khmer history. By Greg Willis from Denver, CO, usa (Preah Khan - Central Stupa) [CC BY-SA 2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Chedei are believed by some to have first appeared in Khmer art during the reign of King Jayavarmann VIII (1243 – 1295).[196] They emerged alongside *vihear* (worship halls) where Theravada Buddhists participated in religious service. Due to the temporality of the wood from which both structural forms were constructed, and a history of war, none of the Angkor era are known to exist. All that remain of them today are their foundations.

When looking at *chedei* from a bird's-eye view however, one can see their relationship and lineage to the towers of Angkor Wat in the way that they open from one center. In this sense, both are but different expressions of a *mandala*. Furthermore, they are both stylized mountains meant to reach out into the heavens, channeling its energy at their highest points, funneling it down, and—like a flower opening—radiate it out onto the land they rest upon or the bodies of the dancers wearing them (who then radiate it out into the surroundings in their act of dancing). This association with mountain is not insignificant as, in their Hindu expressions, these towers represented Mount Meru, home of the gods. And further, they "represented both a powerful local or ancestor spirit—one who had returned to the ancestral mountain abode—as well as a more universal deity in the form of Shiva."[197]

When you look at the *mkot sruoch* of a male character today, you'll find that it more readily resembles a *chedei*. The *mkot sruoch* of a female character however has an additional

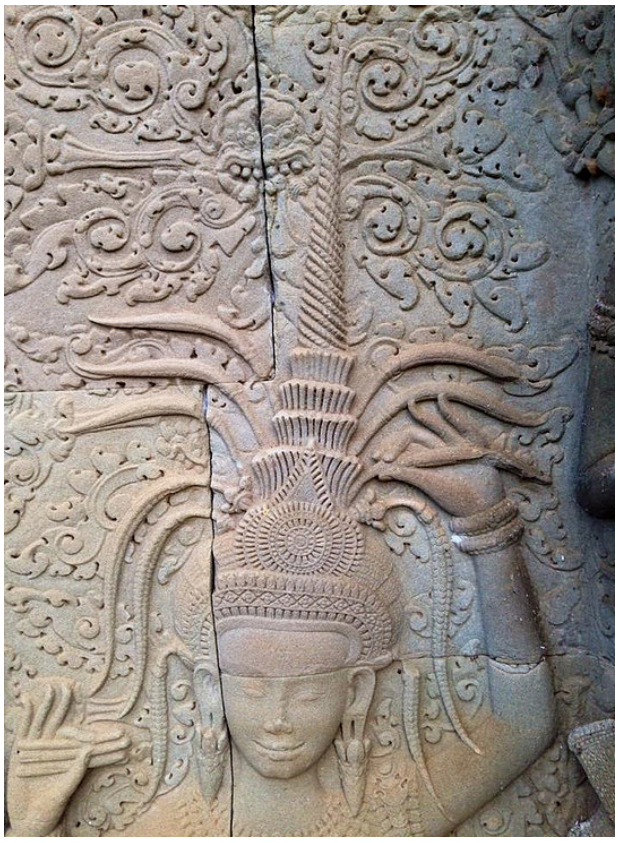
diadem known as a *khbamng* in front. And, in this case, it is easy to see how this crown was derived from Khmer crowns worn by both men and women alike, one that featured a diadem surrounding a lotus-like chignon cover which harkens to the predominant style of Khmer towers.

However, there is stronger evidence that this style of headdress was developed during an earlier time of Angkor as indicated by a carving of a *tevoda* at Angkor Wat. Contrary to her peers, she boasts a diadem whose center is sharply pointed. Behind this, her tiered chignon cover rises higher than conventional crowns of the Angkor era, sharply into a point more readily associated with a Buddhist stupa. What looks like leaves protrude from her crown but these are actually what we call *nhar*, or "shakers," which are still in use as secular jewelry. In today's *mkot sruoch* though, the *nhar* are much smaller and take the form of tiny crystal-studded flowers attached to springs.

With closer study, I realized that this type of crown was worn by a few other *tevoda* at Angkor Wat. Further, it became especially synonymous with its contemporary derivative in a relief carving of celestial women inside their heavenly palace. And, much like the way the most popular, spade-shaped crowns worn by *apsara*, *tevoda*, and *yogini* were abstracted into plant and hair forms, the *mkot sruoch* was also abstracted into a tiered flower hairpin and singular bands of hair at the same temple as well. That ancient Khmers would have intentionally done so can be seen in their use of the name *Sikhasiva*, "Lord Shiva whose chignon is sharply raised up. Lord Shiva who has a most amazing power."[198] We can be sure then, based on epigraphic and iconographic evidence, that the *mkot sruoch* was in existence by the twelfth century.

The earlier origination of this type of crown is also supported by the fact that before the Common Era, "the Buddha was represented symbolically, in the form of the stupa. Thus, halls were made with stupas to venerate the Buddha."[199] We have no surviving examples of pre-classical and classical stupa or *chedei* in Cambodia because, probably like their counterparts throughout the world, monasteries "were built in less durable media, such as wood, brick, and stone."[200] In some form or another though, these structural forms probably existed before the reign of King Jayavarmann VIII. This is attested by Buddha images from the Nokor Phnom and Chenla eras which can indicate the presence of Buddhist art in other forms prior to Angkor. In fact, a Nokor Phnom mission to China included two ivory stupas[201] and there are in fact remains of *chedei* from the twelfth century.[202] Furthermore, the roof of a palanquin carved at Angkor Wat and the roof of a building carved earlier at Baphuon already shows a direct relationship to modern Buddhist *vihear* in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos. As most concrete evidence for the earlier origination of the *mkot sruoch*, a votive stupa dated between the twelfth to thirteenth century bears a clear resemblance to iconography at Angkor Wat. Its rounded base is like a crown or helmet worn by a *tevoda* while the spire that rises conjures those on the crowns of *tevoda* in the central gallery.

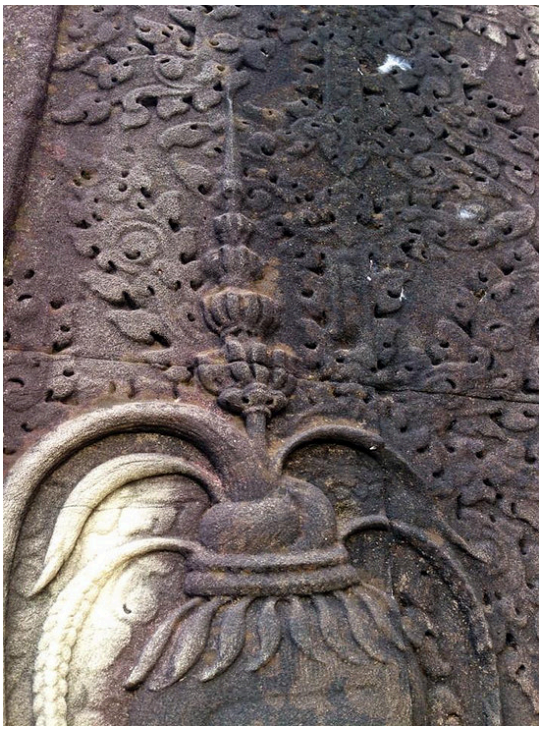
A ritual object is crowned with a pointed cap that resembles modern *chedei*. The object is carried in the procession of King Suryavarmann II carved at Angkor Wat. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.



Angkor Wat *tevoda* wearing *mkot sruoch*. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Celestial women wearing *mkot sruoch* in an Angkor Wat bas-relief. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Female figure wearing pointed crown at Beng Melea. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.



A tiered hairpin at Angkor Wat which abstracts the concept of a *mkot sruoch*. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

The bands in this crown or helmet can be seen in a votive stupa from the twelfth or thirteenth century. Angkor Wat, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

The pointed chignon covers on the crowns of this *tevoda* at Angkor Wat's central gallery bears direct relationship to a votive stupa dated from the twelfth to thirteenth century. Angkor Wat, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Khmer copper alloy votive stupa dated from twelfth to thirteenth century CE. Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Crowns worn by characters of lower rank in Cambodia today include a *khbamng* for female characters and *panhcharet* for male characters. These crowns have a clear precursor in the diadems of the Angkor era and the prior can be worn by young male characters as well as characters who are half-male and half-female. Worn only by female characters, the last crown is what we call a *rot khlaov*; it features the rounded base of a *chedei* but is topped by a finial known as *kantuy hang* (swan tail). As they were the mount of Brahma, the Hindu god of creation, *hang* can be found in the iconography of classical Khmer art. An example can be seen in a lintel carving from Phnom Rong in modern day Thailand, in which Vishnu reclines as Brahma spouts out of his navel atop a lotus. Above Vishnu's head you can see a swan and its stylized tail, which clearly lends its shape to the distinctive finials of a modern *rot khlaov*. The crown is worn with two almost elven accessories that frame the ears, which again have their predecessor in Khmer jewelry as can be seen in reliefs at Angkor Wat and in an image of Lokesvara from around the eleventh century currently housed at the Seattle Art Museum.[203]

Reclining Vishnu with Brahma at Phnom Rong (tenth – thirteenth century CE). Notice the *hang* and its tail in the upper left hand corner of the image. By Thanyakij at Thai Wikipedia (Transferred from th.wikipedia to Commons.) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

Deity in the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk* at Angkor Wat. Notice the way his diadem rises sharply above the ears and then runs down behind the ears, curling up at the end. Remember the earrings and diadem worn by Mañjushri in the prior *thangka* image. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Notice the sharply rising points above the ear of these men's diadems at Angkor Wat. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Finally, on all Khmer dance crowns today, a close examination will reveal incised patterns derived from flowers and foliage. This is not by coincidence as flowers, like the lotus bud-shaped towers of many Khmer temples, are natural forms of *mandala*. They are often depicted as the seats of the gods, of the Buddha, of dancing *apsara* and *yogini*. A Tibetan *thangka* illustrates the divine power of flowers in the tantric concept, with a host of meditating Buddhas springing forth from them.

Appropriately so, flowers and nature figure prominently as ornamental patterns on the temples of Cambodia. They also held great significance in the dress of Khmer people during the Angkor era, of which, according to Zhou Daguan, "floral patterns, woven into the cloth, are reserved for the prince."[204] This is only logical in the Khmer conception since the royal family was perceived as a mirror of the gods—and to wear these flowers was to channel and radiate the power of heaven. This aesthetic and spiritual device can still be seen in the costumes worn by Khmer classical dancers today, and is strikingly synonymous to a Bayon-era depiction of King Jayavarmann VII as the Buddhist deity Lokesvara. Instead of flowers however, Buddhas of various sizes create a chainmail-like texture that is both reminiscent of the Tibetan *thangka* image, the Khmer copper alloy votive stupa, and Khmer dance costumes today.

Bayon-era Lokesvara. Twelfth to thirteenth century. By Jean-Pierre Dalbéra from Paris, France (Bodhisattva Lokesvara irradiant (musée Guimet)) [CC BY 2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Detail of relief at Angkor Wat, inspired by contemporary textile prints of the time. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

This diamond-floral pattern known as *chakkachan*, with degrees of variation, has become the standard in Khmer classical dance costumes today. It can be seen in the skirts, *sbai*, and shirts of male, female, and demon characters. Angkor Wat, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

A military officer in a *chakkachan* print uniform at Angkor Wat. Angkor Wat, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Another example of the flower as diamond, this time seen in the body of a *makar* (Sanskrit: *makara*) at Banteay Srei (tenth century CE). The flowered serpent is an apt metaphor for the Khmer classical dancer. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

In line with the time of Angkor, the silk skirts worn by a Khmer classical dancer have flowers woven into them. The current standard in Cambodia are those that feature a diamond-floral pattern known as *chakkachan*, and these flowers repeat themselves in the *sbai* worn by female characters as well as the shirts worn by male and demon characters. Sculptural evidence from Sambor Prei Kuk makes it clear that this was already a Khmer form of patterning and ornamentation by the seventh century, one that can be seen in royal textiles and military uniforms carved later at Angkor Wat. This pattern is significant as it creates the impression of serpent scales, rendering the dancer a flowered serpent, the dancer's body an ordered, fertile landscape. This connects dancers to the old animist roots that animate our movement tradition as well as the images of *apsara*, *yogini*, and *tevoda* who, surrounded by ornamental patterns of stylized foliage and wearing crowns and prints full of flowers, are simultaneously expressions of nature and the divine feminine.

Even though the *sbai*, as worn by female characters today, is not readily seen worn in the iconography of Angkor era, we know that those in mainland Southeast Asia are Khmer-derived. Chinese annals describe how Preah Thaong, mytho-historical father of the Khmer people, was "unhappy to see [his wife Neang Neak] naked, he folded a piece of material to make a garment through which he had her pass her head."[205] Unless it is being wrapped around and sewn onto a dancer immediately, the process described above is the only way in which a pre-sewn *sbai* can be worn today. And the reality is that the *sbai*, as known in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, can be traced to precursors in the Angkor era as linguistically, monosyllable Khmer loan words become bi-syllable in Thai with *phka* (flower) to *phaka*, *spean* (bridge) to *sapan*, and *sbai* to *sabai.* Ancient Khmers also referred to this garment in Sanskrit terms such as *kapata* and *uttarasanga*.[206]

In fact, at many of the temples, textile patterns were carved onto the temple walls as a form of ornamentation and in some cases as curtains for false windows. Along the columns of Angkor Wat, textiles in the same proportion of contemporary *sbai* were carved. And, like the *sbai*, they featured a decorative bottom section that delineated itself from the top part of the *sbai*. Further, when the inside of the top section of these textile carvings are given floral patterns, the relationship to contemporary *sbai* is especially striking.

Those currently worn in Cambodia are known as *sbai tol* and leave the right shoulder bare, wrapping around the breasts and falling down the back to cover the buttocks. This mirrors how the Buddha was expressly described as baring his right shoulder before preaching in the *Lotus Sutra* (which may have been known to Khmers by the tenth century),[207] therefore possibly indicating a cultic association with the garment.

That said, many of the images of *tevoda* feature two long folds of cloth that have been tucked into the side of the skirt. These may have been the *sadaka* mentioned in inscriptions, which Pou translates as "pieces of fabric for wrapping around the waist, secured from the inside of the skirt."[208] The *tevoda* wrap their arms around and sometimes hold these pieces of fabric, clearly indicating that they are to be manipulated, wrapped around their bodies from the front or the back. In fact, one carving at Angkor Wat demonstrates this clearly: three *tevoda* are depicted, with one in the act of wrapping the

cloth from the back, another covering her breast, and another with the cloth dangling in the front from her bent elbow, suggesting that it can be wrapped from the front like a *sbai* as well.

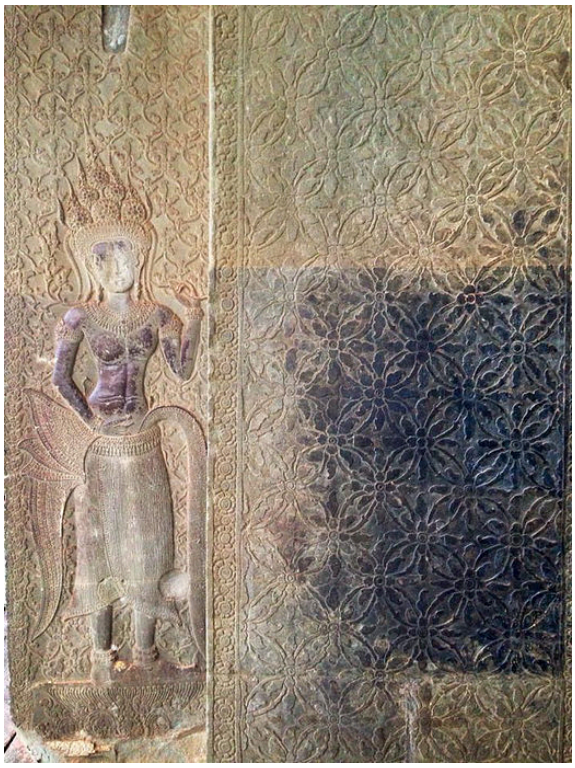
In fact, in Java—where there is a historical connection as evidenced through language, technical similarities in dance, trade, and narratives of war, where two folds of cloth still fall from the belt of the dancer's costume—the pieces of cloth are sometimes thrown diagonally around the torso in this manner. That Khmer people in the Angkor era would have done the same can be gathered from the fact that:

"There is no doubt that some cultural contact with Java is responsible for many artistic styles and jewelry forms that developed during the ninth through eleventh centuries in Cambodia, but how these features were introduced into the Khmer world is unclear. Numerous jewelry forms found in Khmer culture can also be traced back to traditions that developed far earlier in India, as demonstrated by the plethora of jewels represented in mural paintings at Ajanta."[209]

False window with curtain bearing a *chakkachan* pattern at Bayon. Twelfth to thirteenth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Column at Angkor Wat with textile, perhaps *sbai*, carved on the side. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Detail of column carving at Angkor Wat. Notice the border on the edge of (and surrounding) the floral print, which creates a *chakkachan* diamond-floral pattern in the use of negative space. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.



Column, right, foreground, featuring a roundel pattern. Angkor Wat, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Three *tevoda* at Angkor Wat demonstrate the many uses for the pieces of fabric hanging from their belts. Twelfth century. Photo by Kent Davis, Devata.org.

Angkor Wat *tevoda* in the process of covering herself. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

A Javanese classical dancer, one of his saffron-colored folds of cloth slung across his torso similar to how *tevoda* figures in Cambodia would have done. By Viault (Own work) [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html) or CC BY-SA 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

A Khmer Buddha made of bronze from the twelfth century CE. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The second type of *sbai* is known as a *sbai phluoh* (twin *sbai*) or *sbai thom* (large *sbai*) and can be seen in Khmer sculptural depictions of the Buddha. They are reminiscent in design and proportion to false doors at temples as early as ninth-century Preah Ko. In nineteenth-century Cambodia and in Thailand today, this cape-like garment started at a point above the belt where it was tucked, covering the breasts, and falling down the dancer's back to the end of the skirt. Interestingly though, the *sbai* worn by Lao dancers today most closely resembles that of Khmer Buddha images.

This is significant as one of the Lao classical dances they are used in, *Fon Nang Keo* (Dance of Nang Keo), references a history in which Fa Ngum (1316 – 1393 CE), a Lao prince exiled to the Khmer court of Angkor, would return with 10,000 soldiers to consolidate the Lao states into the kingdom of Lan Xang.[210] He brought his wife with him, the Khmer princess Nang Keo Kengkanya. Nang Keo, whose historical Khmer name is not known, brought with her an emerald Buddha and a troupe of dancers.[211] And, according to her wishes, Fa Ngum instituted Theravada Buddhism as the national religion.[212]

The *sbai phluoh* is no longer used in Cambodia. It began to fall into obscurity as early as the reign of King Norodom and was obsolete by the time of Queen Kossamak Nearyrath (although there have been contemporary reconstructions by *khaol* dance troupes). This is very likely due to Khmer nationalist efforts but more importantly to the fact that it covered the shape of the body and crucial gestures such as *deav*. This *sbai phluoh*—along with fundamental differences in Khmer and Thai music (to be discussed later)—is probably what has lent to the extreme bending in the torso and elongated arm angles that characterize Thai dance today. It is the only way that the body will be seen through the costume, a fact made evident by the way a Thai dancer of female roles can best execute a *deav* off to the side of the *sbai*, facing off-center to the audience. In Cambodia, instead of sacrificing the beautiful height of this gesture, the *sbai* was eventually shortened. The *sbai tol*, the preference of Khmer artists today, gives a sensual hint of its roots to the fashion of the bare-breasted *tevoda* at Angkor Wat.

False door at Preah Ko, reminiscent of *sbai phluoh*. Ninth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

A community ensemble of Thai classical dancers. Notice how the female character's body and *deav* (far left) is covered by her *sbai*. By Milei.vencel (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Moving on to the costumes of male and demon characters, you'll notice the epaulets that give the dancer a sense of being strong and broad shouldered. Known as *intanu* in Khmer, they may have their roots in *neak* (serpent) and *neak*-shaped finials that can be seen in all of Khmer art and architecture. In fact, like my brother's story, associating dancers with sacred architecture is not farfetched as our bodies are traditionally seen as vessels for the gods and ancestor spirits—just as temples housed images of these beings and their powerful essences.

All masculine characters—*neay rong*, *yeak*, and *sva*—wear a *sangvar*, a piece of jewelry consisting of two crisscrossing bands which the head and arms must be passed through. *Sangvar* were worn by women and men in the Angkor era, as evidenced by depictions of *tevoda* and that of Suryavarmann II among others. Additionally, *yeak* characters of great importance wear a *kris* that wraps around the torso just below the sternum. These have a clear precursor in gold bands found in Khmer statuary jewelry and in temple iconography.

Breaking away from much of the Angkorean iconography, in which men and women wear *sampot chang khbin*(skirts tied into pantaloons), dancers of masculine roles wear two layers of pants today. The underlying layer is fitted, ending with ornamentation below the knees. The rest of this pant is covered by a *sampot chang khbin*, of which that of male characters feature a pleated "tail" that falls between the legs. Demon and monkey characters have a fold of cloth that covers the back end of the *khbin* where it is tied at the base of the spine, with the latter sporting a literalized tail. This two-layered convention can be seen in later images of a meditating ascetic at Angkor Wat, dating back to the sixteenth

century. However, the two layers of lower garments have earlier precursors in sculptural depictions of the pre-Angkor era and it should be noted that the word *khbin*is attested through ancient Khmer epigraphy through the Sanskrit *kuben*.[213]

Royal woman carried on palanquin. Notice the *neak* finials on the roof that lend their shape to *intanu* worn by dancers today. Notice how, as mentioned above, the tiered roof already bears resemblance to those of modern Buddhist *vihear*. Angkor Wat, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

King Suryavarmann II on his throne, *sangvar* tucked under his *srang ka* (collar piece) just as dancers wear these two today. Angkor Wat, twelfth century. By Michael Gunther (Own work) [CC BY-SA 4.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Tevoda with *sangvar*. Notice the diamond-shaped flower at the point of intersection, a precursor to the *po*, which is only worn by masculine characters today. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Meditating ascetic at Angkor Wat. Notice his two layers of pants, precursor to the two layers worn by masculine characters today. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Of the masculine characters, the two major types to wear masks are monkeys and demon characters. The masks of these characters clearly demonstrate a relationship to the iconography of Angkor. At that time, masks were sometimes known as *varanaka* and likely *suvarnaracita* objects, or "accented or lacquered with gold."[214] Although a history of war and looting has left us with none from the era, these images can give us a sense of what masked dancers may have looked like at the time.

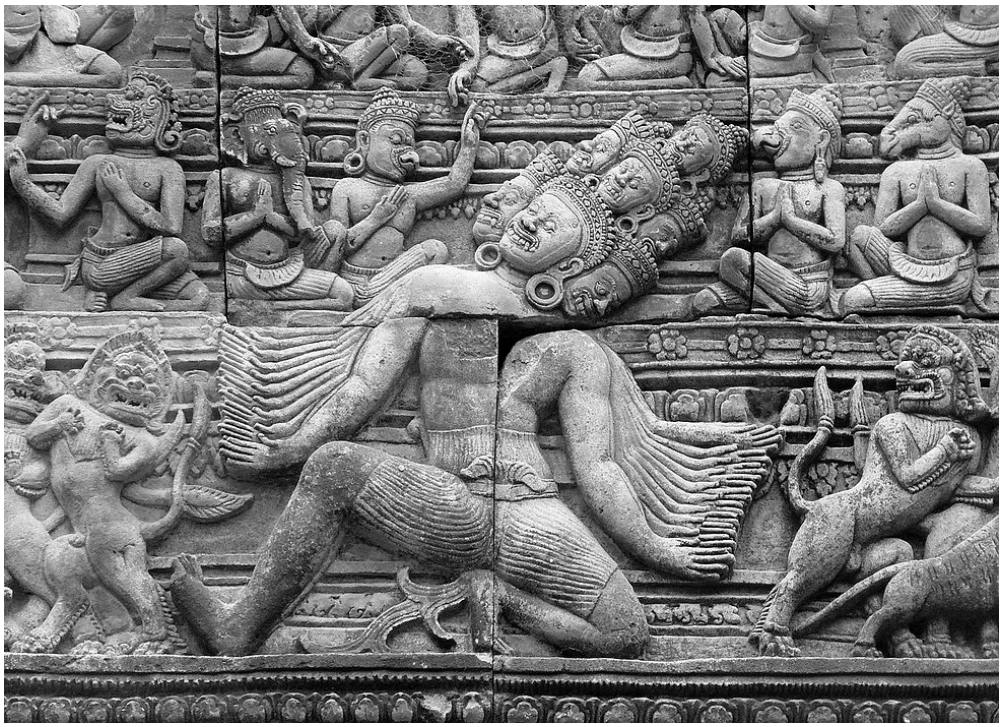
First off, when looking at an image of Peali (Sanskrit: Valin) in the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk* at Angkor Wat,[215] you will see the open mouth, sharp teeth, and protruding tongue that characterize a modern monkey mask. Furthermore, his mouth is framed by a hairline, one that is often colored green today. There are even circular lines incised into the face of the carving, a pattern which, now taking the form of spirals, is seen on contemporary monkey masks and their shirts.

Secondly, when looking at Khmer relief carvings from the Angkor era, you will see that Reab—ten-headed and twenty-armed—has a three-tiered head. The highest tier shows one face or head, the middle tier shows three heads, and the bottom shows three as well. We are still missing three though. However, when you look at the bottom tier you will see that there is clearly a prime face, one that is attached to the neck and aligned with the body, one that is engaged in narrative action. The two heads, which protrude out of this one, look either which way and have a sense of being less significant. In fact, the sculptors have cleverly portrayed them this way to indicate a figure in the round and imply the presence of unseen heads.

Given the manner in which the tiers are fullest at the bottom and smallest at the top, as indicated by head size and width, we can gather that Reab—as depicted in Khmer iconography of the Angkor era—had one head on top, four heads below this facing the cardinal directions, and five heads at the bottom level. The contemporary Reab mask is three-tiered in this manner. And, like the ancient carvings, there is one prime head on the lowest level. The less significant heads of this tier are significantly smaller and placed in a row at the back, revealing the way different mediums and dimensions lend different expressive possibilities. Lastly, one only has to look at the details in Reab's face as well as those of the anthropomorphic creatures and *singha* (lions) around him to see the fangs and unibrows that further connect our masks today to the art of the Angkor era.

Detail of Peali at Angkor Wat. Angkor Wat, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Monkey (left) in the *Battle of Langka* at Angkor Wat. Angkor Wat, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.



Reab inspires fear amongst the creatures of the land in a relief carving at Banteay Srei. Tenth century. By yeowatzup from Katlenburg-Lindau, Germany (Banteay Srei, Cambodia) [CC BY 2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Notice the unibrows, fangs, and beards of these demon characters—all conventions of the modern demon mask today. Notice the *kris* band around the torso of the demon far-right. Notice the rosettes placed above the ear. Bakong, ninth century CE. Courtesy of Johann Reinhart Zeiger, Angkorguide.net.

The Khmer classical dancer wears a great many bracelets, anklets, armlets, belts, and necklaces—all of which were either depicted or had their precursors in the dress of Angkor. For example, *rudraksha*-inspired bracelets known as *kantrum* have been featured around the wrists of *tevoda* and it is clear to see from where the contemporary *chi* and *po* have developed. In fact, the places upon which these pieces of jewelry are worn upon the body—on the head in the form of a crown, in the hair, on the ears, around the neck, below the shoulder around the bicep, around the wrists, around the torso, around the waist, around the ankles—come clearly from the stylistic conventions of the Angkor era. Even the flowers worn on the side of crowns today have their precursors in golden rosettes of Khmer statuary jewelry, which in turn were likely stylizations of actual flowers.

So, although the Chaktumok style costumes may have possibly come to us in the modern era by way of Thailand, they have their firm roots in the Khmer art, court, and culture of Angkor. They are only as Thai as they are Khmer-derived. In fact, considering how Angkor at its height was a society in artistic and religious transition—a cultural evolution largely lost to us due to a history of war and destruction—we may never know the exact scale to which these costumes were directly transferred to the court of Ayutthaya. However, even as Thai classical dance costumes are given new vigor by Peeramon Chomdhavat and others today, many of the patterns, shapes, symbols, and concepts that give these objects and fabrics life point clearly to their lineage in Khmer art and dress. This is no surprise as the monarchs of Ayutthaya and even those of the Rattanakosin era held Khmer classical culture with high regard.

Of course Khmer aesthetic values have been localized into uniquely Thai expressions throughout history. But this process is only mirrored in the way that Khmer artists have injected our own tastes and sensibilities into Chaktumok costumes as well. Today an untrained and insensitive eye would easily mistake the costumes of either traditions for one another. But for practitioners and those who care for the art forms, the differences could not be more significant as details, small as they are, are what build the entire form and reveal the values and spirits of individual artists and the communities they create in.

When King Ang Duong, son of a Thai mother, set these costumes on the bodies of Khmer dancers, he seems to have entangled the two schools for the first time in modern Cambodia. Ultimately though, Ang Duong merely gave an existing court tradition another path to connect to its initial roots—a cultural and artistic legacy it was already aware of and connected to. The king used "the court dance as a demonstration of the modern Cambodian throne's legitimacy in the Angkorean lineage, which the court at Bangkok had so persistently attempted to destroy."[216] This is not out of line with the way he secretly initiated contact with the French to end threats from Siam and Vietnam.

In the end, this aspect of Thai influence does not "break" the Khmer dance tradition. It does not severe the art form's ties to its ancient history. Popular notions that people of the Angkor era only went bare-breasted have confused many, leading some people to say that the tradition was wholly imported from Thailand along with the costumes. In fact, contrary to this mistaken belief, sculptural iconography from Angkor clearly indicates the use of

shirts, armor, and *sbai*. Are we to assume that people of that time were invincible to sickness or cold weather? Or that they weren't keen to fashion and self-expression?

King Suryavarmann II's soldiers wearing shirts, armor, and crowns which curve backward, reminding us of *rot khlaov*. Angkor Wat, twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Armored warriors at Angkor Wat. Notice the shirts below their armor and their animal-headed crowns, precursor to the deer crowns of today. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Merry revelers, dancing and playing music, on a boat depicted at Angkor Wat. Notice their long, *chakkachan* frocks that are cinched by a belt. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Further, there was a tradition of statuary textiles—cloths and fabrics adorning sacred images—alongside that of statuary jewelry, which would have had a relationship to those worn by dancers today. Khmer inscriptions, for example, mention a *cumbala* (diadem or crown) and *hemakavaca* which Pou describes as "a short skirt for women that was made of gold and offered to the gods."[217] Furthermore, modern day silk skirts of gold brocade harken back to the Angkor era as well, as indicated through *suvarnavasana* or *subarnavasana*, "skirts adorned with gold" that were "likely skirts weaved with gold stripes."[218] The Khmer claim for artistic and cultural continuity from Angkor to the present day is further solidified when examining the lineage of Khmer textiles:

"In the post-Angkor period, the mid-fifteenth century onwards, information about silk weaving in Cambodia is hard to find . . . By the mid-nineteenth century, however, extant textiles with a clear provenance at last make an appearance. In 1856 a Royal 'Gift of Mutual Respect' from Siamese monarch King Mongkut and the Second King Phra Pin Klao, were presented to the American President Franklin Pierce. The gift included three silk weft *hol*-patterned silk *sampot* [*chang khbin*] hipwrappers and a similarly-patterned silk shoulder cloth. These textiles demonstrate a level of sophistication in silk weft *hol* weaving of the highest order in both technique and design. The confidence and skill displayed in the realization of these textiles' patterns speaks to a highly-developed and refined ability prevailing for a significant length of time previous to the mid-nineteenth century. In addition their uneven twill groundweave, a technical characteristic almost exclusive to Cambodian weavers, strongly asserts the origin of the weavers. Interestingly, this technical

feature has continued uninterrupted in Cambodian silk weft *hol* weaving to the present, 150 years later."[219]

The degree to which one can claim costumes of the Rattanakosin or Chaktumok eras as uniquely Thai becomes especially complicated then, given the manner in which Thai monarchs and people continued to value and absorb Khmer textile culture in the early modern period—so much so that Khmer artistry served as ambassadorial gifts and emblems of Thai national culture and identity. Furthermore, when examining the linguistic evidence, Varasarin notes that words such as *sabai* (Khmer: *sbai*), *krabin* (Khmer: *khbin*), *sangwan* (Khmer: *sangvar*), *kahbangna* (Khmer: *khbamng*), *kancheak* (Khmer: *tracheak*, the elven pieces framing the ears) and *kravin* (Khmer: *kravil*, earrings) point to the direct origination and adoption of Khmer jewelry and textile objects.[220] Ancient Khmers in turn referred to some of these items through Sanskrit terms such as *kanci* (a belt worn by women) and *kanthi* (a type of jewelry for wearing around the neck, chest, or pectoral), as well as *sarangi* which survives in modern Khmer as *srang ka*.[221]

So, much like the way Theravada Buddhism has acted as a thin veil over the tradition's much older and omnipresent sacred roots, Chaktumok costumes are merely a more recent shell over the body of a dancer performing Khmer classical dance, a shell that connects to the artistic, philosophical, and material precedents of Angkor. They represent a different style, but not a different form. No matter how different in feeling, Chaktumok costumes do not conceal the living Khmer foundations of the art form. Known as *robam kbach boran*, the "dance of ancient gestures" only requires the moving body and the spirit and philosophy of which those movements are born. And, as we will see, costumes can change, along with music and language too, and even then it is still possible to have Khmer classical dance.

Dance During the Reign of King Norodom

After King Ang Duong's death in 1860, he was succeeded by his eldest son Norodom. Facing a revolt led by his half-brother Prince Siwotha, the new king was forced to sign a treaty that established Cambodia as a "French Protectorate" (French gunboats were anchored outside the palace should he not sign). And, "[i]n exchange for their assent and the return of the royal regalia, including the sacred sword, Thailand received the provinces of Angkor and Battambang from France."[222] The coronation of King Norodom finally took place in June 1864.

During his reign, there were accounts of three troupes of dancers in the palace. And, in keeping with Angkorean fashion, his wives and other royal women managed these troupes by taking charge of everything from training to costuming.[223] The dancers performed in a *rong ram*, a dance theater constructed inside the palace during that time.[224]

The king, who was educated in Bangkok, was a monarch of international tastes. "In the early years of his reign he was eclectic in support of numerous Southeast Asian musical traditions, allowing performers from Laos, Burma, China, Vietnam, Malaysia and, of course, Thailand to reside in the capital under royal favor."[225] Cravath notes that the king returned with musicians after his 1872 visit to Manila; that same year, a visit to Singapore saw his return with "'Malayan coachmen' [who resided] in Phnom Penh under his protection; the daughter of one of these eventually became a leading dancer in the royal troupe and subsequently one of the most respected teachers of princess roles."[226] All these artists were given access to Khmer classical dance lessons, additionally performing dances and songs from their own traditions for the entertainment of the king. An account by Kukrit Pramoj, former Prime Minister of Thailand, references the intercultural history of the Khmer court during this time. Pramoj detailed the story of his aunt who fled the Thai court:

> "Aunt Chawiwat hired a sailing boat, put in all her household treasures, took the *lakhon* troupe of Chao Chorm Manda Ampa [a high-ranking court lady], which subsequently became her own, together with all its accessories and the *phiphat* orchestra, embarked at the nearby river in front of the palace at sundown and sailed all night. In the early morning, reaching the mouth of the river, she looked back and saw the royal steamboat in pursuit. Offering a prayer to a nearby *wat* for the success of her escape in the much slower boat, she saw the steamship break down and anchor immediately, permitting her to sail all the way to Cambodia.
>
> When Aunt Chawiwat reached Cambodia, Norodom was the ruling king. Norodom and Sisowath [his brother] had grown up in Thailand during the reigns of the third and fourth kings and were accustomed to the Thai court. When she arrived, therefore, she went directly to Norodom's palace, and, being of his station, he welcomed her . . . But Aunt Chawiwat was clever enough to have brought the *lakhon* of Chao Chorm Manda Ampa—the famous *lakhon nai* teacher—with her, which was the key that opened Cambodia to her.
>
> In that time this *lakhon* was a significant thing because in the area *khon*, *lakhon*, and the *nang* were considered as treasures which enhanced the owner, and every country wanted to have their own."[227]

In Pramoj's story, the suggestion is that Cambodia's absorption of an entire Thai dance troupe along with a *phiphat* orchestra and costumes are what explain the origins of the entire Khmer dance and music traditions. He claims: "[King Norodom] accepted [his aunt]

in the palace and gave her troupe the status of Cambodian *lakhon nai*, and authorized her as the teacher of *lakhon* Thai to the Cambodian court."[228] This belief can sometimes consciously and unconsciously manifest itself amongst some Thais today, and can be seen in the words of a prominent choreographer who once said to me in Los Angeles:

"I love to be in Cambodia. The dancers are very good there because the spirit of the dance is very strong there. The old teachers told me that if I wanted to see real Thai dance that I should go to Cambodia because in Thailand everything is changing."[229]

This same choreographer would later explain before Khmer, Thai, and Indonesian dancers in Cambodia that Thai *khon* was a modern invention because he couldn't find any pictures of it before the nineteenth century (never mind that modern photography was only invented in the nineteenth century). The implication here then—one in line with Pramoj's assertion—is that the art form originated during a time of Thai political eminence and Khmer dance is a mere derivative of Thai traditions. I, however, quickly shared that his rationale was like saying you don't have a mother because you have no pictures of her. Furthermore, la Loubere had already mentioned the "*Cone*" centuries earlier, in 1688. Speaking to the choreographer's quoted words now, of course everything in Cambodia has been and is changing too. And finally, addressing Pramoj's story, there are simply no Khmer sources that support his claim. In fact, we know otherwise.

First off, just prior to King Norodom, during the reign of his father, a missionary by the name of Bouillevaux noted that "in the palace of his Majesty Duong, the first of that name, there is a great deal of music and theatre; I have caught a glimpse sometimes, much in spite of myself, of his concubines who simulate battles between the ancient heroes of India."[230] Secondly, Sam Ang Sam and Terry E. Miller have noted that the *phiphat* orchestra of Thailand was once called the *phinphat*, thus indicating its succession from the Khmer *pin peat* orchestra.[231] Although the Khmer orchestra no longer uses the *pin* (*vina*) from which it takes its name, the semblances of the modern *pin peat* orchestra can already be seen in the wall paintings of Angkor Wat commissioned by King Ang Chan—pre-dating Norodom's reign for 300 years and tracing its lineage to the musicians at Angkor.

In actuality, Pramoj's account and the words of the Thai choreographer above are reflections of a prevailing dilemma in the Thai nationalist psyche, a myth of pure "Thainess" that cannot exist alongside a sovereign Khmer polity. So powerful is this concept that certain Thais have manipulated and fabricated their history in order to "project a 'Thainess' back into time immemorial."[232] A clear example of this is the controversial Ram Khamhaeng stele that was originally commissioned in 1282 CE. Taking its name from the founder of the Sukhothai nation, the stele was further inscribed upon in the nineteenth century to glorify the king's life. Some believe that it was King Mongkut (1804 – 1868 CE), who felt the need to establish Thais as a civilized people in the face of British and French colonial power, that did this.[233] Although the authenticity of the Ram Khamhaeng stele is hotly contested—with some calling the entire thing a nineteenth-century fabrication—what we know for sure is that other "famous and 'traditional'" literary works officially attributed to Sukhothai are actually late Ayutthaya or early Bangkok eras in origin.[234]

Khmer arts and customs, as they are the primary foundations of Thai royal culture, have a particularly warped place in the Thai nationalist agenda. The accounts above indicate the inherent value and authenticity accorded Khmer artistry and culture by Thais. All the while, these accounts and the political agenda they take life from seeks to own the Khmer legacy exclusively in order to assert Thai ethnic, cultural, political, and national superiority. This strategy to simultaneously own and erase—erasing "Khmerness" by owning it, owning "Khmerness" by erasing it—can be seen clearly in a model of Angkor Wat that was built in the Thai palace under the orders of King Mongkut and in contemporary Thai nationalist discourse, both of which I will address later.

That said, Thai contributions to Khmer dance are real and their nature is revealed most in Pramoj's description of dancers as "treasures which enhanced the owner." These words hint at dance as a distinctly secular commodity, one that marked the king's social status and strengthened his political aura. In short, Thailand did not give to Cambodia an entire classical tradition nor an entire repertoire. Rather, Thai influence on Khmer dance came in the form of certain works associated with secular palace entertainment.

Supporting this, and writing on the development of Khmer theater, I will quote Khmer scholar Ly Theam Theng in length from his October 1971 article published in *Kambujasuriya*, which I accessed in Reyum's *Cultures of Independence*:

"Khmer theater has a long standing history, as do the theaters of other countries. Our ancestors created a culture with forms of theater which they have passed down to us. According to the dictionary, the contemporary word for theater—*lakhaoun*—came from the Thai word *lakon* which means 'a kind of theater performing either long or short stories' (Coedes). The origin of the word *lakhaoun* might confuse us into thinking that the Khmer just began to perform theater during the era in which cultural influences from the new Kingdom of Siam began to enter our country (that is, during the [seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth] centuries CE). But this is not really true since, before there was the word *lakhaoun*, we had different names for theatrical performances such as those witnessed by [Zhou Daguan] who wrote an account of his travels in 1297 CE in which he noted performances of a dance theater called *aylam* which seems to have evolved from our Khmer word [*re ram*], the narrative dance performed at the time of Khmer New Year . . . This evidence clearly shows that Khmers in the [twelfth] and [thirteenth] centuries CE already had dance troupes which performed stories, it was just that these performances were not yet named by the new word *lakhaoun* . . .

The word *lakhaoun* only began to be commonly used in the [twentieth] century, and it became particularly popular among officials, ministers, and the King. Although ordinary people enjoyed theatrical performances, they called such events by names such as *yike*, *apei*, *nang*, and *khaol*. These older types of theater weakened in the face of new types of theater such as *lakhaoun bramothai* and *lakhaoun bassac* which came from abroad, were strongly promoted, and thus took up roots in Cambodia. People were attracted by the somewhat unfamiliar forms of performance designated by the new word *lakhaoun*, and these new forms spread quickly throughout the countryside.

The first theater troupe to put the word *lakhaoun* in their name was the theater troupe of the Royal Palace, established by King Norodom. The King financially supported the dancers of the troupe, and brought teachers from Siam [Thailand] who were well versed in the gestures of dance positions as well as the methods for training, conducting rehearsals, and directing *lakhaoun*. Most of these teachers had the fate of being either *khun* or *maum*, that is concubines or wives of the King. These teachers strove to please the King through training and improving their *lakhaoun* troupes so that the troupes could perform during various

ceremonies. Each Royal troupe of *lakhaoun*, no matter their status or skill, was always looking for ways to make their performances new and different in order to yet again please the King. The elderly of Phnom Penh, who were used to entering the palace to watch performances, had a saying: '*Lakhaoun* Khun Than is like the *Trakiet* flower, *lakhaoun* Khun Preah Niet is like the *Trakuan* flower, *lakhaoun* Maum Suon is like the Vietnamese *hat baoy*.' According to Mr. Chum Huon, a person who likes all kinds of *lakhaoun*, both old and new kinds, the reason for this saying was because: 'Khun Than was the favorite of the king and she had many opportunities and had beautiful dance form, thus she was like the *Trakiet* flower. Khun Preah Nhiet was another favorite of the king but she came later and her dancing form was a little bit less skilled than Khun Than. As for Maum Suon, she was of the lowest rank and didn't have means or opportunities. She picked the children of Chinese and Vietnamese to come and dance in her troupe.'

From this saying we could conclude that the Palace had three newly formed dance troupes at that time. Really, however we think that dance troupes, and the form of dancing designated by the long-standing term [*re ram*], is a heritage of the Khmer who have had such forms since ancient times. The *lakhaoun* teachers [who came in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries] had learned new techniques and ways of performing in Siam [Thailand] which they introduced to Cambodia. Their influence added elements, and inflected portions of the *pol* or narration. Words used to name characters, costumes, and jewelry became Siamese so that, for example, the female character came to be called *nang aik* (our *neang aik*) while male characters came to be called *nai roong* (our *neay roong*)."[235]

Ly Theam Theng's assertion that Khmer dance came to be "named by the new word *lakhaoun*" and that certain aspects of its elements "became Siamese" in name is echoed in Thai scholar Wilaiwan Khanittanan's study of Ayutthaya's Khmero-Thai, in which Khmer words were given to things that Thais already had words for.[236] To complicate and illuminate things however, it is important to note that some believe that *lakhaon* "came from the Javanese word *lakuan* or *lagon*."[237] It is a form of male chant used in performances of Javanese *bedhaya*, is poetry of "non-specific nature, describing the beauty of the dancers, their elegant movements, and announcing the beginning of the performance."[238] Alternatively, it can be translated as "play" or "drama" or "act."

This complicates the history as Cambodia remained in contact with Java before, during, and after Angkor. The Thai word *nak*, for example, is derived from the Old Khmer *anak*, which was "initially borrowed . . . from Old Javanese since the dawn of history."[239] Linguistic, religious, and artistic evidence for this cultural connection is further supported in the Khmer word for the gesture for prayer, *sampeah*, whose Javanese relative is a "solemn salutation" known as the *sembah* in the dance. [240] *Sampeah* has been used in Cambodia since the times of Angkor (and very likely before), as even Zhou Daguan noted that "all had to kneel down and touch their head on the ground in a gesture called *sanba*" before King Indravarmann III.[241]

I will not focus on whether *lakhaon* was introduced by way of Java or Thailand. I will however note that if it came directly by way of Java, we must question traditional historiographies of how certain secular dance dramas took root in Cambodia. But if it came from Java by way of Thailand—thereby supporting Ly Theam Teng's ideas—we can tie the term to the introduction of secular theater exemplified most by the Thai work of *Inao*, which is derived from the Javanese drama of *Panji* according to Thai historical sources.

Regardless, the Thai presence in Khmer dance history is undeniable. Roland Meyer's *Saramani*, a fictional story that feels "true even down to the characters," mentions that

dance troupes inside and outside of the palace in Phnom Penh were led by Siamese dance mistresses.[242] These troupes, however, were never in the exact image of dance in Thailand. As Saramani explains in her early years of training, contrary to the words of the Thai choreographer above: "I noticed that from one teacher to another the dance technique was slightly different, they each added and removed elements according to their individual visions."[243]

It is likely that Thai artists introduced certain melodies, dramatic conventions, and aesthetic values with secular works of theater. But never did they bring a completely new classical dance form or dance drama form. Nor were their contributions enough to completely subsume the tradition as there was already a long, pre-existing tradition of dance and dance drama in place at the Khmer court and throughout Cambodia. In fact, during his time as a professor at the University of Fine Arts in the 1970s, Chheng Phon has said that "two schools of thought concerning technique developed in Cambodia, and today there are still two groups of teachers: the Thai tradition technique and the Khmer technique."[244]

King Norodom's reign however—although seen as the most open to Thai culture—was actually the beginning of the end. Since the moment of his coronation, "Thai influence in Cambodia began to wane, fading even more sharply and more or less for good after King Mongkut died in 1867."[245] Eventually, a history of rival internal politics, Khmer nationalism and, even more so, civil war and genocide would leave Cambodia without the Thai style of dance today. But let us look at what the differences between those two styles may have been.

TWO TREES OF ONE ROOT? AN ANALYSIS OF KHMER AND THAI CLASSICAL DANCES

As we look into Khmer and Thai dance for their stylistic differences, it is important to note one thing: although some dances are certainly very old, none of them are exactly the same as when they first took life. The dances of the repertoires, much like the art forms, have been shaped by changing social values, economic realities, cultural contexts, and political situations. Very importantly, they have undergone a constant process of redefinition under the eyes and visions of individual artists. As my teacher Sophiline recalls, not even sacred works in Cambodia are immune to this:

"I remember Soth Sam On telling me that in the 1960s the artist Hang Thun Hak asked her if she could add a more threatening gesture for Ream Eyso before he throws the axe at Moni Mekhala. She did, it strengthened the theatricality of the dance, and so that perfect gesture has been incorporated into every performance of the piece, sacred or secular, ever since."[246]

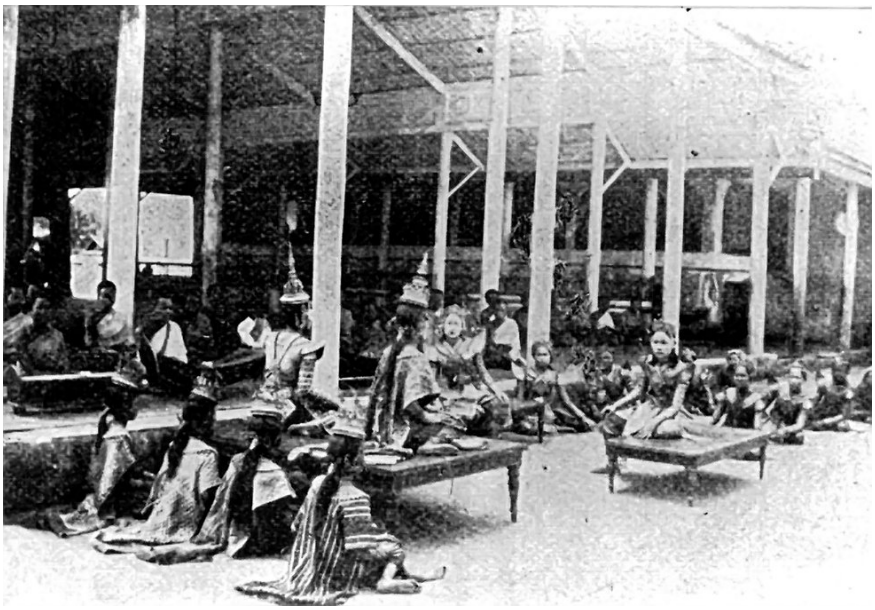
So, as they say, change is the only constant—and I agree—but I would also add that a certain spirit remains intact and alive in this process of evolution. In fact, this gradual refinement is what invigorates the art forms and keeps them fresh, with each generation trying to push their traditions towards a higher state of meaning and beauty.

As discussed before, the earliest graphic evidence of Khmer classical dance comes from temples of the pre-Angkor and Angkor periods. These depictions vary in their degree of realism due to limitations in space and medium but also in their adherence to cross-cultural iconographic conventions associated with dance. In short, some of these images are compatible to the realism of a photograph while others are more stylized transformations of their subjects like an expressionist painting. Even Khmer and Thai mural paintings, with roots in Angkorean bas-reliefs and clearly possessing a relationship to the dance, do not always faithfully document the dance tradition.

With this said, the formal qualities of Angkorean iconography—the arching of the back, the curve in the fingers, the angle of the arms in relation to the rest of the body, the four major hand gestures, the poses for sitting and flying and more—have a clear relationship to Khmer classical dance as we know it. And, when looking at both of these art forms, even when there is a sense of leaning to one side, you'll find a centered, uplifted quality in the subject's or dancer's body. This is true in a carving of Vishnu on Garuda at Angkor Wat, in the first photographs of Khmer dance (which captured a troupe of dancers from Battambang province during the reign of King Norodom), and amongst Khmer dance troupes throughout Cambodia and in the diaspora today.

Vishnu on Garuda at Angkor Wat. Notice that he is in a dancing gesture. Twelfth century. By DoktorMax (Own work) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

Dancers in rehearsal at a provincial theater in Battambang circa 1885. From *Earth in Flower* by Paul Cravath, courtesy DatAsia Press.



Dancers in rehearsal in Battambang circa 1885. Notice the all-female *pin peat* orchestra directly correlating to the sixteenth-century Angkor Wat wall paintings, which have their roots in the earlier relief depictions of female musicians at Angkor. From *Earth in Flower* by Paul Cravath, courtesy DatAsia Press.

Male dancer from the ninth-century temple of Bakong, executing *kbach chak* with *vajra* in left hand. Ninth century. Courtesy of Johann Reinhart Zeiger, Angkorguide.net.

In Thai dance however, this centered quality is broken by a deep bending in the torso and leaning of the head. And, as I mentioned earlier, this may have resulted from the adoption of costumes of the Rattanakosin era which greatly covered the body, forcing the dancer to execute angles of greater extreme and degree in order to show the movement of the body. However, a ninth-century carving of a male dancer executing *kbach chak* at the temple of Bakong already demonstrates this extreme bending in the torso, illustrating the fact that there were likely many styles of Khmer dance during the Angkor era that were made singular by distance and differences in artistic vision. *Kbach chak* is still used in Khmer dance today. And the aesthetic sensibility captured by the carving was or was not (re)adopted by artists at the Khmer court and in Cambodia, depending on their artistic lineage and individual tastes.

Interestingly, in the photograph of Khmer dancers from 1885, we can see that the female characters opened one knee when standing with their knees bent. This immediately conjures the images of female dancers sculpted at Angkor who almost always have their knees bent and open, revealing the fact that certain Angkorean dance conventions—along with the Angkorean dance tradition itself—survived into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Unlike our Thai counterparts, Khmer artists have closed the knees of female characters today, creating a sense of petite femininity that more dynamically contrasts with the movements of male and demon characters.

Another reason for the off-centered quality in Thai dance results from the music. Sam and Miller have noted that Thai musicians consider the *khong wong yai* (Khmer: *kong vong thom*, a low-pitched circular gong) to carry "the most fundamental form of the melody" whereas Khmers believe the purest form of a melody is in the human voice and instruments that imitate the voice best.[247] Further, they note that "Thai language is tonal and Khmer is not. This difference triggers totally different procedures in generating melody in relation to text."[248] It is for this reason that Thai music has an extended quality to it, one that makes the dance have a more pronounced quality of stillness that is then punctured by staccato bodily gestures.

In contrast, Khmer dance has a more consistent, grounded fluidity that is mirrored in the music. The *pin peat* traditionally plays with a sense of fullness in the orchestra, rarely shifting in tempo, volume, or allowing for musicians to stand out as soloists. On the other hand, Thai music can shift greatly in speed, volume, and instrumentation, lending to a more layered, disjunctive relationship between sound and dancing, one that can be seen most in purely musical sections.

The music affects these two styles of dancing in another way as well. A Thai friend who studied dance with me in Long Beach noted the strong presence of drums in Khmer music. He then went on to say his "perception of dance has completely changed since studying Khmer dance. There's a gait, a slightness [that he sees in] Thai dance [now]."[249]

This difference in weight is mirrored in the way that Khmer dance was depicted in stone bas-reliefs whereas Thai dance came to be reflected most in its tradition of mural painting. And, when we look at things in this general manner, we can understand my teacher

Sophiline when she says that “everything in Thai art is elongated.”[250] This quality is reflected in Thai script, music, architecture, and dance, of which the Khmer forms they are derived from are much more compact, condensed, and rounded.

But let’s look at some actual dancing to find more differences between the two styles.

Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso re-staged by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, performed by Sophiline Arts Ensemble for International Women's Rights Day. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SMeiWI9aIc

Mekhala Ramasun performed by Thai artists, precluded by excerpt of *Rabam Si Bot.* Please view *Mekhala Ramasun* excerpt beginning at 9:34. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVhqd6pYK1g

First off, both of these performances are shortened versions of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* (Thai: *Mekhala Ramasun*). Although there is perhaps ten years or more between them, I believe they clearly exemplify the differing values that shape Khmer and Thai classical dances. Additionally, through the power of film and text from the twentieth century, approximately twenty years after the death of King Norodom, we know that these contemporary performances are indeed similar in approach to that of their modern predecessors. Old documentary footage of "White Lotus" shows Thai dancers running in a pedestrian manner as they flee from the rage of Ramasun in 1929 (addressed later). Whereas Ted Shawn, who saw *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* in the Khmer palace during the reign of King Sisowath in 1925, noted:

"A charming dance figure was worked out between the masked villain, the beautiful princess and the ensemble. The princess had a blue crystal ball, symbol of something which the villain wished to take from her. In a most formal figure the pursuit was carried on. The ensemble was arranged in a line of pairs down the centre of the stage; the villain facing the whole line from the head, and the princess hiding behind the first couple. With rhythmic beating of the feet, almost like a simple Nautch step, the villain approached the first couple and formally parted them to get to the princess. The parted couple ran outward in wide circles to the edges of the dance floor and let the villain through only to discover that the princess had slipped through and behind the second couple. The figure was then repeated, the separated dancers joining the first couple, the princess slipping behind the third couple and so on, until the whole line was separated. This entire figure was repeated with the variation of the villain pushing one couple to one side and the next to the other side instead of separating them; and again making a rush at the whole group and dividing the twenty dancers into two groups of ten which ran apart in two large circles and then came back together, one group striking the hands of the opposite group and all giving a light girlish scream as they struck—but always the princess eluded him."[251]

So even though the first video is Neak Kru Sophiline's re-working of the traditional piece, much of the choreography and choreographic concepts have remained the same. The ensemble of dancers simultaneously play as *tevoda* and cloud spirits as they do in the traditional version; and the movements for Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso are essentially the same as before. The difference lies largely in Neak Kru Sophiline's concerted effort to activate the ensemble dancers so as to create dynamic floor patterns and degrees of leveling, as well as her decision to use fans in this section (which are traditionally used in the closing dance only).

When looking at the ensemble dancers in the video, you will see that their movements are based on "formal" unison and harmony. They are often staged in balanced, ordered floor patterns that inscribe a sort of sacred geometry and geography onto the stage. This same approach is seen in the traditional version, although in much more "rigid" north-south and east-west rows. With all of this in mind, it seems as if all of the female characters and all of the male characters might just be different expressions of one feminine and one masculine. And when they hold the purple and yellow fans, they become symbolic of negative and positive energy respectively. Even singular characters such as Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso seem to have a symbolic quality, each representing feminine and masculine, good will and bad will, lightning and thunder, compassion and violence, power and force, calm and rage, vision and blindness, enlightenment and ignorance.

The Thai version of this drama has a particularly different feeling. The ensemble of dancers—dressed in many varying colors—have their own unique identities as characters. Some smile and others grin; some engage with one another as others engage with Mekhala. This creates a lively scene that one can readily associate with a crowded party, one in which people of all demeanors carry on multiple conversations. This human-ness is mirrored in the way that dancers seem to break out of dance as they scream and run from the rage of Ramasun. Even Mekhala, pointedly teasing and taunting her adversary, makes us realize the comic effect intended for a human audience.

Elements such as this reveal the way that Thai classical dance is a theater-driven tradition. This fact is further evident in the rising and falling of particularly human emotions, in the way that Mekhala at times places her hands into the gesture for fear as she runs from Ramasun and as she second-guesses herself in her attempt to hide from him. Perhaps the goddess's fear can also be seen as a reflection of a woman's place in a male-dominated artistic sphere and society, one that is echoed in Thai choreographies of *Supana Matcha Hanuman*.

In Cambodia, where the female expression of classical dance is the standard bearer, Moni Mekhala never expresses any fear. She is aware of her aggressor's pursuit and contemplates the rage and violence of Ream Eyso, unfazed by and unafraid of his threats, even irking him on to break his concentration. His attacks are met with composed evasions and it is the power and knowledge emitted from her crystal that cause the *tevoda* to scream and brings the demon to the ground. This image of a strong woman can be seen again in Khmer depictions of *Sovann Machha Hanuman* (Thai: *Supana Matcha Hanuman*), who flirtatiously and (half) jokingly responds to Hanuman's woos with, "Don't come here showing off and claiming things before you meet danger in your life." And even then she plays hard to get.

In short, a profound difference in Khmer and Thai dance lies in a dance-based approach versus a respective theater-based approach. This is not to say that Khmer *robam* lacks theatricality or that Thai *khon* is not dance. However, these two approaches create strikingly different results in performance due to the inherent values of each discipline. In dance, whose ancient roots are in spirit possession and the supranatural, the performer channels and embodies a deity or state of being in her or his own individual body, in a way that only she or he can. In theater, or in its modern manifestations, the performer assumes the identity of a character, is traditionally focused most on creating an illusion of realism. These two differing approaches to the dance form greatly distinguished Khmer and Thai styles of dance—even at a time when the Khmer court felt Thai influence most. But let us examine two more performances to further illustrate my point.

Reamker performed by Khmer artists at an international Ramayana Festival at Angkor Wat. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSQMfuP_MaI

Ramakian performed by Thai artists. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wyEE6yv9MQ

These two clips, both depictions of the battle at Langka from the *Ramayana*, further illustrate the inherent differences in approaching dance in both Cambodia and Thailand. The 1996 performance by Khmer artists demonstrate the unity of movement and music that is valued in the *robam* tradition, one in which dancers are but different expressions of one ideal. Conversely, while watching Thotsakan (Khmer: Tossakan, or Tossamok or Reab, Sanskrit: Ravana) in the Thai performance, his haughty turning and walking away has a more actorly quality and his hand gestures seem to be extensions of the narrated dialogue as opposed to a symbolic miming of it. Just as in the prior clip, the Thai ensemble dancers seem to have a more individual quality in their stage presence as multiple "conversations" occur on stage at the same time. Furthermore, the Thai demonstrate their preference for dramatic theater once more in the way that Phra Ram (Khmer: Preah Ream, Sanskrit: Rama) is at times under the strength of Thotsakan, and in moments of surprise like when Thotsakan nearly sneaks a strike upon Phra Lak (Khmer: Preah Leak, Sanskrit: Lakshmana). In fact, if you watched the Thai performance in its entirety, you will realize the emphasis placed on spectacle as illustrated by elaborate sets, the use of video, and dancers who are suspended through the air to simulate flight. In contrast, the fact that Preah Ream is never at the power of Reab in the Khmer performance is reflective of sixteenth- to seventeenth-century attitudes towards the protagonist as evidenced in the *Ramakerti I*:

"The image of [Preah Ream's] high [Buddhist] mission is not even upset by the actual battle against the demons. There is no need for him to work out a minute strategy and to perform repeated spectacular feats of arms. A *cakravarti*-king, he radiates power (*tejah*) with which he infuses his followers to gain the submission of the demons and finally the Victory over evil."[252]

It is interesting to note that the dancing in the Thai performance is decidedly different from that of *Mekhala Ramasun* and *Supana Matcha Hanuman* above. The bending in the torso is less extreme and the angle of the arms are more compact, thus creating the centered quality that is valued in Khmer dance and sculpture. Even Thotsakan's body has the fullness that is ideal of a Khmer demon character—one that is naturally achieved when the Chaktumok costumes are worn by a fuller-bodied woman.

A Khmer dance artist once said to me, "Now Thai dance and music is very centered because they have access to [Khmer] materials online."[253] Another said, "Now they are starting to *deav* high like us."[254] This latter point was driven home when I was asked by a teacher at Thailand's Suphanburi College, "What do you guys do to *deav* high?"[255] Furthermore, that line between what we distinguish between "Khmer" and "Thai" styles of *robam* (and *khaol*) becomes especially murky when considering the male dancer depicted at Bakong.

My point here is not that Thai artists copy Khmer artists nor that Khmer artists are superior if Thai artists were to do so. But we must ask ourselves the critical questions in this moment, especially since they can be a source of tension between both communities. What will be the difference between Khmer and Thai classical dances as the traditions become ever more similar? And, in such a case, is it fair to call them two traditions? Or is it more accurate to say that they are two schools of one living tradition, one which—through

iconographic, linguistic, and epigraphic evidence—we know to have its roots amongst the Khmer people?

In any case, at the end of the day, we have only this fact: there are good and bad performers on both sides and successful and unsuccessful approaches on both ends. The fact is that beauty exists everywhere and it is capable of growing everywhere. I bring this up instead to show how both dances have continued to inform one another throughout history and will continue to do so. Because, whether through love or war, exchange happens in two directions. In our present world of digital platforms and technologies, of increasing interconnectedness, it is interesting to see that the values of separate schools are beginning to be in dialogue once more after decades of pronounced disconnect. And, even then, they can only retain their singular beauty and character.

KING SISOWATH & THE OPENING OF KHMER DANCE

King Norodom died in 1904 and his half-brother Sisowath was crowned that same year. The new king inherited the semblances of a monarch and, with that, stewardship of the palace dancers. Two-thirds of them, in mourning of his brother's death—or simply in desire for life beyond the palace walls—followed a Khmer court custom and left the reclusive realities of the troupe.[256]

That same year, George Bois, tasked with curating the Indochina Exhibit at the Colonial Exhibition to be held in Marseille, came to Cambodia in search of Khmer dancers. Refused by King Sisowath, Bois found dancers in the troupe of Naval Colonel de Monteiro, a Khmer of mixed-Portuguese ancestry. His search for more dancers led him to a prison, where he discovered that "many [dancers] were also dismissed [from the palace] for reasons of financial necessity due to the smaller annual pension of the new king . . . many of these dancers 'were immediately seized for debts by the Cambodian prison' and incarcerated."[257] Finally, at the request of the Governor-General of French Indochina, King Sisowath agreed to send his dancers as well.[258]

The numbers vary, but Cravath mentions "forty-two dancers, eight chanters, eight dressers, two jewelers, ten male musicians, and two clowns"[259]—or by some accounts, nearly 100 artists.[260] This was just a bit more than the "typical" dance troupe Bois describes, which was made of one *kru lakhaon*, ten *neay rong* characters, six *yeak* characters, two performers of *sva*, ten *neang* characters, and twelve minor dancers accompanied by nineteen chorus members and a ten-member *pin peat*.[261]

Nonetheless, the dancers arrived with King Sisowath in Marseille on June 11, 1906. They were met by an enthusiastic city, one that had been tantalized weeks before with curious details about their lives. Indeed, the French craving for the exotic was duly satiated and inflamed by the dancers, who caused a considerable stir upon the public imagination. Bois wrote: "Every evening more than thirty thousand people crowded around the stage to watch the marvelous dolls, with their perfect figures, undulate, shimmering with rivulets of gold and precious stones, in the dazzle of electric lights. It was crazy. Cambodia, its King, and his dancers dominated every conversation. Photographers swarmed the city like famished locusts. The newspapers of Paris and Marseille vied to snap the most seductive picture."[262]

A riot ensued in Paris when 5,000 tickets—3,800 more than the seats available— were issued to a single scheduled performance organized by Georges Leygues, the Minister of Colonies. And "order was restored by the police only when Princess Soumphady 'resentfully' allowed a second performance at midnight."[263] It seems the entire spectrum of French society saw the dancers, including the esteemed artist August Rodin. He passionately sketched and painted the dancers, following them from Paris back to Marseilles.

When looking at the sketches and watercolors by Rodin, I get a sense of sound, musicality, and uninhibited movement. And, when these images were exhibited in Cambodia for the

first time, the late Soth Sam On—a former star performer of demon roles in the palace, my teacher's teacher whose very own teacher was on that 1906 tour—said, "If you look to the position of the arm, it is not correct . . . It is too high. But the energy is there."[264]

Very importantly then, Rodin's images serve as critical evidence for the aesthetic and formal connections of Khmer dance of the modern era to its roots at the courts of Angkor (and before). When looking at one watercolor featuring five dancers, for example, the three front-facing dancers who lift their legs bear incredible similarities to the sculpted Khmer images of *yogini*, *apsara*, and other dancers. This is no coincidence as, like the sculptors who came before him, Rodin was working to capture the most dynamic image possible as he translated three-dimensional bodies dancing in space and time into a static, two-dimensional format.

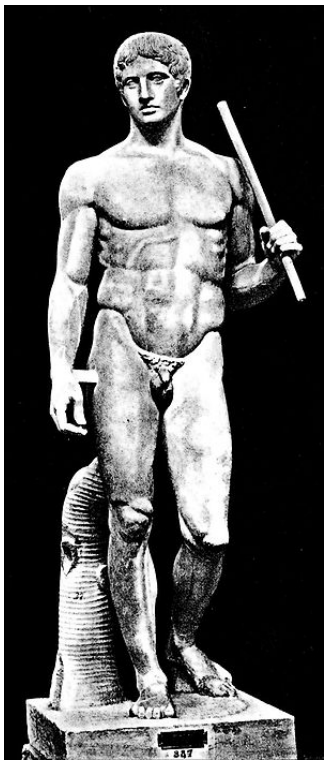
The Angkorean sculptural convention to denote dance then, often with one leg raised in the air or one ball of the foot on the ground (or sometimes both)—like the preference to depict the hands in *chib*—is equivalent to the Greek concept of *contrapposto*. It is used to denote dance because it implies the energetic height in the transition of movement, "encompass[es] the tension as a figure changes from resting on a given leg to walking or running upon it."[265] By contrast, one can see the relative rigidity that results when a dancing figure is carved frontally with both feet on the ground at the tenth-century temple of Pre Rup.

Of the dancers, the sculptor remarked:

"There are stones so ancient that you can no longer date them. When you see them, you think of millennia, and here life, living nature, is producing the same effect. These Cambodians have given us everything that antiquity can contain, their own antiquity, which is just as valuable as ours. We have lived three days from three thousand years ago. It is impossible to see the human being brought to such perfection. Only they and the Greeks have done it."[266]

Cambodian dancers by August Rodin. Copyright of Musée Rodin, used under terms of Fair Use.

Dancing figures carved onto the walls of the Bayon. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.



Marble copy of Polykleitos's *Doryphoros* in *contrapposto*; the original was created in the fourth century BCE. By User:Tetraktys [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

Dancing figures at the temple of Pre Rup, feet firmly planted on the ground lend a relative sense of weight and rigidity. Tenth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Rodin's words further demonstrate the success of the 1906 tour and reveal a "revolutionary notion that an exotic and totally unfamiliar art form could be understood and appreciated on its own terms" in European society and culture.[267] On their departure, he wrote, "What an emptiness they left for me . . . I thought they had taken away the beauty of the world . . . I followed them to Marseille; I would have followed them as far as Cairo."[268] Bois also quotes the sculptor as saying: "'These dancers understand, I'm sure of it, and are incapable of descending from this superior art. There are great artists among the dance mistresses. Even the children are great artists. It's frightening!'"[269]

His sentiments, however, were in contrast to many French understandings of the dance at the time. During the second tour to France in 1922, for example, the royal dancers performed for a French audience whose excitement for foreign curiosities had waned.

Back in Cambodia, this dip in interest was certainly mirrored by French colonials. And, faced with French ideas of modernization—as well as a smaller salary—King Sisowath allowed the dancers to leave the court at any time. He even encouraged the younger of them to go to school.[270] George Groslier, in his 1912 book *Danseuses cambodgiennes anciennes et modernes*, wrote at this time:

"The Khmer dancers are at a point of death. They are no longer anything but shadows. They are wearing out their last costumes. The princesses sell their jewels or take them to the pawn-shop . . . and the women . . . no longer weave the beautiful *sampots* of years gone by."[271]

Such a devastating picture is unlikely however, and only reveals colonial French imaginings of Khmer people as disconnected from our ancient legacy. They used the temples of Angkor to rival the cultural splendors of India that were now under British domain;[272] yet they often refused to believe, and often expressed their disbelief, that Khmer people had built the temples ourselves. More than anything, Groslier's implication that the king was incapable of taking care of the art form reflected a challenge to the sovereign's rule, as well as an assertion of French authority. In fact, as we will later see, the French would vie for control of the dancers and the cultural and political legacy that they represented.

Thus, it only makes sense that Groslier's grave description of the situation was a far cry from reality. Bois, for example, mentioned:

"[The] King of Cambodia . . . with his natural expansiveness and generosity, offered to lend the gold of his coffers and his splendid jewels for display in the Cambodian pavilion's showcases at the exhibition . . . As promised, the King placed his most beautiful jewels under the protection of the Commissioner of Cambodia, whom he trusted. The diadems, bracelets, rings, chains, and cups, enriched with diamonds and precious stones, the diplomatic gifts, and the rest were worth an estimated eight hundred thousand francs. The curious could stare in wonder at this treasure of astonishing artistic originality through a cage, which contained the showcase, which contained the jewels. The cage was closed at night and guarded by several watchmen. This was perhaps the only time in the history of the Expositions that every precious object was accounted for. Every one returned safely to Phnom Penh and the coffers of the Royal palace."[273]

Groslier himself would later say:

"This mime is clothed not in tinsel but in splendid fabrics, with pure gold and real gems. Touch them, weigh them: fifteen necklaces, ten rings, collars and armbands, the oval belt buckle. It's all in precious materials. No need for any artifice to make it seem real . . . The actress is thus everything the spectator could wish for. She is, in a very real sense, a reality that has matched a fiction. Through jewels and costumes and the very role she plays, her actual value is equal to her suggested value."[274]

Even with its reduction in size then, accounts by many visitors show there were almost always at least one hundred and sometimes several hundred dancers in the court during the more than twenty-year reign of King Sisowath. The king used seven to eight percent of his personal budget to maintain their salaries, as well as their costumes and jewels.[275] Furthermore, during his reign, dancers began performing in the newly built Chan Chhaya Pavilion and Pochani Pavilion, which replaced the old *rong ram* (dance theater) built by King Norodom.

The accessibility of film technologies would give us valuable documentation of the splendor of the royal dancers during this time. In fact, they are among the first films of Khmer dance in its more than 1,000-year history. Even more, footage from the period shows less-refined provincial troupes led by retired court dancers who very likely performed for the beginnings of a tourist industry.

Old film of King Sisowath's dancers. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ss9fnNAnfWM

King Sisowath died in 1927 and was succeeded by his son Monivong. During the prior's reign, familiar names to many Khmer dancers today start to appear. Lok Khun Meak was a star dancer during this time and Chea Samy, my teacher's teacher, would arrive in the palace at the age of six in 1925. She would later perform *Robam Chhmar* at the monarch's funeral. For the first time ever, Khmer dance had been opened to and shared with the world beyond Southeast Asia. And, in this, the dance form increasingly became a visible part of our world heritage.

KING MONIVONG & THE COLONIAL STRUGGLE

With the ascension of King Monivong to the throne, Khmer classical dance played a stronger role in the political struggle between the monarchy and the French. During his coronation, French colonial authorities "had already prepared a document . . . which transferred control of the dancers from the Royal Palace administration to the [newly founded] École des Beaux-Arts."[276] Facing great financial limitations—and the reality that only two dancers chose to stay in the palace following King Sisowath's death—the new king was forced to sign the agreement.

The role of the dancers as civil servants was, however, short-lived and lasted for less than a year.[277] After the jeweler stole the precious gold and silver ornaments and fled to Thailand in 1928, the palace eventually regained control of the troupe and recruited from private companies to ensure the proper amount of dancers for ritual propitiations.[278] This was necessary as many of the dancers had already married during their time as civil servants, thus rendering them inappropriate for a life as palace performers and members of the harem.

The Khmer and French battle for authority over the dance and the nation it symbolized came to manifest in the artistic visions of two artists: Princess Say Sangvann and Lok Khun Meak. Both were in the lineage of dancers from the palace.

Formerly a star of the royal troupe, Princess Say Sangvann married Prince Vong Kath and became a member of the royal family. Following a dispute in the court though, she left the palace and started her own troupe. She was immediately supported by the French administration which provided her with the resources to properly train the company. It was Princess Say Sangvann's troupe that was chosen to represent Cambodia at the Colonial Exhibition in 1931 and, following their return, they were "granted a subsidy by the French government and declared to be the official 'one and only' true Khmer dancers with exclusive rights of performance for distinguished guests both in the salon of the Resident-Superior and at Angkor Wat."[279]

Despite its technical and artistic rigor, and the subsidies provided to the company by the French authorities, the composition of Princess Say Sangvann's troupe fluctuated greatly. In fact, young dancers such as Soth Sam On—my teacher's teacher, a woman who would later become indispensable to the survival of Khmer dance—left the Princess's troupe in order to rejoin the dancers in the palace.[280]

Princess Say Sangvann and her dancers made Khmer dance accessible to foreign journalists, tourists, as well as local Khmer people during this period. The painter Jean Despujols created some images of the company, including their torch-lit performances at Angkor as well as a portrait of the star dancer Saem (whose name refers to the color of her valued skin tone, a honey-brown). The troupe is last known to perform in 1941 and Princess Say Sangvann, for all of her work, was perceived by her contemporaries as a puppet of French political intentions. She ultimately found herself in "significant" financial debt to an Indian banker.[281] The French, in the end, made the princess to be "a

cantankerous harpy determined to evade her debts and [emphasized] the (deserved) failure of her private dancing troupe."[282]

Princess Say Sangvann, center, with star dancers from her company. From *Earth in Flower* by Paul Cravath, courtesy DatAsia Press.

Star performer of Princess Say Sangvann's troupe, circa 1937. From *Earth in Flower* by Paul Cravath, courtesy DatAsia Press.

Meanwhile, dance inside the palace increasingly came under the artistic charge of Lok Khun Meak. A star dancer during the reign of King Sisowath, she was trained in female, male, and demon roles. The woman was a favorite of King Monivong, of whom she bore children to. In Toni Shapiro-Phim's *Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia*, Chea Samy recalls Lok Khun Meak's ability to play *roneat* (xylophone) and *khloy* (bamboo flute), and the way she would often solemnly play her music.[283]

Displeased with the state of dance within the palace walls and unhappy with French influences on dance amongst private troupes outside the court, Lok Khun Meak began a rigorous program to pass on the art form in her vision of the most authentic style. Alongside her work with the palace dancers, she began to train approximately twenty young girls and later offered them to Princess Kossamak Nearyrath, the daughter of King Monivong.[284]

Opportunities to see the king's dancers were rare, especially in comparison to King Sisowath's francophilia and openness. One of the chances to see and be seen by them however was during the yearly Water Festival. Xenia Zarina, a European ballet dancer who studied briefly with Princess Say Sangvann, wrote:

"For the *Fete des Eaux* Cambodians come from far and near, from every province, to take part in or to witness the celebrations. Fireworks and street processions of amusing and clever paper figures, with lantern processions at night, make the town gay. Within the pink-red crenellated walls of the palace enclosure, in a spacious pavilion besides the famous Silver Pagoda, provincial ballets requested for the festivities dance all day. Anyone may come and watch. As the pavilion is open on three sides, the spectators sit or stand. The ballets I saw there had excellent and well-costumed star dancers. They danced their very best, for if they pleased some palace talent scout they might be chosen for the King's ballet which would be a great honor, and their families would be well provided for ever after. There appeared to be quite a large membership in the ballets I saw, and in certain scenes representing processions or a trip to another locality, the whole troupe took part following the leading dancers, getting smaller and younger and less adept and less well costumed until the last tiny tots stumblingly brought up the rear, practically in rags, and doing their best not to forget the dance figures."[285]

Zarina's description of these performances at Pochani Pavilion inside the palace is important as it illustrates the breadth to which dance—in keeping with Angkorean times and the rest of Khmer history—existed in and permeated all levels of Khmer society. This is further evidenced by the fact that Neak Kru Sophiline's great grandfather even, "just a commune chief" in the humble countryside, had his own *khaol* troupe.[286] Again, these groups were likely led by former court dancers and their students, and based their standards on those of the royal palace. And, of the dancers of the latter, Zarina saw them on King Monivong's birthday in 1937 and remarked that they were "unquestionably the best in Cambodia."[287]

For what it's worth, the not always reliable Groslier notes in 1929 that "[t]he archives of the Royal Palace preserve a scanty thirty plays, and incomplete plays at that, in which you'd be hard pressed to glean more than ten different themes."[288] In addition, he notes a particularly interesting and outdated performance convention, one which reflects the physical and political context in which dance performances took place:

"In fact, the director is a most fortunate man! Khmer theater plays without a set—or, more accurately, with an unchanging set. The hall consists of a roof supported by columns. The audience sits all around, as in a circus, though with a rectangular ring. The king and dignitaries sit on one long side of the rectangle. Facing them is the chorus. At one short side is the orchestra, across from which the actresses enter by one door and leave by another. Two low tables face each other onstage. When the action calls for a prop—a small mirror, an offering, a bow, a cushion, a magic box—a female servant quite openly brings it onstage and comes to fetch it when it is no longer needed. The costumer makes no bones about coming onstage mid-play to adjust a belt or rearrange the costume of an actress in motion. There is thus really nothing for the director to do. Again, nothing could be simpler or less theatrical. Certainly no effort goes into maintaining any illusion or capturing the audience's imagination by material means."[289]

First off, it is important to note how the structure of the pavilion lent itself to performances in the round (or rectangle to be more accurate). This naturally lent itself to a non-illusory approach to theatrical staging and performance—as not all spectators had equal views and, therefore, access to dramatic action and development. Just as much as experiencing the performance then, this convention brought to the fore the ability to view one another viewing the performance. This then emphasizes the relationships of all those present, reflected in who has the privilege of sitting where, which way the dancers face, costumers coming in to maintain the appearance and status of a dancer, servants coming in to bestow a gift from the king upon a favorite. In short, dancers of the era performed in a more visibly porous situation, one in which the boundaries between performers, spectators, and patrons, divine and earthly space was blurred. This latter aspect has been a component of Khmer dance for a long time, and shows how dance, when associated with the palace, has traditionally reflected and reinforced the king's power as well as everyone's place within the social hierarchy.

Beyond this, Cravath notes that little is known about King Monivong's dancers. Perhaps, as a reflection of the tense times and his desire to maintain control, the king kept his dancers off limits unless a situation absolutely required otherwise. Just as one small example of this, there are no known photos of Chea Samy although she was a star of the palace troupe during this time.

That said, sources indicate that the dance master—who first began her training under the harsh discipline of Lok Khun Meak—was known for her portrayals of Moni Mekhala[290] and became "the most celebrated royal dancer of her day."[291] By some accounts, she also became the king's consort. She, along with other palace dancers, continued to perform dances of prayer to ensure the fertility and well-being of the nation. And, again in line with their predecessors, they served as entertainers and servants of the king. When he died in 1941, Chea Samy did not dance at the funeral as she had done for that of his father King Sisowath. Rather, she shaved her head in mourning.

COLONIALISM & KHMER DANCE IN THE GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Before I progress in the linear account of history, it is important to discuss the effects of the relationship between colonialism and Khmer dance. For, whether peacefully or violently, willingly or by force, an exchange of ideas and approaches is inevitable when different people and groups meet. Even in a most seemingly top-down relationship, there is a movement that goes back and forth. So, instead of writing about French colonialism as solely giving, bringing modern education, railroads, and infrastructure—which is how I encountered it in literature as a ten year-old boy—let's talk about what the French received and shared with the world.

Confronted with a foreign art form and culture, the French did what anyone would do. They understood it through their own lens, puzzle-piecing it into their ever-expanding worldviews. This is only natural of course, but it becomes problematic when that lens is chiseled and tinted by racism, violence, oppression, and misunderstanding. Unfortunately, in such a case—whether we mean it to or not—the things around us become a distorted reality that harms our communities and those of later generations.

In his day, for example, the French naturalist Henri Mouhot was credited as "discovering" Angkor Wat despite that it was already known to exist. Pilgrims, coming from throughout Southeast Asia and from as far away as Japan, continued to journey to the temple after the fall of Angkor into the modern era.[292] And, even further, Portuguese missionaries were actually the first Europeans to visit the temple. They did so almost 300 years earlier, in the 1500s.

"Mouhot himself erroneously asserted that Angkor was the work of an earlier civilization than the Khmer. For although the very same civilization which built Angkor was alive right before his eyes, he considered [modern Khmer people] in a 'state of barbarism.'"[293]

The story that gets passed on then, is that the locals do not know who built the temples, that they tell him giants had built the temple overnight. This story which ironically hints at cultural continuity—Maya, a demon with the power of illusion, built Yudhishthira's palace at Indraprastha in the *Mahabharata*,[294] and Angkor came to be known by Khmer and Lao people as Indraprastha during the Middle Period[295]—was used by the French to create a historical rupture and disconnection, serving to deprive Khmer people of our cultural and political agency and to assert colonial control. A *National Geographic Magazine* article published in 1928 makes this clear:

"[T]he culture [of Angkor] died and the men who had built it disappeared . . . It seems impossible that a culture such as that which built the pyramid of Angkor Vat could have perished without a word of its demise reaching the civilizations with which it must have been in constant touch. But such appears to have been the case . . . Two generations ago the modern world had never heard of Angkor . . . Even without second sight, one senses the presence here of the millions of [Khmer] who are gone. Once they stood out there in the paddy fields as these newly arrived Cambodians are standing . . . The third [theory for the disappearance of the Khmer people], which has the support of [George] Groslier, is that the slaves, who must have constituted a large portion of the population, if such works as Angkor Vat are to be taken as any indication, revolted and destroyed the intellectuals. And this seems reasonable enough. With the teachers gone, it would be natural

enough for the remainder of the population to lapse into savagery, as the Khmer undoubtedly did . . . Who were these people?"[296]

Contrary to such colonial sentiments and misinterpretations however, the demon-builder of Angkor Wat is precisely a symbol for cultural continuity as:

"The final hold of Theravada upon the whole Khmer thought is the cause of these linguistic [and cultural] upsets; it has not destroyed the Brahmanic inheritance, rather it has forced back many elements into the subconscious mind of the community. These elements, stripped of their 'signifiants' survived in latent form like an underground stream of 'signifiés', that art and texts, properly analysed, are capable of bringing to light."[297]

In a somewhat twisted fashion though, in their administration of Indochina, French powers created policies to render Cambodia a symbol of quaint tradition and romantic antiquity. This was unlike the approach to governing Vietnam, which was made to transform with all the semblances of modernity. Indeed, as David Chandler states, "fear of modernity runs through a good deal of French writing about colonial Cambodia, even though the French in another context perceived their role as one of transmitting modernity to the Khmer."[298]

French attitudes towards the colonies are further revealed by a saying of the time, which I heard recited by artists of TeAda Productions during their play *Refugee Nation*: "The Vietnamese plant the rice. The Cambodians watch the rice grow. The Lao people listen to it." Such blatant racism and notions of cultural and ethnic superiority are further manifested in the "mixed Franco-Cambodian children who were abandoned by their fathers and then separated from their mothers by a colonial system that aimed to make them purely French."[299]

It is in this environment that the art of Khmer classical dance was revealed to the world beyond Southeast Asia. Through live performances, films, photographs, and postcards, the art form began to enter into the global consciousness. A few of the people who would interact with the artistic tradition and dancers themselves would be some key figures in modern art and performance.

As mentioned earlier, the 1906 tour to the Colonial Exhibition in Marseilles and Paris left a profound effect on the sculptor Auguste Rodin. The watercolors he created were described by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke as:

"Capturing in the most remarkable way, that most uncapturable thing: dance . . . [The watercolors are like the] pages of an herbarium, one is tempted to say, as one passes from one to the next. Flowers have been collected here and, gently dried, their unconscious gestures have drawn into themselves to assume a final intensity which contains, as though in a symbol, their former existence entire."[300]

During that same tour, Bois mentions that Loie Fuller, a "great and likable artist" who pioneered dance and lighting techniques during her day, "desperately wanted to exhibit some of the [Khmer dancers] under the aegis of her famous name."[301] Furthermore, the experimental theater director Antonin Artaud would later see Khmer dancers in 1922 and

Balinese dancers later in 1931, infusing European theater with ideas of ritualism and ceremony, and "open[ing] the way to the conception of the artistic mission" and giving theater "the task of being the means to salvation."[302]

In Cambodia, foreign-trained dancers sought study with dance masters inside and outside of the palace. Zenia Xarina, who studied dance throughout Asia and with Princess Say Sangvann, published a book that detailed her training and experiences. Often, she created costumes inspired by the dance forms she studied and posed for photos. Ted Shawn, considered the father of modern dance in America, and his then wife Ruth St. Denis saw the dancers of King Sisowath in the palace. The prior described what he saw in his book *Gods Who Dance:* "The Cambodian [dance form], while developed from the Siamese, is a more perfect expression of the style and most worthwhile to see." The dance pioneer then continues:

"[T]he orchestra gave the cue for the entrance of the dancers, and before we realized what was happening, the floor was filled with dancers. They were like live jewels frosted with gold. Vibrant, rich and satisfying color, the fire of priceless jewels, the overpowering scent of jasmine and champak blossoms which hung in tassels from their crowns, and were woven into bracelets for their arms. Twenty exquisitely beautiful girls, half of them dressed as princesses and half as princes, danced in two long lines down the floor. As I watched, I realized why no words, written or spoken could ever recreate this scene, for a simultaneous attack was made through all the senses at once—even the moving picture, perfectly synchronized with the perfectly recorded music, would still be unable to give the caress of the tropic breeze which bore the heavy-scented perfumes of musk and jasmine . . . The exceptional qualities, some of them positively unique, of this dancing, lie in the bodily positions and the use of the arms and hands, the legs always in plié, sometimes slight, sometimes deep, the feet well turned out, and the toes curling up especially in walking or running. The head has an almost motionless posture which is induced by heaviness of the crown. It would come off or be disarranged by any violent movements of the head. The running and walking is done by sliding the feet along the ground swiftly and keeping the upper part of the body perfectly tranquil, giving the impression of floating on the water. When a position similar to a ballet arabesque is taken [*deav*], it breaks every ballet rule; the toe is turned up, the knee is bent to the limit, the standing knee is bent, and yet there is a great sense of flight. The real charm, the real essence of this dancing eludes description; the color, gold and jewels of the costume, the perfume of the jasmine blossoms they wear, borne on the warm breezes of the tropic night, the hypnotic rhythm of the gongs and wooden strikers, the fragile beauty of the dancers, the serpent-supple arms and hands, all combined cannot contain the secret of their power. There is a dignity accumulated through hundreds and hundreds of years, an aristocracy bred by countless generations of court life and adherence to strict and sacred traditions, a tragic evanescence as of a flower which blossoms only for one night, to fade at dawn. Even all of these points when thoroughly considered and added to the sum total do not explain the magic quality of these living goddesses."[303]

Ted Shawn had, of course, written this at a time of Thai political eminence in which they mapped territory, amplified their nationalist strategies, and imitated and adopted the imperialist rhetoric of European colonial powers. So although we cannot argue with his opinion and artistic sensibilities of which dance is more refined, evidence is contrary to his understanding of the historical origins of the art form. Needless to say, the two dancers and their Denishawn dance company in Los Angeles drew from Khmer dance and other forms from around the world, incorporating the techniques of the traditions they encountered into their own movement vocabulary. Jane Sherman, one of their dancers, described this:

"A forerunner of the technical warm-ups now used in many modern dance schools, [was an exercise that] started with feet placed far apart and pressed flat on the floor. With a slow swinging of the body into ever-increasing circles, came head, shoulder, and torso rolls, the arms sweeping from the floor to the ceiling. After a relaxed run around the circumference of the studio, we ended in a back fall . . . we might then sit down to practice Javanese arm movements, do hand stretches to force our Western fingers backward into some semblance of Cambodian flexibility."[304]

Just as Zenia Xarina had done, the artists created costumes and dances made to resemble and, even further, represent the traditions from which they drew inspiration.

Ted Shawn in *The Abduction of Sita*. Photo by Lou Goodale Bigelow, courtesy of New York Public Library.

In 1936, the American horror film *Revolt of the Zombies* was released. Set at the temple of Angkor Wat, it detailed the story of an international expedition seeking to find and destroy the secrets of zombification (because, in the movie, the temples of Angkor had been built by zombies). In the film, Sana Rayya—originally born Sana Margaret Ray of Springfield, Kentucky—is seen portraying "a traditional wedding dance of the Khmer." Costumed in an interpretation of an *apsara* crown and clothes reminiscent of Burmese aesthetics, she reinterprets the dance form with a sexualized exoticism. She objectifies the dancing Khmer female body as she performs something so far from what she was made to represent.

Revolt of the Zombies. Please jump to 14:29 to see the "Khmer" dancing. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYtDasVDikg

Mirroring this sentiment, an adventure film condescendingly relays this story as it portrays dancers at Angkor:

"Being guests of the king, we were permitted to see the royal Cambodian dancers. We notice on the left an outstanding figure wearing a monkey mask, representing the prince of the apes. The dance portrays princesses dancing for him and all the actions center on the figure wearing the monkey mask. The extraordinary motif astounded us! The unbelievable suggestion of apes sweeping power over human beings was unheard of outside of this part of the world and dates back to ancient times."[305]

Looking at the footage however, the level of skill and refinement reflected in the dancing and costumes reveal that they are actually an amateur provincial troupe. And the so-called "monkey" is actually a demon character. Another film of the time compounds to the layer of misunderstanding in its description of the classical dance technique of Khmer people:

"Their dance—a series of postures. Their marched step is closely patterned after the gait of an elephant. Observe how these mice of humanity are able to simulate the ponderous caution of the elephant."[306]

This BAM bulletin reads "Mara in a Characteristic Cambodian Attitude." Courtesy of the BAM Hamm Archives.

Mara von Sellheim, who studied classical dance in the Khmer palace, was instrumental in the realization of the musical film, *The King and I* (1951). After conducting research by reading Raymond Cogniat's *Danses d'Indochine* and George Bois's *Les Danseuses Cambogiennes en France*, Jerome Robbins worked with the dancer to "achieve an authentic replication of the dance form . . . to teach his dancers a considerable amount of Cambodian court dance vocabulary."[307] As a result, "[i]t was the Cambodian classical dance form that Robbins would integrate into his choreography"[308] and Khmer artistry, like the textile gifted to President Pierce, entered into the foreign consciousness as a symbol of Thainess once again.

Due to the ability to reproduce and disseminate film in an increasingly media-driven culture—as well as the popularity of *The King and I* itself—the work would contribute to contemporary popular misunderstandings of the entire Khmer dance tradition as originating in Thailand (inept scholarship, tourism, and politics also plays a role, which we will talk about later). This is so much the case that a journalist would write almost forty years later in the New York Times:

"In the narrative works [of Khmer classical dance] the stage is populated by gods, goddesses, monkeys, demons and clowns. Westerners whose initial image of Southeast Asian dance was formed by the Thai court dance sequence in Jerome Robbins's choreography for 'The King and I' will notice similarities in the Cambodians' high golden crowns, the spiraling hand gestures and the sustained, almost liquid flow of the dance."[309]

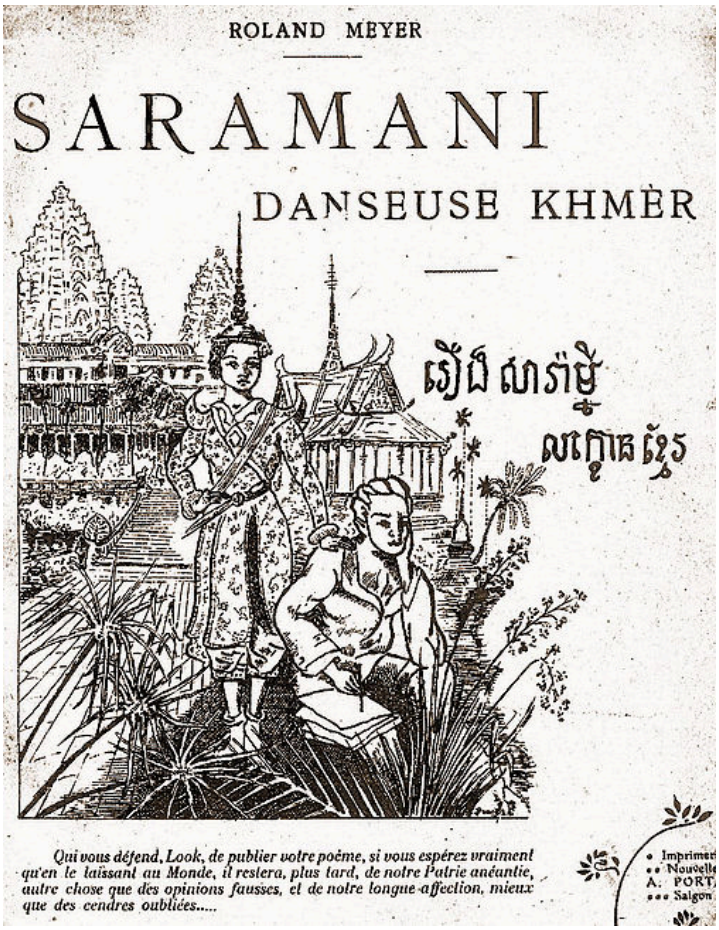
Mara presented her own program at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1953. Titled *Mara and her Cambodian Ballet*, it was seen by the later to be iconic artist Andy Warhol, who created three drawings inspired by the show.

Given all of this, it is clear to see the ways in which colonialism spread an awareness of Khmer classical dance in our modern world. Through books, films, paintings, and more, artists of Europe and America sought to capture and reinterpret the ancient art form for their own audiences. Often times, the images and performances were in fact a hodge-podge of cultures and art forms, completely new creations reflecting European and American imaginations of the Orient. In its most extreme form, these depictions framed the art form as reflecting an uncivilized, savage, animal, and undead race of sexualized others. Occasionally however, like the case of Rodin's watercolors and Robbins's choreography—within the limits of time and access and cultural contexts—they were careful studies of the dance form that reflected individual artistic sensibilities. Ted Shawn, for example, wrote:

"Tagore cried in one of his poems, 'Who can strain the blue from the sky?' How can I then, strain from these dances of ancient Khmer their adorable perfume, color and rhythm and bring them home to America? And yet, while we never could duplicate or recreate this dance art exactly, it has many tangible principles which are universal in their application, and thus should be learned and used. If the dancing in any one country is truly great, it must have been founded on principles which are true everywhere, and thus the study of these principles is of value to every country. In the study of the dances of every nation and race of the world, I am never concerned with imitation, but with surprising the secret source of their charm and beauty, that I, too, may tap that source, and let the divine essence flow through me, perhaps in new forms, to the world."[310]

Among others, the influential Martha Graham, occasionally termed the "Picasso of Dance," studied with Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn at their school in Los Angeles.[311] She and her company in turn helped to "develop many famous dancers and choreographers of the [twentieth] and [twenty-first] centuries including Erick Hawkins, Anna Sokolow, Merce Cunningham, and Paul Taylor."[312] So, just as colonialism pulled from world culture to give rise to Primitivism in modern visual art—and the subsequent genres influenced by it such as Picasso's Cubism—Khmer artistic sensibilities and other artistic traditions would contribute to the beginnings of contemporary dance and art as we know it.

This is important to remember, especially given the way that we separate, categorize, and place borders on what is traditional art and what is contemporary art, and therefore which has more value and relevance and funding in our world today. This process of defining and othering is in fact a by-product of colonial powers mapping and cataloguing peoples and territories. Taking after Roland Meyer's *Saramani: Danseuse Khmer* published in 1919 however, which details the love between a Frenchman and a Khmer court dancer, the colonial affair was not made to last. Months before Mara performed her December 1953 program at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Cambodia gained its independence from France.



Saramani, 1919 edition, Portail, Saigon - Scan by Kent Davis, DatAsia Press.

QUEEN KOSSAMAK, HER SON KING SIHANOUK & THE DANCE OF INDEPENDENCE

With the independence won over by King Sihanouk in 1953, Cambodia experienced what some have described as "a second golden age." The nearly two-decade period was a moment in which the kingdom saw a great surge in creativity, re-introducing and redefining itself on the international stage of culture and politics. Everything from the pop music of Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Sereysothea, films of Ly Bun Yim and Lay Nguon Heng, and acting of Kong Sam Oeun and Dy Saveth reflected the country's newfound freedom and optimism. This atmosphere of creativity "stemmed both from a specific will to define an independent nation, as well as broader regional movements towards modernization and development."[313] The art of Khmer classical dance was not untouched by this sentiment and increasingly became a symbol of Khmer national heritage, identity, and sovereignty as a result.

To fully understand this moment in Khmer dance history though, it is important to know the events leading up to it. In 1941, during World War II, the Japanese gained control of French Indochina. They ceded the territories of Battambang, Siem Reap, and Koh Kong to Thailand, which had been their ally. This caused a stir amongst the Khmer court and people, reminding them that "Thailand's designs upon Cambodia were far from being a thing of the past."[314]

There is evidence that, prior to this, Thai artistic sensibilities co-existed with the Khmer style in the palace at Phnom Penh. George Groslier for example, mentioned the presence of Siamese women amongst King Norodom's and King Sisowath's diverse retinue of women. And, when I shared my admiration for the voice of Em Theay, a dancer once said to me that the old teacher sang not only in Khmer but "beautifully in Thai and Lao too."[315] Furthermore, Soth Sam On—the leading performer of demon roles in the post-independence era—has mentioned in a *Khmer Dance Project* interview that her teachers spoke Thai (but that she herself did not like it).[316]

Revealing the cyclical nature of history and somewhat mirroring the way that the Thai elite of Ayutthaya and Sukhothai adopted Khmer language, art, and culture to assert their right to sovereign authority, the Khmer court later adopted certain elements from the Thai court. Contrary to what Thai nationalists have claimed and propagated however—and to the scholars who draw from their historiography—it did not result in the importation of an entire classical dance and music tradition at any moment following the Angkor era. Rather, certain secular dances and secular dance dramas were imported and existed alongside the Khmer repertoire for the purpose of entertainment.

On the one hand, the dance dramas are compatible to foreign films in our day. They were stories of love, betrayal, magic, and more that served as a form of entertainment (although, with the added effect of reflecting royal order and power). On the other hand, Thai cultural elements—as was certainly the case of Khmer dance and arts—may have represented a certain degree of protest and resistance in a court juggling loyalties and alliances in the face of French domination. Lok Khun Sancheat Bopha, mother of the anti-French Prince Duong Chakr, for example, was "a supporter of Siamese interests in the court with considerable

influence over Norodom" and the king's mother herself was "a staunch supporter of traditional forms and probably an important supporter of the rising" against colonial rule from 1885 to 1886.[317] And later, late palace dancer Sim Muntha would recount how the French expelled all dancers from the palace with King Sihanouk's ascension to the throne, refusing to recognize any dancers unassociated with the School of Fine Arts which they founded.[318]

Amidst the power plays of this era, Princess Say Sangvann had sent one of her dancers to Thailand to learn "dance in the Siamese manner" to turn her company into a "successful financial venture."[319] And Thai artists themselves were sent by their government to spread Thai culture in Cambodia in order to establish Thai authority. Khun Kru Lamun Yamakupt, who "stood apart from the royal palace troupe but eventually became the senior and most respected teacher of dance in the Department of Fine Arts in Bangkok," taught Thai dance in Battambang in 1929 and noted that Nieng and Pan, two dancers from her troupe, eventually taught in Phnom Penh.[320] Whether they taught in the court or in a private troupe is unclear, for even Chea Samy—who entered the court in 1925 in the last years of King Sisowath—has said that she had been "raised in the palace since she was a mere child" but never knew any Thai dance teachers in residence.[321] Their statements are not contrary to one another, as Nieng and Pan may also have been Khmer women who studied Thai dance. Even Khun Kru Lamun Yamakupt noted not ever performing in Phnom Penh because the police "considered all Thai to be political meddlers."[322]

Regardless to say, evidence points to the fact that the two styles and their repertoires co-existed in the palace and in Cambodia itself. Ted Shawn's comment of one dance form being more refined than another and Khun Kru Lamun Yamakupt's note that "all Cambodian singers she saw then sang in Khmer" all hint to this.[323] Cravath notes that even King Monivong, who wrestled with the French for control of the royal dancers, was noted to enjoy Thai *lakhon*.[324] Finally, Lok Ta Chheng Phon has mentioned two groups of rivaling teachers who reflected "long-standing disagreements of a political nature as well, since each of the two dynastic families of Cambodia—Norodom and Sisowath—maintained troupes who 'often disputed about the proper dance style.'"[325] This political rivalry was reflected in the fact that King Norodom was wary of his half-brother who "led troops alongside the French"[326] and "undoubtedly knew of Sisowath's machinations" to strip him of the throne.[327] Neak Kru Sophiline has corroborated these contesting dynasties within our conversations, saying that Phnom Penh actually had two palaces with one remaining open to Thai influence and the other loyal to Khmer traditions.[328] She went on to mention that Queen Kossamak was from the pro-Khmer House of Sisowath and Cravath notes that she did not merge the troupe given to her by Lok Khun Meak with the palace troupe until after the death of King Monivong.[329]

Any positive accord given to Thai artistry and sensibilities would rapidly disintegrate after 1941 however, with the Japanese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1945 and their encouragement of King Sihanouk to declare independence sealing the fate of "Thainess" in the Khmer court. The post-independence nationalism that swept the whole of Khmer dance was a direct response to imperialist threats of the time, described by Thai scholar Thongchai Winichakul as "the 'big wolf' of France and 'small wolf' of Siam fighting over the

'lambs' of Lao and Cambodian territories."[330] Even as France regained control of Cambodia following King Sihanouk's 1945 declaration, new dances reflecting the spirit of autonomy were already starting to take life in the Khmer court. Queen Kossamak Nearyrath, working with the artists, would redefine Khmer dance in these years and after independence in 1953 to create some of the most popular works in the canon today.

Robam Aspara (Dance of the Apsara), one of the most popular Khmer classical dances, "sn[uck] into palace programs in 1948."[331] Interestingly, this same dance was later described by Princess Buppha Devi as choreographed in 1963, after the costume was initially created for Marcel Camus's *L'Oiseau de paradis* in 1961.[332] That said, the work was later set upon Princess Buppha Devi in King Sihanouk's 1966 film *Apsara*. This helped to popularize the dance amongst the Khmer people, with the result that *Robam Apsara* has come to represent the highest in Khmer notions of feminine grace and ethnic and national identity today.

Princess Buppha Devi in *Robam Apsara*. Screen shot source:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbhoH4UZjd8

King Sihanouk continued directing and producing films that depicted Khmer classical dance, providing larger access to the court tradition and augmenting his political aura amongst the people. *Chhaya Lea Angkor*, made in 1967, uses Khmer dancers to depict an allegory of good versus evil. And in *Le Cortege Royal* (1969), dancers pay tribute to him with offerings of gold and silver flowers. Prior to this Queen Kossamak commissioned an American film crew to document the palace troupe in *The Royal Ballet of Cambodia*. The film, released in 1965, shows the dancers in rehearsal, ritual, and performance in the palace and at the temples of Angkor.

Queen Kossamak Nearyrath (right) with her husband King Suramarit in 1956. Courtesy of the Southeast Asia Digital Library, Northern Illinois University.

Ultimately, of the two royals though, it was the Queen who would have the most impact upon the dancers and the art form. She supervised rehearsals, working with artists such as Lok Khun Meak, Mam Dak Peay, Hang Thun Hak, and others to improve the technical and artistic rigor of the company. Costuming elements such as *sbai* size and skirt patterns were made to be more petite, creating a more subtle refinement that set a standard for those worn today. The painting of the face and body white with *yihun* powder was discontinued.[333] Dances were also shortened for palace programs and excerpts from dance dramas came to be reinterpreted as short dances. Any remaining works priorly sung in Thai were translated under the Queen's charge,[334] and certain dances and dance dramas that were popular during her father's reign were eliminated from the repertoire altogether.[335]

Robam Chun Por, *Robam Makar*, and *Robam Buong Suong Yokon* were choreographed or re-choreographed by Mam Dak Peay.[336] And *Robam Pka Meas Pka Prak, Robam Tevet, Robam Chos Srang*, and *Robam Tep Monorom* (and more) were choreographed or re-choreographed by Mam Yann.[337] Under the Queen's direction, the latter dance, which was originally an intimate duet, became a harmonious spectacle of twelve, eighteen, and sometimes even more dancers. "The tradition of large dances of this sort was a stylistic convention of the ancient religious offertory dances to the spirits . . . The result was a danced ritual of delicate precision set in spectacular theatricality."[338]

Robam Apsara, whose opening solo was completely new choreography, incorporated an entire section of choreography, music, and lyrical verses from the drama of *Preah Samuth Neang Puth Somaly* for its second half. Further, movements associated with certain melodies such as *smeu*, used for the entrance of an important character, and *lea*, used for

the ending of short dances, came to be standardized. In fact, the contemporary structure of many short dance works of the Khmer canon can be traced to this period.

One of the biggest changes of this time was Queen Kossamak's decision to have monkey roles enacted by male dancers. After seeing the *khaol* troupe of Wat Svay Andet perform, she incorporated some dancers into the royal company.[339] Prior to this—in modern memory, anyways—monkey roles were performed by women and bore much more similarity in style to the other roles. Emphasizing extreme acrobatic ability with a high degree of naturalism however, monkey roles now stood in greater contrast to the dignified refinement of the other three roles. Even today, this convention is maintained, with the qualities of the character allowing for it to offer glances, scratches of the crotch, and slightly unsynchronized movements that break from the formalism of dramatic action. In this way, monkey roles create a sense of organic realism on what can be considered by some as a rigidly ordered stage.

Queen Kossamak also encouraged other male dancers in the court. Chheng Phon, a theater artist known for his performances as a clown, who resurrected Khmer shadow puppetry in the 1960s and worked alongside his colleagues to basically invent the genre of Khmer folk dance, was noted to start from ground zero among rows of young female students.[340] Male members of royalty were encouraged to perform male and demon roles as well. One day, while rehearsing the role of Preah Vorachhun at the Khmer Arts Theater in Takhmao, a teacher unaffiliated with the company sat and watched me astutely. She later said to me, "You remind me of being a young girl and watching Mchas Ksatra Sophilu dance in the palace. He was very flexible and refined just like you."[341] Mchas Ksatra Sophilu is the short, perhaps affectionate name of Prince Sisowath Monisisowath.

In this time both Queen Kossamak and King Sihanouk played upon existing French accord given to the art form—colonial exotification and romanticizations of antiquity—to fashion a more visible and robust international image of regal tradition. Taking after the Europeans, they further propagated the palace company as "The Royal Ballet of Cambodia." The dancers never spoke to photojournalists or filmmakers personally[342] and performed inside and outside of Cambodia for ritual and political purposes. For example, the entire troupe toured China in 1956 while others "accompanied [King Sihanouk] to the United States in 1958, to the United Arab Republic and Yugoslavia in 1959, to Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Mongolia and China in 1960, to Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia in November-December 1962, to India and China in January 1963, and to France in 1964."[343]

Under the direction of Queen Kossamak, during the reigns of her son King Sihanouk and her husband King Suramarit, Khmer classical dance became a potent symbol of independence. Through live performances, films, and photographs, the monarchs propagated the royalty's newly reclaimed power and authority domestically and abroad. The Queen, who remains an unmatched patron in the modern history of the art form, initiated what some have referred to as a "renaissance" of a sort, and a process of "Khmerization" that fueled a redefinition of existing works as well as the creation of new pieces. More than ever, the dance and Khmerness now stood in contrast to nearly one

hundred years of French domination. It also, more than ever, stood in opposition to Thainess and the nationalist and imperialist programs from which the latter took life. Artistic sensibilities associated with the Thai style however—lightness of movement, broader arm angles, low and staccato *deav*—would remain visible under the direction of Queen Kossamak. And it was only after the ensuing civil war and genocide that Thai elements were ultimately eliminated in Cambodia, when Khmer dance artists found themselves more than ever to be the ultimate caretakers of their ancient lineage and tradition.

THE KHMER REPUBLIC AND KHMER DANCE BEYOND THE MONARCHY

The Classical Khmer Ballet in Times Square, New York City. Source: Unknown, used under terms of Fair Use.

A decade after independence, the Kingdom of Cambodia found itself increasingly drawn into the Vietnam War. And, as a result of Head of State Norodom Sihanouk's neutrality policies, Viet Cong and Northern Vietnamese forces infiltrated Khmer territory. United States leaders responded with covert airstrikes on Khmer land in 1965, with President Richard Nixon "authoriz[ing] for the first time the use of long range B-52 heavy bombers to carpet bomb Cambodia" in 1969.[344] The civilian casualties caused outrage amongst rural Khmer people, allowing for the rise of a then fledgling Khmer Rouge. With the urging of Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, General Lon Nol staged a coup d'etat—deposing Norodom Sihanouk and establishing the Khmer Republic in 1970.

It was in this environment of political instability and uncertainty that the Classical Khmer Ballet of Cambodia—as the royal dancers had come to be known—taught, rehearsed, and performed. With many members of the monarchy such as Queen Kossamak in exile, they found themselves without a powerful patron and furthermore became civil servants of the new government. Training of students was relocated to the University of Fine Arts while company rehearsals remained inside the palace.[345]

Of this period, former palace star Menh Kossany has said:

"The lives of dancers in the era of King Sihanouk was more prosperous than during the Lon Nol era, because we had a decent salary and even received more payments for performances. We had food prepared for us

already, with every type of dessert, and even got paid more after performances ended. The King was very gentle with artists and did not let us do anything other than rehearse and take care of ourselves. But when Lon Nol rose to power, we didn't really rehearse and take care of ourselves because we were busy dodging bullets. Some dancers ran along with their families while others sought new means of survival. The Lon Nol era was a very difficult time."[346]

Despite this dip in quality of life, the dancers and the art form they practiced continued to occupy a central and celebrated place within Khmer society by playing a key role in the Khmer Republic's ambassadorial work. In 1971, they opened the Afro-Asian Music Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The company garnered rave reviews during their American performances, of which "[s]o called 'multicultural performance' . . . was unprecedented in the early 1970s."[347]

Classical Khmer Ballet of Cambodia at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JK1STGOia88

In addition, the company performed abridged versions of *Robam Apsara* and *Robam Moni Mekhala* in a televised program hosted by Faubion Bowers. In it, an eighteen year-old Vorn Savay briefly describes her training to the scholar after performing to the voice of Em Theay and more. Later, Chea Samy is shown placing the crown of Moni Mekhala on Menh Kossany and the mask of Ream Eyso on Soth Sam On. This scene, and the ensuing performance of "one of the oldest dances still performed anywhere in the world," is especially invaluable to me as these latter three women were my teacher's teachers.

Classical Khmer Ballet of Cambodia in *Goddess Dancers of Cambodia*. Part 1. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2NdtbZAL8U

Classical Khmer Ballet of Cambodia in *Goddess Dancers of Cambodia*. Part 2. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RJ86XbAIw0

The Classical Khmer Ballet of Cambodia continued on to Canada and later on to Indonesia where it performed in the International Ramayana Festival. It seems that tensions ran high between Khmer and Thai artists during this performance, of which an "eminent" Thai viewer "condescended" that the Khmer one-hour compression of the *Reamker* was "'a good, fast, modern, comprehensive adaptation which told the story and was good for foreigners.'"[348] This viewer added that "Thais would never do the same thing."[349] Despite this, the company would later tour to Thailand in 1974.

All of these performances, although not political in content, served a political purpose at the time. The dancers were used as goodwill ambassadors to nations in which the Khmer Republic sought the aide of in the face of an increasingly robust Khmer Rouge. But alas, no support was to come and soon artillery shells would land in the palace during company rehearsals and injure a dancer.[350] Faced with the growing pressures of war, the company began to disintegrate, disbanding altogether when the radical communists took over Phnom Penh and Cambodia.

In the short life of the Classical Khmer Ballet of Cambodia then, we are presented with an important juncture in Khmer dance history. The dancers, continuing on with their training and performance without the patronage of royalty, clearly illustrate that Khmer dance could live beyond the walls of the palace. This reality has always had historical precedence of course, with non-royal elites offering dancers to temples during the Angkor era, traveling and provincial dance groups in the modern era (and before then too), and the troupes of M. Catalone, "'vice-roi of Battambang,'" and Navy Colonel de Monteiro serving as but a few examples.[351] This is important, as it shows how Khmer dance can continue to survive despite the realities of a weakened court or during a time such as 1835 – 1841 when there was "neither a resident monarch nor a palace for resident dancers."[352]

More visibly than ever, the dance began to take the identity of a people's tradition.[353] And it had always been one in reality. Despite what staunch Khmer and even Thai nationalists propagate—the prior for continuity and the latter in an attempt to break the ancient lineage of Khmer dance—it was never the sole possession nor prerogative of royalty. Calling the art form as a whole "*lakhaon preahreacheatrap*" (theater of royal treasure) or, in English, the "royal ballet," is therefore gravely incorrect and dismissive of the very real contributions of many people to the art form's continuity. If we are to believe that Khmer dance survived intact in Cambodia from pre-Angkor times to our present day—of which it did—we cannot believe nor perpetuate the myth that it is solely a royal art form. Toni Shapiro-Phim, for example, notes:

> "Though Khmer classical dance is known as dance of the court tradition, Khmer artists acknowledge that the dance's foundations are to be found among the common people, not among the royal family or among the palace compound. Most of the dancers and musicians I interviewed concurred that it was the people, in the villages, who originally found meaning and pleasure in the movements, in the stories, in the music. It was the royalty who had either the resources, and perhaps the foresight, to nurture and encourage the blossoming of the art, or the selfishness to isolate and conceal it (depending on who you ask)."[354]

That said, the Classical Khmer Ballet of Cambodia is an example of how patronage can change, and governments too, but in the end it is—and always has been—a sole group of

people who bear the ultimate ability and responsibility of caring for the ancient dance: the artists. Only artists ourselves can assert any form of ownership over our movement heritage; and only we can claim ownership over the historical, conceptual, spiritual, and physical knowledge living in our individual bodies.

In reality, dance during the Khmer Republic was the beginning of a twenty-year period in which there was no monarchy. It was a moment before a period of inhumane violence, one where Khmer artists would come to prove their love and devotion for their venerable tradition. In doing so, they would reveal the resilience of art, beauty, and the human spirit in the face of one of the worst tragedies in the history of mankind. The monarchy would eventually return to Cambodia in 1992. But even then, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia—named here as a company—would only just be one player in a larger field. This has always been the case in Cambodia; and in 2013, Brian Seibert of the New York Times precisely noted: "Independence from the state is the trend."[355]

DANCING THROUGH TERROR: KHMER CLASSICAL DANCE DURING THE KHMER ROUGE REGIME

In a 1993 article published in the Los Angeles Times, Vorn Savay rationalized the savage brutality that she and many people in Cambodia endured from April 1975 to January 1979:

"'One kills another because of lack of culture in one's mind. Culture makes people with good memories and peace in their minds and their relations with each other. If the Khmer Rouge had known our culture, the cruelty in their minds would have lessened.'"[356]

Presented with this rationale however, journalist Judith Coburn reports that the dancer's teacher "Chea Samy look[ed] away with embarrassment."[357] For in actuality, Pol Pot, the leader of the ultra-radical communists who overtook Cambodia in that nearly four-year period, was in fact closely tied to the higher echelons of Khmer society. His eldest sister, for example, was one of the king's favorites.[358]

Born in the village of Sbauv as Sar Saloth, he left his humble backgrounds through a palace connection. His cousin, none other than Lok Khun Meak, wife of King Monivong and a most influential dance teacher during the king's reign and after, brought his brother into the palace as a clerk. The latter would then bring the six year-old Sar Saloth to live and study in Phnom Penh. The younger Sar gained a scholarship to study in Paris and it was there where he became radicalized, working for the communist party.[359] Chea Samy, who had married his brother after the death of King Monivong in 1941, didn't hear much from Sar Saloth upon his return to Cambodia. And in 1963 he disappeared without trace into the jungle to launch his revolutionary machinations.

With this in mind, it is not hard to see why the old dance master reacted to her student's words in such a manner. For, as "a well-known political figure in Phnom Penh" relayed to Bengali journalist Amitav Ghosh, "Revolutions and coups d'etat always start in the courtyards of the palace . . . It's the people within who realise that the King is ordinary, while everyone else takes him for a god."[360] This is echoed by the fact that amongst Pol Pot's clique were descendants of Samdach Chavea Chhuon, the palace minister who accompanied King Sisowath on the 1906 tour to France who was also the leading expert of Khmer classical dance in his day.[361]

Twisted as it may be, due to their upbringings amongst the court elite, it is no surprise that Khmer Rouge leaders sought the glory of Angkor and the Khmer Empire that birthed it. They mistakenly saw the *baray*, large man-made reservoirs of the Angkor area, as the source of the empire's agricultural success and military might. Inspired by Zhou Daguan's mentions of "three or even four rice harvests a year" during Angkorean times, the Khmer Rouge were unrealistically nostalgic "in [their] efforts to revolutionize [rice] production."[362] Fusing their communist ideals with a racist nationalism, Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge leaders attempted to create an egalitarian, agrarian peasant society—what they created was genocide.

Upon taking control of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, they forced the evacuation of an estimated two million people, a large portion of whom had come to the city only recently to escape American bombings and border conflicts.[363] Marching for days, the Khmer Rouge relocated them to labor camps where they were considered "new people" in need of re-education.

Dancers, in order to survive, hid their identities as all forms of elite culture were to be eradicated. Like the doctors, teachers, lawyers, and other educated Khmer people of the middle and upper classes, they were targeted for execution to realize the radicals' imaginings of progress and equality. The wearing of glasses meant the ability to afford medical care, light skin meant the luxury of not working in the fields, speaking a foreign language meant an education—all were reasonable cause for immediate death in the new regime.

Menh Kossany went from being a star dancer of the palace and republic to a hairdresser in a labor camp.[364] Her teacher Chea Samy, not knowing who Pol Pot was despite having once raised him, did not receive any special treatment either. The former consort of King Monivong told her interrogators that she sold vegetables in the market and when they questioned her lightness of step, she "told them it was because [she] had to walk like on eggshells because of the chicken crap in the market."[365] Proeung Chhieng, the star performer of monkey roles under the charge of Queen Kossamak and during the Khmer Republic, drew upon his performative abilities to survive as well. "[H]is expertise in clowning and mime helped him persuade the interrogators at his labour camp that he was an illiterate lunatic."[366]

Others had not been so lucky however. Along the forced march out of Phnom Penh, a dancer who felt like she could not go on made offerings to the spirit of Lok Ta Moni Eisey, the ultimate teacher spirit in Khmer dance, and the spirits of deceased teachers for their aide. Her prayers were disrupted however and she was dragged away and murdered by a Khmer Rouge cadre.[367] Lok Khun Meak, despite being Pol Pot's kin, received no special privileges either. Like Chea Samy, she did not know who the Khmer Rouge leader was (and the regime did not recognize families anyways, breaking them apart and brainwashing children). Lok Khun Meak would eventually die of starvation in a labor camp.[368] Her daughter, caught trying to buy rice with gold, had her breasts chopped off before being killed.[369] The celebrated *neay rong* star and teacher Sam Sakhan was executed at Tuol Sleng prison.[370]

Vocalist Em Theay would later describe the pain of losing her children:

"They separated me from all of my children, even the very young. When I learned that one of my children had died, I requested the Khmer Rouge authorities to see my child's body. They denied me this. The next day I was forced to go to work in the fields as if nothing had happened. I cried inside, this was so sad and so cruel . . . When the same thing happened after the death of another of my children, I collapsed while working in the rice fields."[371]

Forced into slave labor along with the rest of the country, with no medicine and what could barely be called rice gruel as food, the dance artists—if not killed themselves—also

experienced traumatic violence in their acts as witness. Chheng Phon explained to a group of journalists in December 1989:

"I am a writer, and yet I cannot find words to describe the Pol Pot regime. I saw Pol Pot's men kill eight children in front of their mothers, and then kill the mothers themselves. Seeing this, I nearly had a heart attack."[372]

The harsh conditions meant that many artists found themselves on the line between life and death. Often times, they secretly prayed to the *kru* (teacher spirits) for their survival as well as those of their family, peers, and teachers. Chheng Phon, for example, asked of Lok Ta Moni Eisey: "Please Lok Ta . . . Look after my family and me, and all Cambodia's artists. We are suffering so much."[373] In fact, during this time, "dancers risked their lives, or traded invaluable grains of rice for incense to enact secretive rituals which would connect them to their [*kru*], and to their pasts."[374] One point at the mercy of malaria and starvation, for example, Vorn Savay:

"[F]elt that if she could perform a *sampeah kru* she might survive. Dancers perform this ceremony in honor of their teachers, their ancestors and the gods asking their spirits to enter them so they can dance. Savay knew she couldn't tell the Khmer Rouge it was a classical dance ritual, so she said it was a folk remedy, which the cadres were encouraging to stamp out Western medicine. She lit incense and candles, made offerings of coconut and betel nut, and whispered the chants to herself. Slowly, she recovered . . . The teacher to whom she secretly dedicated that ceremony was Chea Samy."[375]

So even in this period of hellish violence, one where Khmer culture was being destroyed "atom by atom,"[376] the spirit of Khmer classical dance remained intact. Expression of their dance and spirituality—secretly inside their minds and hearts and discreetly in their surrounding physical worlds—was a form of resistance to the inhumane conditions that Khmer artists of the time faced. Even with such grave limitations surrounding them, Khmer classical dancers preserved their roles as messengers to the ancestor and teacher spirits, and also to the gods. Soth Sam On once recounted to Toni Shapiro-Phim:

"I set about preparing some offerings, peeking through the slats in the walls of the house to make sure no one was around. I had hidden some banana leaves, two eggs, and some incense and candles . . . I began tearing and rolling the leaves into cones, and arranging them on a short banana stalk. I had only enough for a three-level offering [of *baysei*], though I should have made a seven- or nine-level as befitting the power of the character I dance [the giant]. I placed an egg on each offering, topped with a candle, and, sneaking one last look out into the darkness, I lit the incense. I prayed that all of us, all of us who used to dance together, would find each other again . . . In the shaft of light from the moon, I started to dance. Slowly I moved as I sang softly to myself. I was so afraid that someone would hear or see . . . I danced *buong suong* (dance of supplication and offering) to let the *tevoda* and [*kru*] know I was thinking of them, and to pray for their help in reuniting us."[377]

In fact, during precious moments alone, "some professional dancers discreetly bent and massaged their fingers and wrists . . . so as not to lose the suppleness it had taken them a lifetime to gain."[378] And, in certain cases, like that of Em Theay, dancers found that openly sharing their talents could actually be life-saving:

"Because they knew I was a [dancer], my life was spared, but not my children. Normally they considered entertainment business-related people to be parasites on society, and many were killed. Instead they found

me useful. The local warlord liked my singing, so they asked me to sing and dance for them often. Later on they also used me to sing in a camp for orphaned children."[379]

Chheng Phon, "the man who was to summon Cambodian dance back from the grave," snuck into the jungle one night where he danced alone in the darkness.

"Conjuring up that night [later in 1993] . . . his right hand [became] the bud of a flower, then a leaf, then a blossom, then a fruit, the exquisite symbols of life and death . . . that ends Cambodian dance performances . . . A child watched Chheng Phon that night and reported his 'crime' to the Khmer Rouge, who threatened to kill him for being a reactionary."[380]

Chheng Phon went on to elaborate to Judith Coburn, "Many artists died then, many because they had no freedom to express themselves . . . To dance is our rice, our nourishment."[381] In fact, in the nightmare unleashed by the Khmer Rouge, one where education, healthcare, religion, money, and the arts were formally banned, where ethnic minorities such as Cham, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai were tortured and killed, and Khmer people's families broken, murdered, and silenced before their very eyes, "a third of Cambodia's entire population had been lost."[382] Succumbing to the slave labor, disease, torture, and execution that everyone faced was an estimated ninety percent of Khmer dancers and their artist and intellectual colleagues.

There is an important lesson here of course, for Cambodia today and in its future. At its root—no matter how horrible their actions were—the Khmer Rouge were attempting to break the harsh realities of authoritarian rule. This has been the style of kingship and power in Cambodia since the time of Angkor and before; and for countless centuries the overwhelming majority of the population has lived in destitute poverty while a tiny few prosper. The Khmer Rouge was a reminder that unchecked power, privilege, and inequality does not work—neither as a slow, quiet boiling that came before them nor as the extreme eruption that marked their rule. Eyes blinded by racism, nationalism, and political ideology, the Khmer Rouge regime went astray and became the authoritarian government they wished to liberate the people from. "The Khmer Rouge's vision of returning Cambodia to the glory of the Khmer Empire had only reinvented slavery, feudal repression, mass starvation and disease."[383] And the cycle of violence would continue to turn.

Chheng Phon would later offer an alternative from within Khmer culture to this reality: "In democracy the people are at the top—they are the most important. In Buddhism it is the same . . . Buddha is democracy, from the king to the common man."[384]

That said, Pol Pot's regime was eventually ousted by Vietnamese troops allied with a rival Khmer Rouge faction. Before this however, Chea Samy had already received a sign of their coming end. Out in the fields where she was set to work, she heard the familiar singing of birds turn into Pali chanting. Surprised, she said to herself, "This must mean that religion has come back. It won't be long now . . . Religion has come back. That means the dance will come back, too."[385] As the end of the regime drew near in 1978, Chea Samy was washing dishes in a communal kitchen when Khmer Rouge cadres hung an image of Pol Pot. It was then that she found out that "the butcher"—as her husband had come to call him—the man who had destroyed their lives and that of so many others was none other than her own

brother-in-law.[386] Determined, it was she, Chheng Phon, Soth Sam On, Em Theay and the few surviving others who would revive Khmer classical dance in Cambodia, an art form that was now beginning to spread all over the world with the refugee artists who carried it within their hearts and bodies.

Much like Khmer classical dancers waiting to perform, our costumes of gold, silk, and gold thread catching light on an unlit stage and theater, the art form revealed signs of life and presence even in the oppressive darkness of the Khmer Rouge regime. Like a line of sacred magicians nearly destroyed but triumphant, the dancers would resurface to share their knowledge and heritage, reclaiming their place and role in the transformation of world society. A new chapter, new dance would begin in Khmer dance history, for it is the post-Khmer Rouge period where Khmer dance grows and evolves most markedly, inside Cambodia and beyond its borders. This is not, of course, without the contributions of the priorly mentioned artists, however. Chea Samy, in her constant twists of fate, would become the most senior dance teacher in the work to counter the destruction wreaked by her brother-in-law. "'We will preserve this kind of dance forever,' she [would later vow], 'as a document for new generations of Khmer.'"[387]

THE REVIVAL OF KHMER CLASSICAL DANCE INSIDE CAMBODIA

Neak Kru Sophiline once shared with me, that as a young student at the newly opened School of Fine Arts, she held her hands in prayer as she watched the most senior artists of the time make offerings to the Khmer dance altar. Chheng Phon, her uncle and the newly elected Minister of Culture and Information, lit incense and candles. He then whispered to Chea Samy and Soth Sam On, "This is our last chance."[388]

With so much lost and the country in a state of destruction, the endangered art of Khmer classical dance faced an uphill battle for survival. Yet, despite the difficulties of the environment—the country constantly on the brink of civil war, malnourished people everywhere, infrastructure in shambles—there was nonetheless a sense of optimism. Speaking of the time, Proeung Chhieng once said, "During the reign of Pol Pot we were like fish taken from water and thrown onto land. Now, at last, we are back in the water."[389]

Before all of this, immediately after the Khmer Rouge were driven out, those who chose to stay in Cambodia immediately walked back to the places they had known in search of normalcy. Talking seemed to erupt in the country after a period of terror-stricken silence, with many celebrating the survival of their friends and family, openly mourning the deaths of others, and sharing the horrors that they had endured. Em Theay, reunited with a former student, began teaching and performing on the road; the two "traded dance for rice to eat" on their journey home.[390] Menh Kossany immediately found work as a dance teacher in Pursat and Kampong Chhnang provinces as she made her way back to Phnom Penh.[391]

Meanwhile Chheng Phon and his student Proeung Chhieng met each other on their journeys back to Phnom Penh. There, they "found the school of dance in ruins, [the] antique, ivory inlaid musical instruments burned and the fabulously valuable royal costumes and headdresses of gold and gems stolen."[392] Chheng Phon immediately initiated a search for surviving artists to begin the arduous task of reviving the sacred art form. People were sent to the provinces to find those lucky enough to remain alive while Chheng Phon himself stood watch by the road in the provincial town of Kampong Thom to spot dancers who might pass by. Chea Samy was found on her way to her hometown by a dance student; one costume dresser and one instrument maker were found as well.[393]

A dance school was formed in Kampong Thom during this time, of which many of the students were orphans. Often times, they were the children and relatives of artists themselves. Neak Kru Sophiline—who would later start a new chapter in Khmer dance history—would take her first lessons at this school with Soth Sam On after Chheng Phon found her and her family in Battambang.[394]

In 1980, a festival was staged in Phnom Penh to finally determine the number of artists who remained alive. A call to dancers, musicians, and more was placed all over the country—of which it was realized that only one out of ten artists were able to survive. It represented a national catharsis of a sort, as one observer reported the constant cries and

sobs of the people as they watched the dancing. Of this, Eva Mysliwiec said, "[Y]ou could have sailed out of there in a boat."[395]

Later in 1981, Chheng Phon was elected as Minister of Culture and Information and Chea Samy elected to represent Kandal Province in the National Assembly (she was the only woman in the governmental body, with nearly 97% of the vote).[396] That same year, the School of Fine Arts was opened. Many students resided at the school Monday through Saturday while artists were provided housing in the nearby White Building. As was the case in Kampong Thom, many of the students were orphans. *Exercices*, a German film from 1980 or 1981, shows all of the orphaned students of the newly opened school, who are joined by those with parents after they finish dancing *kbach bat* or basic movements.

Exercices. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuY_EykJDSg

Acutely aware of the significance of their practice in this historical moment, teachers conducted class with a heightened charge. Chea Samy once said, "'I try to teach the students very seriously . . . so they will be even better than the dancers of the old regime.'"[397] Under her direction, ensemble dancers became more unified and precise, arm angles more compact and *deav* higher, and the dancing heavier with a more centered quality of stillness. This is significant as Chea Samy—entering the dance first as a student of Lok Khun Meak who represented the Khmer style of movement—redefined the technique to reflect her lineage and individual vision. Chea Samy in turn set a movement standard that still exists today in both Cambodia and the diaspora; first because teachers of rivaling styles did not return to Phnom Penh and secondly because her students would eventually become the leading teachers in the diaspora.

Robam Monosanchetana, performed by the first class to graduate from the School of Fine Arts after the Khmer Rouge regime. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bsnpxw8Rm2c

In this intense environment of redefinition and rebuilding—of the dances and music, of the crowns and costumes, of the culture and society—the dance students matured quickly and were soon performing domestically and abroad in India, Vietnam, and more. During a tour through the provinces, one filled with the dangers of landmines and Khmer Rouge forces, Neak Kru Sophiline recalled:

"One morning, we were eating at a noodle shop. The vendor approached us and asked if we were the dancers from yesterday. She then told us that the Khmer Rouge had come with the intent to blow up the stage at the performance. They loved the dancing so much however, that they stayed, watched, and then left . . . Dance saved my life."[398]

Amongst all of this, the artists were forced to make some "concessions" in order to keep Khmer classical dance alive in a second communist government allied with Vietnam.[399] Cultural differences with the latter—which had been under Chinese domination for 1,000 years and was most particularly influenced by the French during the colonial period—sometimes led to misunderstandings. Proeung Chhieng, for example, said:

"'There were a lot of discussions, and some Vietnamese experts said they wanted to help revive Cambodian art and culture . . . They suggested they could buy us all ballet shoes—they thought we danced barefoot because we were poor . . . They didn't understand that in our dance the entire leg and foot is part of the ritual effect and wearing a shoe would destroy the line.'"[400]

Fearing that the new government would be hostile to the art form due to its historical roots, programs, like in the years of the Khmer Republic, were often tailored to combine

both classical and folk dances. Different from before, however, were the new lyrics and meanings given to the dances. Chea Samy shrugged at Judith Coburn when talking about dances whose lyrics said "'congratulation to communism.'"[401] And in *Robam Tep Monorom*, instead of "*ksatra ksatrei*" (princes and princesses) dancing in a circle, it became "*tamng pros tamng srei*" (even the men, even the women). Furthermore, in *Robam Apsara*, Mera now emerged from the temple walls to celebrate how Cambodia was "liberated" from the Khmer Rouge on January 7, 1979. Her attendants, instead of the colorful skirts of the past, all wore red—communist red.

Robam Apsara, performed by the first class to graduate from the School of Fine Arts after the Khmer Rouge regime. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDh5FLfffho

Neither Chea Samy, who wrote many of the new lyrics for the dances, nor Chheng Phon were communists. Nor did they have political ambitions. They joined the government as they understood it to be the pragmatic, most effective way to revive the art form. They did what was necessary to keep the art form alive. In fact, the lyrics of certain dances such as *Robam Chun Por* and *Robam Monosanchetana* managed to remain untouched in the period. But all dances had to be re-interpreted to fit the government's agenda. The *buong suong* ritual, associated with royalty, was suspended during this period[402] while *sampeah kru* became prayers for "national tranquility."[403] In December 1992 for example, contrary to *sampeah kru* ceremonies of prior years, Proeung Chhieng "prayed for peace for Cambodia, a lasting peace that might create a positive atmosphere in which the people, and the arts, could flourish."[404] Furthermore, sacred dances, although the same in movement, music, and lyrics, were reinterpreted as well:

"Former palace principal dancer Menh Kossany has recalled in interviews that in preparation for a tour to the Soviet Union in the 1980s, an official from the Soviet embassy in Phnom Penh visited a rehearsal. The Khmer dance teachers kept the spiritual potency of Moni Mekhala to themselves, explaining the story as one of a strong woman who modeled communist self-sufficiency and loyalty to the nation . . . Even if the ceremonial aspect of the story's enactment was put on hold during the Communist era, the artists maintained their spiritual relationship to the teachers and spirits of the dance, and of this role in particular."[405]

Not all were satisfied with the compromises however. Vorn Savay, in an expression of anti-Vietnamese sentiment—nurtured by centuries of war amongst other things—left the country in 1981. Word spread throughout the refugee camps and within the diaspora of the ballet shoes and doctored lyrics, causing anger over the "Vietnamization" of Khmer culture amongst dancers and not alike. Many claimed that "only the shell of Khmer dance [remained] in Phnom Penh," to whom Chea Samy replied, "[B]ut when they see [the spirit and level of dancing in Cambodia] for themselves, there is no comparison."[406]

Chheng Phon also had some choice words:

"Who can replace a culture? . . . We and the Vietnamese agree: You can force me to eat rice, but you cannot force me to think anything you want. A tank may be able to run over the body, but it cannot destroy the spirit of a people."[407]

Amidst this atmosphere of political oversight, mistrust and disapproval from the diaspora community, and continued fighting between Khmer Rouge forces and the Phnom Penh government, the artists continued to revive, reconstruct, and choreograph dances at the School of Fine Arts. By 1989, after years of recruitment through radio broadcast, word of mouth, and an established reputation through performance, "competition for admission to the school was fierce. Of 1,000 applicants, only 75 passed the entrance exam."[408] In keeping with the master-apprentice teaching style of before—very likely in practice since the time of Angkor and before—teachers hand-picked students to practice privately with them in their homes. The relationship was often like that of mother or father and child in such a scenario.

Dancers from the School of Fine Arts, many of whom were the first generation to graduate since the fall of the Khmer Rouge, were invited to perform at the Los Angeles Festival directed by esteemed opera director Peter Sellars in 1990. There were many issues leading up to the event however as the U.S. State Department did not recognize the Vietnamese-backed government in Phnom Penh and did not want the event to be misconstrued as a diplomatic act. Chheng Phon, as a member of the government, was denied a visa to visit American organizers and the Khmer government responded by not allowing Proeung Chhieng, who was only supposed to assist him on the trip, to go despite being granted one.[409] Despite all of this, the performance happened and evolved into a national tour.

After their performances at the Los Angeles Arboretum, the company performed at the Terrace Theater in Long Beach to a packed audience. Many clapped upon the introduction of certain popular dances, elated to see dances and an art form they were afraid had been lost. Some however saw the dancers as tools of the government and used the moment to

protest. Threats of violence, abduction, and murder were common. Many people tried to get the dancers to defect, buying them food and shoes and clothes and more. This atmosphere of adoration and unease ensued throughout the national tour, with dancers defecting and others seeking asylum.[410]

Star dancer Yim Devi was nearly abducted in New York. And before a performance at the Joyce Theater, Proeung Chhieng—who was directing the tour as Chheng Phon was again not granted a visa—found a bullet in his drawer in the dressing room. This warranted a meeting in the theater's basement in which the dancers discussed whether to perform or not. The show went on, however, after Pen Sok Huon—a star performer of male roles in the 1970s—said, "We are dancers. We are like soldiers on stage. If we die dancing, it's the most appropriate way to go."[411]

After the tour, five dancers ended up staying in the United States. The rest returned to a heartbroken Chea Samy and Chheng Phon, who felt as if their efforts had been lost and the country would continue to lose its intellect and talent. Neak Kru Sophiline—after marrying John Shapiro, the brother of cultural anthropologist Toni Shapiro who was integral in the documentation of dance during this period—would move to Los Angeles in 1991. That same year, Chheng Phon, a devout Buddhist who was never happy in government, left his post. Chea Samy continued to teach until 1994 and died that year.

Chea Samy teaches young students at the School of Fine Arts in 1994. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCKH0fBT6Y8

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Some foreigners who witnessed the first festival in 1980—the one used to determine the number of survivors—expressed their surprise. Surrounded by so much destruction, poverty, and upheaval, Khmer dance artists still made our tradition the highest priority. A Catholic relief worker told Amitav Ghosh, "'I could not believe that in a situation like that people would be thinking of music and dance.'"[412] Yet it is not surprising when we understand the deep significance dance has had in Khmer society in its more than 1,000 years of existence.

The post-Khmer Rouge period clearly shows how Khmer dance can survive without the monarchy and in a time of heavy political unrest. This is extremely important when we think about the post-Angkor period for which we have very little but enough evidence to establish that Khmer classical dance has always existed in the country since then. Sure: the circumstances are not exactly the same. But given the ritual significance of the art form and the cyclical nature of history, we can bet that dance persisted following the court's withdrawal from Angkor. They, at least, did not experience a crippling, inhumane genocide that targeted culture for destruction.

Chheng Phon, Chea Samy, Soth Sam On, Em Theay and the artists working after the Khmer Rouge regime would unknowingly serve as living proof as to how artistic communities can rebuild and thrive following and during moments of war and trauma. Their work represents the survival of artistic legacies, the uplifting of the spirit of their people, and the healing of a nation. Chheng Phon would later tell reporters, "We couldn't wait . . . Dancing was the only way to fight emotional illness."[413]

In that same interview conducted in 1989, he mentioned his invitation to the Czech Minister of Culture to see his "hospital" full of broken sculptures. He shared with the reporters a vision: "It is of an *apsara* with all its limbs and its head cut off. It is flying in the sky, away from me, and I do not know when or how I can put it back together again."[414] This is an apt image for Khmer dance immediately following the Pol Pot regime, in which the artists worked to rebuild their art form gesture by gesture, student by student, and dance by dance.

It is impressive, magical even, that within the brevity of a few years, a new generation of dancers was already performing, reminding Khmer people and the world of our beauty, strength, and resilience. Classical dance, and all the arts in Cambodia really, now had an added purpose of protesting the horrific violence and injustice that the artists and our people experienced—and it will forevermore have this purpose. Regarding this, and the efforts of the artists, Toni Shapiro-Phim has written: "Creativity is a form of resistance to violation. It is an attack on the fracture of the self, an attempt to determine fundamental aspects of one's existence."[415]

With the art form and the country in a state of ruin, it is no surprise that a great impetus to preserve all that was left marked this period of dance practice. It would become a framework that would be interpreted by the artists who followed the leadership of Chheng

Phon, Chea Samy, and Soth Sam On in Cambodia—sometimes stiflingly so. That said, acts of preservation and reconstruction are in and of themselves creative, as it is not possible to be exactly the same as those who came before us. Two people, under the same teacher, dancing the same dance, at the same time, in the same place, cannot perform exactly the same. What makes someone think that we can do so with the past? In the end, our bodies are not the same nor are the experiences that shape how we see the world. The dances themselves don't stay the same either as our societies that imbue them with meaning and value change too.

Having made my points about how Khmer classical dance has survived in Cambodia from the pre-Angkor and Angkor eras to this period—to our present day, a moment in history where no one would question the practice of Khmer dance in the country—I will briefly highlight some points in the ten or so years that followed the leadership of Chheng Phon, Chea Samy, and Soth Sam On in Cambodia.

Immediately in the refugee camps and in the diaspora, surviving artists taught the dance form to a new generation of children. In the case of the latter, they sometimes performed in the earliest days wearing Thai skirts and cardboard crowns with sequins sewn into them. The re-opening of Cambodia to the world would allow for the importation of proper music recordings, costumes, and in fact, dance teachers. Chheng Phon has said of this before an audience in Long Beach, California, "From Angkor Wat, seeds from that earth have been taken here and planted here and will grow and blossom in this new earth."[416] He is right, for now, despite the many challenges that dancers in the diaspora face—lack of access to daily training, the unviability of the dance as a career—some are now able to dance alongside dancers in Cambodia with no less refinement.

On the other hand, the royal family returned in 1992 and the dance lyrics changed accordingly. Princess Buppha Devi would later reconstitute the Royal Ballet of Cambodia drawing from students trained at the Royal University of Fine Arts (formerly the School of Fine Arts). Although proclaimed in 2003, the art of Khmer classical dance would be inscribed onto UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008 through lobby efforts headed by Princess Buppha Devi. The dance school was sold to foreign developers and moved outside of the city and Cambodia's re-opening to the world caused a boom in tourism that increasingly pushes dance towards a form of spectacle and entertainment. And, amidst all of this, an at times detrimental preservationist attitude is perpetuated amongst a majority of the artists—even when they themselves are actively engaged in reinterpretation, change, transformation, and creation.

To that last bit, I would like to share an idea of Chheng Phon: "We should not take culture away from the people and put it into museums. A cultural tradition, after all, is a tradition of creation."[417] In line with his words of wisdom, we will now understand the ways in which Khmer dance relates to its ancient roots by looking at examples of dance today, as expressions of creation. First, we will look at reconstructions of Angkor through dance. Next, Khmer dance ritual. Then, I have collected videos of the many approaches Khmer artists are taking in dance, innovating with it, inside and outside of it, to keep the philosophical and spiritual foundations of the art form alive. Finally, after much insistence

from my peers—and in light of the fact that we only recently have writings from dancers after more than 1,000 years—I will talk about my own artistic practice and the ideas that motivate my work.

In these sections, my voice as an artist will become most pronounced. After all, calling forth the spirits of the past, retracing our histories, is about understanding our present as much as charting higher possibilities for our future. Very recently in Cambodia for example, I heard a former student of Chheng Phon quote his teacher to say the same thing in another way, "*Tov na? Mok pi na? Thveur ei*?" ("Where are you going? Where do you come from? What will you do?")

As there exists no culture of constructive critique within Khmer artistic practice—other than the top-down stick of a teacher—perhaps my words may seem jarring or disrespectful to some. I apologize beforehand. But I have a love for and responsibility to the artistic tradition, and to Cambodia and to humanity, to nurture a culture of dialogue, inquiry, exploration, and growth. How is progress made if we never share our ideas? If we never say the things that need to be said? Chheng Phon would not disagree:

"If you do not know your culture, you cannot bring something new to the culture. People are the masters and the products of their history. Anything made in the twelfth century has its value in the twelfth century, and yet the past has value for the present . . . [Our] task is to write in a way that produces intelligence in people's minds . . . Writers should look at the effect of their writing in producing a culture of intelligence."[418]

In Cambodia and the diaspora today the trend has been to be the product of history. Taking after Chheng Phon however, like the dance that both mirrors and shapes heaven and society, I strive and encourage artists of current and future generations to be both the product and the "master" of our histories.

CONTEMPORARY RECONSTRUCTIONS OF ANGKOR

One day in 2008, I tagged along with Neak Kru Sophiline to Siem Reap in the north of Cambodia. She and select members of her company were to rehearse with esteemed composer Chinary Ung, and I was to visit Angkor for the first time. Stopping by to say hello to the dancers in their room however, I walked into a moment of uncomfortable tension. The television displayed images of Thai soldiers who had encroached into Khmer territory, claiming that the temple of Preah Vihear belonged to Thailand. A dancer, with whom I had conversations earlier about Khmer and Thai relations—myself advocating for peace—looked to me from her place on the floor and asked, "How can you ask us not to hate them? They try to steal everything from us."[419]

This battle for the temple is actually a centuries-long battle for the legacy of Angkor. And, in that, it is a battle for cultural superiority, political might, and economic prosperity as well. Even as far away as India, this intention is revealed in plans for a replica of Angkor Wat that is larger than the original, and when a mystic claimed the temple was constructed in India and shipped piece by piece to Cambodia. Ownership is asserted even further by others, who claim that ancient Khmers were actually of African descent.

Back to Southeast Asia however, there are Thai nationalists who claim that their ancestors completely subsumed, or maybe even destroyed, that lineage and culture, that in fact Khmer traditions today are actually Thai in origin. Some would agree, arguing that the Khmer claim for historical and cultural continuity to Angkor is actually a construction of French colonialism. Hideo Sasagawa, for example, has written: "Discourse which regarded the Cambodian court dance as the Angkorean 'tradition' was also invented under such a fluctuation of colonial encounters."[420]

In actuality though, the temples and the arts and customs associated with them always held political value beyond their religious and spiritual functions. This was the case during their day and before the presence of European colonial powers in the region. Beyond being a religious monument, structures such as Angkor Wat were powerful manifestations of the kings' might and legitimacy.[421] The royal family, as patrons of the source of rain and fertility for which the temples were an expression, legitimized their reign through the dancing bodies of artists serving the same function.

For another example of the manifold value accorded to the temples throughout history, one predating French colonialism in Cambodia and therefore disproving Hideo Sasagawa's assumptions, let us look at this example from 1860 provided by Thai scholar Charnvit Kasetsiri:

"King Rama IV, or King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868), for instance, ordered a Khmer stone temple disassembled and reconstructed on Thai soil, but 'Phra Suphanphisan, after a trip to the ancient Khmer capital at Angkor, informed the King that all the stone temples were too enormous to be taken apart and transported to Siam. Hearing this, the King ordered that Prasat Ta Prohm, a relatively smaller temple, be relocated instead. Four groups of 500 men each were dispatched . . . to deconstruct the *prasat* on the ninth day of the sixth lunar month' . . . [T]he attempt to move the temple structure failed when 'some 300 Khmers came out of the forest and attacked the men who had come to disassemble the temple, killing Phra Suphanphisan, Phra

Wang and one of Phra Suphanphisan's sons. Phra Mahatthai was stabbed, and Phra Yokkrabat was injured. The *phrai* commoners, however, escaped injury by fleeing into the forest.'"[422]

This event corroborated by Khmer oral stories—instead of Thai they were "Chinese Khmer"—reflects the guerrilla warfare with which loosely organized Khmer forces at times "harass[ed] and defeat[ed] a foreign expeditionary force."[423] Importantly however, we must ask ourselves why 300 "*phrai* commoners," without any direction from the Khmer court, come to defend the temple? Certainly they must have felt a cultural and religious affinity for, as well as a sense of stewardship over Prasat Ta Prohm to attack a force almost seven times their size. David Chandler, for example, notes, "When the Angkor complex was 'discovered' by French missionaries and explorers in the 1850s, Angkor Wat contained a prosperous Buddhist monastery inside its walls, tended by several hundred hereditary slaves."[424] Indeed, "researchers found that later in Angkor Wat's history—after it had been converted to a Buddhist temple—the site was turned into a military fortification with wooden structures being built to defend the moated site."[425]

Nonetheless, this event taking place forty-seven years before 1907, in which Sasagawa claims that the French began politicizing Angkor—and from which Khmers adopted our nationalist attitudes—unhinges his "post/colonial" critiques of Khmer nationalism. In fact, there were two faces to French colonialism: one which celebrated the living Angkorean legacy in Cambodia for their own power and one of racist bigotry that could not associate Khmer people with the temples and all they represented. Scholarship and voices that purport Khmer classical dance was wholly imported in the nineteenth century or is disconnected to its Angkorean roots is in line with the latter.

Kasetsiri, possessing a more sensitive awareness, continues with King Mongkut's story:

"It was obvious that the Khmer were angered by the theft of their property and responded violently. The incident convinced King Mongkut to abandon the plan to 'disassemble' the *prasat* and instead to construct a small model of the Angkor Wat temple complex. 'Craftsmen constructed a model of Angkor Wat and installed it at Wat Phra Sri Ratanasasadaram (the Temple of the Emerald Buddha), where it remains to this very day.'"[426]

Model of Angkor Wat at Thailand's Grand Palace in Bangkok. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

In fact King Ang Chan's renovation of Angkor Wat in the sixteenth century, his commissioning of a giant reclining Buddha at Phnom Kulen where Angkor came to life in 802 CE, all point to a history of cultural continuity in Cambodia after the fall of Angkor. As further proof of this, Penny Edwards also notes:

"The spiritual power of the city of Angkor as the seat of the Khmer Empire was progressively developed through ritual, art, and literature from the ninth to thirteenth centuries. In a bid to retain this power, and to perpetuate their divinity and sovereignty, Khmer royalty took sacred statuary with them as they moved southward to escape Siam's reach, transplanting fragments of Angkor to their new capitals at Longvek and, subsequently, Oudong. Its power sustained by statuary and story, Angkor would reverberate at the heart of Khmer culture even as the Khmer Empire splintered and fragmented in the shadow of Siam, Vietnam, and the power plays of rival royal factions . . . From the Siamese victory until the sixteenth century, when Theravadan Buddhists led a movement to 'reappropriate ancient space' through the conceptual and physical revitalization of the Angkor heritage, artists and laity had perpetuated remembrance of Angkor in works of architecture, art, and literature. In the late sixteenth century that reappropriation took the form of renovation. 'The King restored the walls of the building, stone by stone, [and] rebuilt its roof' reads a 1579 inscription at Angkor Vat. The harmonization of that Brahmanic heritage and Theravadan ideology is reflected in *Lpoek Nokor* (The construction of Angkor). Variously dated 1598 and 1620 and attributed to Neak Pang, the poem unfolds the Khmer version of the *Ramayana* (*Reamker*) through vivid poetic images describing the bas-reliefs at Angkor Vat. The early seventeenth century also saw the sculpting of fresh bas-reliefs on the north-facing wall in the eastern wing of Angkor Vat. Sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century inscriptions by Khmer royalty on the temple testify to the lasting identification of Khmer queens and kings with Angkor, and to its emerging significance as a site of Buddhist ritual."[427]

Thus historical evidence reveals that Khmer people—elite and humble alike—have always maintained a connection to the temples and all that they represent. Royalty, in order to stay connected to the legacy of Angkor, would have required the execution of established court rituals of which dance, music, and prayer were integral. "Indeed, as cultural historian Ashley Thompson has suggested, the physical abandonment of the temple city might even be said to have magnified the mystical power and regional orbit of Angkor as a cultural and political concept."[428]

With all of this in mind, let us now look at contemporary reconstructions of Angkor and the impetuses from which they take life.

Dancers of the Royal University of Fine Arts perform *Robam Apsara*. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YgTMS-fXz8

I start with this clip, of *Robam Apsara*, to situate us in the linear progression of history once more. The video represents what happened after the post-Khmer Rouge period of Khmer dance: the royalty returned, the lyrics returned to as they were, and the dancers are now wearing the same color schemes in the costumes as those before the genocide. Furthermore, Ouk Solichumnith, dressed in a white skirt and dancing as Mera, was noted by Neak Kru Sophiline to be "the last student of Chea Samy"[429] (although there were younger ones such as Hun Pen and Chey Chankethya, who worked with the old master in their very earliest years).[430]

There is nothing political about this dance in the lyrics or the dancing itself but, as I have mentioned earlier, it was created at a moment in which Cambodia sought to redefine itself on the international stage of culture and politics. There are some such as Jukka O. Miettinen, however, who would argue that:

"The Apsara Dance is an example of how historical sources can be employed in creating new works, in this case serving nationalism. The creation myth of the Cambodian nation is danced in a pure Thai-influenced classical Cambodia[n] dance style, while the crowns and ornaments, copied from the reliefs of Angkor."[431]

Except for the fact that sculptural evidence from Angkor, shown in prior sections of this writing, already prove a direct relationship between the movement technique and aesthetics of Khmer dance today and that of the Angkor era. Note the following relief details from Banteay Srei, Angkor Wat, and Preah Ko as further proof of this. The arched backs, curved fingers, curled toes, arm angles, bent knees, props, *deav*—both standing on one leg and seated on the ground—and energetic quality all have a direct relationship to Khmer dance today. As mentioned before, any differences in this can be associated with the process of translating a three-dimensional art form into a mostly two-dimensional surface and in the fact that things do in fact evolve over time. When we look at the images closely however, we realize that Khmer technical and aesthetic values in movement—that which defines dance—have not changed much, if at all, through the centuries.

Siva Nataraja, or Shiva King of Dance, at Banteay Srei (tenth century CE), his pose synonymous with male characters today. Courtesy of Johann Reinhart Zeiger, Angkorguide.net.

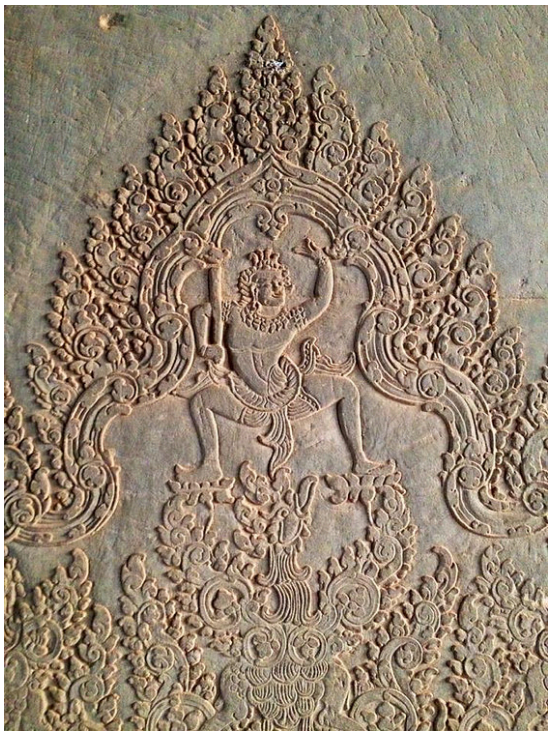
Notice the charioteer in this relief detail from Angkor Wat. His seated pose, arched back, arm angles, and energetic quality are synonymous with dancers today. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Soldiers in combat in the *Battle of Kurukshetra* at Angkor Wat. Their sense of leveling and opposition can still be seen in Khmer and Thai dance today. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Soldiers in combat in the *Battle of Kurukshetra* at Angkor Wat. The entangling legs can still be seen in Khmer and Thai dances today. Notice their arm angles. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

The *Battle of Langka* at Angkor Wat. The gesture of grabbing an elongated leg during fight can still be seen in Khmer dances such as the *Reamker* and *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, and as well as the Thai *Ramakian* today. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Detail of a male dancer in combat pose at Angkor Wat. Notice his curled toes, arched back, bent knees, curved fingers, and arm angles—still the standard in Khmer dance today. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.



Detail of male dancer in pose at Angkor Wat. The way he holds his club is still used today. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Male dancers in standing *deav* at Preah Ko. Ninth century. Image: Sot Sovandy and Prumsodun Ok.

Male dancers in seated *deav* at Preah Ko. Ninth century. What will happen when these images succumb to nature and time? Image: Sot Sovandy and Prumsodun Ok.

It is difficult to take Miettinen's idea of a "pure Thai-influenced classical Cambodia[n] dance" seriously, especially given the vague bias with which he guesses about the origins of Thai dance:

"The present Thai classical dance (*natasin*) probably developed during the Ayutthaya period (1350–1767), although very little is known about the process. Its roots can be deciphered by using the early dance images of the region . . . as archaeological source material . . . One source may be the Mon tradition, depicted in the few surviving Mon reliefs. One possible transmission route for this clearly Indian-influenced dance technique could also have been South Thailand with its connections with Sri Lanka and the Srivijaya Empire. There may also be the possibility that the dance tradition was brought from India direct to the regions of Thailand by Indian Brahman gurus . . . This last possibility is supported by the fact that many dance-related key terms still used in the Thai language, such as *natasin* (classical dance) and *kru* (*guru*), stem from Sanskrit and are related to India's *Natyashastra* dance and theatre manual (*Natasatra* in Thai)."[432]

In some cases writers, drawing upon the nationalist historiography of a more economically, politically, and academically robust country, one that is more popular in the global consciousness due to stronger tourism and media industries, recycle nationalist myths that serve to delete the contributions and autonomy of certain peoples and cultures. Contrary to Miettinen's assertions however, Thai scholar Wilaiwan Khanittanan has already established that Sanskrit and Prakrit words enter Thai vocabulary by way of Khmer. Further, Kasetsiri adds:

"This lack of understanding is reflected in the thinking of a considerable number of educated Thais and members of the ruling class, who distinguish between the Khom and the Khmer, considering them to be two separate ethnic groups. They assert that it was the Khom, not the Khmer, who built the majestic temple complexes at Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom and who founded one of the world's truly magnificent ancient empires. They further claim that Khmer culture, for instance its various forms of masked dance drama, is merely a 'derivative' of Thai culture. (This is despite the fact that the word 'Khom' is derived from the old Thai 'Khmer krom,' meaning 'lowland Khmer.' In spoken Thai, 'Khmer' was gradually dropped, leaving only 'krom,' which over time became, first, 'klom' or 'kalom,' and then eventually 'Khom.') . . . Those elements of Thai culture which are generally considered to have originated in India, such as Buddhism, architecture, artistic designs, and even a significant portion of the Thai lexicon, did not enter Thailand directly from India. Rather, they were all second-hand transmissions, so to speak, having first passed through the Sri Lankans (including the Tamil), the Mon, or the Khmer. Even the concept of divine kingship (*devaraja*) and much of the special vocabulary associated with the royal court were, as M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, a noted intellectual and former Thai prime minister, said, 'derived from Cambodia.'"[433]

The "old Thai 'Khmer krom'" is actually just plain Khmer meaning "lowland Khmer." It is still in use by Khmer people today to refer to Khmers in the Mekong Delta and it was used by Khmers, Thais, and Mons living beyond the Khorat Plateau to refer to those living in central Khmer lands. Linguistic cases in point, the Sanskrit-derived Khmer word *nokor* (city) has become *nakhon* in Thai. *Khmer*, in Thai, is pronounced *khamen*. *Daeur*, to walk in Khmer, is *deurn* in Thai. Ream Eyso, which actually has a silent "ro" or "r" sound in its Khmer spelling, becomes *Ramasun*. In *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* itself, Khmers sing the phrase "*chhvat chhveal*" and "*chhveal chhvat*" while Thais sing "*chhawean chhawat*." Given the way that *chhveal* has been translated to *chhawean*, it is not inaccurate to say that the Khmer word and art form *khaol*, sometimes romanized as "*khol*," is the root for the Thai word and art form *khon*. This is supported by the fact that the "Siamese *Ramayana* grew out of the Old Khmer tradition, in its content and title," as the

Khmer *Reamker* is *Ramakian* in Thai.[434] Further historical evidence—from inscriptions referencing male dancers such as King Yasovarmann I and Vasudeva, and iconographic evidence at temples such as Angkor Wat and Bakong (which solely depicts male dancers)—points to this. In fact, in the latter stages of my research, I found that Saveros Pou had already noted the historical development of *khon* from *khaol*:

"Villagers, young and old, in their simplicity, were satisfied that they had attended and appreciated 'a play of monkeys' (in Khmer, *lkhon khol*), hence the widespread popularity of this name in the entire Cambodian community and even beyond Cambodia's border (it occurs in Siamese: *khon* /khoon/) . . . Any final /-r/ or /-l/ in Khmer loanwords became /-n/ in Siamese. It must be further noted that the initial sense of 'monkey' was not perceived by the Siamese, or was lost when they borrowed the word, whilst Khmer people keep using *khol* /khaol/ (a type of tall, black monkey), and deriving therefrom the sense of 'to be frivolous, to burlesque.'"[435]

It is interesting to note the cross-cultural association of monkeys, humor, dance, and theater that can be seen in Japan's *sarugaku* (monkey music), which was considered a lowly art before it was evolved into the classical form of Noh. That said, let us now look at two examples of Thai constructions of Angkor.

Rabam Lopburi. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJhffDuif3c

This dance, titled *Rabam Lopburi*, is inspired by iconography from the Khmer temple of Lavo. Dressed in costumes to mimic the *apsara* and *yogini* of the relief carvings, the dancers almost always seem to face the camera, striking frontal poses that mirror the frontal manner in which we see relief carvings. Their arms and legs rarely stretch towards

the back or to the front of the body, creating a flatness contrary to the inherent expressive possibilities of dance. The work thus fabricates "Khmer dance" and the "Khmerness" it represents as static, non-dynamic, and uncultured for a Thai public. And, from its flat movement and costuming to its music, *Rabam Lopburi* was created to divorce Thai *khon* and *lakhon nai* from their Khmer roots, so as to create an image of pure "Thainess" for an increasingly nationalist state.

Fast-forward decades later, this same dance would get a makeover in costuming under the direction of Peeramon Chomdhavat. Some choreography has changed as well, incorporating movements and poses derived from certain Indian classical dance forms such as *odissi* and *bharatanatyam*. The three-point curving in the body characteristic of *odissi* is not something seen in Khmer iconography of the Angkor era however (nor is it seen in Javanese *bedhaya* to which some artists and scholars say Khmer dance is historically connected). Rather this attempt to Indianize the Thai past—of which the Khmer city of Lavo was absorbed into, of which even foreigners such as Miettinen succumb and contribute to—serve the function of tracing "Thainess" to an India it never directly inherited its culture from. All the while, as before, it works to hide Khmer cultural roots from Thai classical arts, even despite the fact that they are firmly grounded in Angkorean traditions.

It is also very important to note how none of these dances feature the use of language. This is very likely because an accurate construction of Lavo dance would, in some way, require the use of Khmer. More significantly however, it reflects faulty contemporary perceptions of the past (and of Khmer people) as being illiterate, backwards, and primitive. James R. Brandon, for example, has noted:

"Written evidence for shadow play and masked dance [both forms draw generously on the *Reamker* and *Ramakian* for content] is completely lacking. This leads some scholars to feel that narrative drama was not highly developed during the Angkor period . . . It is possible that the common dramatic repertoire of Khmer and Thai performance largely evolved in the more secular environment of Thai courts after Angkor's decline beginning in 1431."[436]

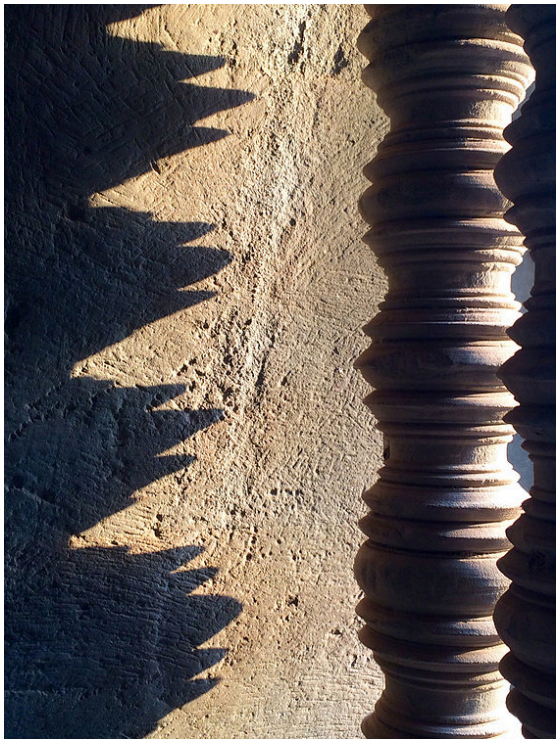
First off, Saveros Pou has already mentioned inscriptions of puppets being offered during the time of Angkor.[437] Angkor Wat itself is a shadow puppet, with "[s]hadows in the shape of the central towers . . . produced by the late-afternoon sun shining through carved pillars in the windows of the galleries."[438] This astute study of and playing with light should come as no surprise, since the temple was an observatory precisely constructed with spiritual and scientific measurements so as to align with the stars, so that the sun rose directly above the central tower during the vernal and autumnal equinoxes.[439]

Secondly, inscriptions also mention a female dancer named Samarasena (whose name means "soldier in the battlefield"). Pou explains that the name was used to "speak of a dancer; she likely performed as a warrior."[440] This name creates a direct association with dance and drama then, giving new life and vitality to scenes from the *Reamker*, *Mahabharata*, and more depicted on Angkorean temple walls.

Thirdly, Trudy Jacobsen has already expressed the problems of solely relying on written sources to construct history. She notes how King Ang Duong and his descendants rewrote the Khmer court chronicles. The Thai court chronicles, mirroring this process, were rewritten and revised to ensure the legitimacy of the Bangkok dynasty after the fall of Ayutthaya.[441] They include fictitious events, such as the *phithi pathomkam* which alleges King Naresuan beheaded a Khmer king and washed his feet with the blood.[442] Unreliability of written sources, and the error of writers who depend solely on them, is precisely explained by Michael Wright in the context of the Ram Kamhaeng stele:

"Locally, during the absolute monarchy history was the exclusive possession of the royal family. There was no possibility of outside questioning or interpretation . . . Internationally, great scholars like George Coedes were employees of the absolute monarchy and so had no reason to cast doubts upon the monarchy's key document. Later, during the Cold War, Western scholars were required to legitimize the dictators, not question the symbolism that appeared to lend them legitimacy."[443]

Finally, notice Brandon's suggestion that drama was somehow more dynamic in a "secular environment." Of course, secular artistic and dance contexts existed and intersected with religious ones at Angkor. It is inaccurate to suppose that the people of Angkor were all prayer, that people did not have fun or experience pain or hope or joy just as those before and after them all over the world had and do. His idea of Angkorean dance as non-literary and non-dramatic reflects a modern bias and feeling of superiority more than anything, reflects a linear flattening of the past based on a worldview shaped by notions and imaginings of *industrial revolution*, *progress*, and *development*. The latter word is, at times, nothing more than an expression of neo-imperialism.



Shadows taking the shape of Angkor Wat's central towers in the morning light. Photo: Laurel Jenkins.

That said, the opposite of Brandon's assumption is true for Cambodia. All over the temples of Angkor, story, narrative, and drama took the form of images in temple reliefs. Inspired by the dance and literature of the time, and like the dance and literature of the time, they were artistic expressions meant to channel, propitiate, please, mirror, and influence the gods. The more beautiful, charged, precise, and dynamic a work of art was, the more spiritual power and efficacy it was imbued with and believed to carry. Indeed the gods and ancestors were given the best of offerings, including the most beautiful human beings, choreographies, lyrics, and melodies with which to take life in and dance through. This is so much the case that today, *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* is the most charged, polished, and dynamic dramatic work of the canon—very much due to its spiritual significance and non-secular nature, one with agricultural, social, and political consequences in the Khmer conception.

Therefore, it is much more accurate and insightful to take into account the words of Ian Mabbet and David Chandler in order to understand the natural intersection of Khmer art, dance, ritual, and spirituality:

"For Khmers of old, the contents of the world we inhabit are but blurred and imperfect imitations of archetypes which exist in eternity, pure and uncontaminated. Thus, heavenly forms can be realized on earth by perfect actions and perfect constructions . . . Their iconography is meticulous, for it is the attributes of the gods which, created on earth, make their presence real. The rules for the sculptor are not really a separate subject of study outside religion; they are religion in practice – the carving of a correctly formed image is a sacramental act . . . All these elements of religious art were familiar to the craftsmen who made the monuments of Angkor . . . The culture was like that of other parts of the world at the same time, notably medieval Europe, where the craftsmen who worked on such monuments as the Cathedral of Chartres were just as much concerned to embody divine powers in stone according to a meticulous iconography. Their symbols were not for them, as symbols in modern culture, objects that merely pointed to other objects not present. They were objects which, by taking the form of the thing symbolized, made that thing real and present. What was symbolized in the art and architecture of Angkor was an invisible order whose existence patterned and made comprehensible the world in which people lived. A craftsman, then, was not just a man with a chisel: he was a priest, thaumaturge, psychopomp, nuclear scientist."[444]

Rabam Lopburi, with new costumes by Peeramon Chomdhavat. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hONZTvW5tTE

That said, the attempt to delete Khmerness becomes ever more obvious when the same company performs a so-called "Ayudhaya Dance." The dance uses the modern *phiphat* orchestra and classically inspired movements to trace Thai identity and nationhood to a homogeneous Thai Ayutthaya, one that is supposedly the source of Thai classical art and culture today. We all, however, know otherwise as Kasetsiri makes clear:

"[T]he respect and admiration for anything Khmer also characterized the Ayutthaya period from the mid-fourteenth century onward. Interestingly, the flourishing of Khmer art and culture at the Thai court was the result of war, a war in which the victors adopted elements of the superior civilization of the losing side."[445]

Furthermore, Peter Vail notes:

"Tangible evidence for Siam's Khmer political ancestry abounds, from the diglossic *Ratchasap* used with royalty, and Siamese court dances based conspicuously on Khmer styles, to the detailed model of Angkor Wat proudly displayed at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. But Thailand's historical descent from the Khmer empire is rarely explicitly admitted in national discourse. Heavy-handed nationalistic propaganda from the 1920s through the 1960s effaced much of Siam/Thailand's historical past . . .The tendency in such nationalist discourse has been either to appropriate Khmer culture and cultural artifacts as Thai, or at least to alienate them from their Khmer roots."[446]

If these dances were made out of a lack of historical awareness, it is one thing. This can hopefully be countered through constructive dialogue. If they were made with full awareness and intention however—like the Thaification policies my father first told me about as a boy, which prohibited people from learning, writing, or speaking Khmer in Thailand and "ordered Northern Khmer villagers to burn Khmer language materials"[447]—they amount to nothing less than ethnocide. Either or, they contribute to the latter.

Furthermore, these choreographies are in line with the Orientalist manners in which colonial powers often depicted Khmer dance and people (remember: Sana Rayya in *Revolt of the Zombies*). This is no surprise as contemporary Thai nationalism took life from the threats of European colonial powers, whose imperialist mentalities and strategies it imitated in an attempt to hang onto independence. The most unfortunate example of this is when Thai nationalists describe Cambodia as a former "colony," despite the fact that what actually existed was a traditional system of vassalage as illuminated by Peter Vail:

"From the mid-[eighteenth] century, petty [Khmer] kingdoms in what are now the provinces of Surin, Buriram and Srisaket, as well as Battambong, Sisophon, and Siem Reap in Cambodia, were aligned in tributary relations with the Siamese court (and in many cases they were simultaneously aligned in relation to Vietnam) . . . In day-to-day affairs, these petty kingdoms were highly autonomous, and few outside their courts had dealings with any living, breathing Siamese."[448]

In addition, David Chandler writes:

"As we have seen, the northwestern *sruk* had come under Thai control in 1794, apparently in exchange for Thai permission for Eng, Sisowath's grandfather, to rule at Udong. Over the next hundred years, except for a brief period in the 1830s, the Thai made little effort to colonize (or depopulate) the region, choosing to

govern it at most levels with ethnic Khmer. Although [the Thai] did nothing to restore the temples at Angkor, they left them intact."[449]

In fact, of this relationship between Cambodia and Thailand, "[t]here is no evidence . . . that the Cambodians ever transmitted the gold and silver trees (*banga mas*) that were a feature of tribute to Bangkok from other dependent states."[450] But, let's table this discussion of Thai nationalism for now, and move on to Khmer reconstructions of Angkor.

Robam Teveak Srei Suor. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIPPnaCePaU

This dance, *Robam Teveak Srei Suor* (Dance of Celestial Women), was choreographed very recently by artists at the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. Like the prior two Thai clips, it tackles the most popular iconographic convention used to denote the act of dance at Angkor, one that has, as I have mentioned earlier, mistakenly led people to believe that Khmer dance at that time was a completely different form than what it is today. In the reliefs and sculpture however, the pose is expressionistic more than actual reality. So although a painting or photograph can capture the feeling, spirit, or essence of an apple, it will never be the apple itself. Thus, close observation of the dancing *apsara* and *yogini* at Angkor—so vivid, so alive, so natural—will often reveal disproportionate bodies.

From 4:11 to 4:17 in the video, the soloist Hun Pen can be seen executing *kbach chak*—depicted at the ninth-century temple of Bakong and still in use today in many traditional works—into the lifted-leg pose known by some as *ardhaparyanka*. The effect is one of

harmony, a seamless integration of the latter gesture into the classical style. So, whereas Thai artists have used the gesture to invent a narrative of rupture, difference, and discontinuity, a Khmer artist has used it to speak to artistic and technical evolution and, through that, a continuity to the artistic and cultural legacy of Angkor.

The movements and costumes of iconography are not all that Khmers are using in our reconstructions of Angkor however. The *Legend of Apsara Mera*, directed by Princess Buppha Devi, mixes classical dance, *khaol*, and *sbek thom* (large shadow puppetry) to bring the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk* to life so as to explain the mytho-historical origins of the Khmer people. It has a historical precedent actually, but this version is different in which specific short dances have been incorporated in full into one narrative. The work opens with movements from *Robam Yon Kabi*, later puzzle-piecing choreography from *Robam Moni Mekhala*, *Robam Apsara*, *Robam Tep Monorom*, and *Robam Makar* to name but a few.

Legend of Apsara Mera performed by the Royal Ballet of Cambodia. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UureiYy00YM

This recycling of dances—with a few changes to choreography, costume, lyrics, floor pattern, and narrative frame—is often described as an approach to preserve Khmer identity and culture. Sometimes it is touted as the best and most authentic way to preserve Khmer dance. However, we must ask ourselves: What happens to an art form, tradition, culture, people, and society when we defy the law of life and the Buddhism which we uphold—the law of impermanence, change, growth, and transformation—to become only five or six dances? What happens to us as a people when we allow ourselves to carry only a few ideas, and to see the world with limited lenses and approaches?

To the viewer without historical awareness however—from the general audience member to professional critics, Khmer and not alike—this is hardly a concern. Pretty girls in pretty costumes is often enough. This is no surprise as not everyone has the training, context, and awareness to know if we are dancing in accord with our tradition (or what that tradition even is). However, at the end of the day, everyone can spot a truly remarkable performer as we all have the capacity to experience a transcendent, universal beauty. A case in point is this review of *The Legend of Apsara Mera* by Apollinaire Scherr in The Financial Times:

"Cambodian court dance has always been a spiritual activity – dedicated to the ancestors and especially the gods, whom the dancers reflect in their calm elegance. But there is a fine line between serenity and inertness, and in a rare visit to New York as part of the Season of Cambodia, the Royal Ballet crossed it a few times too many . . . Oceanic battles and nation-sized passions are the stuff of theatre. And though this lilting idiom does not lend itself to grand theatrics, the repeated gestures and phrases can act like a rising tide. With *Apsara Mera*, however, the story tended to get lost in the repetitions so we were unprepared for the big dramatic moments . . . More bothersome still were the lapses in rhythmic pulse, inherited perhaps from the princess-director herself, who as an impossibly beautiful star in the 1960s liked to blur the beat . . . Loveliest of all was the live *pin peat* music: the soft, round melodies, the harmonies of women and men's plainchant, the sudden huddle of beats when an episode rushed to a close. If only the dancing had achieved such fullness."[451]

To translate this into a Khmer context, Apollinaire Scherr—untrained in Khmer dance—saw the *sambok* (shell) of spirituality rather than the essential core of the actual thing. This is a fear and critique of contemporary Khmer performance that knowledgeable masters and practitioners often express. Chheng Phon, for example, once said:

"Today I'm afraid that we won't take care of things well. The essence always precedes the birth. That's really important! Today, the essence is all gone and all that remains is the birth, the production – and even that is disappearing. It becomes a birth without spirit, a birth without vitality, a birth without essence. It's only a shell that's left and then it become[s] an empty form with only the veneer of the 'artistic'. At the end, when there's not even any birth or creation anymore, it just becomes commercial exploitation, making money through performing. Today, if you know how to sing a little bit, you sing for money. If you know how to dance a little bit, you dance for money. If you know how to paint a little bit, you paint for money. I say that in the future, we'll all be ruined if we do [this]. As more and more tourists come, everyone follows the dollar. If they give you fifty dollars, you do the fifty dollar value. If they give you twenty dollars, you do the twenty dollar value. If they give a dancer ten dollars, they dance the ten dollar dance. I don't know what to do about that. You can't bargain with art. You can't use dollars to think about the value of a dance. You can't do that!"[452]

Furthermore, as we can see from the review, making dances as an expression of "Khmerness" does not guarantee that it is beautiful. Nor is it enough to take care of the art form. It in fact places limitations and borders, creates artists and performers lacking sight of the equally significant global, human and spiritual picture. In such a case, we can only offer so much to our tradition and world. And it is unfortunate because the expression of "Khmerness" is the dominant preoccupation of Khmer classical dancers in Cambodia and abroad. When something is labeled as "Khmer," it seems to become above critique and is almost infallible. However, in order to take care of Khmer classical dance and push it forward—make sure that every aspect of its spirit stays alive—Khmer artists must push for something higher, fuller, and much more meaningful. As Chheng Phon has said years ago, "We want to serve the interests of a universal, regional, and national aesthetic in our

cultural work."[453] I have often referred to this idea, but as being local in character and global in significance.

So although national pride can inspire the production of works such as *Robam Apsara* and *Robam Teveak Srei Suor*—in tune with the origins and evolutions of the *robam* tradition—it can also lead us astray to promote ethnocentric misunderstandings such as *Rabam Lopburi* which stresses fragmentations and inventions. And, when pairing this nationalist sentiment with entertainment, it becomes a harmful addiction of sorts. It is easy to consume and accept it, and the more we take it in the more lost that we become. Remember how high on "Khmerness" and Khmer glory the Khmer Rouge got, for example, and look at what they wreaked upon the art form, people, and land. Art, however, is not confined by borders. Nor is it entertainment. Art can be entertaining. Art can be challenging. Art can be beautiful. But art is never a fleeting joy or temporary escape from the world that entertainment is. Art transforms.

That said, *The Legend of Apsara Mera* is a valuable lesson in the way that works of art become authenticated by an audience. Its association with a nostalgic royal past has led many people both inside and outside of Cambodia, Khmer and not alike, to elevate and exoticize it to a place beyond critique. In doing so, they misrepresent an individual's or group's artistic decisions and sensibilities as the nature of the tradition itself. Allistair MacCaulay, for example, wrote in his non-review of *The Legend of Apsara Mera*, "Some Western observers will surely feel that drama has been eliminated here in the pursuit of soft-spoken and ordered beauty."[454]

He goes on further:

"[B]ut Cambodian ballet began as private palace entertainment . . . [Princess Buppha Devi] has been in charge of this company since the 1980s . . . For Cambodian ballet, the biggest change is that an in-palace entertainment has become a form of public display . . . Certainly it's impressive that, despite the fraught political history of Cambodia in the late [twentieth] century, this company still tells highly charged stories (gods versus giants; the marriage of a goddess and a prince) in terms of religious worship, utmost politeness and order."[455]

Anyone who has seen *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* or the *Reamker* however knows that drama is high, tight, charged, precise, intense, and elevated in Khmer classical dance works. Ted Shawn, who saw the prior dance drama, wrote in 1929:

"We were tired beyond any weariness we had ever known. We had driven over rough roads, through infernal heat for seven hours, we had been so cruelly stung by mosquitoes and other insects that our bodies were aflame—we sat in the palace with the steam rugs wrapped around our legs up to our hips because of the ferocious mosquitoes—and yet we were unconscious of our bodies completely for three hours, and truly were transported into the fairy realm wherein these exquisite creatures unfolded their tales of princesses, hero princes, giants, and demons."[456]

That said, let us break down MacCaulay's words to see how foreign movement vocabularies and cultures become authenticated through colonial, royal, and religious nostalgias.

First off, I always grow a little skeptical when people use outdated colonial constructions of "East and West" or "Eastern" and "Western." There is also north and south, and everywhere between these points is center. The contemporary labeling of Khmer classical dance as a "ballet" extends from this same colonial legacy. And, although it may have made sense when people possessed less cultural sensitivity in the modern era, there's no excuse for it now.

The company's decision to still refer to itself as the Royal Ballet of Cambodia may be a matter of maintaining historical connections. It is, after all, how the palace company first came to be known to the Eurocentric world. Intentional or not however, it is ultimately an example of self-exotification in which the art form and Khmer people lose in the end. Why are we still using the terms of a people who referred to our ancestors as ignorant savages to assert our validity in the world? Why does Khmer dance have to be a "ballet" in order to be an expression of art and culture, elegance and sophistication, knowledge and beauty? It does not; it stands as those things on its own aesthetic, spiritual, and historical foundations. Fittingly, by contrast, the "Royal Dance Company of Cambodia," the more linguistically and culturally accurate translation of Krom Robam Preahreacheatrap (Nei Kampuchea), carries no less prestige.

Secondly, the art form did not begin as a private palace entertainment. Its roots reflect an indigenous movement culture that came to be synthesized with court and temple culture most significantly for the purpose of worship. Furthermore, we know that it has existed beyond the walls of the palace since the time of Angkor even, and that the art form was partly able to survive centuries of continuous war in Cambodia because of its existence outside of the palace. In line with this misconception is the assertion by some that Princess Buppha Devi "single-handedly revived the Royal Ballet,"[457] which serves to delete the contributions of so many artists who did an invaluable and immensely crucial amount of work to revive the art form. It robs artists such as Chea Samy, Soth Sam On, Chheng Phon, Em Theay, Ros Kong, Sim Muntha, Proeung Chhieng, Menh Kossany, Pen Sokhuon, Soth Somaly, and many more of the rightful honor that they deserve.

In actuality, as we have seen, the princess was absent from Cambodia for more than twenty years and did not return until 1992. She taught dance in a refugee camp in Thailand starting in the 1980s and then only reconstituted the Royal Ballet of Cambodia by drawing upon the students trained by the prior mentioned artists. So it could be said that she revived the Royal Ballet in the 1980s—but then only as a company. The confusing thing here unfortunately is that the art of Khmer classical dance in its entirety has come to be referred by some as a "royal ballet." And, in such a case, statements such as those by MacCaulay are false and misleading.

Lastly, there is nothing religious about *The Legend of Apsara Mera*. This is a crutch that people fall upon without fail when they exoticize the peoples of Asia. It is strictly a dance of entertainment, one drawing upon the post-independence discourses of Cambodia and from the preservationist realities of a post-Khmer Rouge era. This claim that the dance work is religious serves to color it with a weight of authenticity. And in that authenticity, it serves to establish the authority of the Princess and her company in the minds of public

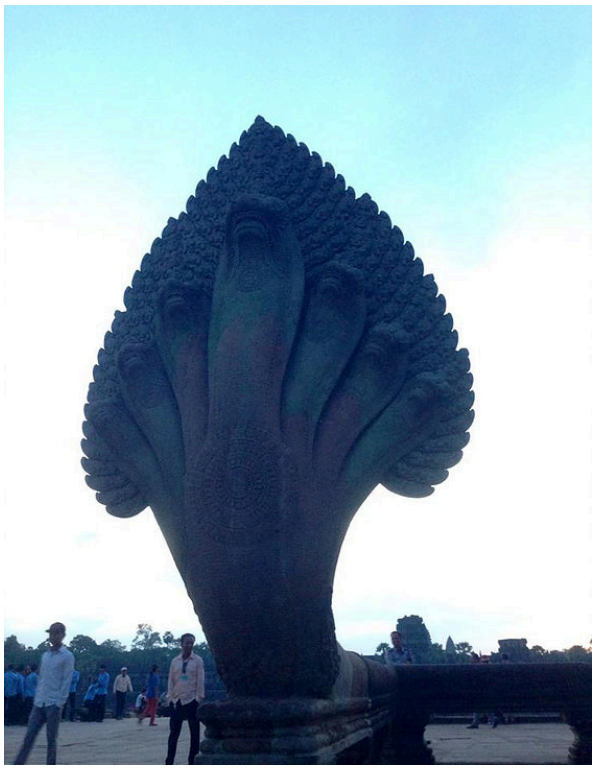
audiences. Chheng Phon, however, has once said, "'The important thing is not a ritual relation to the king . . . but that spiritual purity must be preserved.'"[458]

"Spiritual purity" because: everyone in the world regardless of class, race, ethnicity, education, sexuality, geography, gender, or ability has the potential to experience it. Because the most meaningful artists and performers are those that touch a deep, universal human core that inspires us to make positive gestures in our hearts, minds, homes, streets, and communities. They inspire the awakening of our souls and beings, as well as the enlightening of our world. Chheng Phon's words are echoed in this story, of which I encountered several years ago:

Once some time ago, the emperor Akbar the Great had the best of everything: the most delightful of food, the most beautiful of women, and the most talented of artists to name a few. Of the latter, he treasured most his court poet who composed verses that sang him praise. After each performance, the emperor would always exclaim, "How magically you sing! Surely there is no one of comparison!"

One day however, Akbar catches word of a blind poet who sings better than those at court. He demands the poet be brought forth and orders him to sing. The blind man, gathering himself, sings and sends powerful notes, pitches, phrases, and images ringing throughout the walls of the palace. Shaken and stirred, stunned and inspired, Akbar asks his most prized court poet how can it be. To which, the latter responds, "Your majesty I sing for you, for humans. And he—he sings for god."

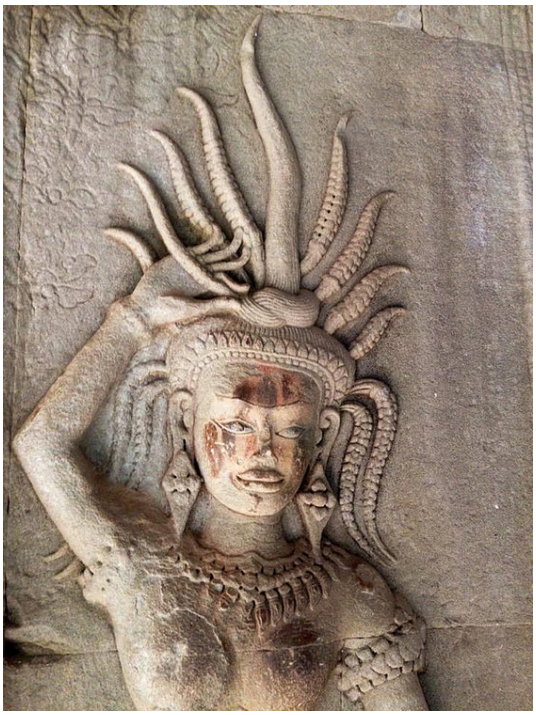
Let us remember that Khmer dancers were once known as *kñum vrah rapam* (servants of the sacred dance). And let us now turn our attention to Khmer dance ritual, and the ancient purposes from which Khmer dance takes life. Through this, we will find a clear place for a most vulnerable and beautiful art form in our present and future. Further, we will see how Khmer classical dance artists—whether we are working traditionally or experimentally—are connected to the potent, living legacy of Angkor.



A seven-headed *naga*, or serpent, lining the walkway to the central towers of Angkor Wat. Notice the spade of which its head is shaped into. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

The *naga* race, as depicted on the lowest register of the Terrace of the Leper King. Twelfth century. Notice how their crowns are fashioned after the *naga*. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

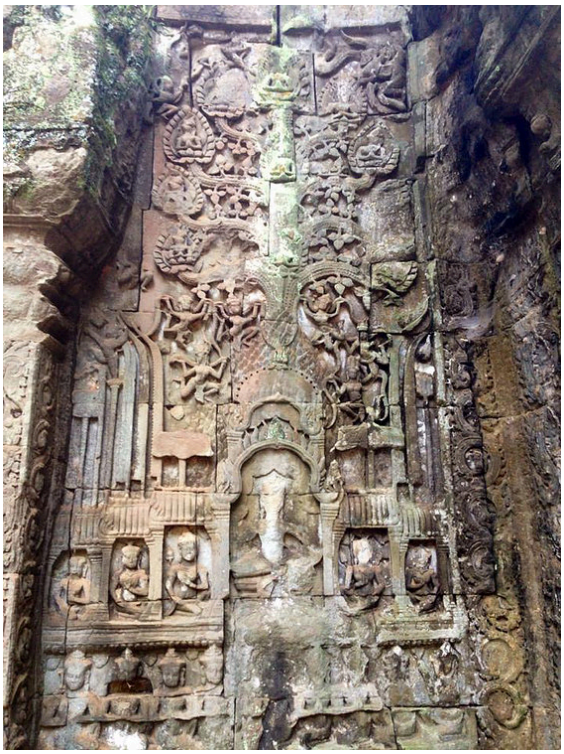
Tevoda at Bayon. Notice how the *naga* in the crown has been abstracted into flowers, leaving just the spade. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.



Tevoda at Angkor Wat. Notice how the *naga* has been abstracted further, the spade shape implied. Remember that it was a nine-headed serpent who visited the king nightly. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

A dancer framed in the *naga*-spade, a motif at the temple of Banteay Samre. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Praying ascetics in spade shape on door panel at Preah Khan. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.



Large spade-shaped tree sprouting from central tower of temple at Ta Prohm. Notice the spade-shaped leaves with spirits in prayer; there would have been nine total. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Popil used in a *sampeah kru* ceremony by the Sophiline Arts Ensemble. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

The *tep robam* prepares to pass around the *popil* during a *sampeah kru* at the Khmer Arts Theater. Photo by Chan Vitharin, courtesy of Khmer Arts.

Despite centuries of change and on-going war, the spiritual foundations of Khmer classical dance have remained intact into our day. During the reign of King Norodom Sihanouk, for example, the royal dancers performed *buong suong* ceremonies on behalf of the drought-stricken countryside.[459] Decades later in 2012, in line with pre-Angkorean customs, fully costumed dancers from the Royal Ballet of Cambodia accompanied the late king's funerary urn as it was processed through the streets of Phnom Penh.

In more ways than one then Khmer classical dancers still embody the serpents from which the dance and nation took life, serving as bridges between heaven and earth in the performance of sacred choreographies. In fact, it is indeed the space of ritual that offers the highest meaning and possibility for the art form in an increasingly secular and globalized world. In order to see this however, let us now examine the potent spiritual rites of the ancient art form.

Before every performance, Khmer classical dancers pray to the spirits of our ancestors, teachers, and lineage for their assistance on stage. We often ask to dance beautifully, to justly represent the tradition, and to be guided by the spirits of the gods and characters for which our bodies serve as vessels. The gesture, however small and intimate, is a powerful manifestation of beliefs associated with animism and ancestor worship. These convictions are so ever-present that they pervade the entirety of Khmer dance practice.

Before getting to this point however, dancers must first be initiated into the tradition by making offerings to our teachers. The specificity of these ritual items depend on the role a dancer has been casted into, but usually comes in the form of one candle, an odd number of incense sticks, fruits, meats, and *baysei*. The latter are constructed of banana trunks and leaves, with either eggplant flowers or *pka kngaok* (literally, "peacock flowers") attached.[460] On top of the *baysei* is a hard-boiled egg of which a candle is placed on top. In their totality, Neak Kru Sophiline has described the *baysei*, trees stylized into mountain-temple towers, as "Shiva *linga*."[461] This idea is hard to argue when we examine the above relief carving of a sacred tree sprouting from a temple tower at Ta Prohm, and recall how the towers of Angkor Wat and other Khmer temples were indeed representative of *mandala* inspired by *yonilinga*.

Upon receiving these offerings, the teacher calls forth the spirits of deceased teachers to bear witness to the gesture, enjoy the offerings, and accept the student into their lineage. They ask that their student learn quickly and dance beautifully, ask for their well-being and success in life and on stage. In this context, Menh Kossany has described teachers as having *mot tip* (magic mouths) capable of voicing the precise and necessary words to ensure the proper development and fame of their students.[462] Once initiated into the tradition and lineage, the dancer will engage in two distinct rituals that connect them to the spiritual, historical, and philosophical legacy of Angkor: *buong suong* and *sampeah kru*.

Literally meaning "prayer," *buong suong* is staged to appease the ancestors, territorial spirits, and gods to propitiate the fall of crop-feeding and life-giving rains. The ceremony is performed in the coming of the rainy season, at auspicious places such as Angkor, Oudong, Wat Phnom, and the royal palace in the present day capital of Phnom Penh.[463] During the ritual, a splendid array of food, flowers, and ritual items are laid before an elaborate altar featuring the most important dance masks and crowns. The mask of Lok Ta Moni Eisey, the first human to receive knowledge of the arts, sits at the center. Sitting before the altar, the *tep robam* or *hmathav* makes a number of ritual calls that serve to avert danger, overcome enemies, and hasten the rains as was done by his tantric Hindu and Buddhist predecessors at Angkor. Dance and music are the most potent offerings during the ceremony and two dance works must always be performed: *Robam Tamng Buon* and *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*.

There are sacred solos that may be offered as well such as *Robam Buong Suong Yokon, Robam Buong Suong Tiyae*, and *Robam Chhuoy Chhay Buong Suong*. The first of these short dances draws upon the Hindu concept of the *ardhanari*, depicting a half-male and half-female brahmin who serves as messenger between heaven and earth. In this case, the harmonious union of masculine and feminine that characterizes *Robam Tamng Buon* and *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* has been encapsulated into the body of a single being. There is cross-cultural evidence that some form of this dance may have originated in Cambodia since the pre-Angkor and Angkor eras during the dominance of Sivaite cults. In the *Shilappadikaram*, dated from the second to sixth centuries CE, a dance is performed at King Shenguttavan's coronation which bears a clear relationship to *Robam Buong Suong Yokon* which is also known as *Robam Pream* (Dance of the Brahmin):

"To amuse the king, a Brahmin boy dancer from Puraiyur, famed for the art of its priests learned in the four Vedas, performed the dance of the hermaphrodite which the god Shiva once danced after uniting with Uma in a single body."[464]

The second of the solo dances, *Buong Suong Tiyae*, depicts a female character who journeys to a sacred place for the sake of her troubled land. The temple reliefs around her cause an elevation in her psychological and physical state, inducing her possession by a deity of "efficacious power." This being then uses her (dancing) form to bestow the blessings that she sought. Both of these short dances employ the four-by-four structure of *Robam Tamng Buon*. *Chhuoy Chhay Buong Suong*, a much later creation, uses this structure as well to invoke Indra, the king of heaven and lord of the atmosphere, to "descend by way of the clouds in the sky."

It appears that in our modern times the staging of *buong suong* has solely been a prerogative of the royal court. They legitimized their rule by patronizing and controlling the source to rain: the dancers and the musicians to whom they danced. This is not the case for the *sampeah kru* ceremony however. Meaning "prayer to the teachers," it "is prepared only for the sake of dancers themselves [and] is not connected to *buong suong* or any other ceremonies within the palace."[465] The ritual comes in two forms: *sampeah kru toch* (small *sampeah kru*) and *sampeah kru thom* (big *sampeah kru*).[466]

Sampeah kru toch can take multiple forms. It can be done before a student learns a new role or before a performance. If a dancer falls ill, she or he may ask for a full recovery from the teacher spirits by staging or promising to stage a *sampeah kru* later in their honor as well.[467] As we have seen, dancers such as Vorn Savay resorted to this during the oppressive rule of the Khmer Rouge. *Sampeah kru* is an essential practice of the tradition. If it is not performed, dancers believe that "the teacher cannot successfully teach the student and can even fall sick. As for the students, they will not be able to remember [teachings] well either."[468] *Sampeah kru thom*, on the other hand, was staged once every month or two months inside the palace before the 1970 coup.[469] The ritual is "staged before the performances of big dance dramas, or for dancers who are retiring from the dance. Or it can be staged at least once a year for the sake of the entire dance company."[470]

As in the case of *buong suong*, offerings of fruits, meats, flowers, incense, candles, and *baysei* are offered during *sampeah kru*. And, as in the case of *buong suong*, these offerings are placed before an altar supporting the most important crowns and masks, again with the mask of Lok Ta Moni Eisey in the center. Menh Kossany has noted that prior to the Pol Pot era, items associated with luring and taming elephants were placed upon the altar as well.[471] This bears a direct association to the *thngai ram* or *re ram* described by Zhou Daguan in the thirteenth century, of which elephant combats associated with the day led Eveline Prorée-Maspero to draw a connection to the contemporary practice of *laeung neak ta*.[472]

From my observation, elephants—in their dark-grey rounded forms, traveling in large herds—resemble rain clouds and symbolize the fertility and life that they brought. Perhaps it is no surprise then that Indra, the god who is master of storms, is said to ride upon a three-headed elephant named Airavata. The *Manimekhalai*sheds further light on the tantric relationship between Indra, elephants, drums, and ritual:

"The great drum used solely for [the festival to propitiate Indra and induce the fall of rain] was jealously guarded in the temple dedicated to the thunderbolt, Indra's weapon. It was pulled out and fixed by cords to the neck of the royal elephant. The sound of this drum covered with buffalo hide was like thunder and so terrifying that the god of death himself dared not leave his lair. The roar of this drum inspired heroic acts and it was venerated with offerings of blood."[473]

We do not know if Khmer drums were venerated in this same exact manner throughout history. However, we do know that blood held potent meaning and function in tantric rituals of the Angkor era. Furthermore, we know that Khmer dancers and musicians connect to our roots at Angkor when we place offerings of food, flowers, candles, and incense before the double-headed *samphor* drum. It is the only instrument in the *pin peat*ensemble venerated as such as it is considered the "favorite instrument of the spirits of music."[474]

Although one may question the significance of rain with the *sampeah kru* ritual, it can be said that the rain symbolizes a refreshing and renewal of artistic generations. Very concretely however, as *sampeah kru* honors pedagogical relationships at its core, we must note that the instruments once included on the altar are a "buffalo hide rope, a vine or rattan *chamnong*, an elephant goad, and more."[475] The *chamnong* (noose, knot, tie, bond) and goad are attributes of Ganesha, the Hindu god of learning who is the remover of obstacles and the protector of children. And here one can see the significance for their placement on the altar during *sampeah kru*. These instruments may also have a tantric Buddhist significance, as Prajñaparamita—the "perfection of wisdom" who is the mother of Buddhas—was associated with an elephant goad and Vajrapani with a noose in a tenth-century Khmer sculpture.[476]

It is interesting to note here that the *chamnong* placed on the altar may be made of rattan, or *phdao* in Khmer. That same material is also used in the form of sticks which teachers sometimes use to beat students into shape. So just as Indra controls magnificent atmospheric elephants possessing the potential to deliver rain, good Khmer dance teachers transform the wild egos and inexperienced bodies of our students into artists capable of caring for our lineage and world, into expressions of art and knowledge, power and beauty, love and spiritual transcendence. This cultural understanding of elephants echoes the words of the Mahayana Buddhist teacher Shantideva, who was active in the eighth century:

"Wandering where it will, the elephant of mind,
Will bring us down to torment in the hell of Unrelenting Pain.
No worldly beast, however wild and crazed,
Could bring upon such calamities.

If, with mindfulness' rope,
The elephant of mind is tethered all around,

Our fears will come to nothing,
Every virtue drop into our hands."[477]

Toni Shapiro-Phim has spoken of this transformation using another metaphor:

"Precious stones are of the earth, cut and refined by trained experts to ideal specifications. Khmer dancers, like the jewelled ball Moni Mekhala so proudly embraces, shaped and perfected through the touch—physical, spiritual, and emotional—of their teachers, mediate a relationship between people and their history by means of movement and ritual. They represent a sacred and a natural continuity across time and space, and have become a symbol of Cambodia."[478]

Sampeah kru thom begins with students offering candles and incense to the teachers. The latter, as during initiation rites, call upon the spirits of the art form to bless the dancers. Chea Samy, for example, once called:

"This is my student named Menh Kossany. Please help me teach her the role of Moni Mekhala. Please accept her as Moni Mekhala. Please help her dance beautifully and show her the way because she will be the one to carry on our tradition."[479]

From my experience, the naming of the student always occurs during this process. And it serves the purpose of establishing the student's place in a lineage that is more than 1,000 years old.

After the offerings of candles and incense, the *tep robam* calls forth the gods as well as ancestor, teacher, and territorial spirits to inhabit the space and the crowns and masks upon the altar. He calls forth melodies that are played by the *pin peat* ensemble, bringing forth the deities and teachers associated with them. Additionally, during a *sampeah kru thom* I participated in at the Khmer Arts Theater in August 2014, tantric pleas to avert danger and overcome enemies were expressed as well.

With the spirits now present and bearing witness, candles and incense lit, smoke carrying prayers to the heavens, offerings of dance begin. First, condensed versions of the movement fundamentals are performed beginning with demon roles, monkey roles, and then finally with male and female roles dancing together. After this a select work or many may be performed, with traditional works first and new creations at the end. During a *sampeah kru thom* I participated in for example, the dances performed were excerpts from *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* (of which Neak Kru Sophiline was getting ready to stage) followed by excerpts from new creations made by her students including myself (of which we were set to perform that weekend).

After the offerings of dance, the ritual closes with certain rites. This includes the turning of *popil*, in which dancers of all generations sit encircling the altar and "pass the light" to one another. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the *naga*-shaped *popil*, ritual items derived from gold banyan leaves originally gifted from Shiva,[480] are passed around to a melody known as *Neang Neak* (Serpent Lady).[481] After this, the tying of raw cotton strings known as *chamnong*, which had been sitting in a bowl of *tuk mont* (*mantra* water), takes place. The strings are tied around the wrists of students by their teachers, the latter

imparting further words of blessing as they do so. The *tep robam* splashes *tuk mont* upon the dancers and then *leach* (popped rice) is thrown upon the masks and crowns as the spirits are asked to return to their abodes.

Sampeah kru is a significant moment of intergenerational connection, a time and space in which dancers both young and old connect to our ancient lineage and its legacy. Acting as gatekeepers to a venerable tradition, teachers bridge past, present, and future through their recollections and their blessings. Their students then embody and enliven these histories and forms of knowledge through the act of dance.

Certainly, with the teacher spirits and the historical, spiritual, conceptual, and philosophical foundations from which they take life as witness, *sampeah kru* is a moment in which love, history, hope, and knowledge are passed on from teacher to student, teacher to student. It is a moment of gratitude and of reflection; it is a moment of celebration and honoring. Given the deleterious efforts of the Khmer Rouge and that of other forces, *sampeah kru* becomes a powerful testament of and commitment to the continuity of the Khmer dance tradition. Even more, in the offering of new works—and the new ideas, approaches, and communities that they encapsulate—it is a moment to grow, expand, and transform the tradition and the larger society it exists in as well.

Of *sampeah kru* and *buong suong*, Toni Shapiro-Phim has precisely written:

"Khmer dance, with its rituals of re-membering, its power of mediation with the spirits of the land, the ancestors, the deities, and the royalty, and with its sheer beauty, speaks to the need to create or forge a grounding. Yet it is a 'grounding' in a community and space unfettered by boundaries of geography, and even time."[482]

Yet there is more significance to be had from the living sacred foundations of Khmer dance.

When examining the story of Lok Ta Moni Eisey, whose mask bears a four-faced representation of Brahma on top of his ascetic's crown, we find an equally paramount purpose for the Khmer classical dancer in our day and future. Indeed, it is a charge for all artists really. To find out what that is, let me now recount the origins of the Hindu theater, of which I first encountered in Rene Daumal's *Rasa, or Knowledge of the Self*.

The world is in a state of moral decay. People rob, cheat, and kill one another; we plunder the earth of all of its resources. As such, the human race has weakened and our bodies, hearts, and minds have become plagued with illness and disease. Seeing the mortal world in this state—increasingly under the influence of the demons—the gods thought about what to do. Gathering in a council, they decided they must equip humans with knowledge of the arts so that we may find truth and transcendence in a world headed for destruction.

They implored Brahma, the god of creation, to gather the heavenly knowledge for us humans. The four-faced god then appeared before Bharata Muni, a wise and virtuous ascetic, and imparted the sacred knowledge unto him. The latter then compiled it into a text called the *Natyashastra* and began to teach his newfound knowledge to his one

hundred sons. Seeing their skill, the gods rejoiced and sent the *apsara* and *gandharva* of heaven to teach them their secret techniques and musical scales. The humans studied and perfected this knowledge in due time.

When he was ready, Bharata Muni summoned the gods, humans, and demons for the very first performance of this sacred theater. He and his disciples performed a scene in which the gods triumphed over the demons, planting the seeds of righteousness in the world. Angered, the demons threatened to kill Bharata Muni and his entire lineage. However, the wise ascetic prayed to Brahma asking for his protection. The latter then shared knowledge of rituals that would keep Bharata Muni safe on stage. The ascetic performed these rites, and so begins the origins of art and theater in our world.

In its Brahmanic roots then, the art of Khmer classical dance is also a tool for social change and transformation. The story deals with issues of censorship and freedom of speech, with the stage serving as a divinely sanctioned place to voice concern and envision higher possibilities for our world. When we examine the story we realize that art is a vehicle for moral, intellectual, physical, and spiritual enlightenment. And, pairing this with the regenerative and renewing aspects of *sampeah kru* and the purpose of *buong suong*—the purpose of sustaining and giving life—the Khmer classical dancer has a most meaningful purpose and responsibility.

The world is not where it needs to be. So how do we get it there? How do we conquer the demons of blindness, ignorance, violence, fear, and suffering that live inside us, and have become the status quo around the world? One path: we make art. And in this art, we cry for those whose tears have run dry, scream for those who have lost their voices, and dance for those who have had the power to stand robbed from their legs. We push our world forward by shaking, quaking, and awakening people from the inside, inspiring them to see clearly and think critically, to speak precisely, to re-imagine creatively, to care compassionately, to love tenderly, and to collaborate efficaciously for the sake of all life.

In order to do so, we must constantly find new ways of understanding, approaching, practicing, performing, and sharing Khmer classical dance—everything from the most traditional to the most experimental. After all, taking care of a heritage is like climbing to the top of a mountain: there is only one peak that we all want to get to but there are many paths to get there. Some people can walk only one of those paths while others may be able to walk multiple at the same time. This sentiment is mirrored in the *Mahabharata*, that ancient epic carved onto the walls of Angkor Wat but now vague to Khmer culture, in which the virtuous Pandava brothers who seem to be five aspects of one being vanquish the evil and decrepit Kaurava brothers who are 100 people with one mind and identity. The Pandava conquer the Kaurava with the help of Krishna—individual symbol of universal consciousness—even when their enemies have the aid of Krishna's faceless, 10,000-strong army.

Diversity of approach, cross-pollination of ideas, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary awareness, and individual voice are what will keep the art of Khmer classical dance alive and relevant for our world today and in its future. In fact, these are the things that have

always sustained and grown the art form. Even during the time of Angkor, a time many people essentialize to be most Khmer, a tenth-century inscription regarding King Yasovarmann I notes:

"[T]he women of the Masters of the Earth danced in his presence taking from him the rhythm which he gave them by clapping his hands . . . As for his glory, it danced without having learned, to the sound of the songs which were heard from the wives of warriors vanquished by him."[483]

These enemy "warriors" would have been both Khmer and foreign alike.

Given this, let us now examine contemporary works rooted in the tradition of Khmer classical dance. I laundry list these videos, so that the viewer may understand the differences in approach and value for themselves. Successful or not, each work offers a seed of possibility from which a new path in Khmer dance can grow. This is important as even in *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*—the most important dance drama in our tradition, one performed for rain and the sustenance and renewal of life—Lok Ta Moni Eisey chose Mekhala, his most innovative student, to carry his lineage into the future. It is in the goddess's hands, and in the hands of visionary artists and thinkers like her, that the love and knowledge of Lok Ta Moni Eisey will illuminate our universe most powerfully.

KHMER DANCE TODAY: A SURVEY

One day, after having lunch with a few friends in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo district, I went into one of my favorite shops. As I made my way through beautiful bowls and vintage postcards, I came upon a book titled *The Art of Life and Death*. Curious, and turning to its back cover to find out more, I was struck by a few of the authors' words: "There is a Japanese proverb that admonishes a student not to step on the shadow of his teacher."[484]

On my way home that day, I thought much about that one line. I certainly agreed with the deep reverence and respect palpable in the statement, the obvious interpretation being not to step on or disrespect your teacher's knowledge and legacy. But I could not help but feel like there was something more. I began to visualize the image, at first seeing myself walking along a dirt path directly behind my teacher. One or two steps behind her every move—imitating her every step (or what I perceived her to be doing)—I soon saw myself walking upon her shadow. I had to therefore move myself appropriately; but in order to do so I had to know where the light was coming from. And this is when I came to understand the image fully.

Depending on which direction the light source is, I had to be behind my teacher, directly by her side, or in front of her to avoid her shadow. In order to be the most respectful and devoted and effective student possible, I have to constantly encircle my teacher and our lineage as I move forward in my own artistic journey. Sometimes I must follow precisely in her footsteps and preserve the knowledge she passed on to me detail by detail. Sometimes I must engage with her and all she represents side by side. Sometimes I must forge my own path and journey by walking in front of my teacher, guiding our lineage towards new horizons. In fact, I have to be doing all of these things at once. It is in fact perfectly possible to preserve an art form by pushing it, maintain a tradition by innovating with and within it at the same time.

Keeping this image in mind, let us now survey today's landscape of Khmer dance. Created by artists of various ages, abilities, career experiences, and backgrounds, these diverse works give a glimpse of Khmer dance in its global context. It features artists working in both Cambodia and the diaspora and is by no means all-inclusive. The featured artists have all gone through years of classical dance training and each pass on the art form traditionally through their work as teachers. We in fact all belong to and encircle the same lineage, one which traces itself to the palace in the modern era and further to the temples of Angkor, to the *neak,* and to Lok Ta Moni Eisey.

My original intent was to focus solely on artists working within the context of "contemporary" performance. Given the intersected history of artmaking and colonialism however—and the inequities it breeds within the global art world—I felt like it was important to define that term "contemporary" through these videos.

Contemporary is not the same as "post-modern." It's not specific to any vocabulary, style, culture, or community. Rather, contemporary is being in harmony with time. And our

experience of time is layered, one where the past is living in our present gestures, where those gestures become the past as soon as they take life, and where the past and present reveal our future.

By virtue of existence then, everything is contemporary. And, no matter how old or new a dance work is, it is a singular act of creation each time it is performed; for it is embodied in the way that only one dancer can, in that specific moment of his or her life, in that one theater or street, surrounded by the histories and experiences of those who witness it (and the contexts just keep on expanding into the vastness of the cosmos).

In sharing these videos, which are both excerpts and full-length pieces, documentation of dance and dance for camera, I present the individual voices of artists who speak to, contrast with, and augment one another's unique qualities through their work. I also refrain from judging them by artistic merit, quality, or value. Through this, I offer the most expansive definition of contemporaneity as it manifests within the Khmer dance tradition. In certain cases, I offer multiple videos for single artists to show the breadth of their work. Given that light and shadow are eternally tied—remember *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*, and the patterns of bird-like creatures colliding and spiraling into each other at Angkor Wat—perhaps the special meaning, beauty, and significance of each artist and their work can only truly surface in relation to each other, and in relation to practitioners of different art forms, eras, and cultures as well. Therefore, through these videos, let us once again contemplate and honor the wisdom of Chheng Phon: "A garden with only one kind of flower or only flowers of one color is no good."[485]

Here then, are some of the many "flowers in the forest" of Khmer dance.[486]

SOPHILINE ARTS ENSEMBLE
Takhmao, Cambodia

Seasons of Migration, choreographed by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and performed by the Sophiline Arts Ensemble. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8BVy1Fk-oE

Mongkul Lokey, choreographed by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and set to *Shir Ha-Shirim* by John Zorn. Performed by the Sophiline Arts Ensemble. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uLKtGC_N4o

The Lives of Giants, choreographed by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and performed by the Sophiline Arts Ensemble. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8441iW1VOY

A Bend in the River, choreographed by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and performed by the Sophiline Arts Ensemble. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJH9yiBqRw0

Stained, choreographed by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and performed by the Sophiline Arts Ensemble. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGGRouGIlvk

ROYAL BALLET OF CAMBODIA
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Inao Bosseba, choreographed by Princess Norodom Buppha Devi and performed by the Royal Ballet of Cambodia. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKSaFcdD4Es

Sovannahang, choreographed by Princess Norodom Buppha Devi and performed by the Royal Ballet of Cambodia. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qy33400CVig

Excerpt of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, performed by the Royal Ballet of Cambodia in a style constructed from film footage of the Sisowath era. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYMEZie203c

SOTH SOMALY
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Robam Reasmei Duong Chantrea, choreographed by Soth Somaly. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BToXS7q6R5w

BALLET CLASSIQUE DU CAMBODGE
Paris, France

Robam Kolab Phnom Penh performed by Ballet Classique du Cambodge. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1nUKH9q5YU

CHEY CHANKETHYA
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

My Mothers and I, choreographed and performed by Chey Chankethya. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1IMAPc2_bY

Departures, choreographed by Chey Chankethya and performed by Amrita Performing Arts. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbSwScst0dI

BELLE CHUMVAN SODHACHIVY
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Choreography and performance by Belle Chumvan Sodhachivy. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIeUtjQKyVc

Choreography and performance by Belle Chumvan Sodhachivy in *SajakThor*. Source: https://vimeo.com/107642158

MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND FINE ARTS
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Dance depicting Queens Jayarajadevi and Indradevi. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwRt6u-zP6A

ANGKOR DANCE TROUPE
Lowell, MA, United States

Apsara Dancing Stones, choreographed and performed by Angkor Dance Troupe. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-5I0m796KI

CAMBODIAN BUDDHIST SOCIETY
Silver Spring, MD, United States

Agangamasor and His Magic Power. Choreography and performance by Cambodian Buddhist Society. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urZEo0SJkww

CHARYA BURT CAMBODIAN DANCE
Santa Rosa, CA, United States

Charya Burt Original Works. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uH3j7V-c1D4

Caressing Nostalgia, choreographed and performed by Charya Burt. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-01M0LbPqnU

Of Spirits Intertwined, choreographed and performed by Charya Burt, Vishnu Tattva Das, and Melody Takata. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJwnx_XkQeY

Forever My Ancestors, choreographed and performed by Charya Burt. Screen shot source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMFa4-UrfMI

I, AN ARTIST

Prumsodun Ok, wearing a *srang ka* designed under his direction, before the dance altar at the Khmer Arts Academy. Photo: Khannia Ok.

One day, my late father and I sat before a writer from the Los Angeles Times. She asked him questions about his views on my sexuality, and what he thought about the nature of my work. My father told her that he had no problem with me being gay; as long as I was a good person that was all that mattered. What shocked me most however was that the old man—in response to the latter question—said, "When Prum was young I wanted him to be a doctor, a lawyer, or a teacher. Now as an artist he is all of those things and more."

Indeed, the artist in the highest and most virtuous sense is someone who heals, instilling justice and morality while sharing the liberating power of knowledge. We have a privileged responsibility to share our gifts, so as to advance and elevate the state of humanity. Artists therefore, are not unlike the *bodhisattva*—enlightened beings who labor for the spiritual transcendence of all. Taking after *The Way of the Bodhisattva* then:

"Therefore, free from all attachment,
I will give this body for the benefit of beings.
And though it is afflicted by so many faults,
I shall adopt it as my necessary tool."[487]

Keeping this purpose in mind, I will now recount a brief history of my performance work. Each project exemplifies my multiplicity of approach, reflecting my realities as a

practitioner born and raised in the diaspora and as an artist trained in dance and music, photography and filmmaking, poetry and writing.

Although I started my ventures as an independent dancer in 2006—when I initiated, directed, curated, and performed in the SFAI Asian Performance Series—it was not until 2008 when I choreographed my first work, *Robam Santhyea Vehea*. Meaning "Dance of the Twilight Sky," it was inspired by my first visit to Phnom Penh, where the LGBTQ community lives in a liminal social space, present but teetering between visible and invisible. I thus challenged myself to choreograph a short work using Khmer classical dance, costuming, and music in the traditional style, to depict the celestial love and union of two male deities.

It is significant to note that I used a melody that I first heard in *Roeung Preah Sang*, which dancers of the Sophiline Arts Ensemble were rehearsing during my time there in 2008. Although Neak Kru Sophiline later told me it was a "feminine melody," I chose it as it was beautiful, and embodied a history of defiantly powerful love. In *Roeung Preah Sang*, the melody is used when Rachana tosses her garland to—and thereby chooses to marry—Preah Sang who is disguised as a *nguoh*. Through the power of her virtue, the princess possessed the vision to see his "golden image" beneath the black skin considered uncouth and savage by her community. Rachana is beaten by her sisters and expelled from the palace as a result—not unlike how some families and certain societies shun and stigmatize LGBTQ peoples all over the world today. In fact, and unfortunately, approximately forty percent of homeless youth in the United States identify as LGBTQ. To invoke Rachana and the *nguoh* through this melody in *Robam Santhyea Vehea* then, was to invoke a history of fearless love, an honest and empowering love that transcends the limitations of society.

When I think about it, *Robam Santhyea Vehea* in many ways reflects my realities as a beginning choreographer—I was only twenty-one years old, and had only been trained as a dancer for five years at the time. Although the work was and remains loaded with much social significance, I often found myself grappling with many limitations. I did not have access to another male dancer (or professional dancers for that matter), so it was first performed by my sister Callie and I. Later it was performed by two female dancers playing *neay rong*: Nong Sophanmay and Khannia Ok, who is my youngest sister.

More importantly the most powerful limitations were self-imposed, as my historical understanding was not as sharp as it is today. I often asked myself if the movements were traditional enough. And my mind was often wandering wildly, thinking sometimes the sky would fall upon me at any given moment for my self-perceived transgression. But of course, there was no transgression of any kind made. And it made me realize that we are most fearful when we are ignorant and lack sharp visions with which to see the past, present, and future.

I snapped out of this however, during lunch one day when I resigned to Neak Kru Sophiline in Cambodia. Watching my peers dance, their technique so polished and refined, I felt like I would never catch up as I did not have access to my teacher every day. Furthermore, I felt like a strange anomaly—skilled enough to dance alongside my peers but unable to perform

with them as I was male. Neak Kru Sophiline responded that I can dance on stage by myself, and it was from then that I was determined to carve a clear place for myself on the universe of the stage. I had to create my own form of theater; and to do so, I drew from the words of my filmmaking teacher Brook Hinton, who taught me to "transform limitations into possibilities."

So in 2009, I choreographed *Robam Lom Arom*. Not having access to *pin peat* musicians, I designed a soundscape incorporating English narration and a Khmer lullaby. Not having access to a costume dresser, I minimalized the costume: shaving my head to create a gender-neutral image, heightening this by painting myself completely white (an outdated practice that I was already using in *Robam Santhyea Vehea*), and donning a gold *sbai* to engender the character—who was a woman waiting for the return of her husband. *Robam Lom Arom* incorporated video that was projected onto my white body-canvas, a nod to the dance's title which translates to "Dance of Emotion's Caress."

In 2010, expanding on this approach, I created *Love Me Rachana*. The work featured English narration that I wrote from the perspective of the *nguoh*, which was layered on a live soundscape by Archie Carey and Odeya Nini. Inspired by my filmmaking practice—which sometimes used found footage and repetition as a tool—I appropriated the sequence of movements for when Rachana "turns her face" and tosses the garland, repeating and building upon it as the narration, which contemplated action in the face of physical and social violence, played. Channeling this history and embodying it through the choreography spoke to the bravery and power of independent choice, allowing for my body to be a vessel for a strong, courageous, and virtuous love.

Expanding on this interdisciplinarity of approach, I choreographed *The Cambodia Exhibit* in 2011. Inspired by nationalist conflicts on social spaces such as YouTube, the work used sound, dance, and performative talk to explore the ways in which the dancer's body had become a tool for nationalist violence between Khmers and Thais. Throughout the process of making this work, and through its performance, I was asking: are there borders to the love and knowledge of Lok Ta Moni Eisey?

Then in 2012, I staged a dance ritual featuring the performance of a one-time work called *White Chalk Horse*. Held on January 20, 2012, it honored the one-year anniversary of my father's passing and celebrated my twenty-fifth birthday—which coincided on that same day. Featuring both traditional and contemporary work, from both myself and non-Khmer artists such as Yannis Adoniou, Vong Phrommala, Cynthia Ling Lee, and Carol McDowell, the ritual was a moment for me to express my gratitude in the face of such significant loss. I have staged the ritual every year since on January 20th, sometimes alone and sometimes with others,[488] to thank my father, my ancestors, my teachers, the teacher spirits, and the gods as I contemplate the interconnectedness of life and death, rebirth and renewal in our universe.

Of Land and Sky, written, directed, and performed by Prumsodun Ok and guest artists. Sound by Archie Carey, Odeya Nini, and Ariel Campos. Screen shot source: https://vimeo.com/118893785

Reflecting this same feeling of loss—this time the loss of lovers—and building upon my approaches to interdisciplinary performance, I created *Of Land and Sky* in that same year. Inspired by a clip from the vintage Khmer film *Tip Sodachan*, one featuring vocals by Ros Sereysothea and Sinn Sisamouth, in which the characters sing for each other across the vast distance of land and sky, the work drew from a mythological motif and plot details seen in the Khmer dance drama *Roeung Kailas*, the Noh drama *Hagoromo*, the Japanese anime *Ayashi no Ceres*, and of course *Tip Sodachan*. I casted two gay men as the realm-crossing lovers torn apart by social pressure, and surrounded them with a chorus of multiracial topless women ages twenty to sixty. In doing so, I was reviving outdated Khmer approaches to the female body to challenge contemporary social norms. In the United States, for example, disconnected men were passing anti-abortion legislation with no consideration for a woman's choice or circumstances. Even years later, at the time of this writing, this war on women is evidenced by American terrorists who opened fire on and killed people at Planned Parenthood centers.

One time, after showing the opening act of *Of Land and Sky* to a group of Khmer students at a university in Southeast Asia, a young woman shared a comment with me. As a Khmer woman, she could not imagine being topless on stage because she valued her "purity." I responded to say that purity and virginity are different things, as you can be virgin and still have violent, unjust, and impure thoughts. You can be a virgin and still hurt and harm others physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

I encouraged her to have more compassion. For what are we to do when young children are abducted or sold into child prostitution? Who is to blame when a woman, living in a

society offering no other opportunities, sacrifices her social regard and personal safety by selling her body to feed her family? In such a case, she has the compassionate strength and purity of spirit that a virgin may not necessarily have. And, as Buddhists, Khmers should understand more than anyone how unreliable surfaces and bodies are anyways.

For example Sophanaka, the demon sister of Reab, transformed herself into a heavenly beauty in the *Reamker* to seduce Preah Ream and Preah Leak. Unable to charm them, her wicked mind and heart rises through her false form and she attacks Neang Seda. Preah Leak subdues and disfigures the demoness before any harm can be done to the princess however. This episode—as well as that of Rachana, Preah Sang, and *nguoh*—shows us then that the body is nothing but a shell and illusion, one that will ultimately decay and crumble. Indeed, as my father once said to me when I was a six year-old boy, "We begin dying the day we are born." So how do we die gracefully? How do we leave this world meaningfully and beautifully? Leave it at a higher level and better place?

Finally, on this anecdote, I made it clear to her that I never forced any of the dancers to be topless. They made a conscious decision to do so because they believed in my vision, and trusted in each other and in me. So what she was seeing was not a group of *srei koch* (bad or broken women), but an immense amount of bravery, love, intelligence, strength, and care. Indeed, I specifically chose the dancers to highlight the diverse breadth of female beauty—because creating a space for myself means creating a space for everyone. Consequently the dancers range in age, color, physicality, energy, and experience. They are mothers and wives, sisters and daughters; they are actors, dancers, performance artists, writers, university professors, and community leaders as well. All of them are the masters of their own lives and bodies, not unlike the *tevoda* and *apsara* at Angkor who sometimes hold their breasts confidently, offering to us the nurturing mother's milk of the divine feminine.

Before this talk however, I unintentionally gained notoriety in Cambodia and Khmer diasporic communities in 2013. For a re-performance of *Robam Apsara*—which I understood clearly to be a much-celebrated symbol of Khmer national identity—I stripped away the skin-colored leotard that dancers wear today. As I was a man, this was an insignificant social gesture so I also removed the skirt that dancers normally wear as well. What resulted was an offering of my body, and the history it carried, to the tradition and the society it represents. The dance came to take on new meaning and significance as a result, all without changing a single movement. Heated discussions ensued about the relationship between tradition and innovation, about whether men belonged in the tradition or not, and about Khmer identity to name a few.

Tevoda at Angkor Wat. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Tevoda at Beng Mealea, her knotted hair conjuring the image of Thorani or the Earth wringing water from her hair. Twelfth century. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Robam Apsara re-performed by Prumsodun Ok.

In fact, my re-performance of *Robam Apsara* was a turn back to dance that reflected certain circumstances of my life at that moment. First off, as my work got bigger and bigger, I felt as if I was in a rat race of sorts. Partly, this had to do with the art school culture I was trained in which calls for constant production. I realized that I needed to slow down, to breathe, and told myself that in this life—no matter how little or how many works I made—it was the quality and clarity of spirit, meaning, beauty, philosophy, and purpose that mattered. Secondly, and more importantly, now that I had become associate artistic director of Khmer Arts, where I was in charge of all training and programming at the Academy in Long Beach, I found myself dancing more and dissecting the dance form further in order to teach it. The performance of *Robam Apsara* then was a back-to-basics of a sort, one which led me to my projects today.

Currently, I am developing a new work entitled *Beloved*. Layering evocative English, Khmer, and Spanish narration onto a lush soundscape, the work casts a history of ritual lovemaking into the dancing bodies of gay men. Inspired by a thirteenth-century ceremony recorded by Zhou Daguan—in which King Indravarmann III climbed to the top of Phimeanakas every night to make love to a *naga*-woman—*Beloved* situates the love between men in the ritual-poetic space in which Khmer dance is set, mirroring and shaping, stretching and rechoreographing the image of ultimate social order: heaven.

Reflecting this return to foundations, it is important to note that the soundscape used in the opening act of *Beloved* is the same one I designed for *Robam Lom Arom* in 2009. I wrote new narration for it of course and substituted the original lullaby for a Khmer dance melody, and certain sections were shortened or lengthened accordingly to the new

choreography. What was important was that my choreographic abilities were much sharper, and *Beloved* is really much so a testament to my maturation as a choreographer, dancer, and performer. An avant-premiere of *Beloved* at the Bangkok Theatre Festival - Asia Focus was described by The Bangkok Post as "Radical beauty . . . brave but also intimate and tender."[489]

My research for *Beloved*, and for this writing, led me to readings on *tantra* and Buddhism. And I am currently re-developing a devotional work that I initially began choreographing in 2009. Re-titled *Robam Knhom Preah Silapak* (Dance of the Servants of the Sacred Art), the dance depicts women who "offer their bodies and lives to the Thommik . . . their sacred lives in accord with the laws of art . . . hands holding *vajra* . . . that conquer ignorance and bring freedom." The work has come to be inspired by the images of *yogini*, and is a revaluation of the dancer's role throughout history and in contemporary society.

Beloved. Photo: Porntep Petchsumrit.

Eros Burning in the Field of Flowers, choreography, direction, and script by Prumsodun Ok. Screen shot source: https://vimeo.com/146813474

Whereas *Beloved* and *Robam Knhom Preah Silapak* are works developing over the period of years, I made *Eros Burning in the Field of Flowers* in a short period of months (an opportunity to perform in Mexico arose so I had to take it). Wanting to honor the gay men thrown off of buildings by terrorists, I researched the relationship between homosexuality, religion, art, politics, and philosophy. I took after Plato's *Symposium*—a text in which a group of Athen's cultural and political leaders gathered to eat, drink, flirt, and give orations on love—and weaved together a history of gods associated with homosexuality, queer priests, royalty, and warriors from Japan to Greece, Muslim Spain to Korea, Aztec Empire to China, Maya Empire to Persia. I pitted these celebrated images against the contemporary state of LGBTQ peoples all over the world today, where we are sometimes burned alive, killed by our own parents, and discriminated against at work and in society. *Eros Burning in the Field of Flowers* then shares both inspiring and sobering histories so as to heal, empower, and push forward, contemplating personal and societal mythologies, violence and inequality towards and within the LGBTQ community, as well as spirituality and reincarnation.

These experimental works may be difficult for most audiences however. And, wanting to create more paths and doors for people to enter the world of Khmer dance, I began *PRUM x POP*. Setting Khmer dance onto contemporary pop music, the project forges a surprising harmony between the worlds of tradition and modernity, art and entertainment. The dances are performed by dancers of Prumsodun Ok and NATYARASA, my newly-formed company which is Cambodia's first gay dance company.

Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA dancers perform *Robam Pka Meas Pka Prak* (Dance of Gold and Silver Flowers) in Phnom Penh. Photo courtesy of Association Anvaya.

I understand fully that not everyone is happy with what I am doing. And although I understand what they are saying—or more precisely, I understand the conditions and environment that shaped their system of values, patterns of thought, and modes of behavior—I am confident in my own vision, knowledge, and good intentions enough to simply disagree.

Yes, after my performance of *Robam Apsara* there were people who wrote to me with angry words, those who threatened to report me to authorities, and those who threatened physical violence. But I am not the first artist to receive such threats in world history nor in Cambodia's for that matter, for even influential artists such as Hang Thun Hak—described as a "*critique social*"—and Chheng Phon faced possible arrest for pioneering *lakhaon niyeay*. Take for example, the words of the latter:

"But later on we had the political problems and they wanted to arrest us . . . Because we criticised them too much. We performed plays that were too critical. For example, the play *Thma Roam* ("The Dancing Stone"). That play talked about loving heritage, loving antiquities and sculpture, and how a powerful person was trying to make a profit off of artists and antiquities. In that play there was also a part about a family fighting. After that we performed another play that was even more sharply critical called *Kanya Chareya* ("The Ethical Girl"). That play critiqued corruption in society and the culture of bribery. So we had trouble. When we performed it, a police van waited in front of the entrance of the theater and the police listened to every word of the play. We ran and got the script and looked it over again, afraid that we would make a

mistake. We were very scared but we still performed. The history of *lakhaoun niyeay* is a really difficult one. We struggled and resisted a lot. There are a lot of things that happened that people don't really know about. The people involved in it, the people who went through that, they understand. In *Kanya Chareya* ("The Ethical Girl"), I played a Chinese person who bribed people. We were very afraid! The police bought all the tickets for the first two rows, and one of them held the script and if you just added a word or made a mistake from the script, they would arrest you. It continued from there and got worse and worse. When the police really went after us, the mother of King Sihanouk, Queen Kossamak, began to protect us."[490]

That said, there were also many more—much more—people who wrote letters of admiration and support, saying that I was "a star of Khmer dance," "an icon of Cambodian culture," and that I was "a child of Angkor and not of colonialism." From this experience, I learned how to not let fear, anger, and violence overwhelm the love and hope all around me. The image that guided me was Shiva drinking poison, holding it in his throat until it transformed into nectar. Even in the community of Buddhist monks who are supposed to be most detached of human folly, jealousy, and emotions, power plays were and remain strong. So who am I to pretend that I should strive to please everyone? Shantideva, for example, wrote:

"Why should I be pleased when people praise me?
Others there will be who scorn and criticize—
And why despondent when I'm blamed,
Since there'll be others who think well of me.

So many are the learnings and wants of beings
That even Buddha could not please them all—
Of such a wretch as me no need to speak!
I'll give up such concerns with worldly things."[491]

According to my Khmer language teacher, even the Buddha—one of the most revolutionary thinkers and leaders in the history of humankind—once faced violent words, aggression, and threats.[492] And in Cambodia, Samdech Chuon Nath, a celebrated figure instrumental in the modernization of Khmer Buddhism, once had stones thrown at him by opponents at Wat Unnalom.[493]

Pleasing people then, is simply not the same as guiding them to a place of healing and liberation. For some medicines are sweet and easy to consume yet some are bitter and hard to swallow. The two are not opposite of one another but instead have their own unique functional properties and purposes. Likewise, when looking at an image of Monju Bosatsu, the *bodhisattva* of transcendent wisdom also known as Mañjushri, I have often wondered why he holds a sword that cuts through illusion and ignorance. The sword, source of so much violence, conflict, and war in day-to-day life, however, is in this case a symbol for the sometimes painful physical and internal struggle we face in our journey towards transcendence. Mañjushri's sword is the battle we face as we strive towards spiritual, mental, and physical liberation—not unlike the way that the beautiful *apsara* are born from the pull between *tevea* and *asora*, a struggle that destroyed the lives of many creatures in the ocean as seen in the bas-relief at Angkor Wat. And, back to Buddhism, did not the demon Mara attack the Buddha with massive force so as to prevent the latter's enlightenment?

I accept that I am the bitter medicine of Khmer dance and the sword of Khmer arts. I am the *nguoh* who says and does the things that others find unacceptable; I am Rachana who loves the golden form, the art form and tradition, more than I love the limitations of the society around me. I know that I am the sweet medicine too. And I will not allow myself to think in polarizing opposites nor will I demonize those who demonize me. As an artist I aspire to be what my ancestors inscribed on temple walls as *satyapala*—a protector of truth—so as to build a *vidyaviraloka*, "a world victorious through great knowledge."[494] I therefore hold a great responsibility to offer my fullest self to my art, tradition, and world—because what is a garden, a society, a universe in which flowers never bloom to share their singular aromas and beauties? What is the purpose of life if it is lived in fear and hiding?

Moreover, my thoughts and approach to the art form are aligned with Vann Molyvann's vision of the Royal University of Fine Arts in 1965, during a time when Cambodia revealed its artistic leadership and genius:

"Under the vigorous impulsion given by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Head of State, steps have recently been taken which should lead to a revival in Cambodia's traditional arts and handicrafts. These involve drastic structural changes designed to improve and co-ordinate training methods and instruction . . . This was the more necessary as – for some decades past – Khmer artists and artisans have revealed little ability to renew traditional art forms or to create works of an original nature: a failure probably to be ascribed to a complex of greatness of Khmer classical art, which led Khmer artists and artisans to reproduce pale copies of masterpieces dating from the [twelfth] century. Thus wood carvings were turned out by the hundreds representing some "Apsara", or some Buddha seated on a *Naga* – hack work which revealed no trace of the artist's personality, or creative imagination – by artisans opposed to this heavy heritage, and by teaching methods which encouraged subservience to, and nostalgia for, an art-style which defied imitation . . . A plan designed to attain these objectives was soon drawn up with the accent placed on providing students with a sound grounding in Khmer classic art in the belief that, once they were impregnated with these principles, students would be able to strike out in new directions. For it was considered that the budding artist, who has assimilated the art of the past, and has become acquainted with modern ideas and techniques, would be well-equipped and psychologically liberated and suitably inspired to produce original works, which would be Cambodian in inspiration and thus contribute to the creation of a modern national art . . . [S]tudents are being encouraged to evolve new and personal styles, derived from traditional conceptions. The objective aimed at is the renewal of that artistic inspiration, which was responsible for the creation of classic art forms."[495]

So when people raise the argument against me that there are no males in dance, I would like for them to recall King Jayavarmann I and King Yasovarmann I, the dancer Vasudeva mentioned in inscription, Machas Ksatra Sophilu whom I was once compared to, and the countless iconographic images of male dancers at Angkor. Furthermore, sitting at the feet of Soth Sam On with my hands in prayer, Neak Kru Sophiline introducing me as her only male student in 2008, all she said to me, all the old dance master ever said to me in this life was, "*Mean ei, s'aat tas*." ("What is there [to say], he is beautiful.")

And for those who say that what I do is not Khmer, I have some questions. From where is the *Reamker* derived? And Khmer script, what is it derived from? Hinduism and Buddhism? And the jeans your wear and the iPhones you use and the car you drive?

This myth of Khmer purity is senseless, especially given the way that Preah Thaong was not from Cambodia. Both of our founding stories are in fact of the meeting of different worlds, of foreign and native, of human and *neak*, of brahmin and *apsara*, of heaven and earth, and of land and sky. I therefore do not see Khmer or Cambodia as static and monolithic but as hybrid, diverse, rich, and dynamic. This is the true source of our strength. This power of the in-between, of embodying multiple approaches, spaces, and cultures can be seen in an image carved by Angkorean sculptors in which Vishnu, transforming into *narasingha* (lion-man), emerges from a column at the threshold of a palace at twilight to destroy a demon king who can neither be killed "by day or by night, by gods, men or animals, inside or outside his palace."[496]

That said, I do not pretend to be the sole symbol of Khmer culture or Cambodia either. Rather, I am one of many artists in the lineage and service of Lok Ta Moni Eisey who "must communicate this sacred knowledge called the theatre to skillful beings, beyond the fire of knowledge, who walk with daring and who have conquered inertia."[497] Thus I strive to serve the highest expression of love, beauty, compassion, knowledge, peace, and humanity. And I will serve the tradition and these things through my art wherever I go, working to uplift the people and world around me.

Drawing from the *Natyashastra* once more, let me remind the artists of today and tomorrow of what art is. When the demons were ready to attack Lok Ta Moni Eisey and his disciples, Brahma, creator of the universe and the dramatic arts, appeared and said to the offended ones:

"Enough of your resentment, Sons of Diti, reliquish your negativity. The opposition of good and evil manifests in you and in the gods; it is the law which relates all states and actions. The theatre represents neither your nature nor that of the gods exclusively. It is a representation of the triple world in its entirety. Sometimes law, sometimes play, sometimes profit, sometimes appeasement, sometimes laughter, sometimes war, sometimes desire, sometimes murder. Law for those who follow the law, desire for those who are dedicated to desire, constraint for those who have no self-discipline, self-mastery for those who know how to behave. To eunuchs it gives audacity, to braggarts energy; instruction to the ignorant, science to the learned. Pastime of great lords, comfort for those struck by misfortune; wealth for those who live from wealth, courage for trembling spirits. Containing all the diverse states, created from all the diverse situations, I created this theatre as an analogy of the movement of the world. There is no knowledge, no profession, no science, no art, no action—that will not be manifest in this theatre. Therefore, you have no right to be angry with the immortals. I have created this theatre as an analogy of the seven continents. The theatre has been made in order to show, in their totality, the actions of *devas* and *asuras*, kings and men and visionary priests. All individual natures in the world, with their particular forms of happiness and sorrow, with their gestures and means of expression—this will be called theatre. To sacred knowledge, to science and to myths, it will give an audience, and to the people, a diversion: such will be this theatre."[498]

So, although I may have offended some self-described "preservationists," I am merely a faithful and devoted follower of an ancient line of world-defining artists. Therefore, from this day forward, I will invoke the words of Shantideva and hope that artists of future generations may find their own voices in the path of the *bodhisattva* as well:

"May I be the wishing jewel, the vase of wealth,
A word of power and the supreme healing,
May I be the three miracles,

For every being the abundant cow.

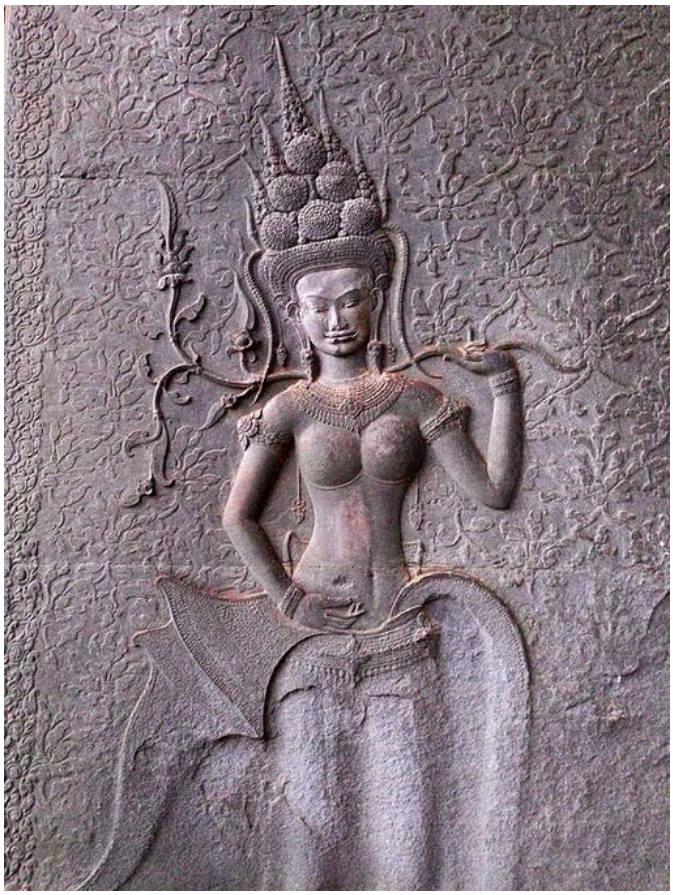
Just like the earth and space itself
And all the other mighty elements,
For boundless multitudes of beings
May I always be the ground of life, the source of varied sustenance.

Thus for everything that lives,
As far as are the limits of the sky,
May I be constantly their source of livelihood
Until they pass beyond all sorrow.

Just as all the Buddhas of the past
Have brought forth the awakened mind,
And in the precepts of the *Bodhisattvas*
Step-by-step abode and trained,

Likewise, for the benefit of beings,
I will bring to birth the awakened mind,
And in those precepts, step-by-step,
I will abide and train myself."[499]

A BEAUTY THAT DOESN'T BREAK



Tevoda at Angkor Wat. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

When I first began my research for this project, I was struck by the many images of *tevoda*. Some of their limbs were missing and their bodies marked by bullets, cracks sometimes splitting like lightning through half of their faces. Despite all of this—despite the pressures of nature, war, and time—the spirits of these celestial women remained potent and powerfully intact. Even through the centuries of blemish, they radiated smiles of knowledge and love, and those of grace and strength as well. Ever so sacred, standing with a confident compassion, they are transcendent embodiments of a beauty that doesn't break.

Walking through the temples in the summer of 2014, I took photos of them in as much detail possible with my phone. Tourists swarmed past me in groups, accompanied by tour guides speaking more than ten languages. The resulting feeling is like that of being in a theme park, which comes as no surprise since two million people visited Angkor in that same year. Unfortunately, this large and growing number of tourists is threatening the life span of the structures. This fact is made most evident for me in an image conjured by Chheng Phon: "The vibrations from jet airplanes . . . shake the foundations of the monuments."[500]

The disappearance of the temples is unlikely to happen overnight of course. Nor will it happen in hundreds of years even. But I can't help but think: what will be left when the irresistible force of time finally prevails? Will the air breathe differently where the temples once stood? Will the birds sing differently and time not move the same? Is there a certain spirit that will remain alive in the earth? Or will nothing be left at all? From our moment in time this scenario seems unlikely however. For, just as our ancestors—Khmer and not alike—have done since the temples' creations, we are in a continual process of restoration and giving new life, for our benefit and for that of humanity.

Like the temples—and all that is encapsulated in their bricks and stones—the art of Khmer classical dance has endured its share of difficult realities. And, like the temples, the tradition ceased to disappear because Khmer artists contributed to a constant process of redefinition, revision, rebuilding, and reimagining, pushing further and further towards "a beauty of the highest quality."[501] Born of the same legacy, these artistic and philosophical expressions are precious gifts left to us by our ancestors. One takes life in the materiality and false permanence of stone; the other, almost opposite in approach, is an art form of human bodies in a constant state of growth and decay, one that dies and disappears as it comes to life in space and time. Sure, the temples shall outlive my individual life—as it has and will for that of many others—but something tells me that the dance, more visibly in tune with the laws of change, transformation, and impermanence, is actually much older than the temples and shall outlive them as well.

Deeply rooted in ancestor worship and animist spiritual practices, Khmer classical dance evolved in its marriage to Hindu, Buddhist, and tantric schools of thought. Its aesthetic and formal values crystallized into how we recognize it today by the ninth century during the Angkor era, when dancers were both men and women, kings and royalty, common people and foreigners alike. These dancers trained inside and outside of the palace and were offered to temples where they prayed to the gods for the coming of rain and prosperity. They were also entertainers of kings and nobility, performing short dances that we know today as *robam* as well as dance dramas derived from Hindu and Buddhist lore.

The oldest and most sacred dances are *Robam Tamng Buon* and *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*. They are always performed together in the *buong suong* ceremony as the narratives of Preah Thaong, Neang Neak, and Moni Mekhala have been linked since the time of Nokor Phnom, whose people identified as Kambuja as early as the first century. The two dances therefore reflect the creation of the Khmer nation and cosmos, two realms that have always been connected, bled into each other, and one in the same in Khmer art, politics, and religion.

By examining the thematic elements of these dance works—the tantric union of masculine and feminine, universal bodies of water, earth, fire, and wind—we can point the origin of these works to pre-Angkorean and Angkorean Cambodia. Sixth-century Chinese sources record that "burial by water . . . burial by fire . . . burial by earth . . . [and] burial by the birds"[502] was practiced by ancient Khmer, and the creative, purifying power of the four cosmic forces likely manifested in sacred acts of performative and literary nature as

well. Indeed, the association of *Robam Tamng Buon* with elemental *mandala*-bodies is supported further by the Buddhist understanding of *mahaphutarub tamng buon*, from which all matter is believed to be made of. Although the *mahaphutarub tamng buon*—"all those four great things that can be seen in the body"—are listed normally in the order of earth, water, fire, and wind, their reordering in the dance reflects the cycle of rain, nature, and life as well as a worldview shaped by the Khmer language. Ask a native Khmer speaker how they would order these elements with the most poetic flow and they would probably answer *tuk* (water), *dei* (earth), *phleung* (fire), *kyal* (wind). The short title, *Robam Tamng Buon* then, implies all four elements, all four dances, and all four melodies at the same time.

In the case of the dance drama, along with its clear association with the *mahaphutarub tamng buon*, we can associate it with the religious competition of the Khmer court. This competition is mirrored in motifs at Angkor Wat that meditate on the generative balance between opposing forces, a theme mirrored in the larger sphere of Khmer "arts, sports, games, dance, singing, music and holidays" that were carried over to Thailand, as evidenced by the Thai adoption of Khmer words such as *prakuot* (compete), *prachol* (combat), and *pranamng* (race).[503] In fact, the Khmer word *chbamng* (battle) was adopted as a "name of a [poetic] meter that originally served to describe the arrangement of the army or a scene of war."[504] Linguistically, it is important to note that the prefix *pra* in the prior mentioned words—which stresses a coming together of opposing entities—also appears in the Khmer word *pralaing* (play), which Varasarin describes as a "kind of opening dance performed before theatrical presentation."

In many ways, the creative power of complementary forces that drives *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* can be seen in other works of literature such as *Preah Thaong Neang Neak* and the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*, in which the battle, competition, and union of two forces gives life to Khmer people ourselves. It can be seen in a scene of the *Mahabharata* carved at Banteay Srei, in which Indra's battle with Arjuna is meant to save the burning Khandava forest. Interestingly fire, if depicted at all, is overshadowed by the arrows shot up by Arjuna, which simultaneously appears to be a heavy rain released by the king of gods. The Khmer emphasis was on life and creation in this struggle, not unlike how several hymns from the *Rig Veda* explain "creation as the result—often apparently a mere by-product—of a cosmic battle,"[505] such as Indra releasing the waters through the slaying of the *naga* Vritra. Whether of Vedic or Khmer origin—or very likely a harmonious mixture of both—Khmers still associate war, conflict, rain, and fertility together, as evidenced through the term *chbamng ramng chul* (to battle as the rains and waters are blocked).[506]

The *Mekhala Ramasun* episode has been described as an opening dance since ancient times by Thai artists, and other Thai opening dances are described in Khmer terms as *baeuk rong* (open the theater).[507] These facts indicate the adoption of certain dances and dance conventions from Angkor, and further points to the origination of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* in the Khmer court. Just as the Peali-Sugrib and Reab-Piphek episodes were antithetical to the Preah Ream-Bhirut story (Peali and Reab, who fail as kings and elder brothers, are opposed and killed by Preah Ream who is a good king and brother), the trickster sea goddess's victory over Ream Eyso contrasts with Seda who is duped and overpowered by Reab. The performance of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* before, as a discreet

opening dance required during sacred festivals, or as part of the *Reamker*, as a frame tale to heighten drama, would have given an especial tragedy to the appearance of the golden deer and to Seda's ensuing abduction. Either way, this can explain why the sea goddess—who some have described as an indigenous Southeast Asian deity, who does not appear in any South Asian versions of the *Ramayana*[508]—would appear later in extant Khmer, Thai, and Lao versions which were all derived from the Old Khmer versions of the *Reamker* sung, danced, performed, and written at Angkor.

Furthermore, as the Khmer story possesses a certain tantric and Mahayana character—Moni Mekhala is a student who perfects her knowledge much like Mahasiddha Mekhala and Vajrasattva—we can gain a fuller understanding of the power of her jewel through the words of the ancient Mahayana Buddhist teacher Shantideva:

"Just as on a dark night black with clouds,
The sudden lightning glares and all is clearly shown,
Likewise rarely, through the Buddha's power,
Virtuous thoughts rise, brief and transient, in the world."[509]

Even the fact that the goddess chooses to escape her adversary, never killing him despite having the power to do so, is mirrored in the teacher's eighth-century words:

"Those whom arrogance destroys
Art thus defiled; they lack self-confidence.
Those who have true confidence escape the foe,
While others fall into the power of an evil pride."[510]

The fall of Angkor is misleadingly associated with a "dark age" in Khmer historiography, one where there are no written accounts of Khmer dance in the palace. However, when we examine the oral stories, iconographic evidence, literature, and other written accounts, we have no choice but to believe Chheng Phon's claim that some dancers were carried to Ayutthaya while others went southwards to the new Khmer capital of Longvek. The country still remained prosperous during parts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, boasting trade relations with the Majapahit Empire of Java[511] and later with the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, Japanese, and British among others.[512]

In fact, King Ang Chan I's transformation of Angkor Wat from a Hindu to Theravada Buddhist temple in the sixteenth century would leave us with clear, hard evidence for the presence of dance in the post-Angkor era. On a bas-relief on the temple's northern gallery, sculptors of the time brought to life a Middle Period dancer with vivid life and clarity. Her gestures and pose are synonymous with her predecessors while her costume, although clearly derived from those before, reflect the evolving tastes and aesthetics of her day.

Carved on a section deemed as poor in workmanship however, and belonging to a less-celebrated period of Khmer history, this section of the temple feels largely ignored. A majority of tourists and visitors rarely circumvent Angkor Wat's galleries to see it and, unlike the others, the bas-relief does not have any signage accompanying it. Consequently, it is easy to see how Khmer people and scholars have overlooked this dancer and all that

she represents. And we are left here with a lesson: when we do not embrace and celebrate all parts of our history—the good and the bad, the beautiful and the painful—we can only lose. We lose sight of and connection to the stories, values, and peoples who have made us who we are and to the things that got us here today. How are we ever to move forward, to grow, to innovate meaningfully then?

Yes, Cambodia has seen centuries of war and violence. Yes, it is difficult to acknowledge the struggles of our ancestors, struggles that manifest in our lives today. But no, Cambodia never descended into any "dark age"—there is only the reality of life and its circumstances. We must therefore strive to view our past with clarity, strive to carry, understand, and value all parts of our history and being. For, just like the paintings re-popularized by Noel Hidalgo Tan, immensely important ideas, expressions, voices, and narratives might be right below our noses, blind to us because we have learned to pride and nationalize certain aspects of our identity and history at the cost of wholesome richness and fertile complexity.

Post-Angkor dancer depicted in sixteenth-century bas-relief at Angkor Wat. Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

Indeed, what happened after the fall of Angkor was the splitting of the Khmer tradition, which already had various styles due to individual approaches, multiplicity of religious creeds, and geographic distance. History points to provincial Khmer schools associated with Vimayapura, Lavodayapura, and Sukhodayapura and more being consolidated with the central Khmer style of Angkor after 1431 in Ayutthaya, where it then evolved to reflect central Thai tastes in the early modern era. On the other hand, losing these territories, classical dance in Cambodia would become solely in the lineage of the central Khmer style of Angkor. This fact can be gleaned in the words of Thai scholar Mattani Mojdara Rutnin:

"It could be assumed that the tradition of temple dancing to glorify Shiva and the other gods was carried on in the Mahayana-Hindu temple in [Vimayapura] by Khmer dancers. This may have been the origin of the sacred ritualistic dance of Phra Phirap, the God or teacher of Thai classical dance and drama, which is still being performed by Thai dancers who have been initiated to perform this most sacred dance in the invocation ceremony, the *Phithi Wai Kru* ceremony, which pays homage to the spirits of the dance."[513]

This statement is evidence for a diversity of Khmer cult practices, the splitting of the tradition after Angkor, and the subsequent evolutions of distinctly Khmer and Thai styles of *robam* and *khaol*. Today even, this fact is manifested in our differing depictions of the ultimate teacher spirit of the dance—Lok Ta Moni Eisey in Khmer and Phra Ruesi in Thai. The Khmer mask of Lok Ta Moni Eisey, unlike his Thai counterpart, is crowned by four heads that face the cardinal directions. This symbolizes the ascestic's universal knowledge and omniscient power, and references the fact that Bharata Muni, with whom the local "grandfather" spirit has been syncretized, received his knowledge from the four-faced Brahma.

Never after the fall of Angkor then was a classical dance or music tradition wholly imported from Ayutthaya or Bangkok to the west. Rather, the cyclical nature of history provides precedential and successive evidence for the dance form's rebuilding and reconstruction immediately after 1431. Jayavarmann VII offered more than 1,600 dancers after the Chams sacked Angkor and carried away immense material and human treasures in 1177 CE; and, in 1981, only two years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, a new generation of dancers had already emerged from the ashes of war and genocide to perform inside and outside of Cambodia due to the efforts of Khmer dance masters. Given all of the epigraphic, literary, and iconographic evidence available to us then, we can be confident that the practice and revival of rituals and customs—of which dance and music were integral—took place within Cambodia as Middle Period monarchs, elites, and common people worked to "rebuild in abundance like in the ancient era again."[514] In fact, these are the words of Queen Socheata herself, inscribed onto the temple walls of Angkor in the year 1577, which remind us of the roles played by Queen Jayarajadevi who came before her and Queen Kossamak Nearyrath who came after.

Indeed Thais only came to politically dominate Cambodia in the eighteenth century.[515] Even then, "Vietnamese and Thai sources agree that at several points in the eighteenth century (when it would be tempting to assert Cambodia had already been bled white), Cambodian forces managed to repel their invading armies."[516] The country, now focused and dependent on maritime trade, was only exasperated into its weakened state

with the loss of the Mekong Delta to Vietnam. Despite being overshadowed by much stronger neighbors, what existed was a traditional system of vassalage, one of relative autonomy in the Khmer court and provinces. During this time, as was the case during Angkor and after, dancers of the time performed inside the palaces and homes of elite. Contrary to their predecessors however, they kept dance alive amongst the common people in Theravada Buddhist temples as well.

It is not until the return of King Ang Duong in the nineteenth century when we have clear written records of dance in the Khmer palace again. Sources, written by him and his descendants regarding the near disappearance of the dance before his arrival are not entirely reliable however, as they are politically motivated to establish his authority and right to rule. Even in the bleak picture that King Ang Duong constructs, evidence indicates that dance was alive before and upon his ascent. The major change was that he costumed dancers in the Chaktumok style, cloaking a different shell over a familiar form of movement. This introduction, whether from Thailand or not, bears roots in Khmer artistic, spiritual, and conceptual foundations as evidenced by the iconography, material culture, and language of Angkor. The innovation here then is not the nineteenth-century invention of these costumes, but, rather, their transformation. The story of Khmer costuming then, and of the dance form as a whole, is that of evolution and not revolution.

Mirroring his Khmer-Thai heritage, King Ang Duong began an approximately 100-year period in which Khmer and Thai styles co-existed with and rivaled one another inside Cambodia. Mirroring the way he secretly initiated contact with the French however, the Khmer court and its artists maintained a sense of independence and autonomy during an era of Thai political eminence. There were certainly dancers of Thai heritage in the palace during the modern era as they consisted a part of King Norodom's harem, and certain works were indeed sung and performed in the Thai language and style. Yet the repertoire was never completely Thai nor did Thai artists ever subsume Khmer dancers at the Khmer court either.

Instead they were one of many women practicing a pre-standing and strong tradition, women who reflected the diversity of Southeast Asia. Even as early as the reign of King Norodom, a time in which the court was most open to Thai culture, one-sided *sbai tol* characteristic of Khmer dance reveal a local character, style, and spirit of independence. Furthermore, although certain dances may have been performed strictly in the Thai style, these dances became uniquely Khmer expressions when they were translated into the Khmer language beginning in the reign of King Sisowath,[517] thereby shifting the music, movement, and choreography. This is the difference between translating ephemeral, performance-based dramatic arts as opposed to their reproducible counterparts such as photography, film, and studio-recorded music into new contexts and locations.

During the colonial era in which the Khmer court juggled alliances between the Thai and the French, the art form increasingly became an expression of "Khmerness" that stood in opposition to Thai and French dominance. Across the border to the west Thais responded to colonial pressures by imitating imperialist mentalities and strategies, co-opting and erasing Khmer cultural legacies that were once held with high regard by their ancestors

from the pre-Thai Angkor and Ayutthaya eras into the modern Rattanakosin era. Thus both powers attempted to strip Khmer people of our cultural, historical, and political agency by distinguishing between two separate races: the Khom and Khamen in the Thai case and the Khmer and Cambodgienne in the French.

The arrival of colonialism would also see Khmer dance opened to the world and performed for an audience beyond Southeast Asia. This exposed some of the most influential European and American artists of the time to the art form, including Auguste Rodin, Ted Shawn, and Ruth St. Denis among others. These artists drew inspiration from the ancient art form to create singular works of art. And, in certain cases, they drew from Khmer dance and other art forms to pioneer a uniquely modern mode of expression from which the contemporary arts and dances of our day have evolved.

The French would vie for control of the dance and the country it represented during the colonial era but the brief Japanese occupation of Cambodia, their ceding of Khmer territory to Thailand and their encouragement of Khmer independence upon their withdrawal in 1945, would most pronouncedly stir the centuries-long Khmer desire for political eminence. The subsequent post-independence period of Khmer dance was spearheaded by Queen Kossamak Nearyrath, and was one of redefinition, restructuring, and re-envisioning to reintroduce Cambodia into the global arena of culture and politics. Significantly, the queen reintroduced men into the tradition of classical dance—a split that her great-grandfather King Ang Duong had made in the modern era—and commissioned the creation of new works such as *Robam Apsara* and *Robam Tep Monorom* which remain some of the most popular works today even.

This optimism and creative spirit would come to an end with the 1970 coup led by Lon Nol and the subsequent genocide initiated by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. A heartbreaking and devastating majority of Khmer dance artists would die in the latter period, causing dancers to conceal their knowledge and identities. The expulsion of the Khmer Rouge initiated the spread of Khmer dance into refugee camps and into the diaspora but it also allowed for the revival of the ancient art form in Cambodia. Led by artists such as Chheng Phon, Chea Samy, and Soth Sam On, classical dance was resurrected from the horrors of war, genocide, loss, and trauma. It was most markedly refined in this period when fear of the art form's extinction was most palpable.

The Lon Nol, Pol Pot, and post-Khmer Rouge eras show us how Khmer dance has survived amidst times of war and struggle; they also show us how Khmer dance has persisted and grown without the patronage of the monarchy. First and foremost then, these periods reveal the tradition as a prerogative of the artists themselves. The money, theaters, schools, organizations, and governments may disappear, but at the end of the day Khmer dance survives because a dancer is passing on her or his knowledge to the next generation. This said, however, everyone has a role to play in sustaining and growing our ancient art form. It will be most alive when people of all creeds recognize its value and work actively with fullness of heart to nurture an unending growth and vibrancy.

On this image of continuity, it is important to consider recent studies that have demonstrated how trauma can be passed on genetically. In 2013, scientists trained a group of mice to fear the scent of cherry blossoms by shocking them every time the smell was released. Their offspring expressed fear and anxiousness at the strange scent, even though no shocks accompanied its release.[518] Furthermore, amongst humans, the descendants of Jewish holocaust survivors have been shown to carry altered genes; they demonstrate higher rates of stress disorders despite having never lived through the horrors of war and concentration camps either.[519]

What are the ramifications of this for Khmer people all over the world, who are survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide or the descendants of the victims and perpetrators of this conflict? What does this mean for a people who are the product of centuries of on-going war, both as victors during the time of Angkor and then as the subjugated for the most part after? What are the beautiful, refreshing, inspirational, life-invigorating, and game-changing "cherry blossom scents" that Khmer people have learned to refuse, reject, and run away from as a result? And what does it mean when we as a people have been conditioned to fear?

Khmer social psychologist Seanglim Bit explains:

"Fear is a constant reality in the Cambodian psyche . . . the fear stems from the centuries of complex history, the religious and mythological belief systems and the social arrangements which characterize Cambodian society. Through the systematic use of force to gain advantage, the Cambodian population has become conditioned to accept and tolerate fear as the expected human condition. Compounding the effects of fear in the Cambodian experience is the fact that it is submerged and hidden behind a façade of social characteristics which present a superficial picture of harmony and humility, at least until the recent period of civil strife. Fear is neither identified nor openly recognized as a primary determinant in human psychology or in the conduct of public affairs by those who would assist Cambodia to resolve its contemporary problems or indeed by Cambodians themselves. Fear restrains the exercises of creativity, the ability to conceive new solutions, adaptations or innovations for contributing to general society. Attitudes of self-glorification based on cultural triumphs long past but incompletely understood, have denied present society a source of inspiration for the changes it must make to reform its cultural values. The triad of fear-oppression-false pride creates an infertile ground for progressive self-development. The net result of this triad operating at the various levels of social interaction is a society which does not have the full benefit of its own internal human resources to generate its own self-development and manage incremental social change."[520]

Toni Shapiro-Phim, via David Chandler, enlightens the situation further:

"David Chandler has discussed Khmer concepts of moral, social, and physical order in a powerful essay (1982) which highlights the rooting of 'order' in the Cambodian past. 'Wildness was to be feared, and so was innovation. 'Don't avoid a winding path,' says a Cambodian proverb. 'And don't [automatically] take a straight one, either. Choose the path your ancestors have trod' . . . Chandler points out that to encourage continuity and security amidst violence and uncertainty, people in Cambodia were 'continually reliving, repeating or 'restoring' what was past.'"[521]

So today, Khmer dance alive and in certain manners pushed to new heights, some artists in Cambodia and the diaspora still express their pride and nationalism by reconstructing the image of Angkor. They create an ethno-nostalgic image of the past by imitating the crowns, jewelry, and skirts visible in temple iconography, often without regard to differences in

two- and three-dimensional artistic conventions. No matter how similar of course, these things are merely of the surface and will always be interpretations and transformations of the past. The absolute worst scenario in Khmer nationalism is when those who claim to know and love their culture and history most fail to accept all of its richness. Their deleterious actions are revealed in an anecdote my friend shared with me: "My teacher told me that the *apsara* and *tevoda* at Angkor Wat are actually not topless. They are wearing very tight shirts."[522]

The nature of this nonsensical "denial of reality" is accurately diagnosed by Seanglim Bit:

"A means of coping with the dichotomy between feelings of cultural superiority and humble present conditions is to selectively deny those aspects of reality which are in conflict. Selective denial can serve as an escape mechanism which defends old patterns of behavior and attitudes and thus justifies their continuation."[523]

Yet despite the misunderstandings of certain artists in Cambodia, despite the neo-imperialist assertions of some Thai nationalists, and despite the scholars who draw from their historiographies, Khmer classical dancers remain connected to the vibrant spirit that animates our tradition whether we try to or not. We are connected to the same legacy from which Angkor takes life, whether it is politicized or whether it is not. Surely, if trauma can be passed on through our blood and genes, so then can beauty and resilience, resistance and vision.

I am Khmer and I am the descendant of creative, innovative geniuses. I am Khmer and my ancestors made countless sacrifices for the survival of their loved ones and of our culture. I am Khmer, a Khmer classical dancer, and I carry the love and hope, magic and knowledge passed on from teacher to student, teacher to student, since before the time of Angkor in my individual body.

Tradition: it does in fact exist. For what are we to call the bodies of knowledge, practices, histories, and values passed on from one generation to the next? Even during the Angkorean era, our ancestors already referred to their traditions—our traditions—using the Sanskrit words *krtya* and *pravaini*, both of which are still in use today.[524] The continuities of our culture, philosophy, and ways of being is manifested further in the Khmer term *tamleam tamloap*, which can be translated as "obligatory practice" or "demanded custom." And, based on diverse sources of evidence, we know that many practices such as the Water Festival—of which dance is crucial—has survived from the Angkor era to today.[525]

Tradition then, exists but is never static, is constantly growing and evolving, shaped and redefined by the visionary devotion of singular artists. Tradition is by nature generative and creative and expansive, and not one practitioner holds nor carries nor owns nor animates it in the same way.

Despite inevitable changes and evolutions then—such is the law of life—the philosophical and aesthetic heritage of Khmer classical dance remains connected to its native roots. Its

spiritual heritage can be seen clearly in the execution of Khmer dance rituals, where dancers continue to pray for rain, fertility, and well-being in *buong suong* as our tantric predecessors had done. The fearsome, flesh-eating *yogini* of tantric ritual may not be known anymore but their residue and all they represent is still palpable in Khmer dance tradition and in Cambodia today.

The *yogini*, for example, have their "precursors" in the *yaksini* (Pali: *yakkhini*),[526] which then translates into the contemporary Khmer *yeakanei* (demoness). At this moment we must think of characters in the repertoire such as Preah Chinnavong and Preah Onaruth who flirt with, court, and sexually unite with the women of demon kingdoms. We must also think of the way that these young male protagonists often rival and overcome the older, mostly demon-king fathers of their lovers—especially in light of how tantric Buddhist and Hindu practices were overtaken by Theravada Buddhism.

Make no mistake, however. The *yogini* were feared even during their day. This is evidenced by the death of a brahmin named Shankalan who witnessed "a sorceress who danced . . . as though in a theater" rip and devour a dead corpse in the *Manimekhalai*.[527] But even this is merely a Buddhist "remind[er for] all those who had loved the living body that it was only flesh, bone, and blood."[528] This violent path to transcendence, like the violent *Churning of the Ocean of Milk* carved at Angkor Wat, can be seen in a song of the Khmer *smot* tradition sung in Theravada Buddhist temples, in which Botum "breaks the body" of a lotus and "lifts it upon her head in prayer" as an offering.

Taking after David Gordon White then, the "hardcore" human body has been replaced with the "softcore" symbolism of the lotus flower in Cambodia, just as offerings such as coconut, jackfruit, and squash represented male blood-seed[529] and betel and areca nut chew came to represent "the blood of defloration" in India.[530] This same process occurred in Cambodia, perhaps during the time of Angkor even as evidenced by Khmer iconography's subtle portrayal of sexuality and anger in relation to its Indian counterpart. But it must have especially become the case as Khmer monarchs, priests, and artists syncretized tantric Hindu and Buddhist philosophies with the austerity of the Theravada school.

So although some specific items and things of the surface may have changed, the gesture of the offering, and the intent behind the offering, the spirit of the offering—offerings of coconuts and fruits, betel leaves and areca nuts, flowers and food, dance and music—is wholly rooted in pre-Angkorean and Angkorean ritual understandings. And whether these rites are of animist, Hindu, or Buddhist nature, we must acknowledge that tantric thought forms are deeply embedded and alive in their practice and consequently, in Khmer dance today.

Culture can be evolved and transformed, but rarely ever is it fully uprooted or destroyed. Like the *smao chinchean* placed into the hair of students during *sampeah kru*, with "[o]ne dip in the morning dew and it comes back to life."[531] It is not surprising then that we honor the contributions, histories, and spirits of those who came before us, invoking the narratives and voices of the past to refresh and renew, to envision new paths for our future. And, thinking of the dance's Brahmanic roots, the space of ritual designates the

tradition as one of social and moral action too. With all of these purposes in mind—praying for life and well-being, recalling our past to find new possibilities for our future, elevating the world through the expression of our humanity—those initiated in and growing from the Khmer classical dance tradition will forever hold relevance and meaning in the world we live in.

Whether dancing in the traditional style or experimenting with the conceptual or technical foundations of our art form, Khmer classical dancers walk different paths to connect to the same spirit. Dancing, we strive to touch the highest capacity of the human experience as our predecessors did before us, and as fellow artists of different cultures and practices do all over the world. Carrying tradition and embodying contemporaneity, Khmer classical dancers now practice in a time of newfound democracy and independence. It is more than ever a heritage of humanity, belonging most to Khmer dance artists and not any more to one than the other.

Remember then, that sacred serpent from which the dance takes life. Trace it from its single, primordial tail planted deep in the ocean and earth to its many glorious heads—to all the artists, voices, approaches, and ideas that they represent in our day. Khmer classical dance artists belong to this one serpent-body-tradition. And it, as well as the country and world it has come to represent, needs all of us to grow and thrive. As this ancestor attempts to coil her way up the highest mountain to that one peak—to that universal beauty that is ever-meaningful and timeless, to transcendent knowledge that liberates us and rids the world of fear and ignorance, suffering and violence—know that the many paths, approaches, and strategies each artist offers will only ensure that she gets there. Know also, that Lok Ta Moni Eisey chose Moni Mekhala, his most visionary and innovative student, to lead his lineage.

Therefore:

Sri! Siddhi! Svasti! Jaya!

May Lok Ta Moni Eisey, ultimate teacher spirit of the dance and arts, his eyes red like the fire that destroys illusion and transforms life, continue to look at us with love and openness as we work to keep our ancient art form alive. And may the spirits of the men and women who have dedicated themselves to this art form, may their hope, vision, love, and knowledge live on through our dancing bodies, through our words and through the dances that we create. May the tradition continue to embody the *vajra*, that irresistible force of thunder and that indestructible nature of diamond, growing and evolving from a core that remains unshakeable and true. May the spirit of the dance live forevermore, taking life with new generations in different mediums, places, and times. May the artists of the future carry forth our ancient heritage and breathe new life into it in a way that only they can. May the path of light be revealed to all living beings, for as long as any sun or moon should shine!

On this day of June 29, 2018, *sadhu!*

APPENDIX I. THE AUTHOR

Standing in the rain at Sambor Prei Kuk. Photo: Dy Puthik.

Prumsodun Ok is a bridge-building artist, teacher, and writer committed to the positive transformation of our world. His interdisciplinary performances contemplate the "avant-garde in antiquity," and have been presented at the Department of Performing Arts (Cambodia), Bangkok Theatre Festival Asia Focus (Thailand), Za-Koenji (Japan), Teatro Benito Juarez (Mexico), bhive (Greece), and REDCAT (United States). His 2013 book *Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso* was reviewed in the Asian Theatre Journal as "a *sampeah kru* ritual of a sort: an offering to teachers living and deceased and to Moni Mekhala [the Goddess of the Ocean] herself." In addition, he has brought together a diverse group of artists, scholars, and activists from across the United States for *Children of Refugees*, a platform of talks and performances which sought to raise awareness for the Syrian refugee crisis.

Ok is the recipient of grants and fellowships from TED, MAP Fund, and Surdna Foundation, and has been a guest speaker and choreographer at California Institute of the Arts, UCLA, Santa Monica College, and Rajabhat University among others. He was also associate artistic director of Khmer Arts, a member of the Alliance for California Traditional Arts's Board of Directors, and an artist in residence at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York. Ok is the founding artistic director of Prumsodun Ok and NATYARASA, and was named an LGBT+ Creative Leader of Tomorrow for The Dots's and WeTransfer's *Championing Diversity* Initiative.

APPENDIX II. THE COVER ILLUSTRATOR

Jacob Kincheloe uses drawing to explore desire and the curious nature of the physical body. His work engages elements of historical painting and photography, restaging and recontextualizing them through the subtle process of graphite drawing. Kincheloe's detailed drawings express the struggle and pleasure of inhabiting a desiring body, and examine the peculiar performance of identity.

He is a recent recipient of the Montague Travel Grant, the William R. Kenan Fellowship, and two teaching fellowships at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

APPENDIX III. ON KHMER-THAI RELATIONS, AND ON SOURCE MATERIALS

Throughout the process of writing this text, I called upon the discerning eyes of some of my trusted friends and colleagues. All globetrotting artists and scholars, from the fields of visual art, dance, and anthropology, they offered invaluable feedback for the refinement and completion of my writing. To them I am forever thankful.

Of this group, a few begged an important question of me. In a text which acknowledges so many intercultural relations—from India to Tibet, from China to Japan—why is there an antagonism towards Thai arts and contributions? The simple and honest answer is that there is not. My eldest brother Sarun was the son of a Thai mother. I have many Thai friends that are dear to my heart. And I have even taught the dance form to students of Thai heritage, both in the United States and in Thailand. I honestly do not harbor any hatred nor resentment towards Thai people nor Thai artists, and I have done my best to write with a constructive sensitivity around this issue.

That said, the relationship between Cambodia and Thailand is long and complex. Through a history of love and war, we have come to exchange and share religion, culture, language, art, food, and even genetics. It is especially shocking then for those who look at our contemporary relationship with an outside lens, relations that can manifest in both peaceful collaboration and prejudiced violence. Someone once said to me, for example, "I just don't understand this whole issue between Khmer and Thai people. It's like little kids fighting over a ball."[532]

But for the players, if you will, it is hardly a clean-cut narrative construction. It is an emotional and lived history, one that is palpable in our experiences of the present day. Furthermore, there exists between ourselves a quiet understanding of the situation at hand, one that can be understood by the Khmer saying: "Plates in a basket cannot avoid colliding."[533]

In the summer of 2014, for example, I watched as a Thai artist—who was my newfound friend in residence at an art center in Phnom Penh—look down at the ground in embarrassment as she apologized. Before a group of children and adults whom she had come to work with, she apologized for the fact that a significant portion of Thais viewed Khmers as bad people. She was met with a silent awareness by all those present, met with an acknowledgement of the senseless conflict between our two peoples.

This, however, is not always the case. In 2003, at the rumor that a Thai actress claimed Angkor Wat belonged to Thailand, an angry group of Khmer people burned the Royal Thai Embassy down and damaged Thai-owned businesses in Phnom Penh. This was not a one-off flaring of emotions but one reflecting a long history of violent conflict. In refugee camps in Thailand, for a modern example, Khmer parents sometimes dug ditches to hide their children so as to avoid them from being trafficked by Thai soldiers.[534] And at Preah Vihear—where refugees were forcefully repatriated on June 8, 1979, that same temple that Thailand would later claim ownership of in 2008—at Preah Vihear many Khmer people died as they struggled down its cliff, stepping on landmines while being shot at by Thai

soldiers.[535] To find a way towards peace from such a situation as in 2003 then, instead of reaching the "facile conclusion that the Khmers are 'the villains' . . . and the Thais are 'the good guys,'" Thai scholar Charnvit Kasetsiri expressed the need to study the "history of Thai-Cambodian relations to understand the deep-seated causes of what took place so that similar incidents can be avoided in the future."[536]

There have been studies of Khmer nationalist attitudes, the source of fire for the 2003 tragedy of course. But I have largely been dissatisfied in discussions of the subject in relation to Khmer classical dance. Hideo Sasagawa's narrow lens on Khmer dance and nationalist discourse, for example, is written with the implication that Khmer dance tradition and Khmer modes of resistance are merely modern inventions of French colonial discourse. He does this without ever once acknowledging the long-standing perceptions Khmers developed towards and hold for Thais through centuries of on-going war, one in which the "sacking of [Angkor] can be compared to the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767."[537] So, as Thais often vilify the Burmese as destructive thieves, Khmers often do so to Thais—for hundreds of years now, long before the presence of Europeans in the region.

This lack of context is reflected in the way that Sasagawa critiques Toni Shapiro-Phim's *Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia* and colors Chea Samy and Khmer artists with a certain dishonest and manipulative air:

"In her dissertation, Shapiro described how well a teacher had been aware of the Siamese influence upon the court dance . . . but she did not discuss the reason why such an awareness had not been revealed in public . . . Thanks to Shapiro's works we know what the dancers said about the dance, but then one begins to wonder why they spoke like that."[538]

The shortcomings of his narrow focus becomes clear, however, when we read the scene he was referring to:

"While in Phnom Penh, I [Toni Shapiro-Phim] translated for Chea Samy during an interview by a Thai journalist. Madame Samy was extremely diplomatic in responding to the journalist's question about 'two hundred Thai dancers coming to the Khmer palace to teach dance' a long time ago. She answered that she had been raised in the palace since she was a mere child, and had never heard her teachers nor anyone else speak of such a thing. After the interview, Chea Samy explained her understanding of the complicated history to me: 'Norodom had grown up in Thailand. He was a man, and royalty at that, so it was natural for him to have a lot of women. When he came to Cambodia, some of the women came with him. And some became dancers. They didn't come here as dancers or dance teachers.'"[539]

Contrary to her words, through the 1971 writing of Khmer scholar Ly Theam Teng, we can say that some Thai dancers came as teachers during the reign of King Norodom, as his wives and concubines. Chea Samy's "understanding of the complicated history" then, although perhaps only partially on point, may be fully sincere. She is not a historian, and entered the palace as a child two decades after King Norodom's death under a very different political and artistic leadership. Her understandings are a product of historical events reflected in *Saramani*, which describe what happened to King Norodom's Thai wives immediately after his passing:

"They invited Khun Than to leave her home near Tinamng Mekhala, keeping it for Princess Vormthida instead. Therefore Khun Than had to gather her many belongings and leave the palace, to build a new house in the south of the city in the Wat Svay Popei neighborhood. There she used her own wealth to build a temple for the sake of the country's future that was named after herself, known as Wat Than today. Khun Preah Nheat had no wealth like Khun Than therefore her house was not so glorious that anyone would want it either. She offered all her *lakhaon* children to the new king to win his favor so that she would not be chased out of the palace, and lived in a state of dire poverty with no one paying her any regard until the day of her death."[540]

Saramani further details what happened shortly after in the early years of King Sisowath's reign:

"The rules and manners of organization inside the palace were completely thrown out. The palace of today is not like the palace in the beginning [when Saramani began training under the reign of King Norodom] . . . Not even a few years in and the ladies of the court, musicians, dancers, dance teachers, all the way down to the servants were completely new."[541]

That said, why would Sasagawa—who specializes in the study and construction of historical discourse—ignore Ly Theam Teng's writing which illuminated the exact nature of Khmer and Thai artistic interactions? How could he claim such sweeping generalizations of Khmer nationalism and Khmer people for that matter, conveniently ignoring Khmer voices that break the theory he has invented? Ly Theam Teng's article was republished by Reyum in 2001, and Sasagawa cited Julie B. Mehta's work published in that same year. Significantly, he ignored Khmer words of cultural interaction in Mehta's very own document, words that counter his polarizing theories:

"Said Khmer civilization scholar Nouth Narang, 'One of the biggest problems for us is that our dance is not just one influence. The enormous influences from Sri Vijaya (Java), India, and Thailand, since our dance returned from the court of Ayuthaya, have made Khmer dance quite complicated. But mostly in nature and character, the dance is based on the movement of the *naga*, the snake, because we believe that our grandparents are from the *naga* king's stock . . . It is very important to remember this because whether it is the *Apsara* dance, the dance by the heavenly court dancers, or the dances depicting scenes from the *Ramayana*, the movements are basically of those same loops and spirals that embody the movement of the *naga*."[542]

Let us not mistake Nouth's words to mean that Khmer dance "returned" in whole from Ayutthaya. This type of thinking is reflected in the writings of James R. Brandon and Jukka O. Miettinen, and is an unrealistic conception of the past that uses outdated scholarship and border delineations—in other words colonial demarcations of power—to measure the social, cultural, and political vitality of a society. Furthermore, they are not historians of Cambodia so their conclusions of Khmer dance history are faulty at best, and reflect more the complications of writing broad, over-generalized, and sweeping histories of "Theatre in Southeast Asia" and "Asian Traditional Theatre and Dance." This coming from the outside to contain and define a people, a culture, a history, and an art form has colonial precedents and its shortcomings are revealed in an image that Neak Kru Sophiline shared with me when I first began my dance training: "When we try to grab and carry too much, like when you wrap your arms around a big pile of grass, the things in the middle start to fall through and away."

History, however, is not a line of clean-cut periods and chapters. We must therefore root the development of Khmer dance as we know it today, even with numerous outside influences, to the core and center that Nouth mentions. Any accurate history of Khmer dance must, like a flower opening and revealing itself to the cosmos, come from the inside out. The *mandala* of *robam* then, radiates in and from Cambodia, and especially from the hearts and bodies of Khmer classical dancers wherever they may be in the world.

Turning back to Sasagawa now, why would a writer focused on critiques of Khmer nationalism ignore and gloss over the exaggerated and unsupported claim of Thai nationalists? Why would the Thai king share an unrealistically generous number of dancers who represented his power, especially given how King Rama III of Bangkok denied dancers to King Anouvong of Vientiane?[543] Why would a writer not be able to understand and empathize with, or rather, why might he overlook, the frustration of an emotional person confronted with absurd misinterpretations? And how could a writer filter and manipulate the words of Chea Samy—words of independence, words of resistance built upon centuries of conflict—to construct the faulty assertion that Khmers only learned to defend our selves, our land, and our heritage because of the French?

Ironically, for all of his critiques of "post/colonial" discourses on Khmer dance, Sasagawa fails in that he adopts the very language and methodologies of the colonizers. He draws only from written evidence—not a single direct source is cited—which is problematic when trying to study or write about a tradition that is passed on in an oral and embodied fashion. He furthermore dismisses French claims of "similarity" between Khmer dance postures and costumes to Angkor without providing any visual analyses of his own. His writing therefore manifests as the other face of colonialism, which worked to create breaks and ruptures between Khmer people and Angkor and the agency it has represented since its inception. The shortcomings of his approach can be seen in the following words:

"Groslier's book included a few illustrations of dancers wearing the same costumes as the sculptures in the Angkor monuments. It is certain that the stone inscriptions of the Angkorean era mentioned the dancers living in the temples. The sculptures of the monuments, however, depicted a divine world, nor is there any evidence to show the kind of costumes the dancers put on."[544]

This statement exemplifies a clear lack of grounded interaction with, connection to, and understanding of Khmer art, culture, and history, as it fails to account for why King Suryavarmann II and his court—historical people carved onto the walls of Angkor Wat—are seen wearing the same garb as the divinity they worshipped. Secondly, through surviving pieces of headdresses and jewelry, we know that there is a direct correlation between the manners of dress as depicted on the temple walls and as worn by Khmers of that time. And last, through other pieces of material and linguistic evidence, we know that there was even more available to the dancers and the people than depicted at Angkor too.

It is interesting to see how Sasagawa's attempted separation between a human and divine world—not even the Khmers of Angkor are allowed to be connected to the fruits of their genius—echoes the French distinction between the Khmer and the Cambodgienne, and the Thai distinction between the Khom and the Khamen. His writing mirrors French and Thai

imperialist strategies for fracturing and asserting power; and, as a reader of Khmer heritage, as someone who carries the living Angkorean dance tradition in my body, I am especially skeptical of someone who incites nationalist flames by mentioning Thai influences but not Khmer influences, critiques Khmer nationalism but not Thai nationalism, and criticizes the colonizer while adopting their languages, structures, devices, and methodologies to become them.

Moving along then, from my friends came also the request for "proper" sources. Citing the future of Khmer scholarship and the legacy of this writing project, they wanted to make sure that the work was as sound and credible as possible using the methodologies of academic writing. Web pages and videos online, for example, can disappear at any day and sites like Wikipedia can be edited by anyone, both informed and uninformed.

I would like readers to know that I have archived all videos and web pages cited in my text. Furthermore, I discerned suitable information from Wikipedia using my own contextual knowledge. After years of studying the visual and performative arts, in the studio and through books, for example, I looked at Wikipedia's definition of *contrapposto* and decided it was fitting to use. Yet there were other pieces of information that I would not have easy access to that I incorporated, pieces of information that are not political in nature. Examples of these include numerous photos of temple iconography, Jane Sherman's description of exercises she practiced as part of the Denishawn dance company, as well as tantric symbology in relation to color to name a few.

The Serpent's Tail was conceived as an online project and with that comes the inherent belief that the world wide web can and should be a platform for concrete and credible knowledge. Although many would question my decision to draw upon these sources, my gesture for better or for worse represents an investment in the platform and community itself. Perhaps when these details are thrown into the fire of time some of them may not survive. But I believe that many of them will, and that there is enough grounded, established and original knowledge contained in *The Serpent's Tail* that will allow it to triumph over such a test and remain useful for future generations. Furthermore, the nature of the medium allows for me to immediately edit and publish as research develops and new evidence emerges; and I will publicly log all changes that have been made as a responsibility to my readers, the art form, and history itself.

What then, as my friends have asked me, is the legacy that I want to leave with *The Serpent's Tail*?

Speaking first on the future of Khmer scholarship, I did not write this text with the intention of it becoming an "authority." Rather, it is part of a much-needed process in which practitioners of Khmer classical dance explore, write, and dialogue about the history and significance of our tradition, both amongst ourselves and with others. This text merely represents the opening of a door, for a new period of Khmer dance and artistic practice. I am confident that future generations of artists, thinkers, and writers will be able to build upon the words and ideas present in this text. And they will refine and sharpen the story of

our history towards constantly ever-higher expressions—just as generations of Khmer artists have done to works in our repertoire and to the art form itself.

Furthermore, my aspiration here is not as an academic. Rather it is as a *kru*, as "one who rids of darkness" as the word means in Sanskrit. In colloquial, everyday Khmer however, the word *kru* also all at once means a teacher, a healer, and a magic-wielding shaman. And whether I am dancing, speaking, teaching, writing, or creating, my goal is to exemplify this word, and to find, embody, and share the "path of light" of which my art and tradition is an expression.

To find this way, this place, to embody this idea, I am showing the next generation how I have pulled from everything in my environment—art, ethnography, oral histories, ancient stories, linguistics, post-colonial critiques, science, and yes, even humble sources of information such as family stories, Wikipedia, and personal experience. There is a grain of possibility in everything, in every place. And truth and false, fact and fiction, high and low, intent and mistake, inside and outside of the system all offer the possibility for enlightenment. It is important then to note that I am not writing solely for the next generation of Khmer academics. I am writing to nurture the next generation of artists, thinkers, creators, nurturers, philosophers, and leaders. I am writing to push my tradition and community and Cambodia forward. I am writing to elevate the state of human culture and society.

Which then, brings us back to the question of Khmer-Thai relations.

When I first began this endeavor, my teacher Sophiline Cheam Shapiro advised, "Hold your emotions on all that you find. Show the best of all sides." I have strived my best to heed my teacher's guidance, sharing the best examples of Thai dance and costuming that I can find given my limitations in time, distance, and resources. Furthermore, offering the best—for the sake of future artists transcendent of borders, for the sake of humanity—does not mean that we should feign ignorance of the past nor be afraid to address its misunderstandings, injustices, and violence either. In fact, we must tackle those issues head-on like a doctor who precisely diagnoses the nature, scale, intensity, and peculiarity of an illness before wholesomely curing it.

So is Thai dance merely Khmer dance? Is Khmer dance merely Thai dance? Or perhaps to find a middle ground, maybe we can contemplate the words of Mabbett and Chandler in reference to Longvek and Ayutthaya: "The high cultures of the two countries as expressed in palace dances, royal language, court ceremonial, temple paintings, and Buddhist sculpture became all but indistinguishable, and impossible to call either 'Cambodian' or 'Thai'."[545] This statement is compounded further by Michael Vickery's claim that "the royal house that ruled at Ayutthaya before 1569 was another royal Khmer line, which always considered Angkor as the old capital."[546]

Yet somehow, even this is not enough. Because, even through all of this sharing, we can be confident that dance in Longvek and Phnom Penh were never exactly the same as that in Ayutthaya or Bangkok. Even if performing the same dances and dramas, these things came

to life in the bodies of different performers, under the direction of different artists, in different physical spaces, and under different political situations.

Which brings us to a crucial question. Peace, understanding, connection, and respect are important, but are they achieved in a we-are-the-world, ignore-the-details, lump-everything-together, meet-you-half-way-half-spiritedly manner? Is Moni Mekhala, or any person who has inherited a precious gift and heritage from their teachers and ancestors, supposed to give away her crystal at the mere demands of an outside force? Is she to reduce her brilliant radiance in order to exist in the world with others? Something tells me not. And perhaps I can draw upon old lore once more, this time from the *Reamker*, to illuminate the nature of this situation.

Having gone into exile, Seda gave birth to Preah Ream's child. She named this child Reamleak, whom she left in the care of an ascetic who had taken her in. One day, while washing her clothes, Seda saw a female monkey tenderly caring for its child. Her own motherly instincts kicked in, and she rushed back to retrieve her own. She took the infant without disturbing the old man, who was in deep meditation. When the ascetic came to his senses, he panicked at the sight of the missing child. So as not to cause Seda any more pain, he duplicated the child and was surprised when Seda returned with Reamleak. He offered to destroy his new creation but Seda chose to keep the twin infant and named him Chupleak.

Like these identical twins, many—including uninformed Khmer and Thai audiences—will mistake the superficial aspects of Khmer and Thai dance for one another. However, despite the similarities of the surface, ultimately like the twins, the traditions are animated by distinct personalities, characters, mindsets, and spirits. This results in different styles of movement, costuming, and music, reflecting two individual styles that stand and function independently in response to the outside world. Furthermore, within these individual styles, are a multiplicity of approaches and visions to the art forms as well.

So yes, through iconographic, historical, and linguistic evidence, having nothing to do with opinions of superiority or authenticity, we can establish that the Khmer dance tradition is the elder twin from which Thai dance was modeled and replicated. And yes, we can say that later in history the elder twin shared knowledge with the younger twin and the younger twin with the elder—both in moments of love and conflict. Yet, no matter how aligned, in tune, in dialogue, collaborative, and intimate the twins are, even if they wear the same clothes or say the same things, it would be inaccurate to say that Chupleak is Reamleak or Reamleak is Chupleak, that Thai dance is Khmer dance or Khmer dance is Thai dance. Their connection and interplay, in a way, is dependent on and reflective of their individuality and distinctiveness.

The flip side of this is that when you strip both of them to the bare anatomy—regardless of what they wear, regardless of what language they speak—Chupleak will always be in the image of Reamleak. So long as Thai dance uses the curvilinear aesthetic that defines Khmer dance, the fluidity of movement derived from the *naga*, it will be in the image of its Khmer predecessor and neighbor.

Perhaps then we can best understand this sharing—understand the nature of tradition and the passage of knowledge from one person, generation, and place to the next—through the words of the Buddhist teacher Nagarjuna:

"What arises in dependence on another
Is not at all that thing itself—
But neither is it something else:
There is no break, there is no permanence."[547]

Khmers and Thais, we have a long relationship. And in any healthy and successful relationship, we must know where one another stands. The way I have weaved *The Serpent's Tail* together reflects none other than my own understandings of and approaches to the tradition—different from my teachers, from my dancing peers, and from my colleagues who provided invaluable feedback for this writing. It was written with my utmost sensitivity and care to promote peace and prosperous growth. And I will express here that I do not support hatred nor violence of any kind.

But, if you will, let us contemplate the decorative motifs of Angkor Wat once more and conjure again its images of conflict manifested in the bas-reliefs of the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*, the *Battle of Langka*, the *Battle of Kurukshetra*, and the birds spiraling and colliding into one another to name a few. Let us also contemplate the dance drama *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, which is the performative expression of that temple's conceptual theme, a performative expression of the generative balance between competing forces. What is the rain that falls after our battle? And how do we find and embody the *apsara*, those celestial dancers born of chaos and violence whom Chheng Phon describes as "the symbol of the surety of a life free from anxiety . . . [beings] trying to find this surety for others?"[548]

I trust enough in both Khmers and Thais to dialogue honestly, critically, and peacefully to rise above our conflicts. And I share these words of Neak Kru Sophiline regarding our relations: "I hope that your generation will have a better experience." Furthermore, I invite us all to put away radical nationalism to contemplate these words of Kwame Anthony Appiah: "'Cultures are made of continuities and changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren't authentic; they're just dead.'"[549]

Cambodia has seen so much war and violence, and it is the last thing that our people need. We cannot afford physical, psychological, social, or emotional violence if the country is to grow and prosper, because there are very real spiritual and human consequences for generations to come. There are very real economic consequences for Khmers, and for Thais as well, as our countries both depend greatly on revenues generated from tourism. Recently, for example, an international boycott was called on travel to the Dominican Republic after the government retroactively stripped citizenship from residents of Haitian descent.[550] So no one wins with hatred, really.

The Serpent's Tail then, is my offering. It is one of my steps in building a bridge. And even before its publication, it was already stirring dialogue and inspiring understanding. After presenting my research on Khmer dance after the fall of Angkor, in regards to Ayutthaya and post-Angkor Cambodia, a dancer in the audience approached me. She said, "So that's why my teacher told me that Khmers and Thais, we are *bong paoun*."[551] *Bong paoun* literally means "elders and juniors," but connotatively, it means "brothers and sisters" or "family." And, in this relationship of similarities and differences, I want to encourage the honoring and celebration of the singularity of our dance forms. We can be connected but stand independent. We can share and still be special. The stage of the universe is big enough for all of us.

FOOTNOTES

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APPENDIX IV. GLOSSARY

My fingers below an Old Khmer inscription reading "Mera." Photo: Prumsodun Ok.

A Bend in the River – An original work created by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro which retells a traditional folk tale of a girl who is eaten by a crocodile and is reborn to exact revenge. The work uses rattan sculptures designed by sculptor Pich Sopheap and original *pin peat* music by composer Sophy Him.
(ខ្សែ - ទន្លេកោងមួយ)

Abhicarah – Tantric ritual designed to inflict harm on enemies.
(ខ្សែ - អភិចារៈ)

Achar – Literally meaning "scholar" or "wise man," a title for the ritual officiant in many Khmer ceremonies.
(ខ្សែ - អាចារ្យ)

Agangamasor and His Magic Power – An original work created by the Cambodian Buddhist Society in Silver Springs, Maryland, which is lead by Meas Masady. The work depicts the previous life of Reab and Preah Ream and how the two became enemies.

Ailan – Romanization of Chinese transliteration by Peter Harris, denoting a dance performed by female dancers in the thirteenth century at Angkor as described by Zhou Daguan.

Airavata – A three-headed white elephant that is the mount or vehicle of Indra.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះវរាត)

Ajanta Caves – A group of caves in India with Buddhist shrines, paintings, and sculptures built between the second century BCE and seventh century CE.

Amrita – The elixir of life and immortality procured from churning the Ocean of Milk. It is also believed to be procured from the *saoma* plant or root.
(ខ្មែរ - អាម្រឹត)

Anak – Old Khmer word derived from Old Javanese. In modern Khmer, the word means "person" or "you."
(ខ្មែរ - អ្នក)

Angkor – The old Khmer capital based in modern day Siem Reap, corruption of the Sanskrit *nokor*.
(ខ្មែរ - អង្គរ)

Angkor Wat – Twelfth-century temple constructed during the reign of King Suryavarmann II. It served as temple, mausoleum, and observatory and has remained a potent symbol of Khmer identity since.
(ខ្មែរ - អង្គរវត្ត)

Apei – A traditional form of Khmer theater, often of comic nature and incorporating conventions from the larger sphere of Southeast Asia.
(ខ្មែរ - អាប៉ែ)

Apsara – Celestial dancer possessing immense skill and beauty, born from the foam of the churning of the Ocean of Milk. In the latter regard, they can be compared to Aphrodite or Venus who was born from the sea foam in Greek mythology.
(ខ្មែរ - អប្សរា)

Apsara Dancing Stones – An original work created by the Angkor Dance Troupe in Lowell, Massachusetts, which is headed by Huy Sereiphousita. The work incorporates theater and classical dance set to re-instrumentalized *pin peat* melodies.
(ខ្មែរ - អប្សរាថ្មរាំ)

Arak Tevoda – A protective deity or spirit, often associated with nature.
(ខ្មែរ - អារក្សទេវតា)

Aravana Adigal – Buddhist teacher who instructs Manimekhalai in method of deduction in the *Manimekhalai*.

Ardhanari – Literally meaning "half-woman," a reference to the union of Shiva and Shakti in one physical form. Sometimes also known as *ardhnarishvara* or the "half-woman lord." The image is left to Khmers today through ancient sculptures as well as through *Robam Buong Suong Yokon*.
(ខ្មែរ - អធ៌នារី)

Ardhaparyanka – Lower body gesture that many *yogini* and *apsara* figures execute, characterized by one foot or the ball of that foot on the ground while the other leg is lifted high into the air and tucked in towards the knee of the standing leg.
(ខ្មែរ - អធ៌បរ្យង្ក)

Asora – A Khmer word for "demon," derived from the Sanskrit *asura*.
(ខ្មែរ - អសុរា)

Astra – A class of weapons that are used by throwing.
(ខ្មែរ - អាស្ត្រ)

Ativrstidharanam – A tantric ritual designed to unleash the fall of rain.
(ខ្មែរ - អតិ្ឋវ្ឫស្តិធារណម៑)

Ayashi no Ceres – A Japanese anime series which retells the traditional tale of *Hagoromo*, by reincarnating the lovers as twin brother and sister.

Ayutthaya – A pre-Thai kingdom that first emerged in the fourteenth century. Named after Prince Rama's city.
(ខ្មែរ - អាយុទ្យា)

Aylam – Romanization of Chinese transliteration by Ly Theam Teng, denoting a dance performed by female dancers in the thirteenth century at Angkor as described by Zhou Daguan.

Baeuk Rong – A dance used to open the theater, an opening dance. Carried over into Thai. ើកវង)

Banga Mas – Gold and silver trees gifted as a form of tribute.

Bangkok – City in Thailand situated on the Chao Phraya river, which became the Thai capital after the fall of Ayutthaya.
(ខ្មែរ - បាងកក)

Banteay Chhmar – Khmer temple built during the reign of King Jayavarmann VII, between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.
(ខ្មែរ - បន្ទាយឆ្មារ)

Banteay Samre – Khmer temple built in the twelfth century in the Angkor Wat style, features include bas reliefs depicting scenes from the *Jataka* and the *Reamker*.
(ខ្មែរ - បន្ទាយសំរែ)

Banteay Srei – Khmer temple built in the tenth century, considered to have some of the most refined carvings today.
(ខ្មែរ - បន្ទាយស្រី)

Balut – Second melody and dance of *Robam Tamng Buon*, a sacred work of the Khmer classical dance canon.
(ខ្មែរ - បាឡុត)

Baray – Large man-made reservoirs built under the orders of Angkorean kings.
(ខ្មែរ - បារាយណ៍)

Battle of Kurukshetra – Climactic battle between the forces of the Pandava and Kaurava clans in the *Mahabharata*.

Battle of Langka – Climactic battle between the forces of Preah Ream and Reab in the *Reamker*.

Bayon – Khmer temple built during the reign of King Jayavarmann VII between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Known for its towers which feature the smiling faces of Lokesvara, carved in the king's likeness.

(ខ្មែរ - បាយ័ន)

Baysei – A ritual item made of banana trunks, leaves, flowers, crowned by an egg and candles. They can be interpreted as stylized tree-mountains and as Shiva *linga*.
(ខ្មែរ - បាយស្រី)

Bedhaya – A Javanese classical dance form of which scholars posit there is a historical relationship with Khmer classical dance.

Beloved – Original work by Prumsodun Ok inspired by the tantric ritual referenced by Zhou Daguan, in which King Indravarmann III would make love nightly to a *neak* at Phimeanakas.
(ខ្មែរ - រជាំស្ងួន)

Beng Mealea – Khmer temple built in the twelfth century in the Angkor Wat style, now completely in ruins.
(ខ្មែរ - បឹងមាលា)

Beng Veang – Khmer temple built in the tenth century and featuring Buddhist inscriptions.

Bhanta (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Clown (humorous)."
(ខ្មែរ - ភន្ត)

Bharata Muni – An ascetic, first human to receive knowledge of the arts from the gods in Hindu conceptions of dance and theater.
(ខ្មែរ - ភរតមុនី)

Bodhisattva – 1) A being who, although possessing the power of enlightenment (and therefore access to Nirvana), chooses to be reborn into the cycle of life and death to inspire the spiritual liberation of others. 2) The Buddha.
(ខ្មែរ - ពោធិសត្វ)

Bong Paoun – 1) Elder and junior. 2) Siblings. 3) Family.
(ខ្មែរ - បងប្អូន)

Brahma – Four-faced Hindu god of creation.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះព្រហ្ម)

Brahmaite – A worshipper of Brahma.

Brahmavihara – Supreme bliss in Buddhist conceptions, resulting from the possession of *metta* (friendship), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (altruistic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity).
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រហ្មវិហារ)

Buddha – 1) An enlightened being who has transcended the illusions of life. 2) Siddhartha Gautama, the historical prince upon whose teachings Buddhism is built.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះពុទ្ធ)

Buong suong – 1) Prayer. 2) Dance ritual executed to pray for rain and prosperity.
(ខ្មែរ - បួងសួង)

Cakravarti – A universal monarch, a king who makes the world turn.
(ខ្មែរ - ចក្រវរ្តិន៍ ឬ ចក្កវត្តិ)

Caressing Nostalgia – An original work by Charya Burt self-described as "classical contemporary," which draws from Khmer dance gestures and sets it on cello music composed by Alexis Alrich. The work "depicts a sentimental yearning for a treasured past."

Catummaharajika – The four kings of Buddhist heaven, who watch over each cardinal direction. They include Vessavana (associated with the north), Virulhaka (south), Dhatarattha (east), and Virupakkha (west).
(ខ្មែរ - ចតុម្មហារាជិក)

Chakkachan – A diamond-floral pattern seen on Khmer temples and dance costumes, one which conjures the image of serpent scales.
(ខ្មែរ - ចំក្កចំនៃ)

Chaktumok – Literally “four faces,” this time referring to Phnom Penh where four rivers converge.
(ខ្មែរ - ចតុម្មុខ)

Chaleang (Thai) – To sing. Derived from the Khmer word *chreang*.

Chamnong – 1) Tie, knot, bond, or noose. 2) A string tied around the wrists of dancers as a form of blessing.
(ខ្មែរ - ចំណង)

Champa – Ancient Cham kingdom located in modern Vietnam, which traced its lineage to Khmer kings at Nokor Phnom but also warred with Angkor.

(ខ្មែរ - ចំប៉ា)

Chamreang (Thai) – Song. Derived from the Khmer word *chamreang*.
(ខ្មែរ - ចំរៀង)

Chan Chhaya Pavilion – A large, elevated pavilion on the edge of the palace in Phnom Penh which was used for rehearsals and performances. Built during the reign of King Sisowath.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះទីនំងចំន្ទឆាយា)

Changol – One of the primary hand gestures in Khmer classical dance, characterized by pointing the index finger. Its base meaning is "tree."
(ខ្មែរ - ចង្កួល)

Changwak (Thai) – Rhythm, beat, tempo. Derived from the Khmer word *changvak*.
(ខ្មែរ - ចង្វាក់)

Chbamng - To battle, fight, combat. Carried over into Thai as a poetic meter used to depict battle scenes during performances.
(ខ្មែរ - ច្បាំង)

Chbamng Ramng Chul – Literally, "Fight blocked waters." A battle during drought.
(ខ្មែរ - ច្បាំងរាំងជល)

Chedei – A Buddhist stupa, in which bones and relics are placed.
(ខ្មែរ - ចេតិយ)

Chenla – Chinese name for pre-Angkorean Khmer polity which succeeded Nokor Phnom.
(ខ្មែរ - ចេនទ្បា)

Chhab – Cymbals.
(ខ្មែរ - ឆាប)

Chhawean Chhawat (Thai) – To circle and spiral. Derived from the Khmer *chhvat chhveal*.

Chheam chruk – Literally "pig's blood," a deep burgundy.
(ខ្មែរ - ឈាមជ្រូក)

Chhing – Small hand-held cymbals.
(ខ្មែរ - ឈឹង)

Chhvat chhveal – To circle and spiral, a phrase used in *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*.
(ខ្មែរ - ឆ្វាត់ឆ្វៀល)

Chi – A pendant worn by female characters today.
(ខ្មែរ - ជី)

Chib – One of the four major hand gestures in Khmer classical dance, created by pinching the thumb and index finger together while splaying the remaining fingers backwards. Its base meaning is "flower" and is often used as a gesture to transition into others.
(ខ្មែរ - ជីប)

Chupleak - Twin of Reamleak, created from magic, in the *Reamker*.
(ខ្មែរ - ជបលក្ស្មណ៍)

Churning of the Ocean of Milk – A Hindu creation myth, in which the gods and demons compete for and collaborate to generate *amrita*, the elixir of life which grants immortality. They have a tug of war using the *naga* Vasuki as a rope, from whose tearing body an ocean of milk eventually seeps out. The tug of war goes on for years, killing the animals in the ocean. The movement and churning of the Ocean of Milk generates many treasures, the most celebrated in the Khmer context being the *apsara*, who are born from the foam of the ocean of milk.
(សំស្ក្រឹត – សមុទ្រមន្ថន; ខ្មែរ – កូសមុទ្រទឹកដោះ)

Columbusing – The claim of discovering something that other people had already known about.

Cone – Romanization of Thai *khon*, a masked dance form derived from the Khmer *khaol*.

Contrapposto – A convention in Greek art and sculpture which seeks to capture a figure in a relaxed stance or in the act of walking, often with the weight of the figure on one leg.

Cumbala (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Likely a diadem, crown . . . seen used as an offering to the gods."
(ខ្មែរ - ចុម្ពលៈ)

Daeur – Walk.
ើរ)

Daka – Masculine form of *dakini*.
(ខ្មែរ - ឌាក)

Dakini – A female tantric figure sometimes depicted in ritual sexual intercourse or serving as a meditational deity.
(ខ្មែរ - ឌាកិនី)

Deav – A Khmer dance gesture executed by kicking one leg back and pulling the foot of that leg in towards the lower back. *Deav* can be done while standing on one leg or sitting down.
ទៀវ)

Dei - Soil, dirt, earth.
(ខ្មែរ - ដី)

Departures – An original work choreographed by Chey Chankethya which explores the theme of displacement and migration, performed by artists of Amrita performing arts.

Deurn (Thai) – Walk. Derived from the Khmer *daeur*.

Devaraja – 1) A ritual object, possibly a statue or sacred fire that was the source of worship. 2) God king.
(ខ្មែរ - ទេវរាជ)

Dharani – The female spirit of the earth in the Buddhist literature of mainland Southeast Asia. Witness to the Buddha's enlightenment and very likely an indigenous goddess. Sometimes romanized as *Thorani*.
(ខ្មែរ - ធរណី)

Dom (Thai) – To hit, strike, or beat. Derived from the Khmer *dom*.
(ខ្មែរ - ដំ)

Dubhi – Bull who kills his father in the *Reamker*, challenges Moni Mekhala and the Hemabant before being killed by the monkey king Peali in a cave.
(ខ្មែរ - ទូភី)

Dvaravati – An ancient Mon kingdom.
(ខ្មែរ - ទ្វារវតី)

École des Beaux-Arts – School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, originally founded by George Groslier.
(ខ្មែរ - សាលារៀចិត្រសិល្បៈ)

Ellora – A rock-cut temple featuring Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain art built between the seventh and eleventh centuries CE.

Eros Burning in the Field of Flowers – Original work by Prumsodun Ok which uses Plato's *Symposium* as a springboard to address the global history and contemporary realities of gay people.

Fon Nang Keo – A Lao classical dance work that references a Khmer princess bringing dance and Buddhism to the Lao court in the fourteenth century.

Forever My Ancestors – Original work by Charya Burt using Khmer classical dance and music to pay homage to artists of the past.

Funan – Chinese name for the first Khmer polity, from which the Khmer Nokor Phnom takes its name. The notion that Funan derives from the Khmer word *phnom* (mountain) was first proposed by George Groslier, and is contested.
(ខ្មែរ - នគរភ្នំ)

Gandharva – Celestial musicians, who were also known to dance. Often husbands of the *apsara*.
(ខ្មែរ - គន្ធរ្ឋ ឬ គន្ធព្វ)

Garuda – Vishnu's vehicle, half-man and half-eagle.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្រុឌ)

Guru – Sanskrit word for "teacher" or "one who rids of darkness," from which the Khmer *kru* is derived.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - គ្រូ)

Hagoromo – 1) A feathered plume. 2) Japanese Noh play which describes the descent of a celestial maiden to earth using her *hagoromo*, and her ensuing encounter with a fisherman.

Hang – Swan, vehicle of the Hindu god Brahma. Derived from the Sanskrit *hangsa*.
(ខ្មែរ - ហង្ស)

Hemakavaca (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "A short skirt worn by women made of gold, an offertory object."

(ខ្មែរ - ហេមកវចៈ)

Hetu – Reason.
(ខ្មែរ - ហេតុ)

Hevajra – A tantric deity whose cult was active in Cambodia from the tenth to thirteenth centuries.
(ខ្មែរ - ហេវជ្រ)

Hmathav – One name for the master of ceremonies in Khmer dance rituals. Derived from Thai language.
(ខ្មែរ - ហ្មថាវ)

Hol – A kind of Khmer silk textile that features woven patterns.
(ខ្មែរ - ហូល)

Homah – Fire sacrifice performed in the temples of Angkor. Today this word is *haom* in Khmer, and its ritual significance can be seen in a pre-performance ritual used to call and pay respect to teacher spirits called *haomrong*.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - ហោម)

Inao – A Thai classical dance drama derived from the Javanese story of *Panji*. Possibly brought to Cambodia during the reign of King Ang Duong.
(ខ្មែរ - ឥណាវ)

Inao Bosseba – Khmer classical dance drama based on the *Inao* story (re)choreographed by Princess Buppha Devi.
(ខ្មែរ - ឥណាវបុស្សបា)

Indra – The king of heaven in Hindu cosmology, master of the thunderbolt and lord of the atmosphere.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះឥន្ទ្រ)

Indraprastha – 1) City Pandava clan ruled in the *Mahabharata*. 2) Khmer and Lao name for the Angkor region during Middle Period.
(ខ្មែរ - ឥន្ទ្រប្រស្ថ)

Intanu – Pointed epaulets above the shoulders of a *neay rong* and *yeak* costume.

(ខ្មែរ - ឥន្ទ្រ)

Isur – Epithet of Shiva. Also known as Isvar and Isvara. Modern Khmer romanization is Eyso.
(ខ្មែរ - ឥស្សរ ឬ ឥស្សរ ឬ ឥស្សរៈ)

Jain – Someone who proscribes to the Jain faith, which stresses non-violence, multiplicity of reality, asceticism, and non-attachment.

Jataka – A large collection of stories detailing previous incarnations of the Buddha, in which the Buddha would detail some past life of his to teach a certain lesson to the *sangha*.
(ខ្មែរ - ជាតក)

Java – The island of Java in present-day Indonesia, home to kingdoms with whom Khmers have gone to war, traded, and exchanged culture with.
(ខ្មែរ - ជ្វា)

Jina – A victorious aspect of the Buddha. This word can be seen in contemporary Khmer in the names Chinnasrei (for the Buddha) and Chinnavong, a popular Khmer dance character.
(ខ្មែរ - ជិន)

Jinendra – Jain teacher cited in *Manimekhalai*, "on whose teaching Buddhist logic rests."

Kadamba – 1) A type of seaside oak. The word has been used in Old Khmer inscriptions. 2) A country in mainland Southeast Asia conquered by King Shenguttavan as mentioned in the *Manimekhalai*.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - កទម្ព)

Kahbangna (Thai) – Diadem. Derived from the Khmer word *khbamng*.

Kalinga – A pre-Common Era kingdom in East India that was conquered by Emperor Ashoka.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្លិង្គ)

Kambu – Literally meaning "gold," from which the Khmer progenitor takes his name. Sometimes romanized as *kampu*.
(ខ្មែរ - កម្ពុ)

Kambuja – The Old Khmer name for Cambodia, from which Kampuchea and Cambodge is derived. Literally, Kambuja means "born of gold."

(ខ្មែរ - កម្ពុជា)

Kambujadesa – Old Khmer name for Cambodia, literally meaning “land born of gold” and bearing a direct relationship to Indian ideas of Suvarnabhumi.
(ខ្មែរ - កម្ពុជាទេស)

Kampong Thom – A province located in the center of Cambodia whose capital city bears the same name.
(ខ្មែរ - កំពង់ធំ)

Kampuchea – Contemporary Khmer word for Cambodia.
(ខ្មែរ - កម្ពុជា)

Kancheak (Thai) – Elven pieces of jewelry worn behind the ears and attached to a diadem. Derived from the Khmer *tracheak*.

Kanchi – A ancient city in southern India.

Kañci (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "A belt for adorning women."
(ខ្មែរ - កញ្ចី)

Kannaki – Kovalan’s queen in the *Shilappadikaram*, an ancient Tamil epic that is prequel to *Manimekhalai*.

Kanthi (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Jewelry for wearing around the neck, chest, and breasts."
(ខ្មែរ - កណ្ឋី)

Kantrum – A style of Khmer dance bracelets inspired by *rudraksha* prayer beads.
(ខ្មែរ - កន្ត្រឹំ)

Kanya Chareya – A *lakhaon niyeay* play meaning “The Ethical Girl.”
(ខ្មែរ - កញ្ញាចរិយា)

Kapata (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "A *sbai*."
(ខ្មែរ - កាបដ:)

Karuda – Deduction, as referenced in the *Manimekhalai*.

Karuna – The Buddhist concept of compassion. See *brahmavihara*.
(ខ្មែរ - ករុណា)

Kantuy Hang – Swan's tail.
(ខ្មែរ - កន្ទុយហង្ស)

Kaundinya – Historical name for Preah Thaong.
(ខ្មែរ - កៅណ្ឌិន្យ)

Kaurava – Clan which warred with the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*.
(ខ្មែរ - កៅរវៈ)

Kbal Spean – A site on Phnom Kulen which features carvings of *linga* and *yonilinga* in the riverbed, created sometime between the eleventh and twelfth centuries.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្បាលស្ពាន)

Kbach bat –The basic movements of Khmer classical dance, used as a warm-up during rehearsals.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្បាច់បាត)

Kbach chak – A dance gesture in which a hand in *lea* is pointed down and out and pulled back up, creating the impression of cutting or piercing the air.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្បាច់ចាក់)

Kenar – Creatures who are half-human and half-bird. *Kenarei* is the feminine form. Derived from the Sanskrit *kinnara* and *kinnari*, respectively.
(ខ្មែរ - កិន្នរ)

Kerala – Province in southern India.

Khamen (Thai) – Derivative of the word *Khmer*.

Khaol – Literally a type of monkey, but in this case a type of masked dance-theater featuring an all-male cast that performs excerpts from the *Reamker*.
(ខ្មែរ - ខោល)

Khbamng – A diadem worn by *neang* characters in Khmer dance, and sometimes by young *neay rong* characters or those that are half-male and half-female.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្បាំង)

Khbin – A pantaloon created by one piece of cloth.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្បិន)

Kheav – Blue.
ខៀវ)

Khimkhat – Belt.
(ខ្មែរ - ខឹមខាត់)

Khloy – A flute. Borrowed into Thai and romanized as *khluy*.
(ខ្មែរ - ខ្លួយ)

Khmer – The name which the people of Cambodia use to refer to ourselves and our language.
(ខ្មែរ - ខ្មែរ)

Khmer krom – Term which Mons, Thais, and Khmers of the Khorat plateau referred to Khmers in central Cambodia. The term is still in use today in Cambodia, but by central Khmer to refer to those living in the Mekong delta.
(ខ្មែរ - ខ្មែរក្រោម)

Khom (Thai) – Derived from the Old Mon and Old Thai *Khmer krom*. Often used to disassociate contemporary Khmers from the classical Khmer culture that Thais hold in high regard.

Khon – Thai word and art form derived from the Khmer *khaol*.

Khong wong yai (Thai) – A large, round instrument featuring lower-pitched gongs. Thai variant of the Khmer *kong vong thom*.

Khun – A title given to women of the palace, usually indicating their status as the king's wife.
(ខ្មែរ - ឃុន)

Khuong – One of four major hand gestures in Khmer classical dance, in which the middle finger and thumb are put together to create a circle as the remaining fingers are pulled back. It is symbolic of fruit.
(ខ្មែរ - ខួង)

Kñum vrah rapam – Old Khmer for “servants of the sacred dance.” Modern pronounciation is *knhom preah robam*.
(ខ្មែរទំនើប - ខ្ញុំព្រះរបាំ)

Kok Thlok - Colloquial name for ancient Cambodia, island where Preah Thaong met Neang Neak.
(ខ្មែរ - គោកធ្លក)

Kong vong thom – A large, round instrument featuring lower-pitched gongs struck with two mallets by a musician sitting in the center.
(ខ្មែរ - គងវង់ធំ)

Kon Khling – “Kalinga child,” used for Khmers with Indian-like features.
(ខ្មែរ - កូនក្លិង្គ)

Konkan – Area in western India.

Konlok – A type of bird said to first take life from three abused and abandonded sisters. They fly away into the forest as their human mother calls for them, crying, “*Konlok*! *Konlok*!” This means "Children of the world! Children of the world!"
(ខ្មែរ - កូនលោក)

Kovalan – Protagonist of the *Shilappadikaram*, an ancient Tamil epic.

Krabin (Thai) – Derivative of the Khmer *khbin*.

Kravil – Earrings.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្រវិល)

Kravin (Thai) – Derivative of the Khmer *kravil*.

Krishna – Avatar of Vishnu, symbol of universal consciousness in the *Mahabharata*.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះក្រិស្ន)

Krom Robam Preahreacheatrap – Royal Ballet, but more accurately translated as Royal Dance Company.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្រុមរបាំព្រះរាជទ្រព្យ)

Krtya (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Tradition, norm, important functions, amazing."

(ខ្មែរ - ក្រឹត្យា)

Kru – Derived from the Sanskrit *guru*, meaning "one who rids of darkness."
(ខ្មែរ - គ្រូ)

Krut – Derived from the Sanskrit *garuda*, half-man and half-eagle, the vehicle of Vishnu.
(ខ្មែរ - គ្រុឌ)

Ksatra – Prince.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្សត្រា)

Ksatrei – Princess.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្សត្រិយ៍)

Kshatriya – The warrior-ruler class in the Indian caste system.
(ខ្មែរ - ក្សត្រិយ)

Kupen (Sanskrit) – See *khbin*.
(ខ្មែរ - កុបេន:)

Kyal - Wind, air.
(ខ្មែរ - ខ្យល់)

Laeung neak ta – A ritual appeasing the territorial and ancestor spirits to ask for the fall of rain.
ើងអ្នកតា)

Lagon (Javanese) – 1) Play, drama, act, story. 2) A non-narrative style of Javanese chant describing the beauty of the dancers, performed before the dancing begins. Sometimes romanized *lakuan*. Possibly source of Khmer word *lakhaon*.

Lakhaon – Theater. Sometimes romanized as *lakhaoun* and possibly derived from the Thai word *lakhon* or Javanese *lagon*.
(ខ្មែរ - ល្ខោន)

Lakhaon niyeay – A relatively naturalistic form of spoken theater, often dealing with contemporary issues, introduced to Cambodia in the modern era.
(ខ្មែរ - ល្ខោននិយាយ)

Lakhaon preahreacheatrap – "Theater of the king's treasure," in reference to dance of the royal court.
(ខ្មែរ - ល្ខោនព្រះរាជទ្រព្យ)

Lakhaoun – See *lakhaon*.
(ខ្មែរ - ល្ខោន)

Lakhaoun bassac – A form of theater inspired by Vietnamese opera.
(ខ្មែរ - ល្ខោនបាសាក់)

Lakhaoun bramothai – A form of modern musical theater introduced to Cambodia in the beginning of the twentieth century which primarily had female performers and used an "orchestre."
(ខ្មែរ - ល្ខោនប្រាមោទ្យទំយ)

Lakhon – The Thai variant of *lakhaon*, possibly from where the Khmer word derived.

Lakhon nai – Thailand's theater of the interior court, or the all-female court dance tradition.

Lakuan – See *lagon*.

Lakshmana – Youngest brother of Prince Rama, who faithfully follows him into the forest and into the battlefield.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះលាក្ស្មណ)

Langka – Island kingdom of Reab and his demons in the *Reamker*.
(ខ្មែរ - លង្កា)

Lan Xang – Lao kingdom established by Fa Ngum with the support of the Khmer court, his Khmer wife was believed to have brought a troupe of dancers and Theravada Buddhism with her.

Lavodayapura – An old Khmer city in present day Thailand. Sometimes shortened as Lavo, Lawo, or Lopburi.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - លវោទយបុរ)

Lea – 1) A primary hand gesture in Khmer classical dance, in which the thumb is crooked forward as the remaining four fingers are curved back. The gesture represents a leaf. 2) A closing melody used to end short dances of the repertoire.

(ខ្មែរ - លា)

Leach – Popped rice.
(ខ្មែរ - លាជ)

Legend of Apsara Mera – Dance choreographed by Princess Buppha Devi which retells the story of Mera and Kampu, ancestors of the Khmer people, and incorporating older dances.
(ខ្មែរ - អប្សរាមេរា)

Len (Thai) – Play, in this case meaning both a dramatic performance and the act of performing a dramatic work. Derived from the Khmer word *leng*.
(ខ្មែរ - លេង)

Len dukdamban – A Thai theatrical performance believed by some scholars to be derived from Khmer performances of the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*.

Leng - To play, to perform.
(ខ្មែរ - លេង)

Linga – A ritual phallus symbolic of Shiva.
(ខ្មែរ - លិង្គ)

L'Oiseau de paradis – Film directed by French director Marcel Camus in 1962, featuring use of Khmer dance and shadow puppets and more.
ឿងបក្សីស្ថានសួគ៌)

Lokesvara – The *bodhisattva* of compassion, with whom King Jayavarmann VII identified with.
(ខ្មែរ - លោកេស្វរ)

Lok Ta Moni Eisey – The ultimate teacher spirit in Khmer dance, possibly a syncretism between Bharata Muni and local ancestor spirits. Others identify him with Shiva.
(ខ្មែរ - លោកតាមុនីឥសី)

Longvek – Khmer capital after the fall of Angkor in present day Kampong Chhnang province.
(ខ្មែរ - លង្វែក)

Lopburi – See Lavodayapura.

(ខ្មែរ - លពហ៊ុរី)

Lotus Sutra – A Mahayana Buddhist text written by the second century CE.

Lovek – See Longvek.
(ខ្មែរ - លង្វែក)

Love Me Rachana – Original work by Prumsodun Ok, which appropriates movements from one scene of the *Preah Sang* dance drama to explore a love defiant of social pressures.
(ខ្មែរ - ស្រឡាញ់ខ្ជឹរចនា)

Lpoek Nokor – A post-Angkorean poem detailing the *Reamker*, as based on the bas-relief carvings at Angkor Wat.
្បែីកនគរ)

Madhavi – The dancer with whom Kovalan falls in love in the *Shilappadikaram*. Mother of Manimekhalai, protagonist of the *Manimekhalai*.

Mahabharata – A Hindu epic that explores the war between rival royal clans, the Pandava and Kaurava, for the throne.
(ខ្មែរ - មហាភារតៈ)

Mahajanaka – Protagonist of *Mahajanaka Jataka*.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះមហាជនក)

Mahajanaka Jataka – A *jataka* about Prince Mahajanaka, who sails to Suvarnabhumi, is shipwrecked, saved by the goddess Moni Mekhala, gains the throne taken from his uncle, and later renounces it for Buddhist practice.
(ខ្មែរ - មហាជនកជាតក)

Mahaphutarub tamng buon – Literally, "all those great things that can be seen," a Buddhist reference to the elements of water, earth, fire, and air from which all matter in our cosmos is made of.
(ខ្មែរ - មហាភូតរូបទាំងបួន)

Mahasiddha – A *yogi* or *yogini* who, through ritual meditation, gains magic powers and spiritual transcendence.
(ខ្មែរ - មហាសិទ្ធ)

Mahasiddha Mekhala – Mekhala, as known in Tibet. The elder sister of the Headless Yoginis.
(ខ្មែរ - មហាសិទ្ធមេខលា)

Mahaosrab – Festival, derived from the *mahotsava*.
(ខ្មែរ - មហោស្រព)

Mahayana – Literally "great vehicle," a school of Buddhism which includes a large pantheon of deities and more readily syncretized Hindu elements.
(ខ្មែរ - មហាយាន)

Mahotsava – Old Khmer word for festivals staged by kings of Angkor.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - មហោត្សវៈ)

Makar – A sea creature symbolic of water that is sometimes described as being like a serpent, sometimes like a crocodile, sometimes like a fish in Hindu cosmology. Vehicle of Varuna, god of the Western Seas, as well as of Moni Mekhala, Ganga, and other water deities. Derived from the Sanskrit, *makara*.
(ខ្មែរ - មករ)

Makuta (Sanskrit) – Crown.
(ខ្មែរ - មកុដ)

Malabar – Area on the coast of western India.

Mam – Title for the king's wife or concubine.
(ខ្មែរ - ម៉ម)

Mandala – A cosmogram that can take circular or square-like form, symbolic of the creative power of the universe. Usually has one deity in the center, as if all of life emanates from its core. Literally, meaning "circle."
(ខ្មែរ - មណ្ឌល)

Mani – Jewel, gem.
(ខ្មែរ - មណី)

Manimekhala – Goddess of the Ocean in Tamil literature and in certain Southeast Asian countries. Believed by some to be an indigenous Southeast Asian deity.
(ខ្មែរ - មណីមេខលា)

Manimekhalai – Protagonist of the *Manimekhalai*, an ancient Tamil Buddhist epic.

Manipallavam – Island that Manimekhala flies Manimekhalai to, where the latter discovers a footprint of the Buddha and receives the magic bowl known as "Cow of Abundance."

Mañjushri – *Bodhisattva* of transcendent wisdom, who wields a sword which pierces through illusion and a lotus which bears the *sutra*.
(ខ្មែរ - មញ្ជុស្រី)

Mantra(*s*) – Sacred prayers which are believed to be efficacious when coming to life through sound and recitation.
(ខ្មែរ - មន្ត្រ ឬ មន្ត)

Mara – The demon who tries to obstruct the Buddha's path towards enlightenment but is vanquished by Thorani.
(ខ្មែរ - មារ)

Maum – Honorific given to women of the palace, usually indicating their status as wives of the king. Also romanized *Mam*.
(ខ្មែរ - ម៉ម)

Mazu – Chinese goddess of the South China Sea.

Me – Mother, master, leader.
(ខ្មែរ - មេ)

Meas – Gold.
(ខ្មែរ - មាស)

Mekhala – 1) Goddess of the ocean and waters. 2) Belt, derived from the Sanskrit *mekala*.
(ខ្មែរ - មេខលា)

Mekhala Ramasun – Thai variant of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, originally derived from the Old Khmer source as evidenced through language and thematic elements.

Melim – Closing melody and dance of *Robam Tamng Buon*, a sacred work of the Khmer classical dance canon.
(ខ្មែរ - មេលឹម)

Mera – Queen of the *apsara*, wife of Kampu, mother of the Khmer race.
(ខ្មែរ - មេរា)

Metta – The Buddhist concept of friendship. See *brahmavihara*.
(ខ្មែរ - មេត្តា)

Mkot sruoch – Tall pointed crown worn by both male and female characters in Khmer classical dance, reminiscent of Buddhist *chedei* and symbolic of spiritual and political maturity.
(ខ្មែរ - មកុដស្រួច)

Mongkul Lokey – An original work by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, set to John Zorn's *Shir Ha-Shirim*.
(ខ្មែរ - មង្គលលោកីយ៍)

Moni – 1) A wise person or scholar, radiant through their knowledge. 2) Epithet of the Buddha. Derived from the Sanskrit *muni*.
(ខ្មែរ - មុនី)

Moni Mekhala – Khmer goddess of the ocean, protector of travelers, chosen leader of Lok Ta Moni Eisey's lineage. Believed by some to be an indigenous deity. Sometimes spelled *meghala*, thereby connecting her with the rain clouds—surely ancient artists, poets, and priests intended this pun in her name.
(ខ្មែរ - មុនីមេខលា)

Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso – Khmer story explaining the origins of lightning, thunder, and rain, performed yearly in dance ritual for the fall and flow of life-giving waters.
(ខ្មែរ - មុនីមេខលារាមឥសូរ)

Monju Bosatsu (Japanese) – *Bodhisattva* of transcendent wisdom, Mañjushri.

Mot tip – Magic mouth.
(ខ្មែរ - មាត់ទិព្វ)

Mount Meru – The center of the universe in Hindu conceptions, home of the gods.
(ខ្មែរ - មេរុ)

Mudita – Buddhist concept of altruistic joy. See *brahmavihara*.
(ខ្មែរ - មុទិតា)

Mudra(*s*) – Sacred hand gestures, used in both ritual and dance performances.
(ខ្មែរ - មុទ្រា)

Mul – Round.
(ខ្មែរ - មូល)

Muni – 1) A wise person or scholar, radiant through their knowledge. 2) Epithet for the Buddha.
(ខ្មែរ - មុនី)

My Mothers and I – Original dance-theater solo by Chey Chankethya.

Naga – A race of mythical serpents from whom Khmers trace our lineage to, often associated with the ocean and water.
(ខ្មែរ - នាគ)

Nai Roong (Thai) – Performer of male roles, variant of Khmer *neay rong*.

Nak (Thai) – Thai derivative of the Old Khmer *anak*.

Nakhon – Thai derivative of the Khmer *nokor*.

Nakon Rajasima – City and province in Thailand.

Nang (Thai) – Leather shadow play.

Nang aik (Thai) – Star female character, variant of the Khmer *neang aik*.

Narasingha – A half-man, half-lion avatar of Vishnu.
(ខ្មែរ - នរសិង្ហ)

Natasatra (Thai) – Derived from *Natyashastra*, likely by way of Khmer.

Natasin (Thai) – Classical dance, by combining the Sanskrit terms *nata* (dance) and *silpa* (art).

Natyashastra – Text of performative knowledge compiled by Bharata Muni, first human to receive knowledge of the arts in Hindu tradition.
(ខ្មែរ - នាដសាស្ត្រ)

Nautch – A Romanization of the Prakrit *nachcha*, which means “dance,” and was often used to describe Indian *devadasi* by viewers in the modern era.

Neak – Powerful serpent race associated with earth and water, bridge between heaven and earth and ancestor of Khmer people. Able to transform into human beings. Sanskrit variant is *naga*.
(ខ្មែរ - នាគ)

Neak Poan – Twelfth-century pilgrimage site which featured four bathing ponds, each representing the elements of water, earth, fire, and wind.
(ខ្មែរ - នាគពន្ធ)

Neang – Lady or, in the dance, female character.
(ខ្មែរ - នាង)

Neang Seda – Wife of Preah Ream in the *Reamker*.
(ខ្មែរ - នាងសេដា)

Neang aik – Literally “lone lady” or "first lady," meaning star female character.
(ខ្មែរ - នាងឯក)

Neang Neak – *Neak* mother of the Khmer lunar dynasty, wife of Preah Thaong.
(ខ្មែរ - នាងនាគ)

Neay rong – Male character.
(ខ្មែរ - នាយរោង)

Neduvil Killi – Character in *Manimekhalai*, whose union with a *naga* princess bears resemblance to Preah Thaong.

Ngai lan – Romanization of Chinese transliteration by George Coedes, denoting a day or days of ritual dancing in thirteenth-century Angkor as described by Zhou Daguan.

Nguoh – Character that is half-human and half-demon, depicted with a black mask and considered uncouth in the universe of the stage. Referred to by old Eurocentric writers as a negrito.
(ខ្មែរ - ងោះ)

Nhar – Pieces of jewelry in crown and hair ornaments that shake and quiver.
(ខ្មែរ - ញ៉ែរ)

Nigama – Summary, conclusion.
(ខ្មែរ - និគម)

Nokor – City. Derived from the Sanskrit *nagara*.
(ខ្មែរ - នគរ)

Nokor Phnom – Contemporary name for the first Khmer polity, of whose name is derived from the Chinese Funan.
(ខ្មែរ - នគរភ្នំ)

Nyai Roro Kidul – Java's Queen of the Southern Seas.

Óc Eo – City in modern Vietnam, site of a Nokor Phnom city. Derived from the Khmer *Or Kaiv*.

Of Land and Sky – Interdisciplinary theater work created by Prumsodun Ok, inspired by the story *Tip Sodachan* among others.

Of Spirits Intertwined – Original work by Charya Burt, Vishnu Tattva Das, and Melody Takata.

Orajun – Thai variant of Vorachhun, believed by some to come from the name Arjuna.

Or Kaiv – Modern name for ancient Nokor Phnom city. See Óc Eo.
(ខ្មែរ - អូរកែវ)

Oudong – Old post-Angkor capital of Cambodia, north of Phnom Penh.
(ខ្មែរ - ឧដុង្គ)

Paksha – Given fact.

Pañcotsava – Annual five religious festivals staged by Angkorean kings.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - បញ្ចោត្សវៈ)

Pandava – Heroic *kshatriya* clan in the *Mahabharata*.
(ខ្មែរ - បាណ្ឌវៈ)

Panhcharet – A diadem worn by male characters in Khmer dance, possibly meaning "five jewels" and reminiscent of the five-crested diadems worn by *asora* at Angkor Wat. Clear relation to tantric Buddhist imagery.

(ខ្មែរ - ពញ្ហរ៉ែត)

Panji – A Javanese tale which gave inspiration to Thailand's *Inao*.

Paramasur – Old name for *Ream Eyso*.
(ខ្មែរ - បរមសូរ)

Parashurama – Rama of the Axe, precursor to Cambodia's Ream Eyso.
(ខ្មែរ - បរគ្រាម)

Parjanya – Vedic god of rain and fertility.
(ខ្មែរ - បជិន្យ)

Peali – Monkey king who kills Dhubi, attempts to kill his own brother Sugrib in the *Reamker*.
(ខ្មែរ - ពាលី)

Pedanataka (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Dancers performing as a group, to dance as a group."
(ខ្មែរ - បេទានាតក)

Pen pot – Twisting and turning in a serpentine fashion, used to describe Moni Mekhala.
(ខ្មែរ - ពេនពំទ្ង)

Phaka (Thai) – Flower. Derived from the Khmer *phka*.

Phdao – Rattan.
(ខ្មែរ - ផ្តៅ)

Phimai – See Vimayapura.

Phimeanakas – Temple where Indravarmann III climbed nightly to sexually unite with the spirit of the land.
(ខ្មែរ - ភិមានអាកាស)

Phinphat – Thai derivative of the Khmer *pin peat*. No longer in usage in contemporary Thai.

Phiphat – Thai variant of the Khmer *pin peat*, this time emphasis placed on the *phi* (a type of oboe).

Phirun – Khmer variant of Varuna, god of ocean and water in the Khmer context.
(ខ្មែរ - ពិរុណ)

Phiti Pathomkam – Fictional ritual described in Thai royal chronicles, in which a Thai king beheaded a Khmer king and washed his own feet in the blood.

Phithi wai kru – Thai variant of the *sampeah kru* ritual.

Phka – Flower.
(ខ្មែរ - ផ្កា)

Phka Kngaok – Literally, "peacock flower," sometimes placed onto *baysei*.
(ខ្មែរ - ផ្កាក្ងោក)

Phleng – Music. Carried over into Thai language.
(ខ្មែរ - ភ្លេង)

Phleung – Fire.
(ខ្មែរ - ភ្លើង)

Phlom – To blow. Carried over into Thai language.
(ខ្មែរ - ផ្លុំ)

Phnom Kulen – Mountain where King Jayavarmann II first declared himself universal monarch and thus beginning the Angkor era.
(ខ្មែរ - ភ្នំគូលែន)

Phnom Penh – Current capital of Cambodia, situated at the convergence of four rivers.
(ខ្មែរ - ភ្នំពេញ)

Phrai (Thai) – Social class in Thai feudal society just higher than a slave.

Phra In (Thai) – Variant of Preah Indr, or Indra, the king of heaven.

Phra Lak (Thai) – Variant of Preah Leak.

Phra Ram (Thai) – Variant of Preah Ream.

Phra Ruesi (Thai) – Teacher spirit in Thai dance.

Phra Thawng (Thai) – Thai variant of Preah Thaong.

Pi (Thai) – An oboe, borrowed from the Khmer *pei*.

Pin – A type of harp. Derived from the Sanskrit *vina*.
(ខ្មែរ - ពិណ)

Pingala (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Brown, a deep red . . . colored like Shiva."
(ខ្មែរ - បិង្គល)

Pin peat – "Led by the pin," the contemporary Khmer classical music orchestra which consists of bamboo and teak xylophones, circular gongs, drums, and a double-reed oboe at the least. Accompanied by vocalists.
(ខ្មែរ - ពិណពាទ្យ)

Po – A diamond-shaped emblem worn at the chest of masculine characters in Khmer dance today, sitting right where the crisscrossing bands of *sangvar* intersect.
(ខ្មែរ - ពោធិ)

Pochani Pavilion – A dance pavilion in the royal palace compound in Phnom Penh.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះទីនំងភោជនីយ)

Pol – A stylized form of narrative chanting used in *khaol*, known in Old Khmer epigraphy as *vol*.
(ខ្មែរ - ពោល)

Popil – A spade-shaped item with a handle used in Khmer dance rituals and other ceremonies.
(ខ្មែរ - ពពិល)

Prachol – To collide, combat. Carried over into Thai.
(ខ្មែរ - ប្រជល់)

Prakuot – To compete, rival. Carried over into Thai.
(ខ្មែរ - ប្រកួត)

Pralaing – To tease, taunt, flirt, play.
(ខ្មែរ - ប្រឡែង)

Praleng (Thai) – 1) Thai derivative of *pralaing*. 2) An opening dance.

Pranamng – To race. Carried into Thai.
(ខ្មែរ - ប្រណាំង)

Prasat – Religious monument.
(ខ្មែរ - ប្រាសាទ)

Pravaini (Sanskrit) – Tradition, custom. Modern Khmer: *prabaini*.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - ប្រវែនិ; ខ្មែរទំនើប - ប្រពៃណី)

Preah Khan – Twelfth-century temple built during the reign of King Jayavarmann VII in dedication to his father.
(ខ្មែរ - ប្រាសាទព្រះខន)

Preah Ko – Ninth-century Khmer temple, built during the reign of King Indravarmann I.
(ខ្មែរ - ប្រាសាទព្រះគោ)

Preah Leak – Youngest brother of Preah Ream, who is his faithful follower.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះលក្ស្មណ៍)

Preah Ream – Prince Rama, protagonist of the *Reamker* epic. Avatar of Vishnu who was later described by Khmers as a *bodhisattva* after the fall of Angkor.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះរាម)

Preah Samuth Neang Puth Somaly – A Khmer classical dance drama.

Preah Thaong – 1) Father of the Khmer lunar race, a brahmin who married Neang Neak. 2) The first dance and melody in Robam Tamng Buon.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះថោង)

Preah Thaong Neang Neak – Story which explains the mytho-historical origins of the Khmer people, in which a Brahmin from India (Preah Thaong) marries a *naga* princess named Neang Neak.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះថោងនាងនាគ)

Pre Rup – Tenth-century temple built during the reign of King Rajendravarmann.
(ខ្មែរ - ប្រែរូប)

PRUM x POP – A series of short dances created by Prumsodun Ok and set to pop music.

P'taong – A pendant or amulet hanging off of a necklace.
(ខ្មែរ - បន្ដោង)

Puhar – Ancient Indian city in the south of India, swallowed up by the sea in the *Manimekhalai*.

Puranas – A wide-ranging collection of tales from India. Literally, the word means "ancient, old" and is the source of the Khmer word *boran*.
(ខ្មែរ - បុរាណ)

Purohita – A brahmin in charge of Hindu rituals in the royal palace.
(ខ្មែរ - បុរោហិត)

Rabam (Thai) – Derivative of the Khmer word and art form *robam*.

Rabam Lopburi – Thai dance work inspired by the temple of Lavodayapura.

Rabam Si Bot – Thai version of *Robam Tamng Buon*.

Rabeng (Thai) – Derivative of the Khmer *lbaing*, meaning "game."

Rachana – Female protagonist in the *Preah Sang* drama, beaten by her older sisters for choosing to marry the *nguoh*.
(ខ្មែរ - រចនា)

Ram – To dance, an Old Khmer root word.
(ខ្មែរ - រាំ)

Ram – See Rama.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះរាម)

Rama – Prince of Ayodhya, hero of the *Ramayana* epic.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះរាម)

Ramakerti I – One of two versions of the *Reamker* composed after the fall of Angkor.
(ខ្មែរ - រាមកេរ្តិ៍)

Ramakian – Thai version of the *Reamker*, its title derived from the Khmer name. Somtimes romanized as *Ramakien*.

Ramam – Old Khmer word for dancer.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - ម៊្រាំ)

Ramaparamasur – Old name for Ream Eyso.
(ខ្មែរ - រាមបរមសូរ)

Ramasun – Thai variant of Ream Eyso.

Ramayana – Ancient Hindu epic exploring the adventures of Prince Rama, prince of Ayodhya, and his ensuing war with Ravana, the demon king of Langka.
(ខ្មែរ - រាមាយាណៈ)

Ramesur – Old name Ream Eyso.
(ខ្មែរ - រាមេសូរ)

Ram Kamhaeng stele – Historically contested stele associated with Sukhothai, believed by some to be fabricated by King Mongkut of Thailand.

Ranat (Thai) – A wooden xylophone, borrowed from the Khmer *roneat*.

Rapam – Old Khmer word for dance or dancer. Sometimes romanized *rpam*.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - របំ)

Rashi – Path, level, cosmic direction. Source of the Khmer word *reasei*.
(សំស្ក្រឹត - រាគិ)

Ratchasap (Thai) – Royal vocabulary and language, derived and developed from the Khmer *reachasap*.

Ratnasambhava – A Buddhist *jina*, or victorious aspect of the Buddha, depicted with gold skin.
(ខ្មែរ - រត្នសម្ភវ)

Rattanakosin – Thai historical era after the fall of the Ayutthaya, in which Bangkok became the capital and colonial powers came onto the national and regional stage.

Ravana – The demon king of Langka, villain of the *Ramayana*.

(ខ្មែរ - រាវណ)

Reab – Khmer variant of Ravana.
(ខ្មែរ - រាពណ៍)

Reachasap – Khmer royal vocabulary and language.
(ខ្មែរ - រាជសព្ទ)

Ream Eyso – Axe-wielding demon in *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* whose name can mean "Rama of Shiva." Derived from the name Parashurama.
(ខ្មែរ - រាមឥសូរ)

Reamker – Khmer version of the Hindu epic tale, *Ramayana*, which follows the adventures of Preah Ream (Prince Rama) as he is exiled from Ayuthyea, attempts to save his wife Neang Seda, and eventually regains the throne.
(ខ្មែរ - រាមកេរ្តិ៍)

Reamleak – Biological child of Preah Ream and Seda.
(ខ្មែរ - រាមលក្ឃ្មណ៍)

Reasei – Literally "path" or "level" and implying the possession of vital and essential life and spiritual forces that dictate one's earthly circumstances. Derived from the Sanskrit word *rashi*.
(ខ្មែរ - រាសី)

Re ram – As translated by Ly Theam Teng, a type of narrative dance performed in the court of Angkor mentioned by Zhou Daguan. The term is still used frequently in Khmer dance works such as *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*.
(ខ្មែរ - ឆៃរាំ)

Rig Veda – The oldest extant Hindu text, featuring praises to the gods.
(ខ្មែរ - ឫគ្វេទ)

Rmam – Old Khmer word, which Coedes describes as the dancers of Angkor.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - ម៊ីរាំ)

Robam – A short, "pure" or non-dramatic dance work that attempts to capture a state of being.

(ខ្មែរ - របាំ)

Robam Apsara – "Dance of the Celestial Dancers," one of the most popular works of the Khmer dance canon which depicts Mera, queen of the *apsara* and mother of the Khmer race, emerging from temple walls to play in a garden with her attendants.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំអប្សរា)

Robam Buong Suong Tiyae – A sacred, offertory solo in which a woman makes a pilgrimage for the sake of her troubled land.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំបួងសួងតាយ៉ែ)

Robam Buong Suong Yokon – A sacred solo in which a half-male and half-female brahmin makes offerings to the "gods of every direction and place" for the well-being of society. Choreographed by Mam Dak Peay.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំបួងសួងយ៉កន)

Robam Chhmar – Literally "Little Dance" or "Petite Dance," a short dance performed by Chea Samy at the funeral of King Sisowath in 1927.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំឆ្មារ)

Robam Chhuoy Chhay Buong Suong – A sacred dance invoking Indra for the fall of rain whose lyrical section is set to the *chhuoy chhay* melody.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំឈួយឆាយបួងសួង)

Robam Chos Srang – A classical dance work depicting Preah Onarut and his men bathing in a pond. Choreographed by Mam Yann.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំចុះស្រង់)

Robam Chun Por – Literally "Blessing Dance," one of the most popular works of the Khmer dance canon in which female *tevoda* toss flowers upon the stage. Choreographed by Mam Dak Peay.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំជូនពរ)

Robam Kbach Boran – Literally "dance of ancient gestures" or, in other words, classical dance.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំក្បាច់បុរាណ)

Robam Knhom Preah Silapak – New devotional work created by Prumsodun Ok, inspired images of the *yogini*.

(ខ្មែរ - របាំខ្ចីព្រះសិល្ប៍)

Robam Kolab Phnom Penh – Dance work set on contemporary Khmer pop music, meaning "Rose of Phnom Penh."
(ខ្មែរ - របាំកុលាបភ្នំពេញ)

Robam Lom Arom – Original work by Prumsodun Ok, which sets Khmer dance onto sound and uses video projection, and depicts a woman waiting for her absent husband.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំលោមអារម្មណ៍)

Robam Makar – Closing dance of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso* in which the dancers carry fans and form a *makar*. Choreographed by Mam Dak Peay.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំមករ)

Robam Moni Mekhala – Excerpt of *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*, depicting Mekhala's battle with the demon.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំមុនីមេខលា)

Robam Monosanchetana – A short dance work depicting the meeting and separation of a prince and princess in a garden.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំមនោសញ្ចេតនា)

Robam Pka Meas Pka Prak – Dance in which princes descend from heaven to offer gold and silver flowers, often used to open the stage. The dance used to only have music but was re-choreographed with lyrics by Mam Yann to honor the coronation of King Norodom Suramarit.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំផ្កាមាសផ្កាប្រាក់)

Robam Reasmei Duong Chantrea – An original work choreographed by Soth Somaly, which sets Khmer classical dance onto modernized traditional music.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំរស្មីដួងចន្ទ្រា)

Robam Santhyea Vehea – An original work by Prumsodun Ok which uses Khmer classical dance, music, and costuming to depict the love and marriage of two men.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំសន្ធ្យាវេហា)

Robam Tamng Buon – A sacred work of the Khmer dance canon performed in the *buong suong* ritual and preceding *Moni Mekhala Ream Eyso*. Considered one of the oldest dances in the repertoire.

(ខ្មែរ - របាំទាំងបួន)

Robam Tep Monorom – "Dance of Heavenly Bliss," one of the most popular works of the canon today that depicts the celestial courtship of gods and goddesses.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំទេពមនោរម្យ)

Robam Teveak Srei Suor – A short dance work choreographed by Menh Kossany, depicting celestial women who execute the popular gesture associated with dance at Angkor known by some as *ardhaparyanka*.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំទេវៈស្រីសួគ៌)

Robam Tevet – A short dance depicting the celestial harmony of gods and goddesses. Choreographed by Mam Yann.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំទេវេទ)

Robam Yon Kabi – A martial dance work that depicts the combat between a male and demon character, or two groups of male and demon characters.
(ខ្មែរ - របាំយ៉ូនកាប៊ី)

Roeung – Story, drama, tale.
ឿង)

Roeung Kailas – Drama in which the daughters of the king of heaven descend from Kailas using the power of their *sbai*. As they bathe, the youngest one has her *sbai* stolen and stays in the human world as the wife of a prince.
ឿងកៃលាស)

Roeung Preah Sang – A dramatic dance work found in both Khmer and Thai repertoires which follows Preah Sang, a young prince who is adopted by a demoness, runs away, and eventually disguises himself as a *nguoh* to test the virtue of Rachana.
ឿងព្រះសង្ខ)

Roneat – A wooden xylophone, made with either teak or bamboo keys.
(ខ្មែរ - រនាត)

Rong ram – A dancing shed or stage for dancing.
(ខ្មែរ - រងរាំ)

Rot khlaov – A type of crown worn by female characters, topped by *hang* tail-shaped finials.

(ខ្មែរ - រត្នក្លាវ)

Rpam – Old Khmer for dance.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - រ្បម)

Rudhira (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Colored red like blood or a gem that is blood-colored."
(ខ្មែរ - រុធិរ)

Rudraksha – Prayer beads that are sometimes strung into necklaces or bracelets.
(ខ្មែរ - រុទ្រាក្ឍ)

Sabai (Thai) – Derivative of the Khmer *sbai*.

Saddha – Teachings of the Buddha.
(ខ្មែរ - សទ្ធ)

Sadhana – Ritual meditation.
(ខ្មែរ - សាធន)

SajakThor – Dance film featuring choreography and performance by Belle Chumvan Sodhachivy.
(ខ្មែរ - សច្ចធម្ម)

Samantabhadra – A *bodhisattva* associated with meditation, patron of the *Lotus Sutra*.
(ខ្មែរ - សមន្តភទ្រ)

Samastabharana – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Fully adorned with jewelry . . . Shiva dancing and fully adorned."
(ខ្មែរ - សមស្តាភរណៈ)

Sambok – Shell.
(ខ្មែរ - សំបក)

Sampeah – Gesture of pressing one's palms together in prayer. Variant of the Javanese *sembah*.
(ខ្មែរ - សំពះ)

Sampeah Kru – Khmer dance ritual honoring the spirits of deceased dance masters, territorial spirits, and the gods. Can come in both large (*sampeah kru thom*) and small (*sampeah kru toch*) forms.
(ខ្មែរ - សំពះគ្រូ)

Samphor – A double-headed hand drum.
(ខ្មែរ - សម្ភោរ)

Sampot – A long piece of fabric that can be worn as a sarong or tied into a *khbin*.
(ខ្មែរ - សំពត់)

Sampot chang khbin – Skirt tied into pantaloons.
(ខ្មែរ - សំពត់ចងក្បិន)

Sanba – Romanization of Zhou Daguan's rendering of *sampeah*.

Sangha – The Buddhist clergy.
(ខ្មែរ - សង្ឃ)

Sangvar – A piece of jewelry made by crisscrossing bands in which the head and arms must be passed through.
(ខ្មែរ - សង្វារ)

Sangwan (Thai) – Derivative of Khmer *sangvar*.

Santih – Tantric ritual designed to avert danger and ensure safety of kingdom. Modern resonance of the word can be seen in *santisok* (security guard).
(ខ្មែរ - គាន្តិះ)

Saoma – 1) Neang Neak, mytho-historical ancestor of the Khmer people. 2) A lunar deity. 3) A plant or root used to make the elixir of life.
(ខ្មែរ - សោម)

Sapan (Thai) – Bridge. Derivative of Khmer *spean*.

Sarabarong – Third dance and melody in *Robam Tamng Buon*.
(ខ្មែរ - សារបរុង)

Saramani – Novel written by Roland Meyer about a Khmer classical dancer during the reigns of King Norodom and King Sisowath. Named after the protagonist and inclusive of many real people.

Sarangi (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Likely a piece of jewelry of the gods, worn around the neck (for protection) . . . Modern Khmer: *srang ka*."
(ខ្មែរ - សារាង្គី ឬ សារាងគី)

Satyapala (Sanskrit) – Protector of truth.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - សត្យបាល)

Sbai – A long piece of cloth worn by women and female characters in Khmer dance, wrapping around the torso to cover the breasts and falling down the back. It comes in two forms: *sbai tol* leaves the right shoulder bare while the *sbai phluoh* (twin *sbai*) or *sbai thom* (large *sbai*) covers both shoulders.
(ខ្មែរ - សែ្បៃ)

Sbek thom – Large puppet shadow play. Can be referred to as simply *sbek*.
(ខ្មែរ - សែ្បកធំ)

Seasons of Migration – An original work choreographed by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, which uses classical dance and music to explore the idea of culture shock.
(ខ្មែរ - រដូវចយាត្រា)

Sembah – Javanese variant of *sampeah*.

Shaduvan – Merchant in the *Manimekhalai*, who speaks to the conversion of the Naga peoples of Southeast Asia.

Shankalan – Young man who dies from fear after seeing a *yogini* dance on and eat a corpse in the *Manimekhalai*.

Shenguttavan – King who conquered the nation of Kadamba, believed by Danielou to be Champa (but which he ascribes to modern day Cambodia).

Shilappadikaram – An ancient Tamil epic, following a king's love for a dancer and the circumstances that pull them apart. Prequel to *Manimekhalai*.

Shiva – The god of destruction in Hinduism, creator and destroyer of the universe through his cosmic dance.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះសិរៈ ឬ ព្រះឥសូរ)

Shivaite – Worshipper of Shiva.

Siam – Old name for Thailand or for Thai people.
ៀម)

Siddhi – Magic powers in the tantric context. This word resonates in contemporary Khmer in the words *sithisak* or *saksith* (efficacious) and *sith* (rights).
(ខ្មែរ - សិទ្ធិ)

Sikhasiva – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Shiva with a chignon sharply pointed up."
(ខ្មែរ - គិខាគីរៈ ឬ សិខាសីរៈ)

Silapak – Art.
(ខ្មែរ - សិល្បៈ)

Singha – Lion.
(ខ្មែរ - សិង្ហ)

Smao chinchean – Literally “ring grass,” a type of grass worn in the hair of students during *sampeah kru*.
(ខ្មែរ - ស្មៅចិញ្ចៀន)

Smeu – A melody used to introduce important characters on stage.
(ខ្មែរ - ស្មឺ)

Smot – A Buddhist form of chant-song sometimes described as “dharma songs.”
(ខ្មែរ - ស្មូត)

Sophanaka – The younger sister of Reab, who first initiates contact with Preah Ream, Seda, and Preah Leak.
(ខ្មែរ - សូរបនខា)

Sovannahang – Khmer dance drama first choreographed during the reign of Queen Kossamak Nearyrath and restaged by Princess Buppha Devi.
(ខ្មែរ - សុវណ្ណហង្ស)

Sovann Machha Hanuman – Episode from the *Reamker*, which depicts the encounter between Hanuman and Sovann Macha, the golden fish, who has ordered the bridge to Langka be deconstructed.
(ខ្មែរ - សុវណ្ណមច្ឆហនុមាន)

Sovannaphum – Land of gold, derived from the Sanskrit Suvarnabhumi.
(ខ្មែរ - សុវណ្ណភូមិ)

Spean – Bridge.
(ខ្មែរ - ស្ពាន)

Srang ka – A piece of jewelry wrapping around the collar.
(ខ្មែរ - សុវង៌ក)

Srei Koch – Bad or broken woman. This can also be plural.
(ខ្មែរ - ស្រីខូច)

Sruk – Land. Sometimes romanized *sruk*.
(ខ្មែរ - ស្រុក)

Stained – Original work of Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, which casts a feminist lens on Seda's relationship with both Preah Ream and Reab.
(ខ្មែរ - ស្លាកស្នាមអតីត)

Stuoy – Khmer dance gesture meaning beautiful, wonderful, great.
(ខ្មែរ - ស្ងួយ)

Subarnavasana (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "A skirt ornamented with gold."
(ខ្មែរ - សុពណ៌វសនៈ)

Sukhodayapura – Old Khmer city now in modern day Thailand, precursor to Sukhothai.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - សុខោទយបុរ)

Sukhothai – The earliest Thai nation in mainland Southeast Asia.
(ខ្មែរ - សុខោទ័យ)

Supana Matcha Hanuman – Thai version of *Sovann Machha Hanuman*.

Suvarnabhumi – “Land of Gold” often referred to in the *jataka*, associated with Southeast Asia.
(ខ្មែរ - សុវណ៌ភូមិ)

Suvarnaracita (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Ornamented and lacquered with gold."
(ខ្មែរ - សុវរណរចិត ឬ សុពណ៌រចិត)

Suvarnavasana (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "A skirt ornamented with gold."
(ខ្មែរ - សុវណ៌វសនៈ)

Sva – Monkey.
(ខ្មែរ - សា្វ)

Symposium – Philosophical treatise on the nature of love written by Plato.

Talapoins – Buddhist monks.

Tamleam Tamloap – Tradition, cultural practices, custom.
(ខ្មែរ - ទំលាមទម្លាប់)

Tantrika – A tantric practitioner.

Taong – To hang onto.
(ខ្មែរ - តោង)

Ta Prohm – Twelfth-century temple built during the reign of King Jayavarmann VII, dedicated to his mother.
(ខ្មែរ - ប្រាសាទតាព្រហ្ម)

Tejah – Power, authority, heat.
(ខ្មែរ - តេជៈ)

Tennyo (Japanese) – A celestial maiden.

Tep Apsar – Heavenly dancer.
(ខ្មែរ - ទេពអប្សរ)

Tep Robam – The priest in Khmer dance rituals. Also known as *achar* or *hmathav*.
(ខ្មែរ - ទេពរបាំ)

Terrace of the Elephants – Outdoor terrace at Angkor Thom, from which the king would watch elephant combats and other games.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះលានជល់ដំរី)

Terrace of the Leper King – Outdoor terrace at Angkor Thom.
(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះលានស្តេចគម្លង់)

Tevea – God, derived from the Sanskrit *deva*.
(ខ្មែរ - ទេវា)

Tevoda – Celestial deity with ability to travel between human and divine realms, sometimes associated with land as well.
(ខ្មែរ - ទេវតា)

Thangka – Tibetan Buddhist painting on cloth.

Thaong – Often understood to mean "gold," although this word does not appear in Samdech Chuon Nath's dictionary.
(ខ្មែរ - ថោង)

Thawng (Thai)– Gold.

The Cambodia Exhibit – Original work by Prumsodun Ok which explores competing nationalisms as manifested on social spaces such as YouTube.
(ខ្មែរ - ពិពណ៌កម្ពុជា)

The Lives of Giants – Original work by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, which explores the prequel to the *Reamker*(and why Preah Ream and Reab are enemies).
(ខ្មែរ - ជីវិតអសូរ)

Theravada – Relatively austere school of Buddhism which became popular in Cambodia in the thirteenth century.

Thlok – A type of tree in abundance on the island in which Preah Thaong first meets Neang Neak. Very likely the local Khmer variant to the Sanskrit *kadamba*.
(ខ្មែរ - ធ្លក)

Thma Roam – "Dancing Stones," a *lakhaon niyeay* play performed by students of Hang Thun Hak.

(ខ្មែរ - ថ្ងៃរាំ)

Thngai ram – Day or days of dancing, as translated from Zhou Daguan's text by George Coedes.
(ខ្មែរ - ថ្ងៃរាំ)

Thommik – An epithet for Maitreya, the future Buddha, who will ring in the next age of morality and enlightenment.
(ខ្មែរ - ធម្មិក)

Thorani – See Dharani.
(ខ្មែរ - ធរណី)

Thotsakan (Thai) – Epithet for Ravana.

Tip Sodachan – Khmer drama in which the daughters of the king of heaven descend upon earth. One of them steals a flower and is therefore fated to be the owner's wife. After having a child, she is forced to abandon her family and return back to heaven.
(ខ្មែរ - ទិព្វសូដាចំន្ទ)

Tossakan – Epithet for Reab, meaning "ten heads."
(ខ្មែរ - ទស្សកាន)

Tossamok – Epithet for Reab, meaning "ten faces."
(ខ្មែរ - ទស្សមុខ)

Tracheak – Literally meaning "ear" but in this case referring to the pieces of elven jewelry that are worn behind the ears and attached to the crown.
(ខ្មែរ - ត្រចៀក)

Trakiet – An edible plant, *Sagittaria sagittifolia* or *Monochoria hastata*.
(ខ្មែរ - ត្រកៀត)

Trakuan – A type of weed, *Ipomoea aquatica*, eaten by Khmer people in soups, stir-fries, or fresh.
(ខ្មែរ - ត្រកួន)

Tro – A fiddle. Carried over into Thai.

(ខ្មែរ - ទ្រ)

Tuk – Water.
(ខ្មែរ - ទឹក)

Tuk mont – Water sanctified by *mantra* that is used to bless ritual participants.
(ខ្មែរ - ទឹកមន្ត្រ)

Udaharana – Example.
(ខ្មែរ - ឧទាហរណ៍)

Udayakumara – Karmically-bound prince who pursues Manimekhalai.
(ខ្មែរ - ឧទយកុមារ)

Udong – See Oudong.
(ខ្មែរ - ឧដុង្គ)

Upayana – Particular case.

Upekkha – Buddhist concept of equanimity. See *brahmavihara*.
(ខ្មែរ - ឧបេក្ខ)

Utsava – Old Khmer word for "festival."
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - ឧត្សវ:)

Uttarasanga (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Likely a form of clothing, an ancient era *sbai*."
(ខ្មែរ - ឧត្តរសាង្គ:)

Vajra – In Buddhism it means “diamond” while in Hinduism it means “thunderbolt.” Symbolic of indestructible nature and irresistible force.
(ខ្មែរបុរាណ - វជ្រ; ខ្មែរទំនើប - ពេជ្រ)

Vajradhara – The holder of the *vajra*.
(ខ្មែរ - វជ្រធរ)

Vajrasattva – Tantric deity associated with a student who, through the master’s teachings, obtains transcendence through their esoteric practice.

(ខ្មែរ - វជ្រសត្វ)

Vajrayana – The “diamond path” or tantric Buddhism.
(ខ្មែរ - វជ្រយាន)

Valaivanam – Naga king referenced in *Manimekhalai*.

Varanaka (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "Masks worn by artists."
(ខ្មែរ - វរណក: ឬវណ៌ក:)

Varsapanam – Tantric ritual designed to obtain rain.
(ខ្មែរ - វស៌បណម៌)

Varuna – Hindu god of the Western Seas, whose mount is a *makara* and was defeated by Parashurama.
(ខ្មែរ - ពរុណ)

Vasamayila – Naga queen referenced in *Manimekhalai*.

Vedas – Ancient Sanskrit texts containing scriptures and literature.
(ខ្មែរ - វេទ)

Vidyaviraloka (Sanskrit) – From Pou's *Lexique*: "A world victorious through knowledge."
(ខ្មែរ -វិទ្យាវីរលោក:)

Vihear – A temple hall.
(ខ្មែរ -វិហារ)

Vimayapura – Khmer city during Angkorean times now in present day Thailand.
(ខ្មែរ -វិមាយបុរ)

Virendravijaya – From Pou's *Lexique*: "A most powerful victory of Indra."
(ខ្មែរ -វីរេន្ទ្រវិជ័យ)

Virendravisaya – From Pou's *Lexique*: "A most powerful victory of Indra."
(ខ្មែរ -វីរេន្ទ្រវិចំយ ឬវីរេន្ទ្រវិសំយ)

Vishnu – Hindu deity who protects life and creation.

(ខ្មែរ - ព្រះវិស្ណុ)

Vishnuite – A worshipper of Vishnu.

Vorachhun – Prince of the earth, student of Lok Ta Moni Eisey and colleague of Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso in the sacred drama. Killed by Ream Eyso and brought back to life by the rain.
(ខ្មែរ - វរឈុន)

Wat – A temple, derived from the Old Khmer *vatta*.
(ខ្មែរ - វត្ត)

Wat Sithor – Khmer temple originally built during the Angkor era, one in which Jayavarmann V had a tantric priest perform daily fire sacrifices.
(ខ្មែរ - វត្តសីធរ)

Wat Sri Ratanasasadaram – Temple of the Emerald Buddha in the Grand Palace in Bangkok.

Wat Svay Andet – Temple in an island on the Mekong, famous for its *khaol* troupe.
(ខ្មែរ - វត្តស្វាយអរំណែត)

White Chalk Horse – Ritual performance staged by Prumsodun Ok in honor of his father's passing.
(ខ្មែរ - សេះដីស)

Yakkhini – Pali variant of *yaksini*.
(ខ្មែរ - យក្ខិនី)

Yang – Male force in Chinese philosophy.

Yasodharapura – Old name of Angkor meaning, "City which holds honored glory."
(ខ្មែរ - យសោធរបុរ)

Yeak – A powerful spirit associated with nature, derived from the Sanskrit *yaksa*. However, the word *yeak* in contemporary Khmer usually implies a giant ogre or demon who feeds on the flesh of human beings.
(ខ្មែរ - យក្ស)

Yeakanei – Khmer derivative of *yakkhini*.

(ខ្មែរ - យក្ខិនី)

Yihun – A type of white powder brought from China used by dancers, obsolete during the reign of Queen Kossamak Nearyrath.

Yike – A form of performance involving dance, music, and song derived from multiple cultural traditions in Cambodia.
(ខ្មែរ - យីកេ)

Yin – Female force in Chinese philosophy.

Yogi – A man devoted to meditation and ritual practice so as to gain magic powers and spiritual transcendence.
(ខ្មែរ - យោគី)

Yogini – Powerful female spirits associated with trees, animals, nature, and funerals who feed on the flesh of human beings. Brave men who dared have intercourse with them were known as *vira* (Khmer: *vireak*) or "virile heroes" who would gain magic powers as a result. *Yogini* are often shown in tantric iconography as dancing on corpses, symbolic of the impermanence of the physical form and of transcendence over ignorance.
(ខ្មែរទំនើប - យក្ខិនី)

Yoni – A ritual sculpture, usually round or square in form, symbolic of a vulva and the divine feminine.
(ខ្មែរ - យោនី)

Yonilinga – A ritual sculpture consisting of a *linga*, symbol of a phallus and Shiva, surrounded by a *yoni*, symbolic of the female principle and Shakti.
(ខ្មែរ - យោនីលិង្គ)