



## **Tradition and Innovation in Cambodian Dance**

A Curriculum Unit for Post-Secondary Level Educators

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## Note to Instructors

This unit on Cambodia takes as its focus the tension between tradition and creativity, between moving forward and staying rooted in the past, as played out on the country's contemporary dance stage. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the pull to the past and the lure of future possibilities remain in conflict. As a way of exploring this dynamic, this unit looks at the circumstances surrounding three major performance events that took place in Cambodia in February, 2004. All three of the performances stirred up debate about the role of the arts in preserving, challenging, and, sometimes, creating tradition. The aim is to encourage an understanding of the relationship of history to notions of "tradition," and to foster an appreciation of Cambodian expressive culture.

The unit is divided into two sections. Each includes study questions. An annotated list of suggestions for further reading, along with references to relevant video material, precedes the appendices.

The first section provides an overview of the concerns some people in Cambodia have with innovation, in this case, in the arts. It "sets the stage" by placing dance and the dancers in an historical context, one that notes both the remarkable continuation and also the repeated rupture of tradition. The second section delves into specific examples of cultural conservatism and innovation by looking at three performances at the Royal University of Fine Arts Theater in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

One of the performances involved the re-staging and expansion of a classical dance-drama that hadn't been performed since the royalty went into exile in 1970. The second was the presentation by an all-male troupe of an episode from a lengthy dance-drama with literary roots in India. Though the epic tale of the *Reamker* (the Cambodian

version of the Ramayana legend) has long been a core of the performance repertoire, dancers had not previously focused on this particular chapter of the story. The third event involved the choreographing of a completely new piece within the classical idiom, by a Cambodian dancer who had been residing in the U.S. for more than a decade. That dance also had its world premiere in Phnom Penh.

The appendices contain excerpts from the lyrics for each of these works, provided as an example of the verbal element in Cambodian dance. The words are not enough, though, to tell the story. Communication through the dance involves an interplay of gesture and movement, specific melodies and rhythms, and facial expression, along with the sung poetry or intoned words. Some dances are performed to instrumental music only. Khmer poetic texts that accompany classical dances are notoriously difficult to translate, steeped as they are in subtle metaphors, word-play, codified rhythmic and rhyming structures, and sometimes, royal vocabulary. The translations offered here, then, are rough at best, meant to give a sense not only of what is said, but also of what is not said, what is left for the audience to interpret from the other components of the dance.

There are several systems for the transliteration of Khmer words into English. Here they are spelled as generally presented in the literature on dance, and as written in program notes produced by the artists themselves. The term “Khmer” technically refers to the majority ethnic group of Cambodia. However, in common usage, the terms “Khmer” and “Cambodian” are interchangeable.

## Section I: Setting the Stage

*Don't steer clear of a winding path.  
And don't automatically take a straight one, either.  
Choose the path your ancestors have walked.*

Cambodian Proverb

One evening in May of 1990, in the dark L-shaped costume room of the Bassac Theatre in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, incense smoke swirled upward from sticks placed in fruits before masks and crowns to be used in that night's performance. Kim Nep, her short gray hair combed straight back, sat on the floor pleating the skirt she had just wrapped around dancer Voan Savong. Savong was to portray an *apsara*, a celestial dancer, on stage in a few short minutes.

The *apsara*, in her golden jewelry and glistening brocade, has come to be a symbol of Cambodia, and an emblem of the country's mythico-historical past. Carved in the thousands, images of celestial women line the walls of the country's ancient temples in the Angkor region, and are seen as links between humankind and the heavens (**illustration 1**). There is even one origin myth that Cambodians know well in which an *apsara* pairs with a sage, and through this union the Khmer people come into being.

As the dressing process continued that May night, two enormous paintings resting against a wall loomed over Kim Nep and Voan Savong. One was a portrait of Karl Marx; the other of Ho Chi Minh, leader of neighboring Vietnam's communist revolution earlier in the twentieth century. In 1990, Cambodia was a communist state, governed under the watchful eye(s) of Vietnam.

Classical (also called "court") dance of Cambodia has a long history intertwined with that of religions and kings. But in the People's Republic of Kampuchea (Cambodia's

official name at the time), rather than being tossed aside with other remnants of a feudalistic or non-Marxist past, the dance, with its intimate relationship to spirits and monarchs (all anathema to the communist rulers), had been re-created and reconfigured as a weapon in the fight for legitimacy of the leadership. The government in power was waging a war against various armies, including that of the infamous Khmer Rouge, who wanted to regain control of the country.

Once dressed in her finery, a multi-tiered crown upon her head, Savong, the central *apsara* in the dance of the same name, took her place on stage. She moved with grace to the melody and rhythms of the *pin peat* orchestra, the ensemble that accompanies classical dance (**illustration 2**). She performed a solo, facing one side and then the other. Her slow controlled movement was deliberate, yet highly energized: toes and fingers flexed, the back arched. Though her weight was centered and low, her travel across space was light and fluid. Her head moved in an almost imperceptible figure-eight wave her gaze reaching to the audience and beyond. When four additional dancers joined her, they lowered themselves to the floor, resting one knee forward, the other behind. With the rear foot flexed, sole to the sky, they were flying, embodying a recollection of their stone ancestors. The chorus sang of the delights of a garden, and the glory of the January 7<sup>th</sup> Day of Liberation (in 1979) of Cambodia from the grip of the Khmer Rouge.

This dance from the classical repertoire of Cambodia, with its reference to ancient myths and temple carvings, a dance created amidst royalty, had been reconceived and presented as a piece honoring the victory of one communist government over another (i.e. the People's Republic of Kampuchea over the Khmer Rouge). The regime in place seized on an image with resonance to the people of Cambodia. Displaying their control

over that image – the *apsara*, the ancient dance – the leaders were in a sense declaring that what had almost been lost during the previous years of war and revolution under the Khmer Rouge was rescued on their watch, and that elements of tradition, even in a new guise, were still underpinning life in Cambodia.

Cambodians outside the country decried this appropriation of what was to them a symbol of all that was right with Cambodia before the revolution in the 1970s, and before communists took the reigns of power there. The *apsara* represented benevolence, and a connection to ancient glory. (Inside Cambodia, and in countries where Cambodians have resettled, including the United States, *apsara* appear on Cambodian restaurant menus, business cards, and even matchbooks.) The chiseled images of dancers on the temples, some dating back more than a thousand years, represented the richness of life in the heavens, and the splendor of the Khmer kingdom as well, since the monarchs fashioned their lives at court after what was imagined to be the world of the gods. This included surrounding themselves with dancers.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, criticism was leveled upon the governmental authorities in charge of the arts by ex-patriot Cambodians for what they considered to be undue interference (the changing of lyrics, for example) with a time-honored tradition. In their view, the juxtaposition of an ancient symbol with spiritual (and national) resonances with the likenesses of Ho Chi Minh and Karl Marx created an irreconcilable clash. To the officials of the Ministry of Information and Culture, use of the association of the *apsara* with the idea of “Cambodia” was part of an effort to unify the populace in the on-going civil and international strife. For many of the dancers of the time, these overarching claims were of less concern than was the chance to dance again,

and to pray as they dressed for a performance -- or while they danced, the dance itself being a sort of offering.

Fast forward ten years, to the month of April in the year 2000. On the grounds of Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts (the royalty had returned in late 1991), a Cambodian classical dance adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Othello* had its world premiere. Choreographed in collaboration with teachers from the University, the project was conceived of and directed by a former faculty member who was then a graduate student in the United States. Audience members discussed the story – issues of trust and revenge – as they headed out after the show, children asleep in their arms. The dancers themselves offered various takes on the relevance of the storyline and the staging of a “foreign” tale in a Cambodian idiom. Indeed, the entire process of creating the new work – a process that spanned more than a year – involved considerations of and arguments about these issues, as well as the technical ones. Immediately following the premiere, local journalists wrote of the dangers inherent in bringing a story not of Cambodian origin to life in a form that had been threatened with destruction just a generation ago. How will our children grow up knowing what it is, what it means, to be Khmer, they pondered, if what they see and hear are other people's stories? What will happen to our traditions?

### *Tradition*

“Tradition” is a term laden with assumptions. In Khmer, tradition (*propeiny*) refers to “the way it has been done,” the old, the known. With a late-twentieth century history of loss and destruction, and a severing from so much of the past, all as a result of revolution, wars, poverty, and international isolation, along with continuing social and

political volatility into this century, Cambodians have been seeking to make order out of the chaos by, in some cases, looking for guidance and counsel from the past. The goals are to remember and enact the lessons and accomplishments of the past so as to gain some command over the present. “Tradition” carries an added burden when it is held up as inviolate, and as a means of pushing back the suffering and uncertainty of the here-and-now. To encourage continuity and security, people have tried to restore what they know of times of yore, in ceremonial terms, in agricultural practices, in maxims handed down from one generation to the next, and so on.

Traditional knowledge, knowledge of the past and the rituals that evoke continuity, resides within cultural specialists – the elders and the *kru* (teachers). The connection between past and present, for dancers in Cambodia, is mediated both by the stories they bring to life, and by the *kru*, a word encompassing the spirits of the dance, deceased and living teachers of dance, and deities. Through their relationship with the *kru*, and through their enactment of mytho-historical tales, Khmer dancers endeavor to bring some order to their world, and to their country.

Along with the kinaesthetic relationship between teacher and pupil (the teacher pressing between her student’s shoulder blades to help move them down and back, or pushing on the lower back to encourage a deep arch), there is a spiritual one. The dancers formally honor their teachers, and their teachers’ knowledge, in a ceremony known as *sampeah kru* (a salutation to the spirits and teachers). Elaborate offerings are presented to the spirits and teachers, and prayers recited, as a way of asking for continued guidance (**illustration 3**). The teachers, for their part, bless the students in return, asking the spirits

to give them the cultural knowledge, perseverance, and skill it takes to be an accomplished Cambodian artist.

### *Emblems of Power*

Dance, music, and drama have always held prominence in the lives of the Cambodian people. They are indispensable aspects of rites of passage and religious and national ceremonies. The history of classical Khmer dance, in particular, is linked with that of religions and kings (**illustration 4**). Inscriptions from as early as the seventh century tell of the presence of dancers at temples. In many of the Hinduized states of Southeast Asia, in fact, magnificent carvings of celestial dancers and earthly men and women dancing to entertain the kings adorned the walls of temples.

In those traditional empires, claimants to the throne sought legitimacy through geneologies and through demonstrations of an accumulation of power. To this end they surrounded themselves with objects or people thought to embody authority and strength: royal heirlooms (umbrellas, spears, palanquins, jewelry) and clowns and spiritual leaders. They also conducted elaborate rituals to represent their concentration of power and, hence, ultimate control over the productivity and well-being of the realm. Their wives and their dancers were part of their regalia as well, used in symbolic display.

Indeed, in the ancient Khmer empire of Angkor (9<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries), which reached over much of what we know today as mainland Southeast Asia, it was through the medium of the dance that royal communication with the divinities was effected to guarantee fertility of the land and people in the king's domain. At least once a year the dancers would perform a ritual called *buong suong*, a ceremony of supplication that asks the deities to nourish and protect the people and the land on behalf of the monarch.

Brahmanism, and to a lesser extent, Mahayana Buddhism, dominated Khmer religious culture from about the sixth through the thirteenth centuries, Indian beliefs and practices having originally arrived in Cambodia about 2,000 years ago. These intermingled with the local system of animist spirituality, creating a syncretism that remains in existence to this day. For example, though Cambodia has been a mainly Theravada Buddhist country since about the fourteenth century, the *buong suong* ceremony, decidedly Brahmanistic, is still performed, and incorporates offerings made to ancestral and nature spirits as well (decidedly animistic practices).

In the mid-1800s, after centuries of fighting off two powerful and adversarial neighbors, the Thais and Vietnamese, the Khmer court solidified itself under the “protectorate” of the French. King Ang Duong (reigned 1841-59) is credited with codifying the gestures, movements, and costuming of the royal dance in the mid-nineteenth century, based on interpretations of the bas relief sculptures of the *apsara* and other celestial beings that adorn the walls of the magnificent temple complex of Angkor. His achievement marked the beginning of a conscious, public effort to hail the image of the glorious kingdom of Angkor as the direct predecessor of Cambodia.

The images of Angkor and its attendant *apsara* were manipulated especially successfully both within Cambodia and abroad by Norodom Sihanouk<sup>1</sup> and by his mother Queen Sisowath Kossamak Nearyrath, who personally oversaw the dance in the middle of the twentieth century. Though still performing many of their ritual functions, including

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<sup>1</sup> Norodom Sihanouk ruled as King from 1941 until 1955, when he stepped down. Addressed as “Prince,” he became Head of State, and retained that title until a coup d’etat in 1970 forced him into exile. He returned to Cambodia for a while when the Khmer Rouge were in power. In 1991, with the signing of Peace Accords, he made a formal return to the country. When the monarchy was restored in 1993, he became, once again, King. In late 2004, he abdicated the throne to allow his son, Norodom Sihamoni, to rule.

the *buong suong* ceremony, in concert with the ruler, the dancers developed into the living symbols of the country itself. Representing the nation-state of Cambodia, they accompanied the royalty on state visits overseas.

When then-Prince Sihanouk was ousted by a coup in 1970, the dancers continued practicing in the palace, touring abroad, and dancing for state guests as civil servants under Prime Minister Lon Nol (served 1970-75). But, with the royalty in exile, they were no longer called upon to be mediators with the gods. During the rule of the Khmer Rouge under the infamous Pol Pot (1975-79), all dance and music – as Cambodians had known them – were forbidden. Only revolutionary songs and dances were allowed. Any known connection with the royalty, even a past one, would have been reason to be put to death.

The Khmer Rouge came to power in April of 1975, and quickly attempted to turn Cambodia into a gigantic agricultural labor camp in which loyalty would rest solely with the anonymous “organization” controlling everyone’s lives. Cities were evacuated; parents and children separated. Religious worship was banned; markets were shut and destroyed, access to modern medicine denied. They aimed to wipe out thousands of years of history, and to begin again, with a “pure” Khmer nation, dedicated to agriculture, and beholden to no outside ideas or directives. In the course of just under four years of rule, close to a quarter of the population of Cambodia perished from starvation, disease, torture, and execution. When surviving artists re-grouped in the capital less than a year after the ouster of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, they estimated that between 80 and 90 percent of their professional colleagues throughout the country (dancers, actors, musicians, playwrights, poets, painters, and so on) had died. In the country as a whole,

schools, roads, irrigation and governing systems, not to mention family relationships and the Buddhist monkhood, all had to be reconstituted, with few or no resources.

In dance, it is the dancing and the dancers which constitute the archive assuring the perpetuation of tradition. There is no written manual. This situation lends itself at once to conservative and innovative possibilities of cultural transmission. With so much destroyed, and so many lost, dance practitioners showed great courage in recreating and reinvigorating their art.

It was at this time that the authorities, some of whom had been prominent artists before the revolution, compromised by creating anew within traditional genres of performance under heavy communist oversight. The results included the Apsara dance (mentioned at the beginning of this section) with altered lyrics; dances (in the classical idiom) about the friendship of the then-communist countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam; even a dance about the immortality of Angkor Wat, the great temple complex. A whole new generation of dancers was trained at government expense, some gaining opportunities to perform and study abroad, mostly in eastern-bloc countries, who maintained diplomatic relations with Cambodia at that time.

The United Nations brokered peace accords in 1991, and in that same year, Norodom Sihanouk returned to Cambodia, along with his daughter (and former royal dancer), Princess Norodom Buppha Devi. After elections were held in 1993, Sihanouk was reinstated as King. But the return of the royalty did not herald sudden privilege for the country's dancers. They had already been high-profile during the previous (communist) regime. Yet their salaries as civil servants stayed below the minimum necessary to feed themselves and their children, forcing them to take second jobs. Before

the disruption of the 1970s, this had never been the case. And while some have traveled in recent years with the royalty on state visits, to other countries on extended performance tours, or entertained visitors at the palace, most maintain their daily strenuous training regimen, performing, from time-to-time, at the arts school and in local or provincial areas on special occasions.

Today, even a generation after the end of the Khmer Rouge era, Cambodia (now once again known as the Kingdom of Cambodia) still has much to recover from. Because formal education had come to a standstill, and had far to go once rebuilding could begin, the general level of education is extremely low. Further, the destruction and/or loss of so many written materials (books, sacred texts), left a vacuum in printed resources. An influx of foreign soldiers introduced an era of rampant AIDS; the division between the wealthy and the poor is vast; a sense of impunity for violence and corruption among the most powerful pervades the land. At the same time, indigenous non-governmental organizations devoted to human rights, women's concerns, and health and child welfare have blossomed. The arts community benefits from openness of communication, with exchanges taking place across Southeast Asia and beyond. Yet as with other communities in Cambodia, the reminders are always out there that recovering what was lost is a priority. Exposure to and learning of the new might endanger that mission, people are told. It is within this context that the conflict between preservation and originality plays out in contemporary Cambodia. The following sections will examine specific cases of creativity in the dance world that approach this tension in discrete ways.

## Study Questions

1. What does the image of the *apsara* represent, and why is it claimed or protected or manipulated by so many?
  
2. Describe the nature of the teacher-student relationship in Cambodian dance. How might that inform artists' feelings about the importance of "tradition?"
  
3. After suffering such extreme destruction and loss, in what ways might re-creating elements of the past help a person or community move forward? Might it also be a hindrance? If so, how?
  
4. What factors make one feel vulnerable to loss of control over one's cultural domain?

## Section II: Twenty-First Century Dances

### *Preah Sothun Neang Monorea*

Many of the classical dances performed today were created in the mid-twentieth century under the guidance of Queen Kossamak Nearyrath. It was her vision that episodes of lengthy dance-dramas be shortened and that “pure” dances, those without a dramatic story-line, be created and presented together on a proscenium stage in a program that would last about two hours or so. (Sacred dances performed as part of a *buong suong* ceremony are, for the most part, a separate category.) Modeling this innovation on Western theatrical practice, she proposed thematic ideas to dance teachers at court, who then developed the choreography in consultation with the Queen. Thus, relatively recent innovation lies behind some of the works considered “ancient” by today’s audiences.

When surviving dancers gathered after the end of the Khmer Rouge era and started to piece together elements of their artistic heritage, they worked not only on these dances of Queen Kossamak’s era, but also on those lengthy dance-dramas that enacted mytho-historical tales, spoke of love and war, and explored human nature and human relationships with fantastical creatures such as giants and celestial beings. These dramas included the *Reamker*, the Cambodian version of the Ramayana, and many others.

In order to be able to stage these works, dancers who specialized in one particular role would labor with others who had practiced different roles, hoping to be able to tweak each others’ memories. Cambodian classical dances are populated with four main character types – the ogre or giant, most often on the side of evil, who moves with a wide, bold gait; the prince or male divinity who appears graceful and strong; the princess or female divinity, tracing no hard angles in her fluid gestures; and the acrobatic and

mischievous monkey, the only role reserved for men. (Queen Kossamak introduced that innovation, too. Before the 1940s, women danced all the roles.) Monkeys are most often on the side of good, a companion and loyal servant of the princes. Additional characters (hermits, certain animals, etc.) are found in any number of dramas.

To this day, dancers at the Royal University of Fine Arts dance department, and at the Ministry of Culture's Department of Arts, speak of not having recovered all the old stories, yet. Of needing to recreate so as to preserve for fear that, otherwise, meaningful components of their artistic heritage will be lost forever. They speak of being driven to remember each gesture and movement, each embroidered pattern in traditional costuming, each line of poetic text, so that others who come after will have access to this vast reservoir of knowledge (**illustrations 5, 6, 7, 8**).

In 2003, while Princess Norodom Buppha Devi was Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, dancers undertook the revival and expansion of the Preah Sothun Neang Monorea dance-drama. It premiered in December of that year. It was performed for a wider audience, including the foreign funders who supported the effort, in February, 2004. The work is just over an hour long. (Oral histories and other records indicate that in the beginning decades of the twentieth century, dance-dramas could last for hours.)

A synopsis of the story of Preah Sothun Neang Monorea, adapted from the program notes, follows. (See selected lyrics in **Appendix 1**.)

Neang Keo Monorea and her six siblings, all sisters, reside in the heavens with their parents. One day their father allows them to visit earth. Each wearing a scarf with magical powers granting them the ability to fly away from their celestial abode, they promise their father to return home as soon as they hear the ringing of the gongs. When they reach earth, they go to bathe in a lotus pond (**illustration 9**).

Unbeknownst to them, however, a hunter leads Preah (Prince) Sothun to watch the celestial visitors clandestinely. Upon the ringing of the gongs, they

prepare to take leave of earth, as they had pledged. But Neang Monorea's magic scarf has disappeared. Unable to join her sisters as they departed, she cries herself unconscious. Taking advantage of the opportunity presented him, Preah Sothun offers to help. He and Neang Monorea fall in love, return to the Prince's palace, and marry (**illustration 10**).

One day, Preah Sothun's country is invaded. His father orders him to go to war to save the country. While he is away, the prince's mother summons a fortune-teller to interpret a frightening dream she has had. Being cruel, he lies, explaining to her that because of sins the Queen committed in a previous life, Neang Monorea must be killed to avoid the continuation of war, and the certain death of Preah Sothun. The King and Queen send Neang Monorea into exile, rather than to her death. On her way back to the heavens, Neang Monorea meets a hermit and offers him her ring so that should Preah Sothun ever search for her, the hermit could show the ring to him.

When he returns to the palace victorious, Preah Sothun is devastated by the news of what has befallen his princess. He asks for permission to search for her. On his search, he meets the hermit and receives the ring she had left for just this purpose. Overcoming many obstacles along the way, the Prince eventually makes it to her world. When he observes royal maids collecting water at the pond, he uses a magic spell to cause one of the maid's water jars to become too heavy to lift. The prince appears just then, to offer his help. While pretending to assist the maid with the pot, he drops the ring inside it.

As the maid bathes Neang Monorea, the ring spills onto her hair, where she finds it. The maid tells her the story of the helpful stranger. Neang Monorea runs to the pond, and there she finds her beloved. Neang Monorea's parents grant them permission to remain in the heavens as a married couple.

The story itself involves the meeting of beings from two distinct worlds. This is a theme in Cambodian origin myths in which a foreign man joins with an indigenous woman to create the Khmer people. Here, however, the couple first lives in the man's home, and then in the woman's. Neang Monorea, the outsider, bears the brunt of the fortune teller's deceit. None the less, the implication remains that good things will (eventually) come from the union of Preah Sothun and Neang Monorea, as they end up together, still in love.

Princess Buppha Devi is the granddaughter of Queen Kossamak. The recreation of the dance-drama was dedicated to the late Queen who had overseen the

choreographing of a excerpt of this very story in the 1960s. (The complete story of Preah Sothun Neang Monorea, though well-known in Cambodia, had never been staged as a dance-drama.) The program notes read: “In continuing the tradition of Queen Sisowath Kossamak Nearyrath . . . ., Samdech Preah Ream Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, is committed to implementing a cultural policy based on the preservation and promotion of the national cultural heritage of the Kingdom of Cambodia. . . .” Later, the notes continue: “It is in this spirit that HRH Princess Buppha Devi chose to remount the story of “Preah Sothun Neang Monorea” as a full length classical dance performance. . . . ., as a means of preserving the national heritage of the glorious Angkor Civilization and to augment existing repertory.”

“Glorious Angkor,” the symbol of all that once was, and all that might be, was evoked. The message here, perhaps, has something to do with the contribution a restaging of an ancient tale in a classical form could make to a recapturing of some of the country’s lost glory. The story itself emphasizes the benevolence of the King and Queen, who spare their daughter-in-law from death, and at the same time, seem to protect their son and their kingdom. (One dancer offers a different interpretation. She sees very selfish rulers who put the prediction of a fortune teller above their responsibility to their son and daughter-in-law.) Directed by a princess, and claiming a continuation of the work of Queen Kossamak Nearyrath, the realization of this complete story in dance reinforces the relationship between royalty, traditional stories, and dance in Cambodia, while at the same time making a space for something new, set within prescribed symbolic and actual parameters.

### *Veyreap's Battle*

Queen Kossamak Nearyrath had been so inspired by the “monkey” dancers in a troupe from a village across the river from Phnom Penh, that, those dancers being male, she decided to bring men and boys into the palace troupe to dance that same role. The Vat Svay Andet Village troupe she had seen at an annual festival on the palace grounds featuring crafts, foods, and performances by people from all across the country, was quite different from the troupe associated with the Queen and her family. Not only did males perform as “monkeys,” they performed as princes, giants, and princesses, too. The all-male masked dance-drama tradition which they practice is called *lakhon khol*. The Vat Svay Andet troupe, still in existence, is the only *lakhon khol* troupe known to have survived the war.

*Lakhon khol's* sole repertoire is based on episodes of the *Reamker*, the Cambodian version of the Ramayana epic, which the Vat Svay Andet troupe enacts each year at New Year time. Even though these days the ritual extends just three nights, instead of the traditional seven before the war and revolution, it remains a complex, multilayered fusion of various spiritual trajectories. Through performance, villagers seek to propitiate ancestral spirits for the sake of the well-being of the village as a whole.

The *Reamker* is the tale of the adventures of Preah Ream (Prince Rama) who, exiled to the forest (through no fault of his own), travels with his wife, Neang Seda (Princess Sita) and his brother, Preah Leak (Prince Laksmana). The evil giant, Reap (Ravana), ruler of the land of Langka, plays a trick on Preah Ream and is able, as a result, to kidnap the princess and whisk her back to his island abode. Preah Ream, overcome by grief, calls upon his monkey soldiers to help rescue her.

Numerous adventures ensue – with magic, battles, tests of loyalty, and tests of endurance between and among an array of monkeys, giants, mermaids, princes, and other beings. Eventually, after constructing a causeway across the sea, the monkey soldiers and Preah Ream, along with Preah Leak, arrive in Langka, engage in a huge battle, and defeat the giants. Though Neang Seda is reunited with her husband, the story doesn't end there. Preah Ream literally puts her through a trial by fire, so distrustful is he of the woman he loves as she has been in captivity in the giant's palace for years.

The first Khmer version of the Ramayana story appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. The manuscript was most likely a libretto for *lakhon khol* performance, recited by a narrator, and accompanied by the music of the *pin peat* orchestra. The *Reamker* has inspired artistic creation in sculpture, painting, and dance-drama for centuries. Carvings on ancient temples show episodes from this epic.

The episode most critical for performance at New Year time in Vat Svay Andet is that of Kumbhakar and the release of the waters. Kumbhakar, Reap's brother, stretches his enlarged body across a river, effectively cutting off the flow of water to Preah Ream's soldiers. The monkey warrior Angkut transforms himself into a dead dog, and floats toward Kumbhakar. Hanuman, the chief of the monkeys, becomes a crow feeding on the dog's carcass. Kumbhakar's frustration and disgust mount as he, unsuccessful at driving off the two animals, becomes overwhelmed by the unbearable odor. He must, at last, jump up to try to attack them. As he leaves his position, he releases the waters.

For the residents of Vat Svay Andet, the performance of the release of the waters is supposed to bring about their very own release of waters – the rains – soon after the dry heat of New Year time gets almost intolerable. New Year occurs in mid-April, the height

of the hot season. Water is the lifeblood of the countryside, and performance of this episode becomes a kind of magic act, assuring fertility of the land as it is believed to bring the rains just in time for the beginning of the next planting season.

Village *lakhon khol* performers may have trained for many years, often under the tutelage of a relative, but they are not solely dancers. Most are farmers by profession. However, as New Year, or some other special occasion nears (the funeral of an important monk; a need to combat an epidemic; even, more recently, to ask for peace, for example), they will spend evenings practicing, preparing for the event which includes the participation of everyone, young and old, as performer or spectator, and people from nearby villages as well. The perpetuation of tradition is perceived as carrying the possibility of combating communal ills and re-establishing natural and social order.

In preparation for the performance, offerings of food, candles, and incense are placed in altars around the village temple grounds, or near the designated performance space. Additionally, an elaborate *sampeah kru* ceremony is held, with performers squatting before a display of the masks and accoutrements they will be using when enacting the drama, arms lifted, hands together is a gesture of prayer (**illustration 11**). During the *sampeah kru*, not only Hindu gods, but the Buddha and ancestral teachers and spirits of the arts are invoked. Mediums resident in the village may become possessed by the spirits of those worshipped at the altars, and then enter the ceremonial space, making declarations about the ritual as it unfolds.

Strong associations exist between the palace and the Vat Svay Andet troupe, with some village elders claiming a royal lineage for the *lakhon khol* tradition. (There is some historical evidence of a long history of male troupes, based at temples or provincial

governor's palaces, performing episodes from the *Reamker*. One ancient inscription lists the king as a dancer.)

Both *lakhon khol* and classical dance have *pin peat* accompaniment. But their relationship to the music and lyrics is quite different. Classical dance has choral accompaniment as opposed to the intoned recitation by two or three narrators for *lakhon khol*. Further, the large drums known as *skor thom* dominate the *lakhon khol*, marking rhythmic emphasis, and signalling transitions in musical sequences. Their use in classical dance is more discreet.

The village performance of *lakhon khol* takes place outdoors. Local residents construct a wooden rectangular structure enclosed only at one end, with wooden railings on either side. After characters enter a scene, and perform a short movement sequence, they move to the railings, upon which they sit, raising their torsos up for emphasis as needed, and gesturing with stylized movements as the narrators recite text about and for the performers.

In the 1960s, when the Royal University of Fine Arts was in its infancy, teams of artists from the school traversed Cambodia, researching and practicing traditional arts. Actors and dancers took what they had seen or learned, and, once back at the academy in the city, proceeded to re-make and re-fine the art for public performance on a theatrical stage. It was in this way that *lakhon khol* developed a professional, theatrical version -- a version considered traditional enough (and important enough) to garner government support for its re-creation immediately after the ouster of the Khmer Rouge. The Department of Arts of the Ministry of Information and Culture, and some provincial offices of the Ministry of Culture oversaw the development of *lakhon khol* troupes. At the

dance department of the School of Fine Arts, certain male students were selected to train in this technique. The theatrical version is dynamic -- athletic and acrobatic, without extended seated sequences in which narrators intone the story-line, as one finds in the village context. Because Phnom Penh's *lakhon khol* performers also trained in the fundamentals of classical dance, their postures adhere to a strict canon, though they are given more latitude for improvisation than are their classical dance counterparts.

At the Department of Arts in the early twenty-first century, accomplished *lakhon khol* performers collaborated to develop a *Reamker* episode never emphasized in their repertoire before, that of Veyreap's Battle. Musicians, dancers, lyricists, and costume-makers worked in concert to create a production that involved a cast of more than forty (**illustration 12**). A synopsis of the story follows. (See selected lyrics in **Appendix II**.)

Reap, King of Langka, had been defeated in a series of battles with Preah Ream. He orders his servants to invite his brother Veyreap and the army of giants to help him in his pursuit of the prince. Veyreap, who rules a land under the sea, agrees.

Preah Ream, in his own camp, has an upsetting dream and requests that the fortune teller interpret it for him. Pipaek, a giant who has switched loyalties, predicts that Preah Ream is in terrible danger and must be protected. Only when Sirius (the brightest star) appears in the sky will he be free of danger. The monkey warrior Hanuman enlarges himself so that he can hide Preah Ream in his mouth until the danger has passed (**illustration 13**).

When Veyreap arrives at Preah Ream's locale, he sees soldiers guarding every corner of the camp (**illustrations 14, 15**). He changes into an aged monkey and, in this guise, manages to learn not only about Preah Ream's hiding place, but also about the prediction. He blows a bright glass sphere into the air, thereby tricking the monkeys into thinking the star has appeared.

Preah Ream's troops are relieved, and they relax their guard, even to the point of dosing off. Veyreap's magic puts them into a deep sleep. He captures the Prince and returns with him to his city beneath the sea. When the monkey soldiers awaken from the spell, they discover what has befallen their leader. The monkey king Sugrib orders Hanuman and the monkey army to rescue Preah Ream.

Once back home, Veyreap commands his godson Machanub to guard the human prince. (Machanub is a half-monkey, half-fish, the offspring of the union of Hanuman with the mermaid Sovann Macha, who appears in another episode of the *Reamker*. Hanuman and Machanub have never met.) Hanuman arrives in the

undersea world, and a fight takes place between father and son (**illustration 16**). Baffled by their mutual show of strength, they discover that they are indeed father and son. Unable to continue, torn as he is between loyalty to Veyreap who has raised him, and the one who gave him life, he abandons the battlefield.

Hanuman spots the female giant Sara Kourn, Veyreap's sister, who is in tears. She explains that her brother plans to kill her and Preah Ream in a vat of boiling water. Together, they devise a ruse to get Hanuman to Preah Ream. Once there, he attacks the giants, throwing many of them into the caldron of boiling water (**illustration 17**). Successful in killing Veyreap as well, Hanuman heads back to the Prince's encampment, Preah Ream leading the way.

The production's director, Pok Sarann, was particularly creative in overseeing the design of costuming for undersea creatures (seahorses, crabs, and so on) (**illustration 18**). He was also instrumental in developing movement vocabulary for those creatures that, while based in the Khmer dance reflects as well each animal's naturalistic movement pattern through water. According to Pok Sarann, the experience of creating such an involved piece (about 80 minutes long) helped the artists re-connect with the subtleties and complexities of the *Reamker*, and expanded their performance repertoire. The presentation of a detailed story in a fast-paced, visually striking way that communicates through intoned and sung lyrics, body posture, gesture, and movement, melodies that signal a certain emotion or action, and distinct costuming by character (color, type of headdress, and so on), challenged them as choreographers, and deepened their resolve to continue to push for more of this kind of artistic effort.

He and others lament the lack of attention paid to *lakhon khol*, by Cambodians in positions of authority in the arts, and by the world at large, and regret that they haven't had the resources or support to develop more such work. "It will disappear if we don't do it," many say publicly. The classical dance, with bejeweled women dancing stories of celestial beings, receives the gaze of the outside world, and the majority of invitations to

perform abroad. This time, artists of the Department of Arts were able to undertake such an endeavor with support for rehearsals, costume and set creation, and production offered by the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, a new kind of collaboration for both partners.

*Lkhon khol's* place in the popular imagination in Cambodia is very different from that of the court or classical dance, the latter referred to in speeches and literature as the soul of the nation, the heart of Cambodia. Innovation in a ritual context is one concern, where the proper practice is necessary to guarantee the intended outcome. But in a theatrical setting, the only limits to the artists' creativity in their work on this *lakhon khol* performance were their internal directives: wanting to expand within the structures that had been passed down to them.

#### *Seasons of Migration*

We return now to classical dance, though with a new focus. Earlier we examined Preah Sothun Neang Monorea, a dance-drama whose story is familiar to many in Cambodia, told by grandparents to their children, and now, performed on stage. A distinct type of classical dance, the dance-drama enacts tales of humans and supernatural beings. Sacred dances, those reserved for ritual occasions, such as a *buong suong* ceremony, for example, may or may not have a story-line. The third type of classical dance, however, focuses on the expression of sentiments, and while it may evoke a sense of the sacrosanct, with dancers costumed as celestial beings, it does not fulfill a ritual function; nor does it follow characters through their adventures. *Seasons of Migration* fits into this latter category.

Sophiline Cheam Shapiro conceptualized and choreographed *Seasons of Migration*. She is the same choreographer who developed the Cambodian version of

*Othello* several years earlier. Based in southern California, she had trained as a dancer in Cambodia, where she was born and raised, beginning in 1981. Graduating from the School of Fine Arts (now the Royal University of Fine Arts) as part of the first generation of students following the Khmer Rouge era, she and her peers worked with surviving dance masters to reconstruct dances and dance-dramas of old. Upon moving to the United States, and enrolling in college and then graduate school, she absorbed new stories and new experiences, and longed to incorporate them into her practice and performance of Cambodian dance.

Seasons of Migration contains four sections, each portraying, according to the choreographer, a state of mind. The work mines her personal journey of psychological transformation as she adapted to life so far from her homeland. She chose to set the piece on dancers at Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts because of their technical skill, and because in Cambodia she could work with those revered teachers of hers who were still alive to make sure the dance, though new, was both developed and presented in a technically and aesthetically appropriate manner.

She was, once again, under intense scrutiny, just as she had been when she worked on her version of *Othello*. Considered a colleague, but also, in some ways, an outsider, she had to find a balance between the drive to innovate, and the threat such creativity represented to many (**illustration 19**).

In the opening section of Seasons of Migration, divinities (five female and five male, all danced by women) arrive on earth, full of excitement and anticipation about the new. Section two is a solo featuring a character recognizable to Cambodians -- Neang Neak, the mythological serpent. She begins with her mind open to the new, and then

dances out her eventual rejection of what she perceives to be burdens she has carried with her. She wants to extricate herself from her lengthy tail, a mark of her difference, as it sets her apart from those in her new surroundings (**illustration 20**). (See lyrics in **Appendix III**.)

The third section explores adjustment through the play of shadow and light, representing past and future. The spirit of the present comes to understand that shadow and light are equal parts of who she is and that to move forward comfortably, she must embrace both (**illustration 21**). In the final section, the divinities strive for balance. The choreography, performed in part in pairs, references the ancient Khmer deity Harihara, who combines the attributes of the Brahmanic gods Shiva and Vishnu, representing a sense of equilibrium and harmony (**illustration 22**).

In attempting to express a contemporary or personal experience (one with universal resonance, though), through classical dance, the choreographer was breaking new ground. She also approached the choreography and music from fresh angles. For example, during Neang Neak's solo, she asked for only two instruments to be played, the lower-pitched xylophone and the lower-pitched circle of gongs. This had never been done before. The dancer, swathed in a shimmering brocade ankle-length skirt, a stylized, serpent-headed golden tiara on her head, first acknowledges the beauty and importance of what she carries with her – symbolized by her tail (an intricately embroidered scarf reaching down her back and trailing about a yard over the ground) by studying it, stroking it. Eventually unable to reconcile the weight of the tail, her “difference,” her past, with her newfound reality, she attempts to tear it, and then rejects it by turning away

from it. The deep sonority of those instruments helped express the intensity of Neang Neak's inner struggle.

The choreographer experimented as well with the dancing itself, as she combined elements from the core gestural vocabulary of classical dance. Classical dances are created through an arrangement of distinct movement patterns and gestures that are all identifiable as part of the form's strict canon. However, she juxtaposed movement patterns in innovative ways, raising eyebrows among some of the older generation of dancers, and exciting others with the path this was blazing. As long as a combination maintained the classical aesthetic, and expressed the intended emotion, it was left in, with approval from the senior dancers.

The warnings raised by some focused on the loss inherent in not paying attention to what has yet to be recovered. How can we take scarce resources, be they local or foreign, and concentrate them on something new, when traditional knowledge is moving beyond our grasp each day, they asked. "If we change things, the original will disappear," one administrator announced. In the very attempt to embrace the dynamism of an art that, as history shows, is in constant flux, even while rooted in exacting tenets and standards, the choreographer confronts the perceptions of those who fear continued or irreversible loss.

## Study Questions

1. Describe innovations made in the twentieth century in Cambodian dance. Why were those changes sanctioned?
2. What were the criticisms or questions leveled at recent attempts at innovation?
3. Describe some differences between classical dance and *lakhon khol*.
4. Describe some differences between the village and theatrical versions of *lakhon khol*.
5. How does the question of who initiates innovation in the dance impact reactions to the work?
6. Compare the situation of Cambodians to that of other groups of people in Southeast Asia who have experienced (or are undergoing) drastic change of one sort or another. Are the issues they are grappling with as a society evidenced in their arts? In other spheres of their cultural lives?

## List of Illustrations

(Photos 2-6, 11 and 14 by Toni Shapiro-Phim. All others by James Wasserman. All pictures taken in 2004. Copyright remains with photographers.)

1. A stone carving of a celestial being on an ancient temple in the Angkor region of Cambodia. Court dancers modeled some of their costuming on images such as these.
2. The *pin peat* ensemble of the Department of Arts during a pre-performance ceremony. The *pin peat* orchestra accompanies shadow puppet theater, classical dance, all-male masked dance-drama, and temple ceremonies. The ensemble generally consists of large and small gong circles (*kong vong thom*; *kong vong touc*), high- and low-pitched xylophones (*roneat ek*; *roneat thung*; and sometimes a *roneat dek*), a double-headed barrel drum (*sampho*), a large pair of barrel drums (*skor thom*), small cymbals (*chheung*), and a quadruple-reed hardwood or ivory instrument akin to an oboe (*sralai*).
3. A multi-tiered *beysey* fashioned from a banana trunk and banana leaves. *Beysey* are presented to the spirits and teachers of the dance in a ritual of respect, called *sampeah kru*, in both classical dance and all-male masked dance-drama traditions.
4. Mural painting on the inner walls surrounding the Temple of the Emerald Buddha at Cambodian's Royal Palace compound. The painting depicts an episode from the *Reamker*, the Cambodian version of the Ramayana epic. Note the dancers performing to entertain the royalty.
5. It takes many people, and sometimes more than a month, to complete one costume for either classical dance, or the all-male masked dance-drama. Patterns specific to certain character types are embroidered bead by bead, sequin by sequin.
6. A detail of #5.
7. Muong Danida being dressed by Sin Samatikchho, herself a former dancer with the royal troupe. It can take three hours or more for a troupe of dancers to get ready to perform, as each one must be sewn into costume.
8. Pen Sokhuon, one of Muong Danida's teachers, places flowers on her crown.
9. Neang Monorea and her sisters. "Preah Sothun Neang Monorea," Royal University of Fine Arts troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theater.
10. A love duet with the lead characters, danced by Chap Chamroeun Mina and Meas Phirum. "Preah Sothun Neang Monorea," Royal University of Fine Arts troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theater.

11. A *lakhon khol sampeah kru* ceremony altar. This one was prepared for a ceremony prior to a performance of the Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe in the capital city.
12. A close-up of a *lakhon khol* dancer being sewn into costume.
13. Preah Ream's monkey soldiers on high alert. "Veyreap's Battle," Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.
14. A scene from the *Reamker* mural painting in the Royal Palace compound depicting the enlarged Hanuman with Preah Ream in his mouth.
15. Preah Leak speaking to Preah Ream in front of the enlarged Hanuman, as the monkey waits to protect the prince. "Veyreap's Battle," Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.
16. Hanuman and Machanub engage in a fight, not realizing they are father and son. "Veyreap's Battle," Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.
17. The giants prepare for a confrontation with the monkeys. "Veyreap's Battle," Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.
18. Seahorses. "Veyreap's Battle," Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.
19. Sophiline Cheam Shapiro has returned to Cambodia as a teacher and choreographer, and is shown respect from those learning from her by the presentation of incense.
20. Sam Sathya as Neang Neak. "Seasons of Migration," Royal University of Fine Arts troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.
21. Dancers navigating the relationship between shadow and light. "Seasons of Migration," Royal University of Fine Arts troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.
22. Realizing a state of inner equilibrium, the dancers strike poses of content and balance. "Seasons of Migration," Royal University of Fine Arts troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

Ang Choulean, 1990. "La communaute rurale khmère du point de vue du sacré." *Journal Asiatique* 278 (1-2): 135-154.

[A window into the relationship between rural life and the sacred in Cambodia. Written by a leading Khmer ethnologist.]

Antze, Rosemary Jeanes, 1992. "Teacher, Student, Lineage." *Parabola* XVII (3): 73-76.

[Discusses the complex teacher-student relationship in Indian performing arts. Similar concepts and practices exist in the relationships between Cambodian dance teachers and their students.]

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[An overview of the history of Cambodian dance, and the situation of the dancers in the 1980s.]

Chandler, David, 1992 [1983]. *A History of Cambodia*. Boulder: Westview Press.

[A general political history, written by one of the leading historians of Cambodia.]

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[Begins with the 1940s, and looks at the trajectory the country followed for much of the rest of that century.]

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[Beautiful color paintings by Chet Chan illustrate the Khmer version of the Ramayana epic.]

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[A classic work on the region, empire, and temples.]

Cravath, Paul, 1985. "Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii.

[Rich historical detail combined with excellent descriptive passages about the history and aesthetics of Cambodian classical dance. Contains an extensive bibliography.]

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[Based on oral history interviews with survivors, this article finds the author back in the village where she did her dissertation research more than thirty years ago.]

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[Written by a French official while Cambodia was a French "protectorate," it presents his interpretation of the lives of the dancers.]

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[Contains wonderful illustrations, with articles on history, religion, architecture, epigraphy and more, written by a number of scholars of Cambodia.]

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[Compares and contrasts Ramayana stories across Asia. Beautiful full-color illustrations.]

Keyes, Charles, 1990. "The Legacy of Angkor." *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 14 (3): 56-59.

[A look at the symbolic import of "Angkor" for Cambodians.]

Kiernan, Ben, *The Pol Pot Regime*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

[An exhaustive study of the inner workings of one of the most brutal regimes in history.]

Jeldres, Julio, *The Royal Palace of Phnom Penh and Cambodian Royal Life*. Bangkok: Post Books.

[Covers the architectural and institutional history of the palace, with archival and contemporary illustrations.]

Ledgerwood, Judy, 1990. "Changing Khmer Conceptions of Gender: Women, Stories, and the Social Order." Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University.

[An ethnographic study of stories and their meanings to Cambodians.]

Mannikka, Eleanor, 1996. *Angkor Wat: Time, Space, and Kingship*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

[An exhaustive study of cosmological ideas as expressed through the design and creation of sacred space.]

Meyer, Charles, 1969. "Royal Cambodian Ballet." *Nokor Khmer* (1) October-December: 2-17.

[History and legends related to the royal dancers. Written by someone in the Cambodian palace's inner circle.]

Mysliwiec, Eva, 1988. *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea*. Oxford: Oxfam.

[Reveals the social costs of war and economic and political isolation.]

Ness, Sally Ann, 1992. *Body, Movement, and Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

[An ethnographic account of the place of dance in the lives of people in the Philippines. Excellent discussion of anthropological approaches to the study of dance.]

Phim, Toni [Shapiro] and Ashley Thompson, 1999. *Dance in Cambodia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[Includes history, performance contexts, and practices of shadow puppetry, classical and folk dance, and all-male masked dance-drama.]

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[A collection of essays by a leading scholar of Cambodia covering linguistic, literary, and epigraphic topics, among others. Several articles concern the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the Ramayana.]

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[Catalogue of an important exhibition on the all-male masked dance-drama tradition, with extensive background notes.]

Roveda, Vittorio, 2000 [1997]. *Khmer Mythology: Secrets of Angkor*. Bangkok: River Books.

[A study of the lives and legends carved in stone on Cambodia's ancient temples.]

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[A comprehensive study of *pin peat* music and technique. Also covers performance contexts.]

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[A short introduction to Buddhism in Cambodia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, prior to independence from the French.]

Sem Sara, 1972. "Lakhon Khol at the Village of Vat-Svay-Andet." *New Cambodge* 21 (November): 46-57.

[Contains rich ethnographic and historical detail about the all-male masked dance-drama performed in this village not far from Phnom Penh.]

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[Focuses on the relationship between dance and war, and on the lives of Cambodia's dancers from 1975 to 1994.]

### **Recommended Films/Videotapes:**

*Dancing Through Death: The Monkey, Magic, and Madness of Cambodia*, 1999. New York: Filmmakers Library.

[Focuses on a dancer of the monkey role -- his relationships with his teachers in Cambodia, and his students in the U.S., where he now lives.]

*The Flute Player*, 2003. San Francisco: National Asian American Telecommunications Association.

[Follows a Cambodian-American back to Cambodia where he starts a project in support of traditional music.]

*Samsara*, 1988. Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey: Film Library.

[A sensitive look at the transition following genocide, as the nation started to rebuild.]

*The Tenth Dancer*, 1993. Melbourne, Australia: Singing Nomads Productions.

[The story of two dancers in Cambodia, teacher and pupil, and the meaning of classical

dance in their lives. Awarded an honor for ethnographic excellence at the Margaret Mead

Film Festival in New York.]

## Appendix I: “Preah Sothun and Neang Monorea”

(Selected lyrics; February 2004 Phnom Penh performance developed and directed by Her Royal Highness Princess Buppha Devi, Proeung Chhieng, and Soth Somaly.)

Reaching the lake, changing their clothes  
Each celestial being removes her sash.  
Joyously, collectively they go to bathe.  
Cleaning and beautifying their bodies  
Everybody happy with what they are doing,  
Swimming together, laughing.

### \*Preah Sothun Spots the Celestial Bathers\*

He saw everybody radiant.  
The more he looked, the more beautiful they became;  
The more it drew him to be in love.  
His heart never satiated,  
Approaching swiftly, he attempted to hold her.  
They, shocked, exited suddenly,  
Asking, who goes there?

### \*Preah Sothun and Neang Menorea Declare Their Love\*

Now I truly love you.  
I ask to give my life to be with you.  
She agrees to love back.  
Both consent happily.

### \*The King’s Preparation for Battle\*

Preah Bath Vong Arthit, very powerful,  
Orders his son to ready the troops.  
To repel to the death  
The enemy that wants to invade,  
Thus quelling all fears.  
Preah Sothun receives the edict,  
Quickly leading the army off.

## Appendix II: “Veyreap’s Battle”

(Selected lyrics; composed by Seng Sam An, Department of Arts.)

\*At Preah Ream’s Encampment\* (From Act II)

Narrator: Preah (Prince) Ream stays alone in the encampment, sad and thinking of his wife, Neang (Princess) Seda.

Preah Ream: The sea is stormy against the rocks The birds swoop and catch fish swimming in the clear ocean. But here I am lonely and depressed.

Narrator: Then Preah Ream turns his eyes to the tall mountains and boundless sky. The gibbons cry loudly in the woods. He says,

Preah Ream: Oh, my love, Seda! For twelve years you have been so far away from me. What terrible karma separates you and me. I am now so sad; my sadness will never cease unless I meet you. When will we meet?

To different melodies,  
- Preah Ream sobs.  
- Preah Leak and Pipaek enter.  
- Monkey soldiers enter.  
- Sugrib, Jumpuhpean, Angkut, and Hanuman enter.

All Together: Your Majesty!

Preah Ream: Great! Take a seat.

Narrator: Once everyone is seated, Preah Leak, Preah Ream’s younger brother, bows with his hands pressed toward his face and utters,

Preah Leak: My priceless brother, with sincere respect, we are all ready to listen to you.

Preah Ream: Perfect! My beloved brother and soldiers, you all look fine, but last night I had a strange dream. In the dream, I saw myself wearing an exquisite, bright golden costume, walking like the god Indra shaking the earth. Suddenly, one of my feet sank into the earth and I was terrified. I called out for help, and then managed to survive. I wonder if it is a good or a bad dream. I now do not feel safe. Pipaek, can you predict and interpret this dream?

Pipaek: Yes, Your Majesty.

Narrator: Once receiving the order, Pipaek, the gifted fortune teller, draws on his chalkboard. Realizing the prediction, Pipaek tells Preah Ream,

Pipaek: Your Majesty, the prediction shows that there would be a mishap tonight. So, please, Your Majesty, order soldiers to carefully safeguard the encampment. All the entrances and exits have to be strictly watched until [the star] Sirius rises; then you will be free of danger.

Narrator: Having listened to Pipaek's prediction, powerful Preah Ream immediately ordered his soldiers,

Preah Ream: Sugrib, Jumpuhpean, Angkut, and Hanuman! Hurry up! You all have to safeguard the encampment as Pipaek stated. I will be in danger until Sirius rises. So, everybody understands?

All Together: Yes, Your Majesty!

Narrator: Hanuman, the white monkey and the son of the king of air, tells Preah Ream he will transform himself into a huge monkey and put the Prince in his mouth.

\*Under the Sea\* (From Act III)

Narrator: Machanub and other sea animals see Veyreap arrest Preah Ream. They wonder why Veyreap does such because it may bring disaster to the city of Batdal. Veyreap enters.

Machanub: Your Majesty.

Veyreap: Good. Good. Machanub, my foster son! You have to safeguard our city with care. I'm afraid the enemy will come to liberate Preah Ream.

Narrator: Machanub thinks the deed [of capturing Preah Ream] regretful, and asks Veyreap the reason he wishes to kill Preah Ream.

Machanub: My Godfather, I was wondering why you want to kill Preah Ream. He is an incarnaton of Preah Vishnu who can turn himself into whomever and whatever he wants. I am concerned that this will bring ruin to our city.

Veyreab: No! No my son. This is the order from the king of Langka. If we cannot do this, we will also end up dead and our city will be in ruin. So you cannot resist. We would rather kill Preah Ream than be killed.

Machanub: Yes, Your Majesty.

**Appendix III: “Seasons of Migration”**

(Lyrics from Neang Neak’s solo, sung as she begins her dance; the remainder of her solo is performed to instrumental accompaniment; composed and translated by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro; copyright Sophiline Cheam Shapiro.)

Once upon a time

There lived a divine female serpent

Who glided majestically

Through the forest of heaven,

Her heart filled with immense delight.

## List of Illustrations

(Photos 2-6, 11 and 14 by Toni Shapiro-Phim. All others by James Wasserman. All pictures taken in 2004. Copyright remains with photographers.)



1.

A stone carving of a celestial being on an ancient temple in the Angkor region of Cambodia. Court dancers modeled some of their costuming on images such as these.



2.

The *pin peat* ensemble of the Department of Arts during a pre-performance ceremony. The *pin peat* orchestra accompanies shadow puppet theater, classical dance, all-male masked dance-drama, and temple ceremonies. The ensemble generally consists of large and small gong circles (*kong vong thom*; *kong vong touc*), high- and low-pitched xylophones (*roneat ek*; *roneat thung*; and sometimes a *roneat dek*), a double-headed barrel drum (*sampho*), a large pair of barrel drums (*skor thom*), small cymbals (*chheung*), and a quadruple-reed hardwood or ivory instrument akin to an oboe (*sralai*).



3.

A multi-tiered *beysey* fashioned from a banana trunk and banana leaves. *Beysey* are presented to the spirits and teachers of the dance in a ritual of respect, called *sampeah kru*, in both classical dance and all-male masked dance-drama traditions.



4.

Mural painting on the inner walls surrounding the Temple of the Emerald Buddha at Cambodian's Royal Palace compound. The painting depicts an episode from the *Reamker*, the Cambodian version of the Ramayana epic. Note the dancers performing to entertain the royalty.



5.

It takes many people, and sometimes more than a month, to complete one costume for either classical dance, or the all-male masked dance-drama. Patterns specific to certain character types are embroidered bead-by-bead, sequin-by-sequin.



6.

A detail of #5.



7.

Muong Danida being dressed by Sin Samatikchho, herself a former dancer with the royal troupe. It can take three hours or more for a troupe of dancers to get ready to perform, as each one must be sewn into costume.



8.

Pen Sokhuon, one of Muong Danida's teachers, places flowers on her crown.



9.

Neang Monorea and her sisters. "Preah Sothun Neang Monorea," Royal University of Fine Arts troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theater.



10.

A love duet with the lead characters, danced by Chap Chamroeun Mina and Meas Phirum. "Preah Sothun Neang Monorea," Royal University of Fine Arts troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theater.



11.

A *lakhon khol sampeah kru* ceremony altar. This one was prepared for a ceremony prior to a performance of the Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe in the capital city.



12.

A close-up of a *lakhon khol* dancer being sewn into costume.



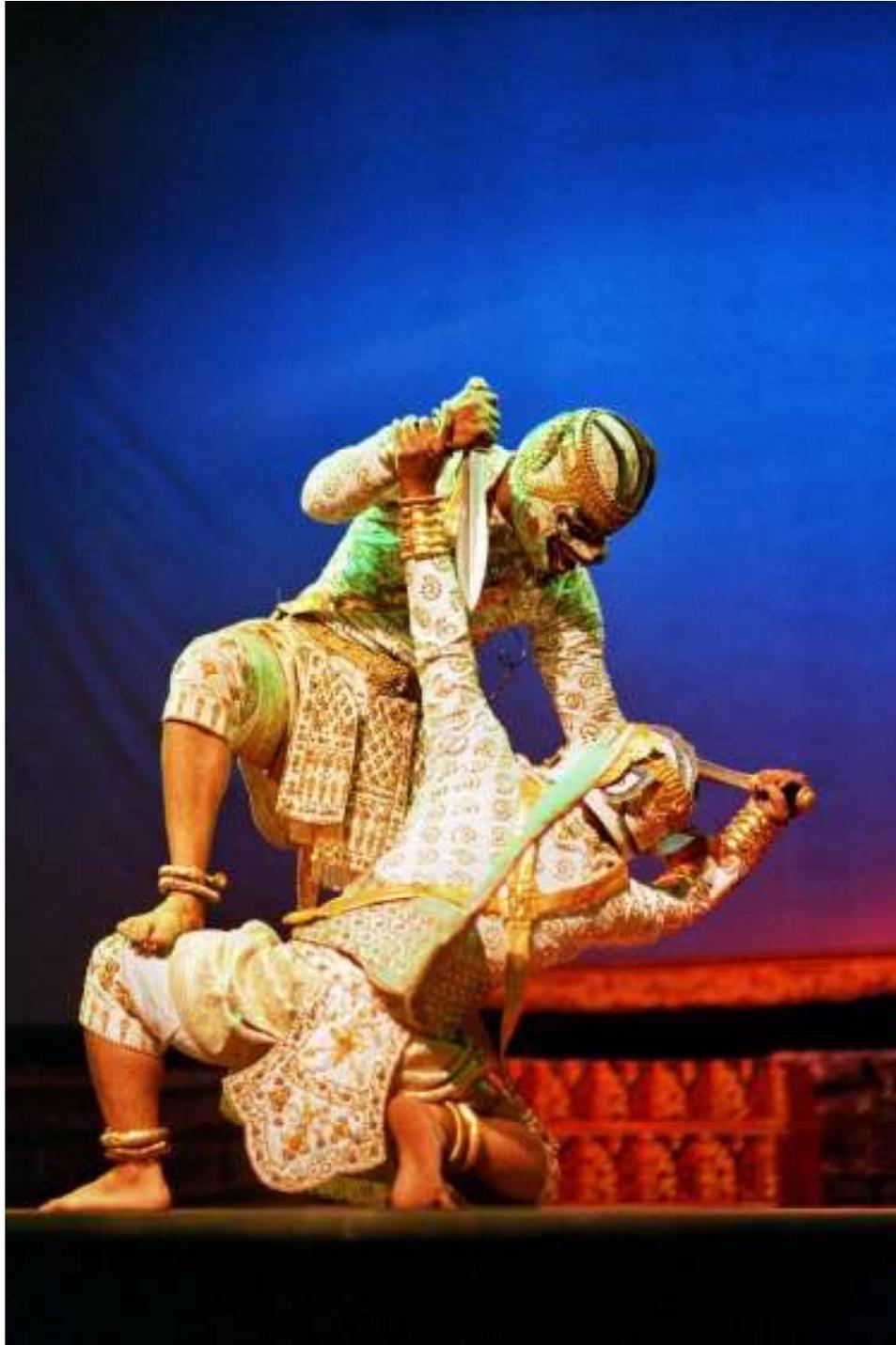
13. Preah Ream's monkey soldiers on high alert. "Veyreap's Battle," Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.



14. A scene from the *Reamker* mural painting in the Royal Palace compound depicting the enlarged Hanuman with Preah Ream in his mouth.



15. Preah Leak speaking to Preah Ream in front of the enlarged Hanuman, as the monkey waits to protect the prince. "Veyreap's Battle," Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.



16.

Hanuman and Machanub engage in a fight, not realizing they are father and son. “Veyreap’s Battle,” Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.



17. The giants prepare for a confrontation with the monkeys. “Veyreap’s Battle,” Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.



18. Seahorses. “Veyreap’s Battle,” Department of Arts *lakhon khol* troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.



19. Sophiline Cheam Shapiro has returned to Cambodia as a teacher and choreographer, and is shown respect from those learning from her by the presentation of incense.



20. Sam Sathya as Neang Neak. "Seasons of Migration," Royal University of Fine Arts troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.



21.

Dancers navigating the relationship between shadow and light. "Seasons of Migration,"  
Royal University of Fine Arts troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.



22. Realizing a state of inner equilibrium, the dancers strike poses of content and balance. "Seasons of Migration," Royal University of Fine Arts troupe, Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre.