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  

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*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
offical 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\textsuperscript{th} 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 genealogies 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 (9th-15th 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 sycretism 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 Sihanouk¹ 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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¹ 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 búng suông 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 relationsh 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.