

# The Khmer Dance Project



In the wake of Cambodia's troubled recent history, the issue of transmitting knowledge in all its forms is vital for the country's reconstruction. In 2008, the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS), which supports research and teaching of the social sciences, arts and humanities of Cambodia, initiated the Khmer Dance Project (KDP) to document court dance traditions. The overall aim is to reach out to both Khmer people and specialised researchers. For this reason, original KDP materials are held at the New York Public Library in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, and copies of all KDP materials are handed over to the library of the CKS in Siem Reap and Bophana Centre in Phnom Penh, the only free-access institution that holds audiovisual documents on Cambodia (video, audio, photographs).<sup>1</sup>

Suppya Helene Nut

Above:  
Dancers perform the Ceremony of Paying Homage to the Spirit of Dance at the Chenla Theatre in Phnom Penh. Photo by Anders Jiras.

## Past and present

During the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979), the country's entire population was sent to the countryside to do hard labour on farms and in forests. It was a ruthless regime; a violent intrusion of a totalitarian state into people's lives. Like all forms of Cambodian culture, the Royal Ballet was banned during that time. The hardship, loss and terror was shared by all the people, but artists of the Royal Ballet were among those particularly hard hit because of their ties to the Royal Court. After the collapse of the regime in 1979, only ten percent of these artists had survived. The trauma to the population as a whole was immense, with more than one million people killed or disappeared, out of a population of eight million.

The sentiment of loss ignited the will of survivors to reconstitute the forms of knowledge and repertoire of court dance. The writer Amitav Ghosh, during a visit to the war-torn country, was struck by "a theater filled beyond its capacity" in spite of the general poverty of the population. He wrote that this first festival held in Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge was as "a kind of rebirth, a moment when the grief of survival became indistinguishable from the joy of living".<sup>2</sup> Finally, the long-lasting and devoted efforts of survivors and the commitment of Princess Norodom Buppha Devi were rewarded by UNESCO, which inscribed the Royal Ballet of Cambodia as a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' in 2003.

Altogether, there are only a few visual archives in Cambodia that date back to colonial times. In light of Cambodia's recent history, almost all visual archives since Independence (1953) were destroyed. For instance, out of the three hundred fiction films, only about thirty were saved from destruction. With the disappearance of the majority of Royal Ballet artists and the advanced age of the survivors, this project is more urgent and significant

than ever. Furthermore, as the journalist and long-time observer of Cambodian performing arts Robert Turnbull wrote, "Cambodia no longer enjoyed the 'protection of international isolation' and the economic 'freedoms' of the 1990s regarded by some as a panacea of better times introduced new social pressures that impacted negatively on the performing arts".<sup>3</sup> In 1994, the Suramarit Theater, the only well-equipped performance venue, went up in flames and was later sold to a private company. In 2004, the campus of the Royal University of Fine Arts suffered the same fate, and was moved out of the center of the capital Phnom Penh. Many of its faculty and students have since deserted the far-away facilities, resulting in the slow decay of what was, since 1964, the main government-sponsored program for transmitting the traditions of court dance.

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I was asked to conduct this project, being myself a former dancer and a scholar working on the subject for many years. The task of reviving the traditions of court dance has advanced remarkably since the 1980s, thanks to the support of the Rockefeller Mentorship program established by the Asian Cultural Council. Nevertheless, the community of artists always remained in the shadows; my intention was to give voice to the entire community, comprising three generations of dancers, musicians, writers, singers, as well as embroiderers. Through interviews, I tried to capture the elusive site of memory, which lies in the body and psyche of every artist. Toni Shapiro, a scholar who spent several years studying this community in the refugee camps and inside Cambodia, pointed out that: "When a culture is destroyed, as it was in Cambodia, dancers and dancing bodies remain as the sole archives of dance tradition".<sup>4</sup> As a Khmer educated in Khmer culture and trained in classical dance in Paris by exiled teachers,

I was in familiar surroundings. My ability to speak the Khmer language, but also knowledge of the physical attitudes, the language codes, characterized by Bourdieu as "le capital culturel", were particular assets when conducting interviews. To keep a sense of authenticity, the testimonies have been only minimally edited to 'clean' external interruptions, noises, and other irrelevant footage, as they are a 'story-telling' process and as such, involve pauses, repetitions, and a non-linear approach to narration.

The work took place primarily in Cambodia and included three phases (2008, 2009, 2010) of interviews and filming: elderly masters, middle-aged teachers and young dancers. The project was to connect a face to a name, a personality to a voice, a person to a story. The face-to-face allowed each artist to intertwine different narratives, an account of his or her own story, of court life, of Queen Kossamak (King Sihanouk's grandmother) the patron of court dance, and of collective life in the 1950s and 1960s. In an interview, Master Sin Sama Deuk Chho, in her 70s, recalled her life as an artist at court; she was a singer and dresser for the troupe, and the last female to dance the 'monkey role'.<sup>5</sup> She came from a generation of artists like her mother Deuk Por, a dance teacher who choreographed pieces of ballet. Another interview featured Proeung Chhieng, a lead dancer of the monkey role in the 1960s, who spoke with emotion about his last moments spent with Queen Kossamak in exile in Beijing. These fragments of life, assembled back-to-back, finally provide a vivid picture of a community, of a period, and of a singular place (the palace and its surroundings). In addition to interviews, several hours of film were dedicated to two dance dramas, *Enao Bosseba* and *Sovannahong*, revisited by Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, including their different phases of reconstitution.

All interviews are catalogued, and both films and transcripts are time-coded, making it possible to locate specific passages with minimum effort. The collection is supported by a comprehensive database, which contains an index of the interviews and details of the interviewees and their life stories, thanks to the Jerome Robbins Dance Division. In order to offer wide access to this material, especially all of KDP's original interviews, English subtitles have been provided. The database collected during three years of field research is a pioneering achievement due to the sheer scope of media gathered: written documents, videos, photos and music.

To date, the Khmer Dance Project contains 46 interviews, nine performances and rehearsals, including two ritual ceremonies and two on costumes and props. The New York Public Library offers streaming video of all these recordings free of charge through its Digital Collections at [digitalcollections.nypl.org/dancevideo](http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/dancevideo). I express my thanks for the splendid photos taken by Anders Jiras, who has been documenting the Cambodian performing arts for more than a decade ([www.jiras.se](http://www.jiras.se)).

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## References

- 1 This project was funded by a grant from the Anne Hendricks Bass Foundation in partnership with the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, home to the world's most comprehensive collection of dance material. The project owes much to the personal involvement of CKS Founding Director and IIAS Director Philippe Peycam, Patron of the Arts Anne Hendricks Bass, and Princess Norodom Buppha Devi.
- 2 Ghosh, A. 1998. *Dancing in Cambodia, at Large in Burma*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, p.168.
- 3 Turnbull, R. 2006. 'A Burn-Out Theater: The State of Cambodia's Performing Arts', in L. Tollier & T. Winter (eds.) *Expressions of Cambodia: The Politics of Tradition, Identity and Change*. New York: Routledge, pp.135-6.
- 4 Shapiro, T. 1994. *Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia*. PhD Dissertation, Cornell University.
- 5 The shift from female to male dancers was initiated by Queen Kossamak in the mid-1960s; see Nut, S.H. 2015. 'Lokhon Luang, the Cambodian Court Theatre: Toward a Decline of Women's Supremacy?', *Asian Theatre Journal* 32(2):416-39.