

THE GLASS PLATE NEGATIVES OF THE CAMBODIAN ROYAL DANCERS: CONTESTED MEMORIES¹

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The discovery of a collection of glass plate negatives featuring dancers of the Cambodian royal dance troupe in traditional dance poses, taken in the first half of the twentieth century by the French curator Georges Groslier, in the National Museum of Phnom Penh² marked an important event for the country's recent past.³ During the five years of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979), most artists of the Cambodian royal dance troupe died of mistreatment, malnutrition, or hardship.⁴ Left abandoned in Phnom Penh, a ghost city, emptied of its population in a three-day period in 1975, many archives were destroyed or damaged. However, stored in the Museum's basement because of a lack of financial resources, these glass plate negatives survived.⁵ In 2008 the National Museum began to restore these glass plate negatives with the help of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), the French Institute, and UNESCO. After lengthy restoration, investigation, cataloguing and digitization, a number of these glass plate negatives were selected for printing and the resulting images publicly displayed.

The exhibition titled *With the Cambodian Royal Dancers* was a joint initiative of the EFEO and the National Museum. The show lasted three months, from December 1, 2011 to February 28, 2012.⁶ The pieces were displayed a year later in New York at the Lincoln Center on the occasion

¹ This article owes much to the dissertation of Céline Chesnel, whose work on the Norodom court was very inspiring, and to Philippe Peycam, director of IAS (International Institute for Asian Studies) for his useful comments.

² In the past, Cambodians called the Cambodian royal dance ព្រឹទ្ធសិល្បៈ *lekbon bluor*, or the "theatre of the king."

³ Groslier's glass plate negatives are among thousands of images of Cambodian royal dance, or *lekbon bluor*, taken between 1901 to 1948 by the *Direction des arts cambodgiens* (Directorate of Cambodian Arts) and private donors. These negatives are in the process of being inventoried and catalogued. Only a small number of them have been processed as photographic prints.

⁴ Only ten percent of artists from the royal dance troupe survived the Khmer Rouge regime. See Shapiro, and Ingleton.

⁵ The collection comprised not only glass plate negatives made by Groslier but also by Dieulefils and Maspero. An exhibition of photographs was organized in 1994-5 to make known this unique and rich collection of Cambodia's images.

⁶ See National Museum of Cambodia, "With the Cambodian Royal Dancers." The exhibition organizers included

of the Season of Cambodia festival (March 28-May 31, 2013). One set of these photographs was given to the New York Public Library's Jerome Robbins Dance Division, adding to its already impressive dance collection on Cambodia.⁷ Another set of photographs was exhibited in Paris at the Guimet Museum (October 16, 2013-January 13, 2014) and in Siem Reap at the EFEO Center (December 8-31, 2013).

The exhibition emphasizes a series of dance gestures photographed by George Groslier, the curator of the French Protectorate's Musée *Albert Sarraut*. In 1927 Groslier explained that through these photographs he wished to immortalize the royal dance, "to present it with all its vibrancy and regained vitality to those who, caught in today's times, would have forever deplored its loss."⁸ As a point of departure, I intend to use this event to examine French official discourse on the "decline" of the Cambodian royal dance and the causes that led to its near extinction.

THE EXHIBITION

The glass plate negatives from the museum collection were taken during the reign of King Sisowath (1904-1927). They captured the *ports de bras* (carriage of the arms) and positions of five dancers. The photographer, George Groslier,⁹ was at the time a colonial administrator and a state official "scholar" who, among other activities, contributed to the creation of the current museum and the École des arts cambodgiens (School of Cambodian Arts) in order to "revive" Cambodian arts and crafts.¹⁰ The exhibition displayed thirty-six images, all recently printed from the digitized negatives of 450 glass plates¹¹ preserved by the museum. I was involved in the process of arranging a slide show that featured the dancers' gestures in chronological sequence.¹² No written documents were found to identify the featured dancers or to explain the context in which this work had been accomplished. It was in fact during a visit to the Department of Conservation at the National Museum that I discovered these incredibly well-preserved glass plate negatives. I later managed to find an article published in 1928 in the periodical *Mercure de France* in which Groslier described his photographic sessions.¹³

photographers Jean de Calan and Tum Saroeun, dancers Em Theay and Sin Sama Deuk Chho, researchers Suppya Nut and Lucie Labbé, and museum staff Chea Socheat, Ham Seiha Sarann, Horl Sopheap, Hor Kosal, Khom Sreymom, Lim Yi, and Vorn Kunthea.

⁷ This Division is considered the world's largest and most comprehensive archive on dance. It was recently enriched by a series of interviews of Royal Ballet artists carried out by this author. See Nut, "Khmer Dance Project."

⁸ Groslier's statement quoted from Vachon.

⁹ For Groslier's complete bibliography see B.P. Groslier, 59-62; and also Cravath, 163-298.

¹⁰ See Abbe for a discussion of the differences between "official" and "amateur." On French scholars during the colonial period, see Peycam.

¹¹ Each plate has two images, therefore there are a total of 900 images.

¹² These sequences of gestures and positions represent the basic vocabulary (*kp̄ac*) of the royal dance that every experienced dancer must master. See Nut, *Étude du vocabulaire du théâtre royal khmer*.

¹³ Groslier, "Avec les danseuses."

The Glass Plate Negatives of the Cambodian Royal Dancers

This article, published a year after the photographic session, provided the much-needed historical context for these anonymous faces. It featured Ith, Nou Nam, Anong Nari, Kieuvan and Suon, all star dancers of Sisowath's dance troupe. Ith had even enjoyed an ephemeral period of fame when the Royal Ballet toured France in 1922!¹⁴ The article explained Groslier's interest in Cambodian dance and his motivation for recording it using the medium of photography. Concerned by what he saw as the great danger of the loss of the royal dance tradition, Groslier commissioned this extensive photographic project in order to document it. The article contained an excerpt from Groslier's journal describing his photography sessions, followed by a discussion of the new home of the royal dance troupe in the École des arts cambodgiens.¹⁵

The photoshoots were set up in the museum in the same room where the department of conservation is presently situated. As Bertrand Porte, the curator of the exhibition, pointed out in an interview:

It was quite moving. These photos have been taken in a very very simple way. It was the same flower bed as it is now with little flowers with an extremely simple set. The ballerinas were gathered in there, and posed alternately.¹⁶



¹⁴ Ibid., 539.

¹⁵ Groslier resigned from his position two years after its creation and handed it over to André Silice. But as director of the Arts Service, he kept effective control over the École des arts cambodgiens as well as the then Musée des Beaux-Arts.

¹⁶ "C'était assez émouvant. Ces photos ont été prises de manière très très simple. C'était le même parterre qu'ici avec des petites fleurs, le décor était extrêmement simple. Les ballerines étaient rassemblées tout autour, elles prenaient les postures à tour de rôle" (Gargiolo). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.



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The Glass Plate Negatives of the Cambodian Royal Dancers

George Groslier gathered a commission of experts in dance to help him to determine the right *ports de bras* and positions. He had the dancers' characteristic roles depicted (female, male, monkey and giant). Precise and meticulous in his photography, he succeeded in capturing the key moment of a figure or a position, composition of bodies, alone or as a duo, in light and shadow. Preference was given to gestures with dancers in their daily rehearsal costumes posing in front of a plain wall. The ensembles and the dancers' hieratic faces reflect a rare serenity fused with concentration and grace. Groslier gave the context of this dramatic event in the introduction of his article:

Cambodian royal dance, the admirable artistic tradition and all of the native past it represents, is under serious threat due to the very evolution of Cambodia as well as Western progress. King Sisowath, a few months before he passed away, with the agreement of the Protectorate, thought it was necessary and urgent to secure his theatre troupe from modern times, to give it a status, an organization which will guarantee its future.¹⁷

Because of the supreme beauty put forth in the production of the visual, reality rarely becomes visible. The photographic images do not only reflect or contain the past; they inevitably question the past and the discourses that supported their production. In what follows I will discuss the context in which they were taken and uncover some of the mechanisms that provoked Groslier's predictions of the "decline" of the royal dance.



¹⁷ "Les danses royales cambodgiennes, l'admirable tradition artistique et tout le passé indigène qu'elles représentent sont gravement menacées par l'évolution même du Cambodge et le progrès occidental" (Groslier, "Avec les danseuses," 536).



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A PREDICTABLE DECLINE

Groslier's concerns about the fate of the royal dance troupe dated well before the photographs were taken. In his book *Danseuses anciennes et modernes* published in 1912, he deplored the general disaffection of the Cambodian population and above all, the dignitaries, the traditional patrons of the royal dance:

Cambodian dancers are in agony. We observe that the population and dignitaries no longer understand their theater ... They are agonizing, these Khmer dancers! They are no more than shadows ... They are dying! They are dying, these charming traditions and poems of olden days! ... In a short while, in nightly celebrations, we will see no more of these mysterious actresses collecting antique poems and lost beauties.¹⁸

Such fatalistic discourse was recurrent in Groslier's writings about Cambodian "culture" and Cambodian "civilization," which he analyzed as terminally ill as a result of a long phase of historical decline since the country's golden age of Angkor. This colonial rhetoric of "decline," rooted in the self-justified language of colonial propaganda, has been well analyzed by a number of scholars.¹⁹ In the case of Groslier, the depiction of the degradation of Cambodia's "classical arts" since Angkor went a step further.²⁰ His conservative and personal stand was described by Ingrid Muan. It eventually led to the creation of Cambodian "Fine Arts" through the training provided by Groslier's École des arts cambodgiens with the ensuing process of commodification of these "arts," in which spaces for creative agency on the part of artists were ignored.²¹

But there is an even more obvious historical reason for Groslier's desperation over the disappearance of the Cambodian royal dance, which the 2012 exhibition should have sought to explain: the contradiction of French colonial policies vis-à-vis Cambodia, and especially the monarchy, as the natural patron of dance itself. I now wish to focus on this contradiction. It should first be recalled that Groslier's 1912 statement came just a few years after the triumphant 1906 tour in France where the royal troupe was acclaimed by the press and by the famous sculptor Auguste

¹⁸ "Les danseuses cambodgiennes agonisent. Nous avons constaté que le peuple et les mandarins ne comprennent plus leur théâtre ... Elles agonisent les danseuses khmères ! elles ne sont plus que des ombres ... Elles meurent ! Elles meurent, les traditions charmantes et les poésies de jadis !... bientôt, dans les nuits de fêtes, on ne vous verra plus, actrices mystérieuses, recueillir les antiques poésies et les beautés perdues" (Groslier, *Danseuses cambodgiennes*, 114).

¹⁹ The theme of the decline of Cambodia was a recurring motif in Groslier's language and in colonial discourse in general as France attempted to legitimize its presence as the protector of Cambodia's heritage. This obsession led to the creation of the École des arts cambodgiens in 1920, and French intervention in Cambodian internal affairs was reformulated as a form of "protection" and "preservation." On Groslier's own artistic practice in Cambodia, see Muan. For more on colonialism in Cambodia, see Edwards.

²⁰ It was not just the historical unanchoring of Cambodia vis-à-vis her neighbors, but the contamination of its pre-modern "purity" through the process of Westernization brought about by colonization that was responsible for the destruction of the country's original cultural and aesthetic attributes. This conservative and personal stand was well described by Muan.

²¹ See Muan.

Rodin!²² His bleak description seems less convincing in light of this event. Moreover, Groslier was just completing the building of the new palace dance hall *Chan Chhaya* in 1913-14.²³ Perhaps he was making a comparison with the earlier dance troupes of King Norodom as suggested by a very detailed passage in his book:

The ballet corps is placed under the direction of the princess, the king's first consort. She is the absolute master, imposes punishments, establishes discipline, controls rehearsals, pays salaries and ensures the regularity of the service of His Majesty. Under Norodom, his five hundred "lakhon" [dancers] were divided into three troupes. The most beautiful, the most stylish, the most adorned were placed under the order of the first consort: princess Khoun Than. Then came the second troupe, of lower value, directed by the second consort, Khoun Préa Nieth. And the last, the apprentices, had at their head Princess Mam Soum.²⁴

As a man who studied the history of the royal ballet, Groslier was well aware of the dramatic decrease of the royal troupe from five hundred members (according to Groslier's own figure) under king Norodom (1860-1904) to approximately one hundred under Sisowath (1904-1927). Although most of the artists chose to leave the palace at the death of their former patron, as expected, the reduction of the numbers of dancers raised questions about its future.

When looking back to the Norodom period, it is obvious that the Royal Dance enjoyed high prestige among court members. High dignitaries generally owned their own dance troupes, while the king himself had three dance troupes with the most beautiful costumes and props, as witnessed by Auguste Pavie, one of the earlier French agents.²⁵ After the French took control of tax revenues, King Norodom was granted a sum of 800,000 piastres per year to sustain his court.²⁶ There is evidence of the presence of itinerant and local dance troupes during his journeys through the country.²⁷ Under King Sisowath, the status of the dancers increased among the French colonials. Pejoratively named "*bayadères*" (a term used for dancing girls in Hindu temples) in early French accounts, the

²² The travel of King Sisowath and the dancers during the two-month visit in France triggered extraordinary media coverage (newspapers and gazettes, not to mention postcards, stamps, images etc.). See Milliot, and the numerous editions of the popular gazette *L'Illustration*, 16-23-30 1906, and 7-14-21 July 1906.

²³ The "decline" of the royal dance was also questioned by Cravath.

²⁴ "Le corps du ballet est placé sous la direction de la princesse, première femme du Roi. Elle en est la maîtresse absolue, ordonne les punitions, règle la discipline, surveille les répétitions, paye les soldes et assure la régularité du service de Sa Majesté. Sous Norodom, ses cinq cents 'lakhon' étaient divisées en trois troupes. La plus belle, la plus stylée, la plus richement parée, était sous les ordres de la femme première : la princesse Khoun Than. Puis venait la deuxième troupe, de valeur moindre, dirigée par la femme deuxième, Khoun Préa Nieth. Enfin, la dernière, celle des élèves, avait à sa tête la princesse Mam Soum" (Groslier, *Danses cambodgiennes*, 95).

²⁵ Pavie, XVII.

²⁶ Tully, 64. See also "Cambodge," *Le Mékong*, Hanoi, 9 Juin 1894.

²⁷ "Les costumes forts beaux rappellent ceux des bas-reliefs anciens. Au théâtre du Roi Norodom à Phnom Penh, ils sont riches et véritablement remarquables. Dans les troupes de second ordre ou celles ambulantes, ils laissent plutôt à désirer mais restent néanmoins dans la tradition" (Costumes that are quite beautiful are reminiscent of those on the bas-reliefs. In King Norodom's theater in Phnom Penh, they are rich and truly remarkable. The second-class or itinerant troupes seem to lack quality but they nevertheless remain in the tradition) (Pavie, XVII).

artists became “sacred dancers” in the following reign.²⁸ The international tours further raised the status of the dancers; the 1906 tour, in which the royal troupe traveled with King Sisowath left a memorable souvenir. During the second tour in 1922, the troupe had the honor of performing in Paris at the most famous theater, the Opéra Garnier.²⁹

The contrast between Groslier’s gloomy predictions and reality reveals France’s contradictory intentions towards Cambodia. As a man who played an active role as a colonial propagandist for the royal troupe, promoting extravagant exhibitions overseas, and who was a rare eyewitness of the royal troupe in Phnom Penh, Groslier found himself caught in a paradoxical situation. The celebration of France’s protectorate in Cambodia, to which he displayed constant devotion, contrasted with his bleak and pessimistic writings over the fate of the royal dance. His loyalty towards the colonial administration until his tragic death prevented him from blaming French intervention into Cambodian affairs as the cause of dance’s “foreseeable” decline.

FRENCH IMPOSITION ON THE CAMBODIAN COURT

When King Norodom successfully repelled the threat of Siamese and Vietnamese hegemony by placing the kingdom of Cambodia under the tutelage of France in 1863,³⁰ he did not imagine that he would be dispossessed from his royal prerogatives by his “protectors” two decades later. During the early period of the Protectorate, the royal dance continued to enjoy high prestige as many of its performers came from noble families. Were a dancer to become a favorite of the king, who was considered the “Master of water and earth” as well as the “Master of all lives,” she and her family would be rewarded with gifts, prestige and power. Some dancers had their status raised to the highest level of society by becoming the king’s consort.³¹ No exact number of artists was recorded at the court of Norodom. Foreigners were not allowed to enter the private compound of the palace, which sheltered all women, royal as well as servants, including artists.³² Figures varied from 400³³ to 500³⁴ to 800,³⁵ while administrator Jean Moura gave a total figure of 2000 servants, including dancers, for the entire palace.³⁶ As previously mentioned, Groslier listed five hundred dancers divided into three royal troupes, each directed by a royal consort. The king was fully involved in the artistic development of the royal dance, to which he expressed profound

²⁸ See Bois and Cardé.

²⁹ *Le Petit Parisien*, May 30, 1922.

³⁰ See Gaffarel. The Protectorate was signed on August 11, 1863.

³¹ The fate of the dancers is closely related to that of the royal family. Since the reign of Ang Duong (1841-1859), the first reign for which we have substantial documentation, all kings had as consorts dancers of the royal troupe, including royal members and high dignitaries.

³² For a complete view of the royal palace under Norodom, see Népote.

³³ M., “Norodom 1er, Roi du Cambodge.”

³⁴ Lanessan, 125.

³⁵ Le Faucheur, “Lettre sur le Cambodge,” in Taboulet, 660.

³⁶ Moura, “Lettre au Gouverneur de la Cochinchine sur l’esclavage 11 février 1873,” in Taboulet, 662.

attachment, as noticed by Paul Collard, the Resident Mayor of Phnom Penh:

The sovereign of Cambodia loved his *lakhons*: they were his favorite pastime ... Whenever he felt a certain degree of bitterness, whenever he felt the need to overcome an obsession, he gathered his *lakhons*, far from inquisitive eyes, in the forbidden compound of his palace.³⁷

Most French records of this time attest to regular performances before the king who, as a true connoisseur, did not hesitate to change or direct performances.³⁸ In fact, Norodom was often mocked for this in French accounts.³⁹

From 1880, French pressure on the king grew stronger and his manner of rule was condemned. The French argued that the king's extravagant expenditures for his royal dance troupes "crippled" the budget.⁴⁰ He was criticized for the large numbers of his female entourage, and specifically for several powerful palace women who had a "bad" influence on the king. Adhémard Leclère went further, identifying the palace women as strong opponents to French influence: "Palace women, especially princesses, favourites and servants, offered a strong resistance to all change and represented a reactionary center."⁴¹ Admiral Lafont complained in a letter to Norodom about the behavior of some court members:

Many individuals involved with theft, debt, and also crime, had letters issued by high dignitaries, princes, and also by consorts of His Majesty specifying that no one had the right to threaten them without having first obtained the permission of the Protectorate.⁴²

Owing to their intimacy with the king, some palace women succeeded in building complex systems of allegiance networks and exploiting the human and financial resources of the kingdom for their own profit. They exerted power through bonds that linked each man, a "Client," directly to a "Patron,"⁴³ and through the women's clans.⁴⁴ One can have a picture of the women's extended

³⁷ "Il aimait ses lakhons, le souverain du Cambodge: elles étaient sa récréation préférée. Aussi, dès qu'il éprouvait quelque amertume, dès qu'il sentait le besoin de s'affranchir d'une obsession, réunissait-il ses lakhons, loin de tout regard indiscret, dans l'enceinte réservée de son palais" (Collard, 130, 132).

³⁸ Lanessan, 240.

³⁹ Le Faucheur; private correspondence with Doudart de Lagrée, in Taboulet, 394, 406, 408.

⁴⁰ For more informations on French accounts, see Chesnel, "Retour," 57-60.

⁴¹ "Les femmes du palais surtout, les princesses, favorites et servantes, opposaient une grande résistance à tout changement et constituaient un centre réactionnaire" (Leclère, 65).

⁴² "Beaucoup d'individus, compromis pour vol, dettes et même pour crimes, se font délivrer par de grands mandarins, des princes et aussi des femmes de S. M. des papiers spécifiant que nul n'a le droit de les inquiéter sans avoir au préalable obtenu l'autorisation du Protectorat" (Taboulet, 668).

⁴³ According to traditional custom, each free man must choose a patron among the ruling class, mandarins, royal members and influential palace women. Patrons in the court circle were of course the most valued and the most demanding. While the client offered allegiance and labour, he in turn, expected protection from the patron. The more clients (*pol*) a patron had, the more his prestige was recognized (Alberti, 182).

⁴⁴ Female dancers were often chosen as spouses of a king but also of princes and high dignitaries. Thus, the matrimo-

influence when reading Klobukowsky's report, written when he was the Cabinet Chief for the new governor of Cochinchina, Charles Thomson:

These women had placed the sovereign in a cage, collecting for their own profit a portion of the taxes, appointing governors, ministers and judges through auction, engaging in slave trade, supporting bands of criminals, bringing discredit on whomever comes to see the Resident-Superior.⁴⁵

The person who exacerbated French irritation was Khun Than, the first king's consort, who ruled over her protégés "with a heavy hand." She was one of the most powerful women at the time, and according to French sources, held great influence over the king.⁴⁶ For example, she had the rare privilege of taking part in any reception given by the king to greet visitors, and her presence in no way served as mere decoration.⁴⁷

Overt conflict arrived on July 17, 1884 with the overthrow led by the governor of Cochinchina, Thomson, who forced Norodom to sign a treaty transferring all of his powers to the French administration. Along with these changes, the restructuring aimed to put an end to traditional patron-client bonds, effectively cutting off the financial and human resources of the palace women. The abolition of the slave system further diminished the women's power and prestige.⁴⁸

Despite the series of anti-French rebellions that inflamed the country during 1885-1886, in which the close entourage of the king, and the king himself, played a crucial part, the nominal head of Cambodia never recovered his privileges.⁴⁹ The year 1887 marked the imposition of French power over the kingdom and the neutralization of the influence of the "women." After suppressing rebellions in the countryside and resistance within the royal palace, French authorities managed to gain control over Cambodia through a series of treaties that removed all power from King Norodom. As a consequence of these reforms, the royal troupe lost its power of attraction. Henceforth, an annual allowance was assigned to Norodom and a civil list of beneficiaries were issued. In 1893, the king received an endowment of 372,000 piastres that was renewed every year.⁵⁰

Powerful clans began to shift their allegiance to the new power epitomized by the Resident-Superior. The final years of King Norodom's reign ended sadly. He and his closest partisans lived secluded in the palace compound, "diverting his sorrow in performances of his *'bayadères'* and

nial linkage extended throughout the whole country. On the importance and the role of the palace women, see Népote.

⁴⁵ "Ces femmes ont 'mis en cage' le souverain, recouvrant pour leur compte une partie de l'impôt, nommant aux enchères les gouverneurs, les ministres et les juges, trafiquant sur les esclaves, entretenant des bandes de malfaiteurs, jetant le discrédit sur quiconque vient voir le Résident supérieur" (Klobukowski, 184-223).

⁴⁶ See Nut 2014 and "Khun Than, the first lady and the French: a predictable confrontation," forthcoming.

⁴⁷ Brossard de Corbigny, 445. See also Meyners d'Estrey, 404-9.

⁴⁸ A first study of this period appears in Forest; a very thorough study is found in Chesnel, "La cour de Norodom."

⁴⁹ On the insurrection of 1885-1886, see Osborne, 206-28; and Ke Khi You.

⁵⁰ Forest, 75. According to the journal *Le Mékong* (1894), to maintain the entire court of King Norodom, 800,000 piastres were needed annually.

in the petty details of palace life.”⁵¹ When the King passed away, the majority of the dancers left the court.⁵² The allowance provided by the French to the new king, Sisowath, did not permit him to entertain a troupe as numerous as in the preceding reign. Under Norodom, between three thousand to four thousand people lived in the palace in 1899, while only 806 were counted under Sisowath, including less than a hundred artists.⁵³ In the first year of his reign, Sisowath received an allowance of 505,198 piastres, of which 111,324 piastres were assigned to princes, princesses, singers, dancers, and musicians.⁵⁴

Slow decline was henceforth irrevocable as the budget assigned for the royal troupe was not raised after 1917, as mentioned by Groslier when he took charge of the troupe in 1927.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the fundamental diminution of the role of the monarch forever affected the position of the royal dance. Along with this process was the coming of age of a new generation of French-educated dignitaries who developed new ways of displaying their prestige, such as car ownership or the display of French ornaments.⁵⁶ The last minister who owned a dance troupe died in 1909.⁵⁷ The royal palace thus became the only repository of the art and practice of royal dance.

The official “policy” of an imperial French vision initiated by Jules Ferry, the architect of the French Third Republic (1870-1940) sought to absolve the “conquest” of its violent and barbarous side to stress France’s “civilized” and “humanitarian” work.⁵⁸ The Cambodian royal troupe was used as a political pawn in the colonial promotional agenda in fairs and exhibitions meant to enhance French prestige (*la grandeur de la France*) and to legitimize France’s role as eternal protector of the arts.⁵⁹ After 1906, during the reign of King Sisowath, the programming of dance performances for secular events hosted by French authorities became a regular occurrence. A grandiose stage was designed to celebrate Marshal Joffre’s visit to Angkor, “the Jewel of Indochina,”

⁵¹ Gervais-Courtellemont et al., 58

⁵² A good description is given by Meyer in his semi-fictional book, *Saramani, danseuse khmère*.

⁵³ “Le corps de ballet actuel de S.M. Sisowath se compose de huit premières danseuses ; de soixante-six à soixante-dix sujets et d’une quarantaine de fillettes élèves” (Groslier, *Danseuses cambodgiennes*, 96).

⁵⁴ Forest, 74-75

⁵⁵ Groslier, “Avec les danseuses,” 552.

⁵⁶ “L’automobile est arrivée par là-dessus, favorisée par un réseau routier de plus en plus serré. Il n’est pas à l’heure actuelle, un prince, un jeune Khmèr fortuné qui, au lieu d’acheter une auto, prendrait un orfèvre, un sculpteur et un joueur de guitare à sa solde” (Groslier, “La Reprise,” 400).

For portraits of the new generation of dignitaries, see Edwards, 64-124.

⁵⁷ Groslier, “La Reprise,” 399.

⁵⁸ The speech delivered at the Chamber of Deputies on July 28, 1885 set the foundation of French colonial policy. See “La Troisième République (1870-1940).” This official ideology still has its followers among French academics. Historian de Bernon, in his book *Voyage en France du roi Sisowath* [King Sisowath’s Journey to France] wrote: “The Kingdom of Cambodia associated itself with the French colonial empire with no drama or conquest, almost surreptitiously (Le royaume du Cambodge s’était associé à l’Empire colonial français sans drame, ni conquête, presque subrepticement)” (11). The choice of the phrase “s’était associé,” given the rebellions following the French coup, is remarkable. De Bernon further adds that subsidiary treaties increased the monarch’s wealth. It has however been thoroughly demonstrated that the king’s renunciation of levying taxes in exchange for an annual allocation dramatically reduced his budget and curtailed his authority over his subjects. See, for instance, Forest, 75-78; Chandler, 142-48; and Osborne.

⁵⁹ Interestingly enough, organizers of exhibitions sold tickets for royal dance performances and, according to one account, at a rather high fee. The “sacred art” for Cambodians became a “tourist attraction.”

on February 23, 1922, in which Groslier played a crucial role. King Sisowath sat on a palanquin, carried by four porters, and “accompanied by 50 attendants and preceded by an advance guard carrying innumerable candles,” welcomed Marshal Joffre at the entrance to Angkor Wat.⁶⁰ It was followed by a moonlit performance of the royal ballet. A film captured this moment for posterity as it was integrated into the news for the *métropole*.⁶¹

Despite playing an important role in colonial propaganda, the royal dance troupe continued to steadily decline from around five hundred to one hundred artists between the two reigns, ending with less than forty members under the supervision of Groslier. In 1928, shortly after beginning his reign, King Monivong agreed to sign an order placing the royal dancers under the authority of the École des arts cambodgiens.⁶² Had the French wanted the royal dance to stay in the Palace, they would have raised the king’s allowance, however they did not. Hence, Groslier never achieved his goal of becoming the “protector of the royal troupe.” A year later, he had to dismiss all the dancers.⁶³ Only twenty of them returned to the Palace, lacking relatives or too old to find new lives elsewhere. The situation of the royal dance was so desperate that French authorities had to hire a private dance troupe from Siem Reap province to perform at the 1931 Colonial Exposition at Vincennes.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

The exhibition of photographs recently held in Phnom Penh and New York mirrors a successive and indeed repetitive French colonial discourse on the benevolent role of France as protector of the Cambodian arts. It also highlights the personal vision of a man who sought to freeze tradition in time, on the grounds that Cambodian culture was moribund, and that it should not be infected by modern influences. Yet, traditions evolve. The canons of dance captured by Groslier dramatically changed under Queen Kossomak later in the century, an evolution that he could not have predicted.

Groslier’s attitude vis-à-vis the royal ballet reflected the tension between the idealized discourse and the reality of colonialism. He was caught in the French Protectorate’s doubled-sided nature: “a blessing and a curse, both a constructive and a destructive force.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Tully, 57; FA, FO, 64265.

⁶¹ Norindr, 138. France hosted no fewer than ten colonial exhibitions and fairs beginning in 1889 and ending in 1931. See Hodeir and Pierre.

⁶² “Réorganisation de la troupe de danses du Palais Royal: Projet d’ordonnance royal, n° 9093,” Archives nationales du Cambodge, 6 pages.

⁶³ A squalid theft of 25 kilos of the royal dance troupe’s jewels by Phen, the member of the troupe in charge of jewels at the École des arts cambodgiens, provoked the wrath of King Monivong, and instigated the dissolution of the troupe. See “Under the reign of his Majesty Monivong.” See also a letter signed by the Director Silice dismissing the whole troupe, n° 2181, Archives nationales du Cambodge under the number 20980.

⁶⁴ “Ordonnance royale n° 72 du 24 septembre 1930,” Archives nationales du Cambodge; “L’exposition coloniale de Paris,” *L’illustration* May 23, 1931. See also Cravath, pp. 141-145.

⁶⁵ Tully, viii.

Aestheticism often disguises tensions, wounds, unresolved pasts, and misunderstandings lying beyond “beauty.” The recent exhibition stressed the grace and the delicate quality of the dancers while it paid tribute to Groslier’s impressive work. This evocation harkens back to the captivation experienced by writers, artists and travelers at the sight of Angkor and of its carved *apsara* images. Most of the French colonial accounts underscored the resemblance between these female divinities and the royal dancers, as can be seen in a description made by Laloy, a musicologist and writer in the early twentieth century:

The temples of Angkor have been falling apart for centuries, but the delicately sculpted images on the lintels of doors and under the cover of their cloisters are still alive; with their inimitable grace, a tradition piously and strictly preserved until the present-day. When Cambodian dancers enter the stage, it seems that the stone dancers are brought back to life, which in Buddhism is called reincarnation. They open their eyes, and the gestures carved by the artists’ chisels become movements.⁶⁶

The sculptor Rodin, who followed the royal dancers at the 1906 Colonial Exposition in Marseilles, said “it was impossible to see human nature reaching such perfection,” and compared them to “Greek statues.” Cambodian dancers embodied for Rodin “the principles of classical art.”⁶⁷ It reveals “an intense aesthetic reimagined appropriation” which binds dancers to Angkor, to a dreamed vision of Angkor. And as is so often the case in French displays of colonial artifacts, it sought to call on visitors’ emotions, aesthetic sensibilities, reverie, fantasies and nostalgia without trying to historicize – let alone problematize – the pieces. No information on the stories of the beautiful *indigènes* featured were deemed necessary to enlighten the contemporary audience to the context in which they had lived.⁶⁸ Only a short excerpt gave some context for one of these dancers: Nou Nam, a former favorite of both kings Norodom and Sisowath. It is believed that photographs should speak for themselves. Apparently, the contemplation of “beauty” needed no words.

Memory is often reinvented, rearranged, and transmitted differently depending on which side one stands. It is my intention to contest the prevailing discourse of the recent exhibition and to reveal a period in the history of the royal ballet largely ignored by contemporary Cambodians.⁶⁹ Interestingly enough, the royal dance troupe enjoyed an extraordinary revival under a princess, the future Queen Kossomak (1904-1975), who revived the sacred traditions that linked this art to the monarchy.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ “Les temples d’Angkor sont en ruines depuis des siècles, mais les figures délicatement sculptées aux linteaux de leurs portes et sous l’abri de leurs cloîtres vivent encore. Une tradition pieusement sévèrement gardé jusqu’à nous leur grâce inimitable, et, quand les danseuses cambodgiennes entrent en scène, il semble que par une de ces résurrections qui, pour la foi bouddhique ne sont que réincarnation, les danseuses de pierre retrouvent un corps et que leurs yeux se rouvrent, et que leurs attitudes fixées par le ciseau de l’artiste redeviennent mouvements” (Laloy, 3-4).

⁶⁷ *L’Illustration*, July 28, 1906.

⁶⁸ See the polemical article on the museum of the Quay Branly in Paris by Lebovics, “Le Musée du quai Branly,” in Bancel, 443-54.

⁶⁹ In 1963 the Ministry of Information issued a publication titled *The Khmer Royal Ballet*, which followed Groslier’s discourse on the “decline” of the royal dance.

⁷⁰ Princess Kossomak became Queen in 1955 after her son Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his father Suramarit. Even

Beyond the politics of their creation and their recent public display, these images represent an extraordinary source of study for future dance historians. As National Museum Director Kong Vireak explained: “The exhibition will contribute to the promotion of Khmer culture and of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008.”⁷¹

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before ascending the throne, she supported a small troupe of artists under the responsibility of Khun Meak, a former star dancer and king Monivong’s consort. She allowed French colonial authorities the use of her own troupe in ceremonies where dances were required. When Cambodia regained its independence in 1953, Queen Kossomak devoted her entire life to revive and at the same time to modernize the royal Cambodian dance. See Nut, “Queen Kossomak through the eyes of dancers,” and “Lokhon Luang, the Cambodian Court Theatre: Toward a Decline of Women’s Supremacy?” forthcoming.

⁷¹ Excerpt borrowed from Vachon.

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ABSTRACT*The Glass Plate Negatives of the Cambodian Royal Dancers: Contested Memories*

Suppya Hélène Nut

This article interrogates French colonial discourse on the necessity of preserving the diminishing tradition of Cambodian court dance (*lkhon hluon*) by drawing on the example of the 2013 exhibition of glass plate negatives of Cambodian royal dancers. George Groslier, the founder of the École des arts cambodgiens, who explicitly deplored this slow decline, began to photograph dance gestures in order to save the vulnerable tradition. In light of documentation, it appears that, in actuality, it was the French colonial authorities who were the cause of its decline, due to their reduction of the budget allocated to King Sisowath (1840-1927, r. 1904-1927).

RÉSUMÉ*Les négatifs sur plaque de verre des danseuses royales du Cambodge : mémoires contestées*

Suppya Hélène Nut

L'article remet en question le discours colonial français sur la nécessité de préserver la danse royale cambodgienne (*lkhon hluon*) en voie de disparition, en prenant comme exemple l'exposition des plaques de verre sur les danseuses royales cambodgiennes en 2013. George Groslier, le fondateur de l'École des arts cambodgiens qui a déploré son déclin inexorable a réalisé des photos des gestes de danse afin de sauver cette tradition menacée. À la lumière des documents, il apparaît, à l'inverse, que ce furent les autorités coloniales françaises qui étaient à l'origine de sa décadence en réduisant le budget alloué au roi Sisowath (1840-1927, r. 1904-1927).

សង្ខេប**ហ្វីលីដាបន្ទះកែវរូបអ្នកកាំល្ខោនហ្វូងខ្មែរ : សើវីការប្រជែង**

Suppya Hélène Nut

អត្ថបទនេះវែកញែកសើវីការអះអាងនៃរដ្ឋបាលអាណានិគមបារាំងដែលថាគេត្រូវតែជួយរក្សាល្ខោនហ្វូងខ្មែរ ដែលកំពុងទៅរកការវិនាសបាត់បង់ដោយយកការតាំងហ្វីលីដាបន្ទះកែវរូបអ្នកកាំ ធ្វើពីបន្ទះកែវនៅឆ្នាំ២០១៣ មកពិចារណា។ លោក George Groslier ដែលបានបង្កើតសាលាចនាឆ្នាប់សោកស្តាយការចុះស្រុតនៃល្ខោនហ្វូងនោះ ហើយបានថតរូបអ្នកកាំក្នុងកាយវិការរាំផ្សេងៗ ដើម្បីស្រាវជ្រាវប្រពៃណីដែលប្រឈមនឹងការបាត់បង់នេះ។ លុះពិនិត្យឯកសារទាំងនេះទៅ យើងឃើញផ្ទុយទៅវិញថា គឺរដ្ឋបាលអាណានិគមទៅវិញទេ ដែលនាំអាទិ៍ឲ្យមានការចុះស្រុត ដោយសារបានកាត់បន្ថយថវិកាទៅព្រះករុណាព្រះបាទស៊ីសុវត្ថិ (១៨៤០-១៩២៧, សោយរាជ្យ១៩០៤-១៩២៧)។

