# The Imperative of Memory

## A VISUAL AND ORAL ARCHIVE OFFERS LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE NEAR-DEATH OF THE KHMER CULTURE.

By Karen Greenspan

A petite, aged woman sits with legs folded atop the kitchen table in her little Phnom Penh flat, surrounded by walls with paint peeling from the nicked plaster. Em Theay, a master performer and one of the oldest surviving singers of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, fingers her three songbooks with their thick, yellowed and stained loose pages as she recounts how she was singing at the Royal Palace the moment the Khmer Rouge took over in April 1975. When she was forced to evacuate Phnom Penh, she took only a skirt and her songbooks in a basket. "I took care to hide them when I went to work. If ever it was discovered, they would end as paper roll for tobacco." Because she had the presence of mind to safeguard her texts of song lyrics, subsequent generations know the songs that accompany the ballets and can perform them today.

That was the first video testimony I viewed from the Khmer Dance Project (KDP), a video archive of three living generations of Cambodian artists (dancers, musicians, singers, costume makers, and dressers) who kept their cultural traditions alive during and following the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime of the late 1970s. The repository of Khmer dance knowledge was in danger of being lost forever, as elderly dance masters were passing away and artifacts of the dance culture were disappearing after years of disrepair and disorganization due to political instability. The project was initiated in 2008 by the international Center for Khmer Studies, a nongovernmental research consortium of institutions and individuals, in partnership with the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New

PETE PIN

*Dancers from the Royal Ballet of Cambodia* (left) *perform* The Legend of Apsara Mera. *Apsaras, celestial nymphs from Hindu mythology, can be seen in the lintel* (top of page) *from the Hall of Dancers at Preah Khan Temple, at Angkor Temple Complex, Cambodia.*

York Public Library (NYPL) and the Anne Hendricks Bass Foundation. (Bass, a well-known philanthropic force for dance in New York City, conceived and nurtured the KDP into being.) The video archive has become available for online streaming, providing free access to the public—in keeping with the NYPL Dance Division's mission, in the words of its founder, Genevieve Oswald, to create "tangible records for an intangible art."

The KDP does not fit the notion of a classic dance archive. Nor does it align with other genocide archives or survivors' narratives, which have the goal of healing, tolerance, or transformation. The video testimonies, in concert with dance and ceremonial footage, document the history and present state of Cambodian culture, which unspeakable torture and destruction proved unable to destroy. The surviving artists are reclaiming the stories, songs, and dances of their past and working to transmit the rich, highly developed, and sacred culture to the next generation while the country rapidly progresses into the twenty-first century.

The KDP consists of fifty interviews and footage of nine performances and rehearsals taken during a two-year period from 2008 through 2010. Suppya Nut, a Khmer language and literature scholar, designed KDP and conducted the interviews. She had trained for ten years in Cambodian classical dance in Paris, France, where her family fled in 1972. Nut currently lectures at the National Institute of Oriental Language and Civilizations in Paris and the University of Cologne in Germany. She informed me that she did not base the archive design on any previous model. Her interviews reflect her familiarity with the material and her ability to establish a warm rapport with her subjects, sometimes using their personal photos or possessions as a jumping-off point, teasing out almost-forgotten details of a bygone era—as was the case with Em Theay's cherished songbooks.

Cambodian written records dating from the sixth century refer to dance as a temple offering, notes Cambodian dance scholar Paul Cravath. Dance was an essential feature of Khmer culture during the Angkorean period from 802 to 1432 CE ("Khmer" refers to the majority ethnic group in Cambodia as well as to the Cambodian language and culture.) During that golden age of Cambodian wealth, power, and temple construction, thousands of dancers were employed by the royal court.

According to Cravath, in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries King Jayavarman VII installed 615 dancers in the temple dedicated to his mother's spirit, 1,000 dancers in the temple honoring his father's spirit, and 1,622 dancers in other temples throughout the kingdom—not to mention all of the dancers already in service. Dancers and dances were a form of spiritual currency. The tradition of performing sacred dances for the deities to ensure blessings (especially rain and fertility) for the kingdom permeates the Cambodian classical dance culture and the artists' attitude toward the practice of their art.

In 1431 the Khmer Empire at Angkor fell to the Thai kingdom, and many court dancers were taken to Thailand. During this period Cambodian dance absorbed Thai dance traditions. According to the video interview with Em Theay, as late as the mid–twentieth century many people in the Royal Palace (both royalty and artists) spoke and sang in Thai. Thus, a great deal of cultural exchange continued between the two kingdoms. Queen Kossomak (1904–1975), the mother of King Norodom Sihanouk, spearheaded a movement to Khmerize the ballet: she wanted all Thai manuscripts and songs translated into Khmer and the costumes and headdresses redesigned in Khmer fashion.

PETE PIN

*Dancers from the Royal Ballet of Cambodia continue the tradition of Khmer arts.*

During the first half of the twentieth century, traditional dance was again flourishing under the protection and support of the Cambodian royal court. However, in the 1960s the country devolved into chaotic civil war and strife. A coup d'état in 1970, and four years of bombing by the United States in an attempt to destroy North Vietnamese supply lines, destabilized the country further until the communist takeover in 1975. Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge army waged a ruthless and systematic war on the country's memory—with the aim of razing society down to what they named "Year Zero," a peasant economy of rural manual labor for all alike. In pursuit of erasing all vestiges of the monarchy and foreign influence, including classical court culture and performance, the Khmer Rouge tortured and killed dancers, artists, teachers, intellectuals, and professionals. Much of the population was forcibly marched and relocated while starving, converting the jungle into a mass labor camp.

ANDERS JIRAS

*Princess Norodom Buppha Devi (center) with the Royal Ballet of Cambodia*

All but the youngest generation of performing artists archived in the KDP endured and suffered through this horrible period of Cambodian history. In the video interviews, they each share their personal experiences of terror, survival, and the reclamation of their lives and their art. With dignity and resolve, in the service of documenting their country's history, they reveal very personal, devastating details of losing relatives, teachers, and friends. Em Theay speaks of being required to dance and sing endlessly for the other workers in the rice fields, until one day she simply fell unconscious while dancing. Ballet Master Pen Sokhuon tells how she took great pains to hide her identity as a dancer during the Khmer Rouge years, fearing she would be killed for her connection to the Royal Ballet. Proeung Pruon, a player of the *roneat*, or Khmer xylophone, with the Royal Orchestra, tried to hide his identity and his musical skill until, one day, a Khmer Rouge member brought him a xylophone and commanded him to play. The randomness that dictated who survived, why, and with what unbearable losses is simply chilling.

"Three years, eight months, and twenty days," Cambodian accounts quantify the dark years under the Khmer Rouge. They confine the regime to this finite time frame, as if to reassure themselves that the nightmare of senseless murder is indeed over. Once the Khmer Rouge were successfully overthrown in 1979, the surviving dancers and artists made their way to refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border or back to their home villages and cities. As they sought out their colleagues, friends, and family, the dawning horror emerged: an estimated 90 percent of the performers and dance teachers had been murdered or had starved to death.

Before KDP, classical Khmer dance had never been no-

tated or systematically recorded. The choreography was always passed physically from teacher to student. Watching the videos of dance classes and ballet rehearsals, I began to appreciate how this actually happens. In the six-hour video recording of a rehearsal of the ballet *Ennao Bosseba*, Royal Ballet Master Soth Somaly literally shapes the next generation's bodies, in a kind of duet between master and student in which she maintained constant physical contact—sculpting, molding, and adjusting their bodies with love and care. That video, along with many others, bears witness to a culture in which the gift of memory is bestowed from teacher to student.


SUPPYA NUT

*Dressing a dancer before performance*

Traditionally, Cambodian dancers train from a very young age to perform one of the four dance roles: the male, the female, the giant, or the monkey. All four roles were performed by female dancers until the mid-1900s, when Queen Kossomak introduced the idea that men should perform the monkey role. Soth Sam On, an elder dancer and master teacher, who has passed away since the dates of her video interviews in March of 2008, describes how she went to live and study with her dance teacher, Khun Mitt, who adopted her as a young child. Soth Sam On trained to perform the giant role, though she sometimes danced the male role as well. She recalls, with great sadness, how all the other "giants" died during the Khmer Rouge reign.

Frequently, dancers of the older generation happened into the profession because their parents worked as performing artists in the Royal Palace. In her interview, Sin Sama Deuk Chho, born in 1940, speaks of how her mother, Deuk Por, a renowned dancer in the Royal Ballet, took her to rehearsals three months after giving birth to her, and began bending her fingers back to attain the extreme wrist and finger flexion required for the multitude of highly stylized hand gestures that are a hallmark of Cambodian classical dance. In telling her story at the age of sixty-eight, she is still stretching her hands and fingers back. When her body didn't fit any of the roles, Sin Sama Deuk Chho trained to dress performers (a laborious process that even involves sewing dancers into their costumes), to sing, and to beat the drum for the ballet, ensuring her usefulness on many levels. Hers and other stories help to showcase how the Royal Ballet was an organizational model for human resource sustainability. The wisdom and experience of retired dancers was recycled through the retraining of these members; the longevity of personal careers was integral to the organization and community as a whole.

The quality of being sacred informs many of the Cambodian dance traditions, perhaps most vividly expressed in the two videos of the Ceremony of Paying Homage to the Spirits, *Sampeah Kru*. Dance troupes perform this ceremony before initiating a new piece of choreography, as well as before performances and at the start of a new tour. *Sampeah Kru* used to be held at the Royal Palace. Today it may be performed in a rehearsal space or even onstage at the theater where an upcoming performance is scheduled. Dancers, teachers, orchestra, and singers all attend, sitting on the floor with legs folded and the palms of their hands pressed together in devotion, as a master of ceremonies dressed in white recites ritual texts. Generous offerings of fruit, pig heads, eggs, candles, incense, and *baysei* (elaborate, multi-tiered arrangements made from folded banana leaves, flowers, and betel nuts) are placed on altars. Suppya Nut informed me, "To be initiated to a dance, the apprentice has to make a *baysei* as an offering to her teacher and to the spirit of the dance. Dance is a sacred knowledge, as it is linked to the divine world."

Nut also explained to me the nuances of *kru*, or teacher. "In the ceremony it [the word *kru*] should be understood as 'the spirits of the teachers.'" Although the purpose of *Sampeah Kru* was for the dancers to obtain consent and power from the spirits to perform the roles, on another level it is a ritual of teachers empowering their students. This idea is captured in the video of eighty-four-year-old Yit Sarin, a master of the all-male Khmer masked dance genre, *Lakhon Khol*. In the video he ceremonially places evocative dance masks on each of his young students. He blesses each child, asking the spirits for their protection, as he sensitively gives them advice on how to breathe and see while wearing the enclosed headdresses.

The hybrid design of KDP, taking oral testimony as well as dance video, creates a rich, descriptive archive. The verbal testimonies provide informative explanations for what is illustrated in the rehearsal and performance footage. One unusual brainstorming session was documented in the home of Princess Buppha Devi, a former star dancer with the Royal Ballet in the 1960s and the granddaughter of Queen Kossomak. The princess and three creative advisers to the Royal Ballet discuss the design and construction of the giant *naga*, or serpent, prop for the ballet *The Churning of the Sea of Milk*. The princess announces, "We have to study the Nagas of Angkor Wat. I must go back this time to study the *nagas*' heads." She pulls out her cell phone, displaying a photo of an extraordinary nine-headed *naga* taken at the Angkor temple called Preah Khan. The princess, like her grandmother, works as a tireless champion as well as a choreographer for the Royal Ballet. At a post-performance discussion last spring at the Season of Cambodia arts festival, the princess described how her grandmother designed the costumes and headdresses for the *Apsara Ballet* by studying the temples at Angkor. Instead of consulting Google for costume and prop design, they consult Angkor Wat.


SUPPYA NUT

*Sacred ceremony of* Sampeah Kru, *which honors teachers and divine spirits*

Many of the interviews touch upon financial difficulties older performers now have, attempting to live on their teaching salaries alone and after retirement. In earlier times, when the ballet was within the purview of the royal court, the Queen paid performers and masters attractive stipends for rehearsals and performances. In addition, many of the artists also worked as servants for the King and Queen. Sin Sama Deuk Chho reports, "It was a very easy job. You waited for the Queen's orders. Usually, it was just to carry small things to her. At the end of the day, we were rewarded with a nice sum." The royal court artists were housed at no cost in "longhouses" that resembled apartment complexes. Now that Cambodia is a parliamentary democracy, the Royal Ballet has moved out of the palace, and the dancers are trained at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, those opportunities, which kept a profession in the arts financially viable, no longer exist. However, younger dancers seem to accept the need for another source of income. Roth Chan Mony, a dancer at the Royal Ballet, speaks with pride about her small business venture in partnership with a relative, who minds the business when she is on tour.

Proeung Chhieng, Associate Choreographer for the Royal Ballet of Cambodia as well as Performing Arts Advisor for the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, acknowledges sadly that much more needs to be done to record the past. "If one artist passed away, it is a library that disappeared with him or her. We, Khmers, were not able to take care of our legacy." Chased and hounded by time, he doggedly pursues funding as he attempts to reconstruct and record as many ballets and other traditional dance forms as possible. His efforts were bolstered when Princess Buppha Devi served as Minister of Culture from 1999 to 2004 and applied to UNESCO to have Cambodian classical dance, known as *Robam Preha Rej Troap* in the Khmer language, designated as a Masterpiece of Intangible Heritage. In 2003 it was granted this status. In 2005 Shadow Puppetry, or *Sbek Thom*, also won UNESCO status.

One moving interview involves two dancers who currently live in Paris, Voan Savay and Voeun Amrit. They dedicate themselves to training dancers for Cambodian dance companies in France. The interview points to an interesting direction for further developing the KDP: recording testimonies of second-generation Cambodian performers who live in the main population centers of the Cambodian diaspora. How have their artistic expressions developed as a result of outside influences? There are also folk theater forms, even other dances, within the Cambodian cultural universe—other than the court ballet—that are more than worthy of documentation.

Many of the testimonies in the KDP reveal human beings who have lost those nearest and dearest to them. They reflect upon their own survival. Now they channel that personal determination to survive and dedicate themselves to the remembering, transmission, and documentation of their art and culture, which is finally gaining proper recognition by the world as a prized legacy.

**Karen Greenspan,** a dance researcher and writer in New York City, travels regularly to Asia observing and researching sacred and traditional dance forms, as well as engaging in dance lessons and discussions with performing artists in various countries. A former dancer with several modern dance companies in New York City, Greenspan spent many years performing and teaching international dance, with an emphasis on Israeli folk dance. The KDP can be accessed at digitalcollections.nypl.org/dancevideo; click on Khmer Dance Project, listed as a featured collection.