osara:

e Feminine in Cambodian Art

by Amy Catlin

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Apsara:

The Feminine in Cambodian Art

An exhibition and publication on the arts of Cambodian women in the Los Angeles area.

December 1, 1987 – January 6, 1988

Curator and Editor: **Amy Catlin, Ph.D.**

photo by Amy Catlin

The apsara dance as performed by Sin Ny and the Khmer Classical Dance Troupe at the National Folk Festival in 1980. The painted backdrop shows the four-faced towers of Lord Brahm of Angkor Thom.

Cambodian women chant Buddhist prayers during wedding of Ouk Sophanary (r.).

photo by Amy Catlin

(Cover, Figure 2) *Goddess (detail), Angkor Wat, 12th century. This goddess wears her hair pulled into a long rope that she has tied into a knot on top of her head, the end of which stands straight upward. Placed around the knot is a frond, perhaps a fern, and stuck behind the knot are four (two on each side) areca palm flowers. The border around her forehead may indicate that this area was shaved. We do know from Chou Ta-Kuan (writing a century later than the Angkor Wat reliefs) that both men and women wore their hair twisted on top of their heads; that some women shaved their foreheads; and that only palace women wore ornaments in their hair.*

Amy Catlin wears kramaa *dress designed by Malen Chhuon as she checks her musical transcriptions of the Apsara song with the dancers.*

photo by Irene Fertik

Acknowledgements

The Woman's Building is proud to present "Apsara: The Feminine in Cambodian Arts." This pioneering exhibit is the first in the world to celebrate Cambodian women artists. These refugees bring with them a rich visual and performing arts history. A sincere thank you is extended to the participating artists, dancers and musicians who have devoted their time and talents to the exhibit and Festival Day.

Curator **Dr. Amy Catlin** has pulled together the diverse elements and artists from the disciplines of visual arts, music and dance to give a comprehensive picture of Cambodian cultural heritage, a heritage that adds to the artistic enrichment of us all.

Many individuals have helped with the development, coordination, and installation of the exhibit. Without the participation of the following individuals and organizations, this exhibit and volume would not have been possible. We gratefully acknowledge them here: **Amy Mellencamp,** Director, United Cambodian Community, Long Beach; **Lynda Philipp,** Director, American Indochinese Association of the San Fernando Valley; **John Thierry,** Trustee, Southeast Asia Art Foundation, Hill, New Hampshire; **Erica Azari,** Program Coordinator, United Cambodian Community, Hollywood; **Claudia Fishman,** Ph.D., Public Health Foundation, W.I.C. Program; **Renee Sweig,** Public Relations Consultant; **Monica Kagdis,** Art History Intern, UCLA; **Khong Vuth,** Calligrapher; **Irene Fertig,** Photographer; and **Nazir Jairazbhoy,** Chair, UCLA Ethnomusicology Division. **Dr. Haing Ngor, Dixie Swift, Kathleen Forrest, Michelle Roberts, Sandy Baisden, Ruth Ann Anderson, Kathleen Graas, Nancy Ann Jones,** and **Cheri Gaulke** have helped with various arrangements for the exhibit. Special thanks to the artists **Hang Leng, Phan Ith, Ouk Sophanary, Siv Khon, Ouk Pinthang, Choung Sath, Men Savoeun, Chhuon Malen** and to the singers, **Pich Chantol, Che Song, Loeum Ny, Sita Mom,** and **Kim Heang** for sharing their lives and work with us.

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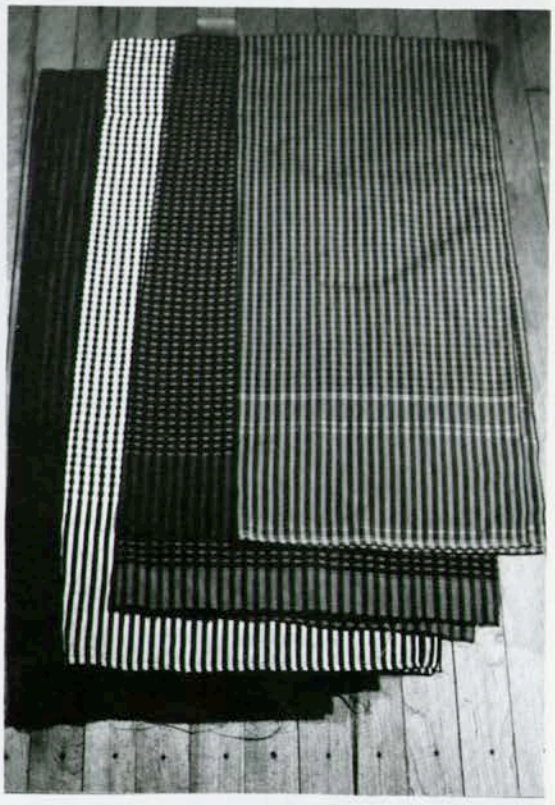
Sue Maberry
Co-Director of the Woman's Building

Lynda Lyons
Gallery Coordinator



Kramaa made by Khmer Women Weavers' Project, Long Beach.

photo by Amy Catlin

Videotapes of their own performances serve as teaching tools for the dance students in Van Nuys.

The head undulates in figure-8 designs, taught best with hands-on instruction. Ouk Pinda learns from her aunt in Van Nuys.

photo by Amy Catlin

The Feminine in Cambodian Dance and Music

by Amy Catlin

How can we connect the *apsara* carvings of Angkor to today's Khmer women of America? How can we relate the stone images of the past with the living women of the present? And indeed, why should we attempt to connect the two, given their separation over so many centuries?

The answer to the last question is found in the minds of the many Khmer people who feel a deep and profound connectedness to the civilization of Angkor. Their adoption of the towers and the *apsara* carvings of Angkor as cultural symbols attests to the strength of that rootedness. Innumerable visual representations of Cambodianness in exile include the *apsara* and Angkor Wat. In fact, the annual pilgrimage to Angkor was a *desideratum* of many Cambodians prior to the most recent upheavals. Aside from the political overtones which these symbols have acquired, they should not be overlooked in considering the cultural meanings attached to them. An intrinsic bond between the past and the present is revealed in the actions of Khmer women today. We are merely attempting here to explain in words an unspoken relationship which exists between the images of femininity found in the *apsara* and in today's Khmer women.

To answer the first questions, we may turn to the lively arts of dance and music, which have survived the upheavals of the recent past to a considerable extent. The *apsaras* and other female carvings of Angkor show beautiful women in graceful and magical movement. Today's Khmer women and young girls invest immense amounts of time and energy in the beauty and grace of their dances, which extoll the glories of the past and their cultural heritage. They sing of the *apsaras* and their queen, of magic ladies who bewitch princes, of love among gods and goddesses, of a goldfish queen seduced by a magical white monkey, of parrots, butterflies, and cats . . . of the delicate flower of Khmer dance and music, treasures admired by all the world.

This exhibit is the first to explore women's roles in Cambodian arts. We have discovered that the concept of the feminine principle, as seen in symbols such as the *apsara,* is extremely strong in the fostering of Cambodian arts in exile today. Khmer women in America, while to a great extent preoccupied with the processes of acculturation, are simultaneously providing important leadership in the preservation of the lively arts of dance and song. The female singer is still considered essential to the traditional wedding ceremony, a role performed by a handful of refugee women in Southern California. Khmer women and girls organize and perform classical and folk dances for the two major community festivals, Pchum Ben for the ancestors, and Chol Chhnam for the new year. These performances also require women's voices along with instrumental music. A number of singers have fulfilled those needs, some learning the songs for the first time from cassette tapes brought from the refugee camps. Over it all, the guiding *apsara* figure hovers as the symbol of preservation and regeneration of the fine arts of dance and song.

This volume opens with an introduction to the *apsara* and other female images as found in the stone carvings of Angkor. Robert Brown, Professor of Art History, UCLA, a highly regarded scholar of Southeast Asian temple architecture and sculpture, has kindly collected images from archives in Europe and the United States for this exhibit. His essay provides a concise and invaluable background to the women and goddesses of the Kingdom of Angkor.

From those ancient stone monuments we are catapulted into the present state of Khmer women of Southern California through the personal statements of nine Khmer women artists, all refugees who have suffered immense loss and trauma. These women—dancers, singers, a weaver, a costumer, a designer, and a traditional grandmother—all contribute to the rebirth of Cambodian arts and culture in America. Their joyful creations produced in groups amidst resounding laughter show us that there is indeed life and beauty after the killing fields.

The last essay focuses on music and dance, the ephemeral arts of Khmer women and their daughters, especially through the daily activities of the Cambodian Dance and Music Project of Van Nuys. Having logged over 500 hours of practice in the last 15 months, they are among the best-rehearsed ensembles in the country, thanks to the generous support of the National Endowment for the Arts, Folk Arts Program, the principal contributor to the present exhibition.

A cassette tape of the music for a Cambodian wedding and for classical dances is available, similar to the installation tape heard continuously during the exhibit. These recordings were made in the field in Southern California, where the tears of the *apsara* spring up as flowers for us all to enjoy.

photo by Amy Catlin

The hand as flower: Sophorn Samreth, dance student in Van Nuys.

apsara: *(from ap + sri) "going in the waters or between the waters of the clouds," a class of female divinities (sometimes called nymphs; they inhabit the sky, but often visit the earth; they are the wives of the Gandharvas and have the faculty of changing their shapes at will; they are fond of the water; one of their number, Rambha, is said to have been produced at the churning of the ocean.)*

ap: *water; air, the intermediate region; the star δ Virginis; the Waters considered as divinities. (See lat. acqua; Goth ahva; Old German aha, and affa at the end of compounds, etc.)*

sri: *to run, flow, speed, glide, move, go*

(Figure 3) *Goddess, Angkor Wat, 12th century. The Angkor Wat goddesses in relief stand upright, but never as stiffly as the cult goddesses. In this example, her feet are placed in profile, while her legs twist toward a frontal view. Even her abdomen, however, is not yet seen completely frontally, with the navel still off-center to the right. Her bust, shoulders, and head are fully frontal, although the upraised right arm raises the right shoulder and tips the head off center. Thus, the body is seen in a composite view with some sense of animation.*

(Figure 4, right) *Goddess, Angkor Wat, 12th century. This goddess is in the process of arranging the decorations in her hairdo. She puts what may be an areca palm or coconut flower in place with her left hand, while she holds three short round sticks in her right. These may be more of the sticks that are arranged in four tiers that support the central cone of the hairdo. Perhaps these are sticks of scented wood or incense.*

(Figure 5) *Four Goddesses, Angkor Wat, 12th century. While goddesses appear as single figures on temples before the 12th century, it is not until Angkor Wat that they are placed in groups. This photograph shows four goddesses located on three different faces around a corner.*

(Figure 7, right) *Two Dancing Goddesses (detail of a pillar), The Bayon, late 12th-early 13th century. These two goddesses dance, mirror images of each other in gesture and stance. Seen above the dancers is a small effaced figure. This is a seated Buddha image that has purposefully been destroyed by followers of Siva after the reign of the Buddhist king Jayavarman VII, under whom the Bayon was built. The dancers were not damaged. This underlines the fact that the dancing goddess was imagery acceptable to both Hindus and Buddhists.*

Female Imagery in Ancient Khmer Sculpture

by Robert L. Brown
University of California, Los Angeles

Almost all female images in Khmer sculpture are representations of goddesses. These goddesses have a distinct hierarchy. The *apsaras* of the exhibition's title are, for example, relatively minor deities, associated with both water and the sky, who are musicians or dancers of unbelievable beauty. Other goddesses are important deities who are worshipped as the focus of major cults. How did the ancient Khmer visualize and represent these and other goddesses? How and by whom were the images used? Can we find in these depictions general comment on the role women played in ancient Cambodia? This short essay will attempt to sketch briefly answers to these questions.

Sculptural images of deities in Cambodia appear only quite late, around the 6th century A.D., and are from the beginning under the impress of Indian art. There is no evidence for deities, male or female, being represented in anthropomorphic form in Cambodia before this time.[1] When the goddess appears, she is depicted in Indian iconographic terms, and we can thus recognize her. But we cannot know if the Southeast Asians saw her in the same way as she was seen in India. Almost certainly, the Cambodians reinterpreted her, probably to a great extent in light of their indigenous beliefs and interests. Unfortunately, these are mostly lost to us today.

The goddess as a cult deity appears never to have become as important as such male deities as Siva, Vishnu, or the Buddha. Her images are usually medium or small in size, and are mostly associated in a subsidiary manner, often as a consort, to the male deities. Nevertheless, the large number of extant sculptures of female images argues for their popularity. This 11th-century image *(fig. 1)* is a typical representation of a cult goddess. She stands stiffly upright, facing forward, wearing a long sarong that ties with a fold between the legs and is held with a hip belt. Otherwise the goddess is nude; she does not even wear jewelry; and her pierced ears are empty of earrings. The lack of jewelry is probably to emphasize her ascetic nature, which is also indicated by her stylized ascetic's hair-do of tiny braids pulled to a bun on top of her head, meant to represent matted hair. The Khmer visualized their goddesses as eternally young and beautiful, as seen in the firm taut body; yet, befitting their exalted position, they stand in a formal posture and partake of the ascetic ideal.[2]

The various goddesses are usually identified by the attributes that they carry in their hands. Unfortunately, the arms of the goddess in figure one are broken, as is frequently the case in extant examples, and thus no specific identification can be made. She may be Uma, the wife of Siva, or Laksmi, the wife of Vishnu. Whatever her identification, she would have been placed in a temple as a focus of worship.

(Figure 1) *Goddess, Cambodia, 11th century, Stone, H: 77 cm. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Anonymous Gift, 1983) The goddess stands stiffly upright. She wears a sarong that tucks in at the waist and falls in a frontal fish-tail fold. A belt ties around the hips. Otherwise the goddess is naked. Her hair forms a bun on top of her head in a stylized rendition of an ascetic's matted hair. Carved in the round, the image was meant to be placed in a shrine and worshipped.*

As we move down the hierarchy from such major female deities as that represented in figure one, we find the goddesses tend to lose their formality. They begin to show movement and to decorate their bodies. Movement may be subtle. The famous goddesses carved in relief on the Angkor Wat temple *(figs. 2-6)* stand as do the cult goddesses, but their feet and legs, sometimes with a slight flex of the knee, are seen in profile, while their torsos and heads, often tilting forward and to the side, are facing forward. The body's rigid vertical axis is therefore broken. These goddesses hold their arms away from their bodies, usually one lowered and one raised, thus adding to a sense of movement. They most often hold objects, but not attributes, in their hands, such as flowers or an end of their sarongs, and strike langorous postures. At other times they pose coquettishly with a mirror to arrange their hair, or when in groups, they link arms or hold hands. The varying arm positions of each goddess create a quiet rhythm.

Who are these goddesses? No texts or inscriptions identify them precisely, but their intent is clear. They are celestial maidens whom the artist

(Figure 6) *Goddess, Angkor Wat, 12th century. This goddess displays yet another variety of hairdo. The hair is cut short around the face and combed outward. The rest of the hair is drawn into two long ropes and tied on each side of the top of the head; the ends hang to the shoulders. The hair has been decorated, and lavish ornaments also decorate the goddess's body. Of particular interest is the enormous ring held by a beaded chain that falls between her breasts. This ornament is worn by a number of Angkor Wat goddesses. Its size and unique form suggest it may have had religious or ritual significance.*

(Figure 8) *The Churning of the Ocean (detail), Angkor Wat, 12th century. This is a detail from a long relief that depicts the Indian myth of the Churning of the Ocean by the gods* (devas) *and the demons* (davanas) *in order to create the liquid of immortality* (amrta). *The demons and gods used Mount Mandara as the churning stick, around which they wrapped the multi-headed snake Vasuki, and the gods taking his tail, and the demons his head, began to churn the ocean. The relief is conceived in three horizontal bands. This detail shows the demons holding Vasuki's heads in the central band. Below the central band is the ocean, filled with fish and aquatic creatures, while the upper band shows flying* apsaras. *The churning produced a variety of objects, including the* apsaras; *but their presence is used in addition to define the third or heavenly area into which the universe is divided.*

(Figure 9) *Pra Thorani (detail of Finial), Cambodia, 12th-13th century, Bronze, H: 39.2cm. (The Cleveland Museum of Art, Andrew R. and Martha Holden Jennings Fund.) Each time the Buddha performed an act of merit in his innumerable past lives, he poured water as a libation on the earth. In this detail, the goddess Pra Thorani, the personification of the earth, wrings the accumulated libation water from her hair, creating a flood. Pra Thorani performed this act to witness the Buddha's store of merit, which at the same time swept away the evil King Mara's army that was attacking the meditating Buddha (a portion of whom can be seen above the goddess here). Two of Mara's demons flee the water on each side of the goddess.*

has attempted to represent as otherworldly in their beauty and attraction. Their presence (and it is a significant presence with some 2,000 of them represented on Angkor Wat)[3] signifies that the temple is a celestial abode–it is the home of the Hindu god Vishnu whose cult statue was placed in the inner sanctum. These goddesses are located in conspicuous places, such as on the outer walls of the galleries where they are the dominant sculpture, signifying immediately the cosmic nature of the temple.

In their overt sexuality, they are the opposite of the ascetic goddess of figure one. We know from inscriptions that such attractive beauties were thought to await the devout who after death were reborn into heaven[4] and King Suryavarman II, the builder of Angkor Wat, must have anticipated such a fate. The temple itself, in fact, is a model of the celestial palace that Suryavarman would expect to find after death, the goddesses made corporeal, for the king already was considered to be in some way a part of Vishnu himself, whose presence was manifested in the cult statue.[5]

Part of the attraction of the Angkor Wat goddesses must have been seen to be their rich jewelry and intricate coiffures. As already pointed out, the lack of decoration identified the ascetic nature of the cult goddesses. The extreme elaboration of the headdresses on the Angkor Wat goddesses, accentuating their sexual natures, is unmatched in ancient Khmer sculpture. Although extremely varied, there are basically two arrangements. The hair may be exposed with a portion knotted into a long narrow rope that stands (with the aid of lacquer or an internal wire support?) straight up above the head *(see cover)*, or in two ropes that form large loops on each side of the head *(fig. 6)*. The second headdress arrangement is to wear a crown that completely covers the hair. These crowns usually are topped by three or five pointed triangles or cones that are set in a row and descend in height from the center *(fig. 3)*. The ornamentation is of jewels and flowers for both the hair-dos and the crowns.[6]

Are we to suppose the Khmer women would have dressed in this fashion at the time? One can only guess, but it would be reasonable to suppose that if these fashions were copied from those of any particular group, it could be the king's harem. These palace women numbered in the thousands and held honored positions; aristocratic families vied to give a daughter to the king as a way to increase the family's importance. Chou Ta-Kuan, a Chinese diplomat who was at Angkor for about one year in 1296-1297, wrote in his memoirs that "Most of the time they [people in the king's government] choose princes for employment [as officials]; if not, those selected offer their daughters as royal concubines," and "When there is a beautiful daughter in a family, they do not fail

to inform the palace."[7] These concubines competed for the king's attention by, one may suppose, adorning themselves to increase their attraction. In contrast, we know from Chou Ta-Kuan's report, that the common women wore very little, nothing but a loin cloth: "In general, the women, like the men, wear only a piece of cloth with which to wrap their loins, leaving uncovered the breasts of milky whiteness . . ."[8]

A second possible group of women who logically could have dressed similarly to the goddesses is the temple dancers.[9] Here we can return to the point of movement. Whereas the Angkor Wat goddesses just discussed never move vigorously, other sculptural representations of goddesses at Angkor Wat, and at numerous other ancient Cambodian temples, do. They may dance or fly. The dancing goddesses, as in fig.7, bend their bodies into geometric angles in an energetic dance. They wear jewelry and peaked crowns similar to those of the standing goddesses. They dance in honor and celebration of the enshrined god, just as did the human dancers dedicated to the same temples. Both the sculptural and human dancers are likenesses of the celestial goddesses. Appropriately, modern Cambodian dancers dress in crowns and ornaments modeled on those of the Angkorian sculptural dancers.

When the goddesses fly they strike a pose with both legs far apart and the knees flexed that suggests a dance posture *(fig. 8)*. It is, in fact, the posture used in modern Cambodian dance to indicate flying. This pose is a convention for flying taken from Indian sculpture, where it appears at least as early as the 2nd century A.D., and was adopted throughout Southeast Asian art.[10]

The royal or temple dancers and the king's concubines may thus be the most likely human counterparts to the goddesses sculptured in relief on the temples at Angkor.[11] Are there also human counterparts to the cult goddesses such as represented in figure one? The sculpture in figure 13 shows a kneeling woman. She wears a sarong, but otherwise is naked. Devoid of jewelry, her eyes are closed and her hair is pulled into the ascetic hairdo. In front of the bun is a Buddha image in a meditative pose. This Buddha, Amitabha, identifies the sculpture as the goddess Prajnaparamita ("perfect of knowledge"). Prajnaparamita was a popular goddess in the late 12th and 13th centuries, when she often formed a triad with the Bodhisattva Lokesvara and the Buddha. But here she kneels, a posture of supplication unknown in the dignified and formal postures of the cult goddesses. It is thought perhaps this statue is also an idealized portrait of a queen, Jayarajadevi, in the guise of the goddess.

Supporting this identification are such individualized characteristics as the unique facial

(Figure 10) *Goddess (detail), Banteay Srei, North Sanctuary, ca. 968 A.D. The Temple at Banteay Srei ("Citadel of the Women") was dedicated to the god Siva in 968 A.D. It is well-known for its exquisite and delicate sculptural reliefs, including a number of goddesses who stand individually in niches. The head of one is shown here in detail. She smiles sweetly, a smile shared by most of the other goddesses illustrated here. Often treated as enigmatic, the smile is in part explained by the belief that deities do not display emotion through facial expression. The smile is the* absence *of human emotion and a constant, intended to contrast with the ever changing facial reactions of human beings.*

(Figure 11) *Snake Goddess (detail), Terrace of the Leper King, Angkor Thom, late 12th-early 13th century. The Terrace of the Leper King perhaps served as the cremation platform for Angkorian royalty. Arranged in tiers on the platform's base are figures of kings with their consorts, including a snake king with his consorts. This detail shows one of the snake queens, identified by the three snake heads in her crown.*

(Figure 12) *Tympanum (detail), from Banteay Srei, ca. 968 A.D., stone. Musée Guimet. The detail shows two male figures, with their weapons raised, while holding onto the central female figure. She appears to be the object of their fight, and may be identified as the* apsara *Tilottama over whom two demons killed themselves.*

Note: Due to the popular nature of the exhibit, diacritics have been omitted from Sanscrit words.

(Figure 13) *Prajnaparamita, from Preah Khan, Angkor, late 12th-early 13th century, Stone. Musée Guimet. As noted in the text, this image of the goddess Prajnaparamita probably also is a portrait of Queen Jayarajadevi. While it is difficult to know exactly how this statue would have been placed at Preah Khan, the feet and lower part of the image are unfinished in the back, suggesting that it was intended to be seen primarily from the front. Thus, although kneeling in supplication, the image was probably worshipped frontally as an icon.*

Photo Credits:

All photographs are by Yves Coffin, courtesy of the Southeast Asia Arts Foundation Archives with the following exceptions. Figure 1 is courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Figure 9 is courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art. Figures 12 and 13 are courtesy of *La Reunion des musées nationaux.*

features and the unpronounced breasts. We also know from numerous inscriptions that portraits of royalty were made in the images of the gods, including the goddess Prajnaparamita. Queen Jayarajedevi was a principal wife of King Jayavarman II (r. 1181-ca. 1219), who had his own portrait depicted as the Buddha; it would thus be logical for her to be depicted in the likeness of Prajnaparamita.[12]

After Jayarajadevi died, her sister Indradevi wrote and had inscribed a long paean to her, from which we learn of Jayarajadevi's importance to her husband, who was desolute after her death. We are also told of the queen's devotion, both to her husband and to the gods. Indradevi herself was

renowned for her wisdom and learning; she had composed the poem to her sister in flawless Sanskrit.[13]

We see, in conclusion, that although only goddesses are represented in ancient Khmer sculpture, they reflect the human world as well, at least that of the king, his court, and the aristocracy, the patrons for whom all the extant art was made.[14] The two spheres, the celestial and the earthly, were seen as closely linked, the earthly reflecting in form and function the world of the gods. In this aristocratic society women, such as Queen Jayarajedevi, had important and powerful positions, positions that were defined largely on analogy to those of the goddesses.[15]

Notes:

[1]There are very few earlier imported images, from India, China, and the Roman world. There are also some references in Chinese sources that suggest the presence of images of deities before this date, but even these descriptions are of images conceived in Indian terms, and no such early examples have so far been found. Finally, there are figures on so-called Dong-son drums that may be deities; but they are too abstracted to be identified, even as to sex, and may be shamans or ancestors.

[2]Ascetic practices were believed to create personal power, and rigorous ascetic practices are often sited in Khmer inscriptions as an accomplishment of the dedicator. O.W. Wolters has recently suggested the way in which this Indian concept of ascetic power (*tapas*) may have been adopted and altered by the Khmer. See O.W. Wolters, "Khmer 'Hinduism' in the Seventh Century," in *Early South East Asia*, ed. R.B. Smith and W. Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979):427-442.

[3] S. Marchal has placed the number at 1,737. See Sappho Marchal, *Costumes et parures khmeres d'après les devatas d'Angkor Vat* (Paris: G. Van Oest, 1927):19.

[4]George Groslier, "La Femme dans la Sculpture Khmere ancienne," *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* 2, no. 1 (Mars 1925):35.

[5]Lawrence Palmer Briggs, "The Ancient Khmer Empire,; *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 41, no. 1 (1951):194.

[6]See Marchal, *Costumes et parures khmeres,* for a detailed discussion and many drawings of the varieties of headdresses.

[7]Paul Pelliott, *Memoires sur les coutumes du Cambodge de Tcheou Ta-Kouan* (Paris: Librairie d'Amerique et d'Orient, 1951):14 and 15 (respectively).

[8]*Ibid.,* p. 15.

[9]We know from inscriptions that dancers, both male and female, were donated to temples; some inscriptions mention hundreds of dancers belonging to individual temples. For a discussion of the temple dancers, see Paul Russell Cravath, *Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1985, pp. 65-72.

[10]For early Indian examples see Susan L. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India* (New York: John Weatherhill, INc., 1985): Figs. 8.31 and 9.12.

[11]The differences among the temple dancers, palace dancers, and concubines are not always clear. There certainly was overlap among these groups. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the court dancers and concubines were essentially the same group. See Cravath, *Earth in Flower*, pp. 132-260.

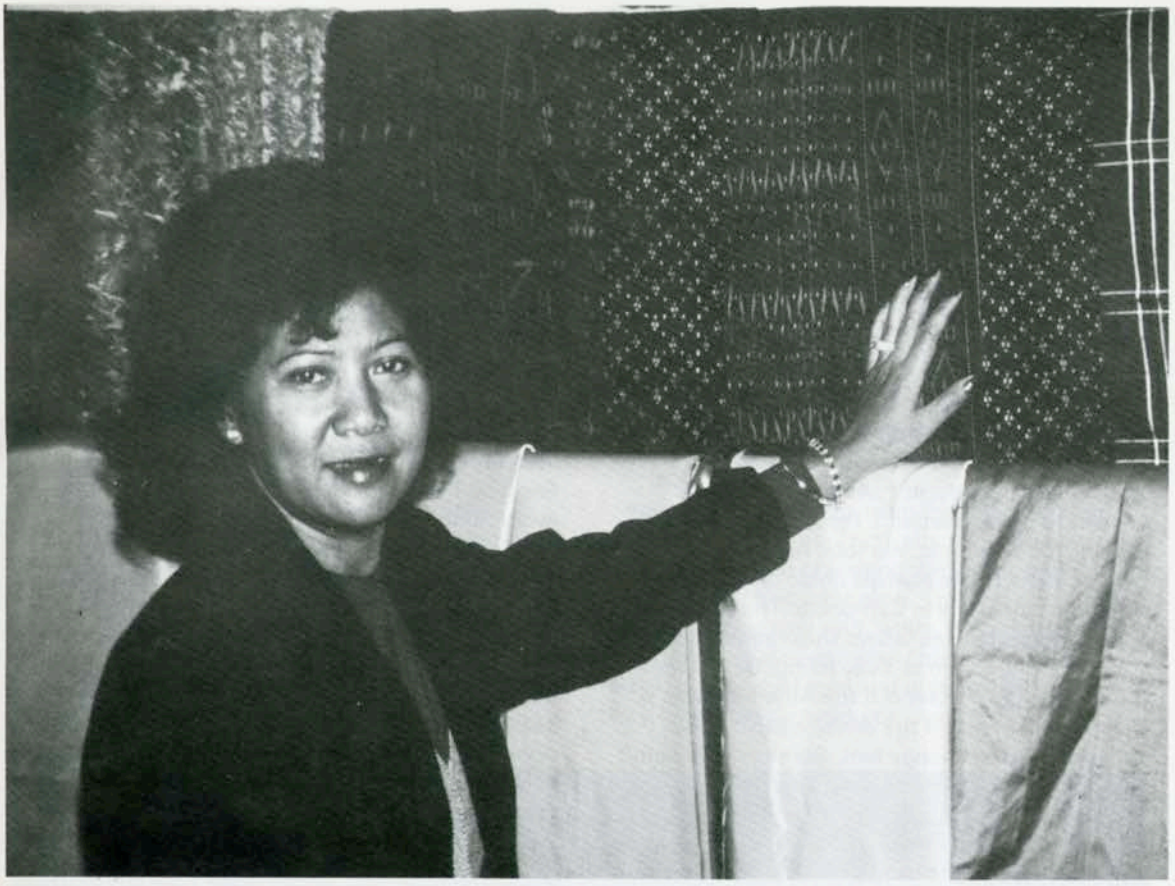
[12]See Philippe Stern, *Les monuments khmers du style du Bayon et Jayavarman VII* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965):189-194.

[13]See G. Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia,* trans. by Susan Brown Cowing (Kuala Lampur: University of Malaya Press, 1968):172.

[14]The only exceptions occur in a few genre scenes in the 13c Bayon.

[15]This discussion has focused on the artistic evidence, which supports the overall assessment of the important and active role elite women generally had in ancient Cambodian society. Common women as well as the elite appear to have had important positons. Chou Ta-Kuan , for example, states that women were in charge of daily trade. (Pelliot, *Memoires sur les coutumes du Cambodge de Tcheou Ta-Kouan,* p. 27.)

Hang Leng



Hang Leng with the silk she sells in her shop.

Dir. of Cambodia Arts Preservation Group

(oral history as told to Amy Catlin)

My parents were farmers. I went to school until I was 18, when I graduated from Prek Eang College and joined the Army, Cinquieme Bureau. From 1961-68 the Army paid me to learn dancing and acting, and to perform throughout the country.

Every morning we did arm and leg exercises for an hour. Then we learned classical dances (*lakhon ruom, lakhon kbach*) for an hour or two: Robam Chuon Por (Flower Blessing Dance), Tep Manorum (The Gods in Love), Mani Mekhala (The Goddess of Lightning) and folk dances (*robam pracie prey*) such as Robam Trolaok (the Coconut Dance) and Konsaing Snae (the Magic Scarf Dance). The teacher was Mrs. Mom Say Songvann, from the palace. She must be 68 years old by now. *(A palace dancer who married a prince, she took her own troupe to the Paris Exhibition of 1931, and performed under French patronage at Angkor for many years after—ed.)*

After lunch we learned how to act in dramas (*lakhon ciet, lakhon niye*). We had to look sad, then happy, then be upset and cry. After that you must get up and remember it and play it. If you don't act right, they take you out and put in someone else. You must be good because the army pays! Our teacher was Mr. Om Kom Uon and one other.

After training, we danced and played in every province so all the people could see: Svay Rieng, Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri, Neak Luong, Siem Riep, Battambang . . . We stayed in Phnom Penh and whenever we got the paper from General Lon Nol, we travelled with the musicians by Dakota airplane, or by helicopter if only 5 or 6 people went.

The plays were realistic love stories or adventures, not propaganda. Then I played in 5 films. One was *Golab Pailin,* "The Rose of Pailin," with the famous actress Dy Soveth. She and I were the only women. In *Pursat Neang Khmau* ("Black Woman from Pursat") I played a dancer, and a teacher in *Pralung Bosibba.* I was also in *Visna Neka Sai Kup* and *Chamka Mon,* "The President's House," with Prince Norodom Sihanouk. I played his secretary, always in a white uniform. The movie star, Lok Sakam Koya, played with us.

I was trained in the military, so the first time I met Sihanouk, I didn't know what to do. The chairs were all covered with white. When I sat down, his wife began to smile very sweetly. She is really nice; she knew that I don't stay with those people! Then I heard my supervisor call to me, "Oh please, sit *down.*" I am not from a royal family so I didn't know I had to sit on the floor! If I see a good chair, I sit!

From 1968-72 I was receptionist and bookkeeper for the Army Transmission Division. In 1970 Sihanouk fell; in 1972 the Lon Nol government sent me to Saigon to study nursing and psychology so I could understand people's reactions and what they are thinking. When I came back later that year, they sent me to the transport station to dispatch for the American Embassy. The training in psychology was really so that I could be in covert operations like the CIA—to be a spy.

My office was in the airport in Po Chintong. I had 40 drivers; only two were women. We worked for the American Embassy, but were paid by FANK *(acronym for the Khmer Republic army—ed.)* If someone came from America I would help them decide where to go. If they needed to buy something, I took them to buy jewelry, food, clothes. We took American Embassy people to the *bantiye tihian* (soldiers' camps) everywhere in Cambodia. The American people wanted to see where the communists got into Kompong Cham or Svay Rieng. Sometimes the drivers had problems if the American was a Colonel or a Major. If the driver wasn't good enough, I had to change him. Some drivers didn't want to go with an American in broad daylight. They were afraid of attacks by Pol Pot and the communists. Sometimes the driver would cry to me, ''I don't want to go!'' Then the Americans would say, ''Leng, I don't like this driver. Please change her for me.'' I hated to change, but if I didn't they would report it to my supervisor and I could get fired. I didn't go unless the driver was sick and there was nobody left to drive. I was afraid, but we had to go. We were being paid. If we don't go, how can it be called the military?

I left Cambodia two weeks before the takeover of Phnom Penh in April 1975. My rank was seargeant. There were lots of women in the Army, but only 5 or 6 like me, because I trained as a nurse, a dancer, an actor, and I could go to the clubs as a spy. My life was a business!

I first came to America sponsored by Church World Service. Between 1975 and 1977 I lived with Father Carey in Santa Monica and took care of children, and earned a degree as Beauty Operator. Then I worked as a beauty operator in San Bernardino. I was married in 1975 and we have one daughter, Gloria. Before, I had been married in Cambodia, and had a boy and girl. We divorced in 1969. The boy, Romana is 18, and lives here with a Cambodian pastor. The girl, Romany, lives with her boyfriend nearby. We meet every Sunday for church.

I moved to Long Beach and ran my own beauty shop from 1979 to 1986. In 1983 I founded the Cambodian Arts Preservation Group. I trained boys and girls in classical and folk dancing, to perform for New Year festivals and for American shows. We even danced in the Dudley Moore film, *Mikki and Maude* that year. We need more invitations like that! This year we also produced a video of a Cambodian folk opera (Lakhon Bassac) called *Son of the Sun,* with about thirty local artists. Soon I will begin a new dance class at home for girls of Gloria's age.

We rent out the clothes for Cambodian weddings and concerts, and make them for other Cambodian groups across the country. In Dallas, Texas they bought a beautiful set of costumes. The people I train help to dress and make up the bride and groom and dancers; now they make good money as beauty operators, too. They can make all the clothes for folk and classical dances, and the traditional blouses and skirts that Cambodian women like to wear for formal parties.

I do these things because I want to help my people, and I am too old to go there and fight. I want American people to know my country, and the children to learn to dance and make traditional costumes.

Hang Leng sewing the beads on an ao sbay, *velvet shawl worn as dance and wedding costume.*

photo by Alexander Keo

Ouk Sophanary

Dancer

(oral history as told to Amy Catlin)

I was born in Phnom Penh in 1963, and went to school there until 1975, where we learned Cambodian and some French.

Nobody was happy at New Year in mid-April 1975, because everything was so expensive. We could hear big guns exploding everywhere and we thought the Vietnamese communists were coming, the Viet Cong. The invasion came on April 17th, 2 or 3 days after New Year—but they were all Cambodians! They were the Khmer Rouge: in Cambodian, that means Khmer Krohom, or Red Khmer.

My mother Chuong Sath, my brother Ouk Sophan, his wife Ly and their 3-month old daughter Pinthang and I were all sent to Kaet Takeo. After 3 months we were moved to Moung in Battambang Province. Before that, my brother had a job and supported us all, since one person working was enough for most families. My father was a soldier, killed in the battle at Angkor in 1972. They could not find his body.

Under the Khmer Krohom, we worked as farm laborers. We rose at 3 in the morning, worked from 6 til 6, and sometimes we had overtime until 10 or 11. We dug, planted, and transplanted rice. They made me live with other girls my age, and I ran away to my mother a lot. Then they made me work double. I got the idea to leave after everyone was asleep at about 11 pm, and then return before 3 am. Nobody knew that I went to see my mother!

The Pol Pot people had songs and dances, all about war and work—never about love. Movements were like farming or shooting. They hated the apsara dance. Only the managers could watch the dance shows, when they gathered for their big meetings and parties with food and drink. Ordinary people were not told about these shows, just the men and women leaders.

We learned the songs from the radio, taping them onto cassettes. Then, since I knew how to read, I had the job of writing the words and teaching the children to sing. The first dance was always the Hammer and Sickle. When the three older teachers moved away, I became the teacher, all because I could read and write, which most of the Khmer Rouge could not.

photo by Irene Fertik

Ouk Sophanary surrounded with dance and family photos. During a wedding, the bride emerges from this curtained doorway to meet the groom, as she herself did recently.

photo by Amy Catlin

"The Prince and the Maiden", Preah Chan Korup (r.) and Neang Mora (l.), a classical narrative dance episode performed by Siv Khon and Ouk Sophanary.

The Khmer Rouge were poor village people who were jealous of the city people. They said city people were too rich and never worked. I cannot understand why they hated us, because we are all Cambodians. My husband says it is because some Cambodians like to be free—like us—and some want communism—like them.

The Khmer Rouge women were the meanest, even meaner than the men. They were only 16, 17, 18 years old, but they were so *mean.* If you made a mistake, they just said, "Next time—dead." And then the next time they killed you with a bamboo pole, hitting your head from behind so it broke.

Finally we escaped to Thailand by walking through the jungle. In Thailand, the dance teachers were so nice! Mrs. Soeun and Mrs. Va were my teachers at Khao I Dang, where I learned classical dances like Yeak (Giant), Chuon Po (Flower Blessing), and Tep Manorum (Love of the Gods). When I moved to Merut Camp only Mrs. Soeun came; I think Mrs. Va went to France. Mrs. Mao was the other teacher. Now I think Mrs. Soeun lives in Washington, D.C., but I'm not sure. In Merut, I was with Project Concern. We learned Preah Chan Korup (The Prince and the Magic Lady), Plat (Fan Dance), Bopha Lokei (Flower of the World) and Chma (Cat Dance).

I came to America in 1981 and went to high school. I didn't have a chance to dance again until 1984 when I met Khon. We did our own program together for New Year, teaching all the girls. Then we got the grant from the NEA so we could practice almost every day and have our own costumes and live music. I come home from work at the Bird Farm and all the girls want to practice. It makes my head feel so full! I love it!

After all that happened, I am the lucky one: to be alive, and to dance again.

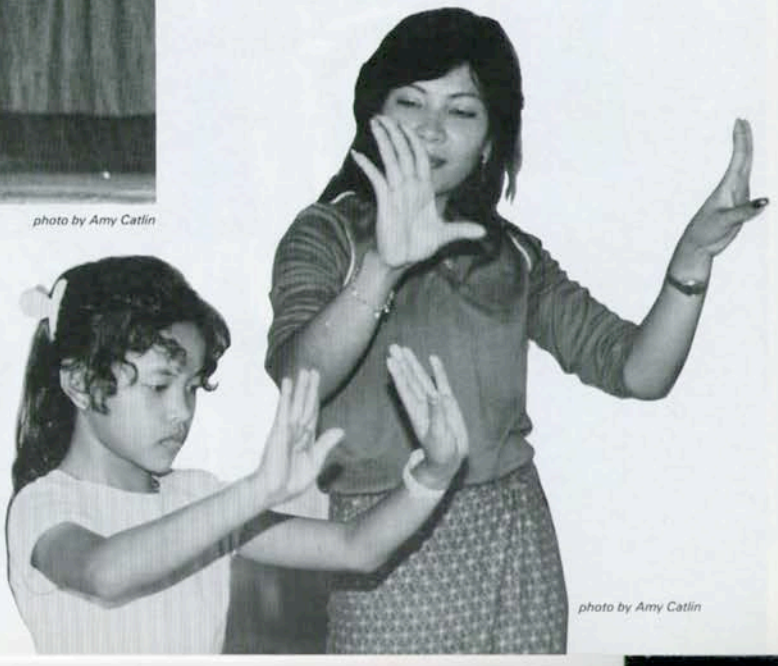


photo by Amy Catlin

Learning the hand movements: Ouk Sophanary teaches Nuth Kim-An during classes of the Cambodian Dance and Music Project of Van Nuys.

Pinthang Ouk

Dancer

(oral history as told to Amy Catlin)

I was born in Cambodia in 1975, and when I was only three months old, we had to leave Phnom Penh.

After that, my mom and dad and aunt had to work. I stayed with my grandma. She used to take care of the other old ladies, and the sick. I was always with her, so whenever they gave her food, I got some too. I was so fat my mom couldn't even carry me! Only my grandma could. She would take a *kramaa* and tie it in front of her and let me sit there. I loved to do that, and pull her hair. It must have been awful for her.

When I was five years old we went to Khao I Dang, the refugee camp in Thailand. I went to the school there, but I couldn't concentrate on the letters or talking. One day I was crying and the teacher hit me so I ran out of the school and went to my grandma. I told her that I wanted to quit school. Then my grandma took me out of the school, because she would rather let me dance. That's why I don't know how to write or read in Cambodian.

I started to dance every day. We used to dance Flower of the World, Parrot, and Cat dances. There were lots of others but I can't remember them now. I loved it, because I always was the leader. I didn't want to be in front, but the teacher thought I should, and that made me feel excited. Every morning I had to bend my back down and put both feet up on my lap, arch my back, and bend my hands. It really hurt, but when you're used to it, it stops hurting. At first I cried every day. We don't do that any more—we should, but we don't. My grandma says we should too.

I didn't dance when I first came to America in 1981 because I didn't know anyone that knew about this kind of dance. We just had to forget it. But then Khon came. I thought there was no interest in culture, but right now, we're growing. Last year we danced in a couple of schools, and the kids asked me how I did the hands and the action. I said that it was hard to explain but that you have to concentrate on how the hands go.

The dances we do now are Chuon Po and Apsara. The Apsara dance is a princess dance. She is a princess from heaven and she created the first dances about how to be like her. The Apsara dance is hard because if you dance wrong, people might laugh at you—the people that know. It's a lot to remember, more than ten minutes long. I already know the beginning when the first Apsara comes down with her friends to the garden and they all smell the flowers. When I learn the dance, first I watch Khon. If I know some of it, I do it by myself; for the rest I have to watch her. After I remember it all, I have to do it by myself.

I think I'll just dance for two more years. I don't think I could be a teacher, it's so hard. My grandma liked me to dance, so if I have kids I can teach them to dance like me too. If they grow up and marry and have kids, they would probably go on and teach it again. We don't want anyone to forget how to dance, and about our language. Maybe the little kids right now don't know what it means and what it is like, so that's why we're starting to dance and let people know. It makes me feel proud. It doesn't mean that we wanted to dance, but rather that we thought it was important.

photo by Irene Fertik

Chuong Sath (c.) and family: son-in-law Uy Sarik, husband of daughter Ouk Sophanary, grandchildren Pinda, Sophanara, and Pinthang, with their mother Heang Ly.

Professional costumer and beautician Chan Phuong In of Pacoima dresses Ouk Pinthang before a performance.

photo by Amy Catlin

Ouk Pinthang, 1987.

Learning is important for me in my life right now. I just started seventh grade. Every night I go to my grandma's altar and I pray that I will be smart. I want to get a really good job, like working in an office, or being a lady cop. Then I can get a passport and go to other countries. I want to be like one of my teachers who travels all around the world: China, Italy, France. She's not married now because she wants to have fun first. That's what I'm going to do. Maybe when I'm older I'll get married, like 30. I want to go to college. My grandma doesn't want me to, but I'm going to go for it, no matter what. I'm going to find a good college and get a scholarship.

On the first day of school, I dressed real fantasy, with my hair up. I like New Wave. The difference between New Wave and Punk is that New Wave dresses fantasy, and punk—well, I hate to say it out loud but they dress like a lady who works in a bar. Those girls really looked at me and tried to start a fight. They bumped into me on purpose, and started to get their friends. That's what I hate most about school. Some girls are nice, but some are really bad.

In Cambodia I didn't have these kinds of problems. Everybody just tried to be friends. Cambodia is way different than here. At my school there are only Mexican and Asian people, and a few Americans. I'm the only Cambodian girl in seventh grade.

Whenever I make my hair up and start to dress cool, my grandma says, 'Don't make your hair so high!' Whatever she says, I don't talk back to her. I have to put my hair down right away, or else she hits me. If she doesn't see me, I put it up high. I don't care what she says, but I still listen to her because she's my grandma no matter what. That's the Cambodian way—or else you go to the devil fast.

I don't want to have a boyfriend. Some New Wavers do, but I like to be alone with all girls. If I had wanted to have one, I could have gotten a boyfriend a long time ago. There are a lot of boys who ask me out from all kinds of countries. I tell them I don't want to, that I'm too young. If I get a boyfriend, then I can't learn. Even the Cambodian girls are the same as the American and Spanish girls now, so I don't like to be with them. All they think about is their boyfriends. They can't stop. I like to think about being smart, instead of thinking about guys. Anyway, I'm not even supposed to have one. If I do, I'll be in three pieces. You'll see me, probably five, a million . . . hamburger!

We need more girls in the dance group. The girls quit dancing because either they're lazy or their boyfriends want them to quit dancing. My aunt is always tired when she dances. She always has to change her costume, then dance again, then take it off, and start it again. I feel sorry for her, not just because she's a teacher, but because she's always tired. I want to help her. Every time we finish dancing I feel sorry for my grandma too. She has to get the clothes in the box and put it on the shelf. My grandma really likes to help people.

My mom doesn't think anything about dancing, except that it's great. She didn't learn to dance when she was little. She just lived with her mom and they were rich. My family were rich when they lived over there, but right now we're not. My grandma learned dancing when she was little and her grandmother did too. She used to do a dance like Apsara but a little different. Her grandma used to dance in a temple. They could cook too, the king's food. They were professional, called *mom kreung*. She was a professional dancer and would stay with the kings. That's how my grandma knows those kinds of things.

Chuong Sath

Altar Maker

(oral history as told to Amy Catlin)

I was born in 1920 in Kompong Chhnang, but we lived mostly in Phnom Penh after that. Both my mother and her mother before her were called *mom kreung,* one who prepares ingredients, spices, and food for the king. My father was a merchant, with a shop of general merchandise, in which the family members all took part. Most of my relatives were soldiers or teachers, wealthy and educated people who didn't have to work very much, well known people involved in politics who did not survive the Pol Pot regime.

My mother also used to dance for the temple. My uncle took her there to learn the dances. She would not allow me to dance, because I was her only daughter and she loved me too much to let me go. I stayed home with her. When the time for "entering the shade" came and I became adolescent, she kept me inside for only 7 days (*coul mlop,* "entering the shade" was a practice of confining young adolescent girls which had virtually disappeared by the mid-twentieth century.–ed.). Some mothers, especially the rich ones, kept their daughters in for a whole year! At the start, they planted a banana tree, and when it bears fruit, in about a year or less, the time is finished. Until then, the girl had to remain in complete darkness, dressed in long sleeves so that her skin became very white. Rice, coconut and black pepper was what you ate, and you prayed every night. It was like a prison. Then you became so beautiful that you might be kidnapped. My mother was kidnapped that way, by her cousin. After that she lived a luxurious life, without any work, so her fingers became very long.

From the time I was 18 I was known for my skill in medicine, just like my mother. People came to the house constantly for help with their health: babies, mothers, everyone. I learned in my dreams how to cure them, using the traditional techniques. Today I still use those for my family. I keep the special animal horns and antlers to make the powders that cure sickness.

How do I like America? Very well, except one thing: There is no place to walk! Old people like me used to walk everywhere in Cambodia. The shops were close to the houses, and there were neighbors everywhere to talk with. Now I just stay home and take care of my grandchildren, pray at the altar, and watch the dance classes. I talk to the children learning to dance, and tell them the right way to behave—the Cambodian way. I scold them when they are bad and listen to them when they need advice, and teach them the stories of the Buddha so they will not forget our culture. I do not want them to forget their language and their heritage.

photo by Irene Fertik

photo by Irene Fertik

photo by Irene Fertik

(top) Chuong Sath before her altar, surrounded with scenes from the Buddha's lives. She holds her mother's portrait.

A Buddha amulet carved into a boar's tusk, which has magical powers. This is kept on the altar on a salver (l.) along with folded cloth religious designs, a protective belt, the hair from an ancestor, and a ball of cat hair from a former pet.

Ngem Chum (1891-1958), mother of Chuong Sath, during her later years when her hair was cut daily at the temple as an act of devotion. The photo is mounted on the home altar.

Siv Khon

photo by Amy Catlin

Siv Khon receives dance instruction from Mme. Buth Krihsna, Cambodian classical dancer now living in Paris, at UCLA in September, 1987.

Dancer

(oral history as told to Amy Catlin)

My name is Siv Khon. Khon is my first name, that people call me. My father's name is Til Siv, and like some people in my country, I have his first name as my last name: Siv.

When I was a child I lived in Battambang Province. My hometown was called Roung. It was far from the city. My mother and father came from Prey Nokor, in Vietnam, and so they speak Vietnamese and Cambodian. They are both Khmer Krom, so they pronounce Cambodian a little different than other people. I was their last child. I had 3 brothers and one sister who had already married. Now I have one sister.

My mom and dad had a restaurant. It was called Siv Noodle Shop, and you could get all kinds of food there. I could eat there any time I wanted. We had about 5 farms for growing rice and my mom rented hers to someone. My mom, my sister, and my dad worked in the restaurant and my other sister, who died, sold shaved ice cones in a booth. She got married and lived in Phnom Penh, and they had a car dealership and repair shop. Now my brothers are all dead. One only drank coffee because he didn't like to eat the broken rice we had then. Pol Pot's soldier's really liked him because he knew how to fix cars.

When I was growing up, my country had a war with Pol Pot, and they told me to leave my home town to live in another town. I was about twelve years old then. They put me in the group with all the *kumarey,* the young single girls age 6 to 15; the boys, *kumara,* slept in another place. My sister lived with the teenagers from 15 to 20, in another town. My mom and dad lived far from us with the old people and the adults, and they had to work too.

Every morning at 8 o'clock I went to work. We were in the place where they grow cotton, and my job was taking the grass off the roots and the worms off the cotton. I was so scared but I had to do it.

We came back to eat at eleven. Boys and girls all ate together, standing in line, bringing our own plates and spoons. I didn't like it—we didn't have enough food to eat and I was so skinny. White rice and tomatoes, sometimes with beans. It didn't taste too bad, but we had to eat the same things every day. In the morning, rice soup, and in the evening, rice with tomatoes and corn or beans. Lots of things in it, and only a little rice.

The first time I learned to dance was in 1979 when I came to Khao I Dang Camp in Thailand. Until I was 12, I lived in Roung and just went to school. It was a temple school where we learned the alphabet, reading and writing. Before the war, dancing wasn't for people like us. It was for the king and only a famous person could dance. In school, sometimes they taught folk dances, but never classical dance.

My teacher in Khao I Dang was Mao Vicheth. He went to France and was killed in 1983 in a car accident. We had other teachers too. For four years, I learned every day. Now I know more than 30 dances, classical and folk. I was one of the best students, so they taught me a lot.

Ouk Sophanary and Siv Khon.

photo by Irene Fertik

Men Savoeun

Dancer

(oral history as told to Amy Catlin)

My name is Men Savoeun. I was born in Kompong Speu, in the village Somraung Toung. My parents were farmers for rice, vegetables, fruits, and everything. Then my father had to be a soldier. I had four brothers and four sisters, but now there is just me and my two younger sisters left. Luckily, I lived with my parents all through the Khmer Rouge because I was still small, but I had to work every day in the fields picking up the rice stalks.

I want to dance because I do not want to forget Cambodian culture. The first time I saw classical dancing, I was ten years old in the refugee camp, and I loved it. My dad didn't want me to learn, he wanted me to go to school, but my mom said I could dance. So I danced from 7 to 12 in the mornings, and then went to school for reading and writing in the afternoons from 1 to 5. My dance teachers were Mr. Khuth Sarim and Mrs. Van. He lives in Los Angeles and plays Lakhon Bassac, and she lives in Canada, I think. Kim Heang was also my teacher, and she lives in Los Angeles now too.

I saw the Khmer Rouge dance in Cambodia. They danced only about work and war, all dressed in black. I didn't like it, but we had to pretend and say that we enjoyed the concert. They were horrible, worse than in *The Killing Fields*.

I came to America in 1984. I like it very much. It is a good country. Even the police, some of them I like too. They just don't want us to get hurt. I am a student at Fulton Junior High. Last year we danced there for all the students and they loved it. We danced Preah Chan Korup to show why Cambodian girls don't like to talk to boys. It is not part of our culture to talk to boys, and we never touch boys before we marry. The other students didn't understand, but that is the Cambodian way, except for some girls who are changing. We also respect our older people very, very much. That is almost like our religion, and we can never change that.

photo by Amy Catlin

Men Savoeun at her wedding.

photo by Lou Jeanne Catlin

Men Savoeun guides the young dancers in Van Nuys.

Pich Chantol

Singer

(oral history as told to Amy Catlin)

I was born in 1950 in Kondak, and lived in Kompong Chham, in the village Srok Srei Sontol. In 1973 we moved to Phnom Penh. After 1975, I worked in a factory for making khaki cloth for four years, near Phnom Penh in Po Chintong. I escaped to Khao I Dang Refugee Camp in Thailand in 1980, and was married there the next year. My daughter was born in Chonbury refugee center in 1981. We left for the Philippine camp when she was an infant, and to Missouri when she was five months old. There we lived in Eldon, where my son was born in 1983. My children and I moved to Long Beach in 1984. I left my husband in Eldon because he was unfaithful. Now I work as a translator for dubbing Chinese films into Cambodian. After work, I go to school to learn more English.

I started singing for weddings only 6 months before I was married. My teacher was Mr. Cheang, who now lives in Washington, D.C. He is also very good at the funny songs called *ayay* and playing the hand drum *skor daik*. Last year I also sang for the dance, but it strains my voice too much. Singing for weddings is my favorite.

I miss my parents very much. They still live in Cambodia. Now the most important thing to me is to make life happy for my children.

photo by Amy Catlin

Pich Chantol sings for a wedding.

photo by N.A. Jairazbhoy

Pich Chantol sings wedding songs for UCLA Noncert, November 1986, accompanied by Prahlung Khmer ensemble, Kao Vinsay, xylophonist.

Malen Chhuon

Fashion Designer

(oral history as told to Amy Catlin)

My name is Malen Chhuon. I am originally from Cambodia. I came here 6 years ago in 1981. I was born in 1969 in Kompong Chhnang, about 50 miles north of Phnom Penh. When I was still a little girl my family moved to Phnom Penh because the communists burned down our house. We had to start everything from scratch because we didn't keep anything in the bank, since they weren't very safe; we just kept it in the house.

In Phnom Penh, everybody went to school except one sister. My dad was a businessman and my mom a seamstress, making clothes for people. That's how we lived until 1975. One morning we were having breakfast, everybody doing their own routine, eating and going to school. Suddenly we heard guns shooting all over. Everybody got panicked and looked out the window. The communists dressed in black, with guns in their hands, went to each house and told everyone to leave. My mom was so afraid, she cried. They told us we couldn't take anything except a few clothes and some food.

My grandfather suggested that we go back to his home town, Kompong Chhnang. My dad didn't want to go there, but he begged us to go there, so we did. We walked for about three months to get there. On the way it was chaos. Everybody walking with their families, crying, on the street sometimes I saw dead people. I was really scared—I never saw dead people before. We just kept walking and walking, and on the way the communists gave us some food. We finally got to Kompong Chhnang, and the communists told us to build a small shack for our family. Our family built it, and they gave us some food to eat, but not very much.

About a month later, everything changed. They told us to go eat at the place where they cook. They gave us just a little food, like two pounds of rice in a lot of water, some vegetables, no meat, and sometimes no salt. Then they gave us just a little bit, like this much (a cupful) of this soup. Then my dad got really sick. My grandfather got really sick. Everybody turned into a skinny stick. Later my dad couldn't walk, he was so weak, and my 3 older brothers were sent somewhere to work, I don't know where. My dad kept getting worse. We couldn't help him, because we didn't have any food either. He was just sick from lack of nutrition. He looked so hopeless. Later on he died. We were sad and cried. They told us not to cry, so we had to hide to cry. They watched everything we did and said.

Then my grandpa was sick. My mom and older sisters all went to work. I was home with my little sister and my grandfather. He was just sitting there. All of a sudden he fell down. I was so scared. I didn't know what to do. I ran over to where my mom worked and told her. She came home and looked at him. He was dead. Our family was sad again.

Later on they separated me from my mom. They took me to a place where they took all the little kids. Each morning they woke us up before the sunrise, and we would go to work out in the fields. We cut down small trees to make compost, cutting it all up in little pieces to put on the fields. I didn't know if it was Friday, Saturday, or what. For a while I cried every night because I missed my mom. I had never been far away from my mom. I was only 6 years old! Everybody cried at first, but then we stopped. We had to accept the fact; that's it, we can't change it. If we ran away

photo by Irene Fertik

Malen Chhuon, fashion designer, and mother Thang Tan, whose skill as a seamstress saved her three daughters.

to go home, they would catch us and kill us.

I didn't want to make any friends at first. I was too sad to make friends. Later on I made friends, but they weren't very nice. I lived in the city but they used to live in the country, and so they were more adapted to what we were doing. I never did this stuff! All I did was go to school. They weren't my type. They didn't like me very much because I came from the city. They hated city people. I was one of the few, the minority.

I was *so* skinny. I had to go to work every day, and not eating enough. It was really bad. I only had two sets of clothes. We lived in a shack, and sometimes we would go to work and it rained. The rain got inside the shack, and the ones I am wearing are all wet too because we had to work in the rain. They won't let us stop until the rain is really heavy. So sometimes I came home with wet clothes and nothing dry to change into. I would just sit by the fire and let my clothes dry, and go to sleep. We worked until sunset. So that was my routine.

We worked together with boys, but the girls and boys slept in different places. Their ages were a little younger and a little older than me, but not too much different. The bosses were the old people who were communist before our country fell, the Khmer Krohom we called them. We never heard the name Pol Pot. Everything was so isolated. We didn't know anything outside, not even the next town. All we knew was what we did every day. We never heard Pol Pot's name until the other communists from Vietnam took over; they told us.

Later I was sick, and they took me to a "hospital," a fake hospital without any real doctors. They were just people like us, giving us fake medicine. Now I'm scared of anything that looks like medicine. I'm serious! Even candy that looks like medicine scares me! They made fake pills, and now everything that looks like a pill scares me. They gave me a whole bunch every day. It didn't have any flavor; I just ate it all the time because I didn't have enough food to eat. I wasn't like the other kids. They would go out and find fish and crab, but I didn't know how. And I didn't steal either. You had to steal to survive. My mom told me not to steal, because at night they tied up the kids that steal and hit them, and they cry; sometimes they beat them up until they die. That was her advice to me. She cried when I left, but there was nothing we could do. If you said one thing wrong, you were gone.

The Khmer Krohom were all different ages, just like us. Their top people told them to do this and that, and then down the line to us. If they belonged to a Khmer Krohom family, the whole family was Khmer Krohom. The woman in charge of us was about 20 years old; she wasn't mean, she just did what they told her to do. She didn't act like a big sister or mother; they just treated us like adults, like any other person. I was so sick; I begged them to go home, but they wouldn't let me go. Later I met my next oldest brother there. He had the same disease. I don't know what they call it, but my body was all swollen up. I was skinny, but my belly was all swollen. I couldn't even recognize my brother! It was a shock. He was all skinny, all I could see was bones, and he carried a cane. Too weak to walk by himself. He was only 8 years old then, and bald. He knew how to get things to eat, and he was so good to me, he shared with me. Other people didn't share, even though they are brother and sister. If you're all fighting for your life, you know . . . He would walk out of the hospital and find something to eat! He was good at finding things. We hid it and cooked it. Later on he died there. I didn't know what to do. I just cried. I had nobody to talk to. I didn't want to take a chance of saying anything. Someone might want to impress the boss, and tell them what I said, and then they would kill me. It's better not to make friends. Acquaintances, yes, but not too close so that you share a lot of deep things with them, like your feelings. I couldn't trust them.

(The Khmer Krohom overhear Malene's sister telling an innocent story about a wolf. They misunderstand her and send her away for three months' hard labor. Then Malene becomes critically ill and is taken back to her mother, also seriously ill. They both recover, and are separated again.)

I got real sick again! This time, my mom was better off. She moved to another place in a bigger town. They knew that she could sew, so she made clothes for the supervisors and all those big people. They let her live in the kitchen house where the cook lived, so she could eat anything she wanted! Everyone treated her nice, because she made good clothes for them. The place was in Kompong Chhnang too. She was making clothes for the Khmer Krohom. She was the only seamstress. You know, I forgot to tell you, when you first get there, they check your stuff. If you have gold, diamonds, jewelry, they take it away. They said you're not supposed to have anything personal. They took *hol* (silk ikat), *phamuong* (striped silk) and *kranatpa* and everything because those are nice, and they gave it to my mom to make underwear! Shorts and underwear! Those people were stupid!

We never knew what day we might die, because if you do a little thing wrong, click, like that, you're gone. But I never thought of dying. When I was really sick, I never thought that I was going to die, even though other people thought so. They took me to my mom, because I was about to die. But I never thought I would die, because before the communists took over, my brother read all these magazines, and he told me, and everyone in

the family, that America is really nice, you know, it's just like paradise. I thought, gee, it's a really great place. I wonder . . . I just want to see it before I die. I want to see it first, then I can die! I won't regret dying! I thought that for real, I'm not lying!!! (laughs) So when I got really sick, I would think about America, and think, gee, if I can see it before I die because my brother told me that it's really nice, just like paradise! I thought it would have lots of flowers and nice people, nice scenery, no problems. I never thought that I would ever, ever have a chance to come here. I used to pray a lot. My mom taught how. Now I've forgotten. I know how to talk to God, to Buddha, because I was never exposed to Christians, so I don't know anything about that. I talk to God a lot, and sometimes, when I hear gunshots, I pray with those words. I really completely forget right now!

After I got healthy from staying with my mom, they sent me away again. This time it was by a small river, and when the fish season came, you could eat lots of fish. The land was not starving there. They made me a 'little nurse.' They liked me a lot! See, I met this nurse when I was staying with my mom. She came around to ask my mom to make her clothes. I knew how to step on the machine and make it go, so they were really impressed! I could make a straight line, because I saw my mom do that. So she took me with her to that river, and made me a little nurse. I didn't go to work like other people. Instead, I brought food to sick people when they couldn't go to work at mealtime, and boiled water in a huge pot. Every day I carried it from the river and put it in the pot, made a fire, and boiled it. It took me all day, because I didn't know how to do that stuff! I got a little at a time in a bucket. Those people who live there, they know how to do it right, but the river bank is really slippery. If you don't step on the right thing, you fall in! If other people had my job, it's like a piece of cake, but me, it took me all day to boil the water! I carried it on my head too, but I didn't know how to carry it with a pole. Almost everybody else knew how to do that, except me. They put herbs into this water from some tree or something, and they said it was good for you, like a medicine. I put those in when I boiled the water. Sometimes when it rained, the wood wouldn't stay lit! God, I could just kill it!!! (Laughs) Then sometimes I didn't boil the water, I just got it hot, because I couldn't! I pretended that it boiled, and when it got hot, I put the stuff in, and the color came out. I didn't have to find the fire, I just took it from the kitchen. I had the privilege of going up to the kitchen and eating anything I wanted. So, I was healthy.

It was the sewing that got me the job, but I didn't really do a thing. On the old machine, you put your feet on the treadle and it goes. Then they said, 'Wow! Look, it moved!' They were stupid, they didn't know anything, those Khmer Krohom.

My mother also saved herself by the sewing, but also because she kept her mouth shut all the time. See, under the communists, if you have an affair, you get killed. She never had affairs, but she saw the Khmer Krohom having affairs in the kitchen house, because it was a big house, and all those big people went up there. She saw, but never said anything. The lady before her got killed because she had a big mouth. I don't think there's anything that keeps people from loving other people.

Malen's mother Thang Than, a professional tailor, makes the traditional Cambodian skirt from silk ikat.

photo by Irene Fertik

That went on for a while. I was still less than ten. We moved from that river to another river further down, and I stayed with another cook. She liked me a lot, too. I got to eat with all the big nurses, so I was really healthy. Sometimes when I didn't have anything else to do, I would help her with the fish, when we got lots of fish from the river. I didn't learn much from the big nurses, though, because they didn't know anything. They didn't know how to read and write. I was better than that, I knew how to read and write. Those people didn't know anything at all, believe me. But they were just doing what they were told to do.

(One night the "other communists" came and everyone fled.)

The other communists were the Vietnamese. It was 1979, and we went to where my mom used to live. Everybody there had already left. It was so quiet there. No one there. I was crying, thinking, 'I'm never going to see my mom again.' But then, they knew where my mom went, and we were going there too, but she went there first. This big man took me to my mom because he knew my mom. So I saw my mom and sister there. Only my two sisters and my mom and me left, from the whole family. Before, when my mom was really sick, some people told us that they saw my brothers were killed, all three older brothers. But we didn't tell my mom, because she was close to dying, but we knew for a long time. I had 4 sisters and 4 brothers.

It was in the forest where my mother was, in Kompong Chhnang, on a mountain. We walked together with all those families. When night came, we found a nice tree to sleep under, to make a bed. I don't know how long we did that. Then we got to the foot of the mountain. The communist Khmer Krohom told us to go up the mountain, but we didn't want to go. Even my supervisor didn't want to go, because he had an old parent who couldn't go up there. They were planning to kill us because we refused to go up the mountain. They planned to kill us about 12 or 1. They had already dug a big hole. My supervisor told us that every person must have something in his hand, we must fight back. They told one guy to go out and tell the Vietnamese communists to come and get us. I didn't really know, they didn't tell me because I would panic, but everyone looked so quiet and sad. My mom was just sitting there quietly, you know, because we were going to die, and my sister too. Everybody was sitting hopelessly, they didn't say anything. We wouldn't go up the mountain because we would die there too, anyway, because there was nothing to eat. Some did go, and it was really hard to climb. We didn't want to take a chance. But it wasn't 12 o'clock yet. We didn't have the time; they had the time. Maybe it was about 10, I guess, when the Vietnamese people came in. I heard gunshots, so everybody said, "Run! Run toward the guns!" So we ran. We threw away everything except food. My mom didn't carry anything. My sister carried food and bags on her back and shoulders, and she ran. I took my mom's hand, and she was so panicked, her body was all soft! She couldn't even run! She fell down. I tried to get her up and dragged her out of there. I'm saying, "My God! I'm going to die any time!" The guns were "Bing, bing, bing" everywhere! I was afraid. Everybody ran, so I ran too. I saw people falling because they got shot. I was thinking, "Any minute now, any second!"

(The group heads toward Kompong Chhnang. Malene's sister is the only woman to go into the forest with the men to catch cows, running wild due to the disruption. She catches two, and keeps one to use as a pack animal for their water, food, and utensils.)

So we made it to Kompong Chhnang, and we decided to come to Phnom Penh. We walked for a month. My feet were all blistered because we had no shoes! Only the Khmer Krohom had shoes. My mom told me to put a cloth over my feet, and we did. Kids would look at me and laugh at me! They just walked with bare feet. When we got to Phnom Penh, we just picked a house, because everybody left their house and our old house was burned down. We cleaned it up. The Vietnamese communists were in charge. Those communists were better, because we could spend money, we could go to work, and they would pay us. We could eat at our house, whatever we wanted, and do whatever we wanted. This was the end of 1979.

Later on we heard that people came from America to start the camps. My mom found her sister (she had 7 brothers and sisters, and this was the only one left). She moved in with us. Her husband had gone to America in 1975, because he knew the country was going down. He sent his picture all over to look for his wife, saying that he will give money to anyone who can find his family. They were really rich. They found us, so we decided to go to Thailand and stay in the camp. She went first, and then we gave up everything again and went to the border. We asked for a car to hide in, because they wouldn't allow us to come. We had a friend who worked for the Vietnamese. He wrote a fake note to excuse us to go to Battambang. After the car reached a certain point, we had to walk. Some people took us there, and we gave them money.

Finally, the last chapter. They wanted money again to get us into Thailand. So we gave them money to give the Thai soldiers, to pretend they don't see us going in. But that man ran away with the money, so everybody had to run in. My mom was all soft again! The guns were shooting, because the Thai people knew we were coming

and we didn't give them money. My sister could have gone, me too, but we waited for Mom and went back because she couldn't run. The Thai guard caught us and hit my brother-in-law with the gun. (My sister got married after we came back.) My mom said, 'Don't shoot my son!' but they kept shooting him, and everybody was crying. They took all our money. They saw my dad's picture, my older brothers' pictures, everybody's pictures there, and they tore them up. Then they put us in jail. Later on my aunt knew we were coming, and so they looked for us in the jail. They gave the Thai guards some money, so they let us go. Then we stayed in the camp. My brother-in-law applied to come to America. He had a brother and sister in France who could have sponsored him there, but he didn't want to go there. He wanted to come here. He put an application to come here, and our name was called. Oh, I was so happy! When our name was called, thought, 'Now I don't have to worry about all the shooting, and when I'm going to die again!'

Anyway, I got to Oregon, and I was so happy! This is the United States! Wow! My uncle got us an apartment, a refrigerator, with all the food in there, the church gave us food and clothes. I was so happy I went to church every week! Especially in Oregon the people are so friendly, not like here! And in school the kids liked me a lot. They came to talk to me, but I didn't know how to talk! Then I was eleven. I never learned English before I came.

We came to Los Angeles in 1986 after Christmas. I graduated from Cleveland High School in 1987. Now I am a student at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in Sherman Oaks.

I always liked to sew. I saw my sister making clothes, like everyone in my family. When I saw her buying material, I would ask her to make this for me, make that for me. If she didn't have time I would take a chance and try it, and it worked! I kept liking to do it, so that's why I want to be a designer. My mother never taught me; she didn't want me to be a designer, but I saw her working, and I saw my sister, and that's how I learned. Now I want to get my degree at the Fashion Institute, work a few years for some company, and then maybe later on, do my own line of clothes.

It would be great to have a design contest at the Fashion Institute using Cambodian textiles. I'm just beginning, so I don't know if I could enter the contest. I design all my own clothes. Most of the Cambodians don't understand my clothes and my hair. They freak out! The back of my hair is so short, they ask me, 'Why are you cutting your hair like that?' I just say, 'Because I like it!'

I would like to take this opportunity to say thanks to America for making it possible for my dream to come true. Don't say it too much or they'll think I'm just faking. But that is really the truth.

photo by Irene Fertik

Malen Chhuon (c.) with her mother Thang Tan (c.), and two sisters Chanton Kammara (l.) and Kim Leang Chhuon.

Phan Ith

Phan Ith weaving at Khmer Women Weavers studio, Long Beach.

photo by Amy Catlin

Phan Ith, weaver at Cityroots Folk Festival, May 1987.

Weaver

My name is Phan Ith. I came from a village near the town Preah Neth Preah in Battambang Province, Cambodia. My family lived near the rice fields, and I helped them farm as I grew up. We had a very simple life. I married my first husband and we had two children. We farmed and took care of ourselves.

I learned to weave when I was older. Many of the weavers in Cambodia live near rivers, perhaps because more cotton was grown there. The rice farmers like my family lived more in the interior of the country. After the rice harvesting season, we would exchange our rice for cloth woven by people near the rivers.

There are two main kinds of cloth woven in Cambodia: *kramaa* which are like big scarves and *sarong* which are used like skirts, although men wear them too. The kramaa are made from cotton and used in our everyday life as a covering while bathing, a basket for carrying fruit and other things, a baby carrier, and a scarf for the head and neck. Sarongs can be made from cotton or silk, but the prettiest are silk which we always wear for special occasions and holidays.

I learned to weave when I lived in a refugee camp in Thailand. My husband was killed because he was forced to be a soldier during the Pol Pot time, but one good thing that helped me was that my two children could escape with me. We had so little food and were always afraid. But then we got to Thailand, and I met my second husband whose wife had died and he knew all about weaving. His mother had taught him and they wove after the work was done in the fields. He knew how to do everything in weaving and best of all, he can make looms. He taught me how to weave in the refugee camps and I have been very proud that I can now weave in my new country. Many Cambodians still use kramaas and sarongs here, especially in the house, though some of my friends work on farms and when they pick fruit, they put it into kramaa.

It is hard to make a living by only weaving. I have to work in an electronic assembly job during the week, and the other times I weave. Sometimes when I weave, I remember Cambodia and worry about what happened to my friends and relatives. Weaving is like a memory of what most of my life was, and how we could take care of ourselves. Now it is hard to learn English and to be comfortable, but we are trying.

Cambodian Weaving

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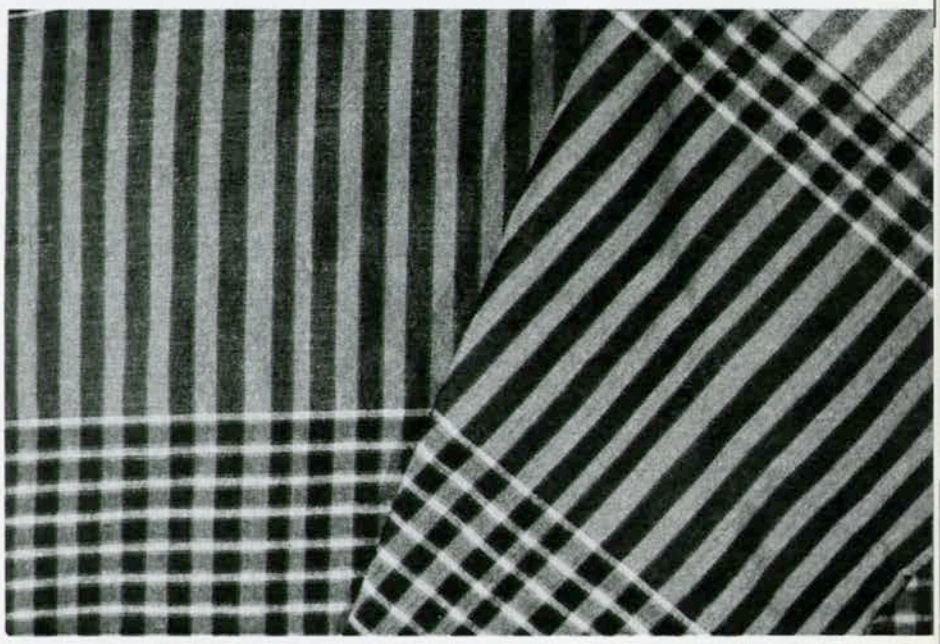
by Amy Catlin

The use of looms for weaving was a common feature of Cambodian village life. According to Gabrielle Martel, in the village of Lovea, near Angkor in Siem Riep Province, the looming of cotton cloth was often done by two families who cooperated, or in a few cases, by an individual woman.[1] About ten looms were in use in the village of 715 inhabitants in 1962, fewer than in the years prior to that time due to a decline in weaving. Each time the loom was strung, ten pieces could be made, although sizes varied; if half were sold, the cost of the thread (imported from China, costing 250 *riel*) was met and the five additional pieces could be used by her family as profit. The cotton cloths, called *konsaing* or *kramaa*, were used by women as turbans or wrapped around the chest as an upper garment, as a lower garment for men, or as a shawl by everyone. They also functioned for carrying articles, tied into a bag. Children played with *kramaa* wrapped and tied into dolls with arms, legs, and sometimes a shawl. In Lovea, the prominent colors were red and white, gingham checked or plaid, with striped borders; other color combinations and plaid designs sometimes signified a particular village or region. The Khmer Women Weavers Project of Long Beach produces multicolored *kramaa* of polyester threads which do not break as easily as cotton.[2]

Traditional Cambodian silk is woven in a number of different ways. The most labor-intensive cloth is the *ikat* type called *haul*, in which the weft is tie-dyed in small bundles, caluclated so that they produce geometric and floral patterns when woven. Formerly, such pieces included entire representational scenes, similar to those seen elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia. Today, the *haul* is standard formal wear for women's lower garments, topped with a lace blouse. The process has not yet found a niche among American Khmer weavers.

Silk is also woven into irridescent fabric called *pha muong*, the "shot silk" of contrasting warp and weft colors, and in the striped *anloeugn*, both of a heavy weight like the haul. The thin and patterned anloeugn stripes are created by threads which are partially wrapped in a contrasting color. Both are woven by the Khmer Women Weavers in Long Beach. Lightweight *sarong saut* (saut=silk) is woven into plaids with several bright colors forming squares, and is worn as a lower garment by men at home.

[1]Martel, Gabrielle. *Lovea: Village des environs d'Angkor. Aspects demographiques, economiques et sociologiques du monde rural cambodigen dans la province de Siem-Riep.* Paris: Ecole Francaise d'extrême-orient, 1975, pp. 166, 325.
[2]For detailed drawings and instructions in Cambodian for setting up a loom, see Pad Sirivad, *Khmer Weaving.* Bangkok: Khao-I-Dang Printing Project (1985).



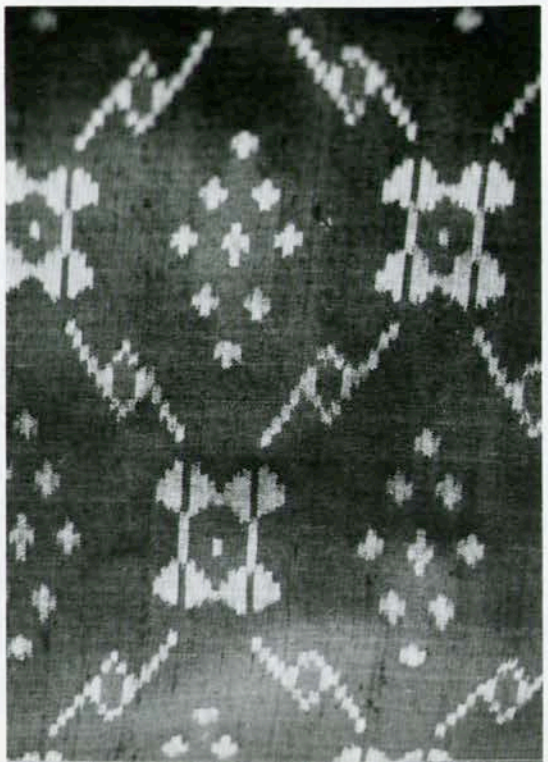


photo by Amy Catlin

Kramaa borders, made by Khmer Women Weavers' Project, Long Beach.

(top) Cover of Sirivad et al, Khmer Weaving. *Bangkok: Khao-I-Dang Printing Project (1981).*

Hol, woven silk ikat *pattern.*

Apsaras and Other Goddesses In Khmer Music, Dance, and Ritual

by Amy Catlin

The dance and music of Cambodia have been associated with ritual and royalty for many centuries. The legendary ancestors of the Cambodian kings were the hermit Kambu Svayambhuva and a heavenly dancer, the apsara Mera. Sanskrit inscriptions attest to the dance skills of the 7th-century Khmer king Jayavarman I, and five other stone inscriptions from the 6th to the 8th centuries give sacred and prestigious Sanskrit names to the dancers and musicians associated with temple worship. Carvings of flying goddesses called *apsaras* decorate many of these pre-Angkorean temples. Thus we know that elements of today's Khmer music and dance can be traced to ritual performances for court and temple originating a thousand or more years ago.[1]

With the founding of the Kingdom of Angkor in 802 A.D. by Jayavarman II, who returned from Java with a retinue including dancers that year, we begin to have temple sculptures and inscriptions which refer to growing numbers of dancers and musicians. Under King Suryavarman, the builder of Angkor Wat in the early 12th century, entire walls were carved in bas relief depicting scenes from religious mythology, especially the Reamke, based on the Indian Ramayana epic, which is still the most popular dance drama today. The 12th century king Jayavarman VII installed 615 women dancers at the temple Ta Prohm, dedicated to his deceased mother; in a second temple honoring his father, there were 1,000 dancers, and he installed 1,622 dancers in other Angkorean temples during his lifetime. With his death in 1218, the decline in the Angkor Empire began. Invading Thais abducted Khmer dancers in the 15th century and incorporated the practice of ritual dance as a symbol of royalty. Few references to Khmer dance are known until the 17th century, and those are only fleeting.

Dancers portray the Reamke *(Ramayana) characters of Lord Ream (Rama), Princess Seda (Sita), the white monkey Hanoman, and the ten-headed demon Lord Reap (Ravana). Above, the apsaras of Angkor Wat in bas relief.*

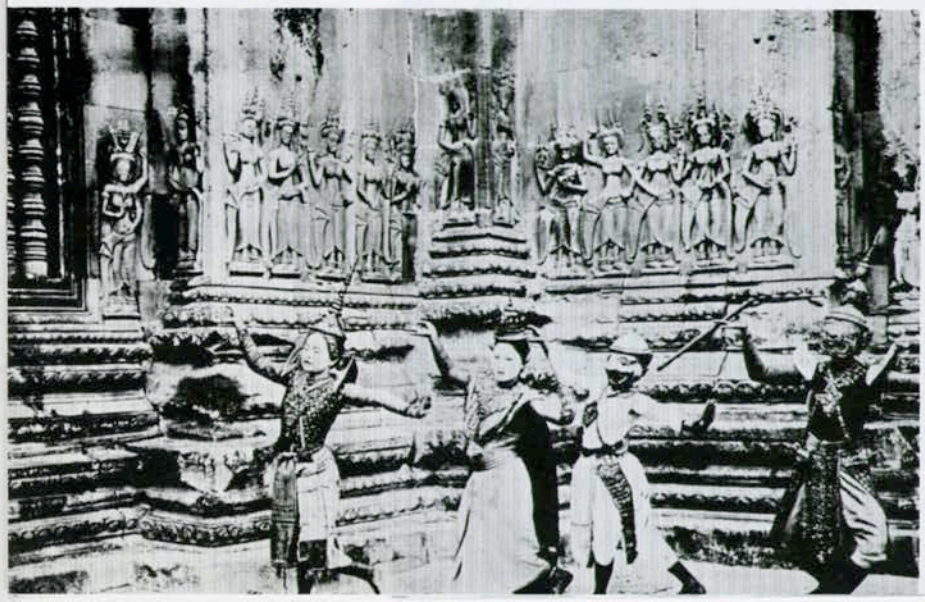


photo: Raymond Cogniat. Danses d'Indochine. *Paris: G. de San Lazzaro. 1932.*

It is the 1841 return of the Khmer king Ang Doung from 20 years' exile in Thailand that marks a turning point in the history of Cambodian dance. He devoted himself to the development of the palace dancers, as noted by various foreign travellers. The dancers were, as was the custom, members of his harem, described as costumed in Angkorean style, with loose sampots and silk scarves lightly draping the shoulders. It is believed that Ang Doung later changed many of the dance movements, eliminating rapid shoulder and chest motions, possibly a type of shimmy, as well as a full body shake. He also altered the costume, introducing the stiff and confining upper garments used today. He founded a palace dance school for girls and boys, and married men danced in his troupe. His son, Norodom, continued the tradition of supporting the dance as a symbol of royalty, and built the dance pavilion in Phnom Penh in 1866. However, the size of the troupe diminished from 500 at his coronation in 1860 to 100 after his death in 1904. During his reign, the viceroi of Battambang's dancers were described by one French visitor as superior to Norodom's, proof that lesser courts supported classical dancers as well. Members of two such private troupes joined with dancers who had left the palace after Norodom's death, and performed at the French Colonial Exposition in Marseille and Paris 1906, the first Cambodian performances abroad which incited riots in Paris because the hall could not accommodate the huge audiences.

Gradually the seclusion of the palace troupe was liberalized. King Sisowath encouraged his younger dancers to attend school, and the first performances outside the palace took place at the Saigon Exhibition in 1928, during King Monivong's reign (1928-1941). In 1931, a newly-trained troupe of dancers and musicians performed at the French Colonial Exposition, this time headed by Princess Say Songvann, who had recently left the palace. With continued French support, her troupe performed for many years for tourists in Phnom Penh and at Angkor, formerly the province of local dancers.

Under Norodom Sihanouk's leadership (1941-1970), the Conservatory of Performing Arts and the University of Fine Arts were founded, with degree courses in many aspects of performance, thus democratising the palace tradition. For the first time, the palace troupe accompanied him on foreign diplomatic tours to promote friendship with other nations. The Queen Mother Kossamak modernized many aspects of the dance productions, and performances for audiences up to 1,000 people were presented in Phnom Penh, as well as annual New Year performances at Angkor. At the palace school, hundreds of dance

Dancers of the Royal Palace, Phnom Penh. Photograph from Raymond Cogniat, Danses d'Indochine. *Paris: G. de San Lazzaro, 1932.*

students were taught on a daily basis each morning. The troupe maintained their reputation as one of the finest ensembles in the world, and their 1971 tour of the United States met with unmatched praise. Upon return to Cambodia, however, their activities were severely curtailed, in part because of the war, and from 1975-1979, at least half of their members were killed in Communist purges. The founding of the School of Fine Arts late in 1979 re-established training and performances in the classical dance which continue today; meanwhile, many Cambodian refugees have formed ensembles abroad with the skills they have carried with them.

In this article, we will present an overview of the images of female divinities—apsaras and the like—as found in the music, dance, and ritual observances of recent times. Although no longer patronized by the courts and temples, these dances and songs are fostered by Cambodian communities everywhere as vital expressions of cultural identity.

Although the actual compositions they performed are not known, some of the musical instruments depicted in stone at Angkor are still played today, notably gong circles and drums. Others have disappeared, such as the harps, and still others evidently are of more recent origin, such as the lutes and zithers. The oboes, still featured in weddings and dance programs in Cambodia, have yet to be heard in America, perhaps reflecting changing aesthetics. Similarly, some dance compositions and songs might possibly be as old as Angkor, but we have no clear evidence to support the case.

Both music and dance are considered to be appropriate offerings in Cambodian religious ceremonies, and are often included in the annual Buddhist festivals of Pchum Ben, 'Gathering the Offerings' for all deceased souls, and Coul Cnam, 'Entering the New Year.' Khmer communities here observe both these festivals, whenever possible including a concert of classical and folk dances which follow after the morning rituals.

Perhaps the most powerful ritual usage for dance and music in modern times is the ceremony called *buong suong,* a ceremony requesting a favor from heaven.[2] Any individual may conduct a buong suong ritual, which involves making an offering, often of music and dance.[3] However, the larger ritual has been conducted on a national level at least twice in recent times, in 1965 and 1967, when delegations of Khmer peasants from drought-ridden provinces approached the Head of State requesting that the *buong suong* be performed.[4] In his discussion of the royal *buong suong,* Cravath states that the ritual is addressed to a female divinity when drought is the cause. He describes the ritual as consisting primarily of sacred dances with music, many of which come from the series of dances (also named *buong suong*) involving Mani Mekhala, the Goddess of the Waters, and Ream Eyso, the Storm God. From their conflict, symbolized by the interaction of lightning and thunder in the dance, rainful results. It is believed to be the oldest dance in the repertoire. In the central episode, The Goddess of the Waters, Mani Mekhala, emerges from the sea holding a glittering diamond ball, representing lightning. She encounters Ream Eyso, the Storm Spirit, who tries to capture her magic jewel, but in vain. She dazzles him with its brilliance, and he retreats in anger, his rage creating thunder.

Mani Mekhala

The costume is studded
With shining golden flowers.
The belt shines brightly (mekhala*: belt),*
And the crown is very beautiful.
The highest woman of the world
Carries the magic diamond (mani: *diamond),*
The powerful jewel,
And she leaves her kindgom.
She dodges and parries and circles around,
Waving the diamond up and down,
Blinding the eyes of the giant
Until he falls.[5]

The theme of the temptress emerges in the dance drama *Preah Chan Korup.* A forest sage who has been instructing a prince, Preah Chan Korup, offers him a box made of *mora* stone as he leaves for his kindgom. The prince disobeys the sage and opens it before reaching home. The beautiful maiden Neang Mora emerges from it, and the prince falls in love with her, often seen as a very popular dance duet whose music is exceptionally beautiful. Later, robbers attack them, and in her attempt to prevent bloodshed on either side, Neang Mora inadvertently causes the Prince's death. She then joins the robber band, accepting their consolations. The god Indra brings Preah Chan Korup back to life and urges him to forget the faithless Neang Mora. Indra then

Apsara figures of Angkor Wat. Drawings from Sappho Marchal, Costumes et parures Khmers d'apres les devata d'Angkor Wat. *Paris: Librarie Nationale d'Art et d'Historie, 1927.*

transforms Mora into a gibbon, who frightens all the robbers with her horrifying—and hairy—advances.

Many other Cambodian tales depict women as evil temptresses, notably those who try to distract the Buddha from his meditations, such the three daughters of Mara the Earth King, Tanha, Arati, and Raga. The latter appeared in a dance drama created in 1952 for the reception of relics of the Buddha and two disciples in the Silver Pagoda, adjacent to the Royal Palace.[8]

Most dance depictions, however, dwell on the virtuous attributes of divine females, usually with their male partners. Tep Manorum, "The Love of the Gods," is perhaps the most popular of all classical dances. Originally a duet, it was made into a group dance for six couples in modern times. The singers' words request that all the dancers be transformed into apsaras and devatas; their wish is fulfilled and they enjoy celestial love together.[9]

Sovann Maccha and Hanoman, drawing by Phoung Proeung, 1980, a carver now living in Maryland.

Mani Mekhala is a favorite piece for concerts as well. The dancer's skill may encompass feats such as catching the glittering ball behind her back after tossing it high into the air.

Unlike Mani Mekhala, the Apsara dance is not among the seven extant ritually powerful dances. According to Cravath's theories, this may in part be because a conflict between masculine and feminine is not the theme of the dance. It recalls the standing bas-relief carvings of Angkor, both in its costuming and placid demeanor. Some dancers believe that the dance depicts the coming to life of those carvings. The apsaras are celestial dancers who entertain the gods in heaven. In this dance, the apsara queen comes to an earthly garden to gather flowers with her companions.

photo by N.A. Jairazbhoy

Prahlung Khmer, "The Spirit of Cambodia," musical ensemble of the Cambodian Dance and Music Project of Van Nuys, performing at UCLA in 1986.

Robam Apsara

Today I am very happy.
I see the flowers
Growing in the garden.

I will make a bouquet of flowers,
many bouquets,
And put them around me and on my bed.

If you like these flowers too,
I will give you this bouquet.

(Enter companions)
In the garden the apsara enjoys herself
With her companions.

The apsara picks up flower
And gives it to her,
For everyone to enjoy.

All this beauty
Has come from heaven,
Both the flowers and the apsaras.

They thread garlands of blossoms
To decorate themselves
From the jasmine
Which sway with their movements.

The frangipani flower garlands
Will be used to drape their bodies.
The apsara is the most beautiful girl
in the world.
She can make any young man's heart
fall in love.[5]

The Apsara Dance appears in Palace programs for foreign guests at least as early as 1948, although there are earlier references to dances which included apsaras. It became a showpiece for the Princess Bopha Devi in her youth, and was featured in a film by the same name which her father, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, created. The plot of the story involves a young man who falls in love with an apsara. No doubt the film had an important impact on the popularity of the dance.

The melodies for the dance are indescribably beautiful, with long, gracefully curving phrases gliding effortlessly through space. It is difficult to believe that the vocal melodies are actually pentatonic (based on five notes equivalent to the piano's black keys), given the fascinating and complex effects they create. Occasional glissandi slides between pitches, melodic ornaments, and non-pentatonic tones expand the five-note limits to some degree. However, the key to the sophisticated suspended effect of the phrasing lies in a rhythmic technique of modulation between weak and strong beats. A strong beat is thus made weak, or vice-versa, creating ambiguity in the metric underlay, and an effect of timelessness results.

The only way to do justice to the piece is to provide here a few analytical cues to the unknown composer's artistry. This transcription is taken from a tape of unidentified musicians and a female vocalist recorded at Khao I Dang Refugee camp, probably around 1980, in an exquisite rendition.

First, an instrumental prelude is played for the lead dancer's entrance. As in all Cambodian instrumental music, each instrument performs an idiosyncratic version of the same melody simultaneously. This has been described as 'functional heterophony,' because the musicians are deliberately straying from the melody in order to create suspension and eventual resolution when the melody is finally joined again.[6] The effect is something like lace, all strands weaving around a basic pattern. *(See Example 1: Apsara Prelude)*

The propensity for spinning out more melody when one expects a conclusion is already evident here, as the *tro* does not rest on the first degree (the note A) reached in measure 8; rather, the note has been prepared in such a way that it sounds like it occurs on an upbeat, enabling the melody to be carried for 8 measures further.

The singers begin the song of three verses, each sung to a three-part tune. Again, the composer's skill in reversing strong and weak beats enables the melody to glide effortlessly overhead, defying the pull of the inevitable cadences. These resting points avoid the finality of the first degree, settling instead on the more temporary second and fifth degrees (the notes B and E). *(See Example 2: Robam Apsara)*

After a transitional interlude played by the musicians, which picks up tempo and energy slightly to enhance the arrival of the apsara's companions, the singers perform a second song in a higher range. Again, three phrases of increasing lengths end briefly on the second and fifth degrees, giving a lift to the phrase endings which propels them forward. *(See Example 3: Robam Apsara)*

Having enacted each of the verses, the dancers conclude with the *sampeah* or *anjali,* a ceremonious and elegant dance interpretation of the Cambodian gesture of greeting and respect. The music plays in a melody and rhythm reserved for that action, followed by "flying music," or *chhoeut*. Here, the line of dancers exeunt following a serpentine floor pattern passing through all four corners and finally the center—the five directions of the universe.

A group of goddesses, or *tepthida,* appear in the greeting dance called *Robam Chuon Po,* "The Flower Blessing Dance." Each dancer carries a silver or golden bowl or salver containing flower petals from heaven, tossed toward the audience

photo by Amy Catlin

The singers Pich Chantol and Che Song review the song texts before the UCLA Concert of Cambodian wedding music in November 1985, with translator Nam Ros (l.).

photo by Amy Catlin

Man Chhoeuy stringing the UCLA gong circle.

as an expression of goodwill and good luck to all present. Hence, it is also called *Bai Pka,* colloquially *Tossing Flowers;* another title, *Sinuon,* is the name of the tune accompanying the dance.

Robam Chuon Po

Please, see us all joined in harmony
Together we develop, improve,
and become better
Like the unity of the world, brightly shining

This is the dance of flowers,
Thrown and offered freely
To greet the whole country
Everyone please enjoy life
In all directions, good evening

Another favorite dance depiction of a divine female is the Princess of the Underworld, who transforms herself into a beautiful goldfish, called Sovann Machha (gold + fish). She is the daughter of the ten-headed demon king in the epic dance drama derived from the Indian *Ramayana.* Her appearance is not found in the Sanskrit original, although it does appear in several Indian vernacular versions, as well as in Laos.[7] In this duet, Sovann Machha is seduced by the magical white monkey Hanuman, partly to dissuade her from tearing down the bridge being built to rescue the Princess Seda. It is danced to instrumental music, without voices, and provokes laughter at Hanuman's simian antics, in contrast to Sovann Machha's imperturbable beauty.

Gong circle player depicted in a bas-relief at Angkor Wat, East side, 16th century A.D.

Chhim Chandara, former soloist with the Cambodian Royal Ballet, performing the apsara dance at UCLA in 1986.

photo by Amy Catlin

Pinthang Ouk dances the Flower Blessing Dance for the Western International Studies Consortium, 1987.

photo by Amy Catlin

Both dance performances and weddings begin with a prelude called *Homrong* or *Twai Kru,* "Respect to the Teacher." It is addressed to the *kru,* (*guru*), a spirit representing all honored teachers, as well as to the angels—apsaras, devatas, tepthidas—and guardian spirits.

Homrong

I pray to god and all the angels in heaven
*To the guardian spirits (*neak tha*)*
From all directions, come together
Give happiness to us all—
We represent all humanity[10]

During the course of a wedding, two singers, one male and one female, portray the visiting *tevota* and *tephtida,* god and goddess from heaven. They are addressed by these names throughout the ceremonies. Sometimes they dance, encircling the couple while singing the songs for each stage of the ceremony, accompanied by the musicians seated nearby. Instruments may include the *roneat* xylophone, *takkei* lute, *tro* 2-stringed bowed lute, *khim* hammered dulcimer, *sko dai* hand drum, and *khluy* fipple flute, played by men. One of the singers keeps time with a pair of bronze finger cymbals, *chhing,* constantly alternating open ('chhing') with closed ('chap') strokes.[11]

After the procession of gift-bearers and musicians, the singers sing "Crossing the Ocean" on behalf of the groom. The title refers to the great symbolic distance he must cross before marrying the bride . . . whom he may know only slightly before the wedding.

Kat Traoiy: Crossing The Ocean
sung by Mrs. Chhe Song

Oh darling, today is a good day
The most wonderful moment
To bring gifts

The rarest treasure
Kept for you only
Brought to you

My new parents
Please feel free
To accept these gifts

Including pork, duck, chicken,
Fresh fruit, areca nut, cigarettes . . .
For my new parents

The bride waits in her chambers behind a curtained doorway. Songs are sung to her by the singers, such as the following.

APSARA

Ex. 1

TRO

tr

tr

RIT

Ex. 2

Ex. 3

photo by Amy Catlin

The dancing singers at Cambodian weddings portray a tevota god and apsara goddess, encircling the groom and bride.

Pat Chiiyei Klaay: Open The Curtain
"New Version" sung by Mrs. Pich Chantol

Oh, the sun goes down
Darling, all the living creatures chatter
It sounds as if the forest will explode

Oh, males and females
Fly up high in the sky
Very happy before nesting . . .
Nesting!

Oh, here comes the evening breeze
We both are very happy
Like birds going to their nests . . .
Nesting!

Cloudy skies
Cold like you and me
We meet to talk of love
With all our hearts

Pat Chiiyei On: Open The Curtain
"original version," sung by Mrs. Chhe Song

Oh my dear
Please open the curtain
And come join me

This moment is the best of all
The families are all together
The song and the music sound wonderful
The matchmaker smiles
Because the best moment is coming
The bride and groom
join together in the morning
The best man
And the maid of honor
The best moment arrives
What are you waiting for?
Oh my dear,
Come join me,
Come join me!

The entire occasion is full of laughter, chatter, and fun, even during the ceremony, in contrast to our often somber interpretation of the word "ritual." The singer must dance during the following song, teasing the bride and groom with a red scarf. She invokes the Earth Goddess, Neang Hing Pra Thoni (Thorani) for fertility.

Konsaing Krohom: The Red Scarf
sung by Mrs. Chhe Song

Quiet night
Creatures cry in the distance

At eight o'clock
Please come, achaa *(lay monk) of*
Pielii (mythical town)
And Neang Hing Pra Thoni
(Goddess of the Earth)
Give your blessings

Preparing delicious food
Giving blessings to the bride and groom

Red scarf
I carefully guard it
Not using it
Fearful that it will lose
The scent of my beloved

Many more stages follow, including the symbolic cutting of hair by the two singers in a danced song. Formerly the marriage would last for three days, but now it is compressed into one, with multiple changes of costume by the bride and groom to cre‹te the illusion of the passage of time.

In a brief reversal of the mundane and the celestial, the hitherto heavenly singers close with a few improvised dialogue songs called *ayay,* on distinctly worldly topics to entertain the bride and groom, now enthroned as if they were a king and queen. Their exchanges provoke bursts of laughter from all present, as in the following excerpt, partly sung, and partly spoken.

Ayay
performed by Mr. Chhuang Naht
and Mrs. Pich Chantol

Man: *In Long Beach the widows cry for their husbands*
In Van Nuys the widows cry for a necklace.
Woman: *Every day I pray to meet you. Now at last you are here. What shall we talk about?*
Man: *Widows only cry at night.*
Woman: *You are an educated man, but you only talk about nighttime. Why is that?*
Man: *I am so handsome that more than twenty*

widows call out when I walk in the market.
Woman: *I have come here and would like to love him, but his face is so ugly, it looks like a burning pan! If you just look, you will see that his nostrils are bigger than his eyes!*

Let's say goodby. But first, I would like to hear a sweet song.

The singers take their leave of the *achaa,* the lay minister presiding over the ceremony, jokingly referring to the appointments they must keep in heaven where they reside, and saying that they would prefer to leave before the next earthquake. They sing their final song, a poignant and langorous one replete with melodic ornaments and improvised embellishments.[12]

Sooriya Langiec Tngay: "Sunset"
sung by Mrs. Chhe Song

The time of sunset, euy . . .
The wild oxen, euy . . .
Graze on the slopes

Small ones graze together, euy . . .
Big ones graze together, euy . . .
Graze on the slopes, euy . . .
They drink along the stream

Oh stream, do not flow
Oh stream, do not flood
Wait until she has passed . . .
Then flood!

The bride and groom now retire—with a retinue of curious onlookers and playful hecklers—to the decorated bridal chamber where they feed one another fruits in a hilarious display. Then food is served and the feasting continues for the rest of the day and night, accompanied by modern bands as couples dance the latest social dances in high fashion formal attire.

Thus, today's apsara has traversed many centuries, recalling the images of Angkor in dance, song and ritual.[13] Her presence is perhaps more strongly felt than ever, a beneficent symbol of rejuvenation after a time of crisis. Cambodian women and men join together in summoning her forth from the misty heavens to bless the present, and we all welcome her arrival in America.

NOTES

[1]For a wealth of historical information on Cambodian classical dance, as well imaginative, if controversial, speculations on the subject, see Cravath, Paul, *Earth In Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia,* unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1985, 659 pp. The present article could not have been written without the benefit of this work.
[2]Cravath, op.cit., 565-569.
[3]For example, a Khmer woman in Van Nuys recently arranged a small *buong suong* ceremony conducted before her home altar, at which musicians and dancers performed.
[4]"Sacred Dances," *Kambuja,* September 15, 1965, p. 19. "Sacred Dances at the Palace to Bring Rain," *Kambuja,* August 15, 1967, p. 23.
[5]Translation by Say Sara, Sek Meu Racy, and Amy Catlin
[6]Translation by Say Sara, Sek Meu Racy, and Amy Catlin
[7]For references to other appearances of the Sovann Machha episode, see Sahai, Sachchidanand, *The Ramayana: A Study of the Gay Dvorabhi.* Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1976, p. 24.
[8]The term 'functional heterophony' was coined by N.A. Jairazbhoy.
[9]Cravath, op.cit, p. 345
[9]ibid., p. 361
[10]Translations of this and the wedding songs following by Nam Ros and Amy Catlin from a concert of wedding music performed by Prahlung Khmer at UCLA on November 14, 1986
[11]For a detailed discussion of the instruments used in wedding ensembles in Cambodia, see Brunet, Jacques, "l'Orchestre de mariage cambodgien et ses instruments" in *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient,* Volume 66, 1979, 203-247.
[12]For examples of wedding music recorded in Cambodia by faculty of the University of Fine Arts, see the LP entitled *Traditional Music of Cambodia,* Compiled, Performed, and Annotated by Sam-Ang Sam. Middletown, CT: Center for the Study of Khmer Culture, 35 Knowles Avenue, Middletown, CT 06457.
[13]A cassette tape illustrating the present article contains recordings made by the author in the Los Angeles area as well as in refugee camps in Thailand. See *APSARA: Songs of Khmer Women.* Van Nuys, CA: Bagh e Ashraf, 6539 Greenbush Avenue, Van Nuys, CA 91401.

Suggested further reading: Ebihara, May. "Khmer Village Women in Cambodia: A Happy Balance" in Carolyn Matthiasson, ed., *Many Sisters: Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective.* NY: Free Press/Macmillan, 1974, 305-347.

Note: Due to the popular nature of the exhibit, Khmer words are transcribed from speech for ease of pronunciation, rather than being transliterated from Khmer spellings.

Daily dance practice in Van Nuys, at the home of teacher Ouk Sophanary.

photo by Amy Catlin

Apsara-Angkor Thom.

The Apsara and class schedule posted in Khao I Dang refugee camp, Thailand, 1980.

"Everything is art. I am very pleased and proud to see Cambodian art honored here. Very soon, I hope to see our culture flourish in Cambodia again."

– **Haing Ngor,**
Academy Award-winning actor,
The Killing Fields, *and author of*
Cambodian Odyssey.