

Philip Geisler

Cambodian Court Dance After Genocide

Embodied Heritage and the Limits of Critique



Essay

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Philip Geisler, Cambodian Court Dance After Genocide:
Embodied Heritage and the Limits of Critique

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under the Khmer Rouge.

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Embodied Heritage and the Limits of Critique

Contemporary Cambodian royal court dance poses are often claimed to be part of an uninterrupted continuity of tradition proven by the 12th-century bas-reliefs of dancers at Angkor Wat. However, the types of dance performed in this period remain unknown. This essay examines how French colonial politics utilized a wide range of representation to create an aesthetic that persuaded constituencies in Europe and Asia to find a cultural essence in the genre's form. Assessing the interplay of cultural practices based in embodiment and the epistemological system of representationalism that fosters absence, the essay traces the process of authenticating dance as an intangible tradition in the modern era. Today, this creation has become a nationalized heritage backed by UNESCO. In Cambodia's post-genocide society, though, the dance's status as world heritage empowers activist contestations of its institutionally authorized forms that serve to heal trauma and socially emancipate marginalized groups. Such non-official incorporations function as embodied archives that call upon secular scholarship to reframe its methods through empathy.

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Cambodian Court Dance After Genocide: Embodied Heritage and the Limits of Critique

The importance of an art form for a nation could be measured by the extent to which it transcends the materiality, media, and places of its representation. In Cambodia,¹ dancers are made of sandstone and flesh, of watercolors and toner. They appear all over the country, from official mediatised receptions to informal rural gatherings. In Angkorian reliefs, wafting spirits transformed into icons of world heritage have performed their celestial dances for over 900 years (Fig. 1). In carved vitrines, museums display the worldly traces of these ethereal beings through jewelry, adornment, and photographs (Figs. 2a-c). In sterile national authority offices, charts arrange canons of hand positions (Fig. 3). And behind modest, green courtyards, small dance companies perform choreographies of death and trauma, having

1 ART HISTORIES AND AESTHETIC PRACTICES, based at the Forum Transregionale Studien (Berlin) from 2013 until 2019, explored transregional histories of art and aesthetic practices in particular world regions through Traveling Seminars. In 2019, the Traveling Seminar, titled “Cultural Heritage and Post-Genocide Memory”, took place in Cambodia, where I first presented the ideas outlined here. The seminar was organized by Hannah Baader (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck-Institut), Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier (University of Nottingham/ART HISTORIES Fellow 2018/19), and Gerhard Wolf (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck-Institut). Over nearly the entire duration of the fellowship program, I was privileged to be part of its staff. With this essay, I wish to express my gratitude for my time there. I am especially grateful to Hannah Baader, Gerhard Wolf, Georges Khalil, the ART HISTORIES Fellows of 2013-19, and my colleagues at the Forum for their lasting impact on my own approaches to scholarship. I also thank Kent Davis, Lisa Phongsavath, Haytham Bahooora, Natchiket Chanchani, Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier, Moritz Buchner, Jenny Meurer, Claudia Pfitzner, Caroline Clymer, Wulan Dirgantoro, Wendy Shaw, and Bertrand Porte who assisted in the editing of this essay and offered helpful comments. Finally, I am grateful to DatASIA Press, New Cambodian Artists, Sophie Shapiro, Prumsodun Ok, Joel G. Montague, Diethard Ande/White Lotus Press, the Groslier family, the Musée Rodin, and the National Museum of Cambodia for granting me permission to include their images in this essay.



Fig. 1
Celestial women, often framed as Apsaras, with legs in flying posture in a bas-relief depicting the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk* at Angkor Wat, 12th century.

been denied access to larger stages and cultural sites. Cambodia's most revered artistic practice materializes in manifold forms.

In all these forms, dance interweaves past and present – heritage, memory, and trauma – in cross-temporal and cross-geographical ways. It intimately entangles place and time through the medium of embodiment. Though this is also true for Cambodian dance genres such as *sbeak thom* (shadow theatre), *lakhon khol* (all-male dance drama), and ceremonial folk dances, the interconnectedness between Cambodia's past and present is most prevalent in the genre of *lakhon luong*, or Khmer royal court dance, which was inscribed in UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008.²

2 For an overview of some of these main genres of Cambodian dance, see: Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Figs. 2a-c
Vitrine at
Phnom Penh's
National
Museum
displaying dance
costumes and
photographs
from the early
20th century,
both produced
by George
Groslier's
Service des Arts
Cambodgiens.
Costumes made
of *khmok*
(lacquer) on
textile or leather
with gilding and
glass inlays.



Fig. 2b



Fig. 2c



Much of the evolution of this genre is unknown. Following the 16th or early 17th century, after its long history as part of sacred Hindu rituals and various forms of Cambodian Buddhism, it came to perform episodes of the *Reamker* – a Cambodian version of the Hindu *Ramayana*, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India.³ The forms of court dance seen today can only be traced back to the 19th and early 20th centuries with certainty. Narrating well-known stories of the *Reamker*, the genre must have also incorporated various new themes over the course of time, including folktales, stories of the life of the Buddha, worldly scenarios, and ceremonial dances.

In the past two centuries, almost all characters have been performed by women – adorned with golden headdresses, flowers, jewelry, and brocade skirts. In royal court dance, corporeal movement is slow and restrained, facial expression is subtle, and rhythms are measured. Formalized bent, arched, and flexed positions of backs, hands, fingers, feet, and legs elevate the fleeting poses. The dance is made of more than five thousand postures and gestures that, in their combination, slow-moving succession, and relation to costume, music, and choral chanting, conform to a complex narrative language with its own vocabulary, syntax, and punctuation.⁴

With a choir and pin peat orchestra, court dance is a sonic artistic form, too. The music predominantly features percussion instruments such as the *roneat ek* (xylophone), the *roneat thung* (low pitched xylophone), the *roneat dek* (steel key xylophone), gongs, barrel drums, cymbals, and the *sralai* (oboe). The orchestra improvises linear, heterophonic alterations based on the polyphonic stratification of several musical lines with simulta-

3 Ibid., 9. For an English translation of the *Reamker*, see: Jeanne Jacob, *Reamker (Ramakerti): The Cambodian Version of the Ramayana*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

4 Phim and Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia*, 13.



Fig. 3 Chart in an office of the APSARA headquarters in Siem Reap displaying various hand positions (*kbach*) of the royal court dance: Planting, Growing, Young Leaf, Leaf (top, left to right); Flowering, Fruit, Ripe Fruit, Falling Fruit (bottom, left to right).

neous variations on sets of pentatonic melodic motifs.⁵ A chorus chants poetic narration in high-pitched recitation, though the narrative meaning primarily emerges through the choreography and its intersections with these sonic elements.

“Renowned for its graceful hand gestures and stunning costumes, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, also known as Khmer Classical Dance, has been closely associated with the Khmer court for over one thousand years,”⁶ UNESCO claims, resonating with the conviction that many Cambodians maintain and that which tourists take back home. When critically assessing this cultural form, however, what can be seen in dance shows

5 For music and instruments involved in Khmer court dance, see: Denise Heywood, *Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods*, Bangkok: River Books, 2008, 114ff; Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower: A Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia*, Holmes Beach, FL: DatASIA, 2007, 193ff.

6 UNESCO, “Royal Ballet of Cambodia”, *UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage*, 2008, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/royal-ballet-of-cambodia-00060> [accessed: 01.07.2019].

today, in documentary films of the 1960s, or in engravings from the 19th century, cannot so seamlessly be related to such early performance practices. Similar to tangible cultural heritage, dance, as well, has been imagined and ascribed with cultural meaning in the 19th and 20th centuries. Much of what is framed as ‘ancient’ performance traditions today are colonial as well as nationalist inventions that were associated with the ideas of ‘ancientness’ and ‘origins’ through the ideological discourses of modernism in need of a traditionalized past.

In the first section of this essay, I will elaborate on how this cultural imagination of ‘ancientness’ was realized in the colonial and early national periods by intersecting ephemeral and intangible dance with architecture as well as visual media, and how, in this process of heritage-making, authenticity was forged as a quality of this cultural form. This first part essentially gives a summary of the current state of research on the colonial and early national histories of royal court dance, which I then problematize by making a larger theoretical argument about the methodological paradigms of secular scholarship in cultural assessments of a post-genocide society. Contrary to most research on the subject that dismisses today’s royal court dance in Cambodia off-handedly as a colonial legacy, I will foreground the many moments in which Cambodians altered and continue to appropriate this genre and thereby extend the embodied archive of Cambodian dance. In performance spaces beyond the official touristic stages, many artists today work on transforming the dance’s meaning and creating new agencies through subversive and postcolonial practices often grounded in the collective experience of genocide and strive for emancipation. With these new performers, today’s social and cultural relevance of royal court dance in Cambodia is still grounded in the lasting effects of earlier heritage constructions; yet based on this past and its status of world heritage, dance has become a prime prac-

tice of social transformation and of overcoming collective trauma, as I will illustrate in the second section of this essay.

From Embodiment to Representation: Authenticating “Graceful Gestures of One Thousand Years”

When assessing an ephemeral cultural form, one of the first problems concerns the question of what can be known about its early history. Of course, the figure of Shiva as the Lord of Dance was familiar to the Khmer of the 12th century. Vernacular inscriptions suggest that dance troupes associated with temples and the court existed early on. Written between 609 and 611 CE, *Phnom Prah Vihar*, the earliest Khmer inscription known to date, refers to dancers and musicians as slaves donated to serve the gods of a temple.⁷

While this hints to early dance practices as offerings inside temple confines, little more can be said about dance culture, including the training of dancers, up until the 19th century. With this lack in historical evidence and analytical presentations of dramatic art – as in the case of the Indian *Natya Shastra*⁸ – the types of dance performed in this early period remain completely unknown.

So then, what politics authenticated dance as tradition in the modern era and what were the aesthetics of persuading dif-

7 Mahesh Kumar Sharan, *Studies in Sanskrit Inscriptions of Ancient Cambodia*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1974, 197f.

8 The *Natya Shastra* is an authoritative text on the performing arts dated between the 5th century BCE and the 8th century CE, whose current form was possibly created between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, see: Natalia Lidova, “Natyashastra”, *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2014, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399318/obo-9780195399318-0071.xml> [accessed: 31.01.2020].

ferent constituencies to find a cultural essence in its form?⁹ For despite these fundamental voids of knowledge, an omnipresent claim in official, academic, and cultural debates has been the uninterrupted continuity of tradition in today's court dance poses reaching back to at least the 12th century.¹⁰

The strategies of producing an authenticated tradition primarily involved relating the intangible cultural practice of dance to the site of Angkor Wat, which provided irrefutable physical evidence and a monumental form of persuasion regarding its authenticity. This claimed authenticity was quite literally carved in stone through the claim of a coherent aesthetic between tangible and intangible cultural forms constructed in diverse kinds of visual arts and media, including painting, drawing, and engraving, as well as photography, documentary film, and theatrical displays.

The enterprise of making royal court dance a globally recognized form of heritage originated in the French colonial imagination of the 19th and early 20th centuries. For the colonizers, the idealized site of Angkor Wat and its bas-reliefs became the reference for constructing an unbroken continuity of tradition from a 12th-century architectural site to a 19th-century dance practice, based in the principal argument of a graphic continuum. It was especially the figure of the Apsara that, as will be shown, French colonial discourse and later Cambodian

9 I take up Mattijs van de Port's and Birgit Meyer's terminology and methodological suggestion of looking at how heritage, which is always constructed, becomes orchestrated in a dynamic of authenticating politics and persuading aesthetics rather than stopping at the constructivist conclusion that heritage is invented. Mattijs van de Port and Birgit Meyer, "Heritage Dynamics: Politics of Authentication, Aesthetics of Persuasion and the Cultural Production of the Real", in: id. (eds.), *Sense and Essence: Heritage and the Cultural Production of the Real*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2018, 1-39, here 2, 13ff.

10 See, for example, Princess Norodom Buppha Devi as cited in Heywood, *Cambodian Dance*, 6; as well as the UNESCO statement cited above and UNESCO's video listed below.

national actors as well as international heritage organizations and scholarship singled out as an unambiguous point of reference for 19th- and 20th-century dance practices.

While in the Angkorian period, many of the reliefs seen on the walls of Angkor Wat were probably understood as depicting figures of dancers, their iconography likely functioned much more ambiguously than construed in the written accounts of modern observers, such as French archaeologists and colonial administrators. Modern discussions of these figures distinguish unequivocally between Devatas (Hindu deities whose number is believed to amount to 33,000) and Apsaras (celestial dancers associated with the heavenly abode of Indra, a leader of the Devatas), and created clear-cut iconographic systems of assigning these two groups of Hindu deities to two general prototypes of visual representation, one depicting standing figures and one showing figures with crossed legs (Fig. 1, Fig. 4).

However, the meaning of the bas-relief sculptures of dancers at Angkor Wat might have been much more malleable, especially since Devatas and Apsaras share many common features: Both reside in the heavenly abode and both are skilled dancers that from time to time descend on earth and possess magical powers. This suggests problematizing the use of labels such as Devatas and Apsaras by assessing how figures of dancers functioned in semiotic ways. In fact, the reliefs' meaning might have been established and continuously re-established through their interaction with the practices that took place nearby or directly in front of their specific location within the architectural compound. As stated before, these practices must have included human dancers in the 12th century. Despite the effort of assigning clear iconographic meaning to specific figural forms, it seems likely that the boundary between Apsaras and Devatas and between dancing, flying, and other modes of movement central to Hindu divinities blurred. The boundary

Fig. 4
Standing deities,
often framed as
Devatas, in a
carved relief at
Angkor Wat,
12th century.



between dancing sculptural deities and dancing humans was probably not so clear either, so that meaning was reciprocally constituted through dance forms performed by humans and postures embodied in sculpture of a specific scale and iconographic spectrum. Thus, the overall distinction between the human dancers in the temples of the Khmer Empire and celestial Apsaras and Devatas was not clearly marked and our understanding of their connections might be much better framed through the concept of embodiment than through the concept of representation, especially given the importance of dance in Hinduism and considering the omnipresence of the *devaraja* (the king-who-is-god) as the legitimizing apotheosis of the ruling king, established in the early 9th century by Jayavarman II, the founder of the Khmer empire of Angkor.¹¹

The early colonial enterprise of constructing clear iconographic distinctions still defines the overall understanding of Angkor's reliefs and Cambodian dance today. It has to be seen as a crucial first step of colonial appropriation in the form of heritage making. Tangible and intangible cultural forms were inserted into a universalist discourse that could claim it for the cultural machine of preservation, based on the erasure of ambiguous spiritual meaning associated with the concept of em-

11 While in the Angkorian period, the king was certainly associated with the divine, there is a controversial discussion about the exact meaning of *devaraja* and the extent of its significance in the context of the Khmer Empire, see: Saveros Pou, "Dieux et rois dans la pensée khmère ancienne", *Journal Asiatique* 286, 1998, 653-669; Ashley Thompson, "Angkor Revisited: The State of Statuary", in: Jan Mrazek and Pitelka Morgan (eds.), *What's the Use of Art: Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2007, 179-213; Hermann Kulke, "The Devarāja Cult: Legitimation and Apotheosis of the Ruler in the Kingdom of Angkor", in: id. (ed.), *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia*, New Delhi: Mahoar, 1993; Kate Crosby, "Devaraja", in: Ooi Keat Gin (ed.), *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to East Timor*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clío, 2004, 418-419.

bodiment (equally relevant for bas-reliefs and human dancers) through the epistemological system of visual representationalism. This erasure of ambiguity and embodiment as overarching concepts even for tangible sculpture enabled the construction of a clearly denoted architectural heritage and its representational meanings that could then become the basis for ephemeral dance to be connected to and authenticated through them and to be framed as ancient heritage along with the architecture. As I will explain in the following section, the ambiguous (both heavenly and earthly) abode displayed in the reliefs of Angkor soon came to be pictured as cultural practice on paper, and henceforth produced through human performance in displays at world exhibitions and touristic sites in France and Cambodia. In being made a display of a larger reality, a modern colonial world of history and progress, representation and its media revealed themselves as the tools through which Europe could assimilate the colonial realm into its own systems of knowledge and make it intelligible. This representational system relied on and continues to fashion disembodiment, detachment, and absence, as Timothy Mitchell points out for the case of Egypt at the world exhibitions: “The representation was set apart from the real political reality it claimed to portray as the observing mind was set apart from what it observed.”¹² Compared with the 12th century, the dancers performing in France’s Colonial Exhibitions and at touristic sites in Cambodia signified a newly established interrelation between human performance and architecture, one that had been established through a modern, capitalist, and representational mode of understanding the site of Angkor and its sculptural dancers.

12 Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991, 9.

Media of Imagination: Colonial Creations in Khmer Royal Court Dance

During the period of the establishment of the French protectorate (1867), dance troupes performed for the Cambodian king during coronations, marriages, and other ceremonial occasions, but these were withdrawn from broader reception. The first public descriptions of this dance form, then, were made in French written and visual sources around 1880. Early on, they established a connection with the site of Angkor Wat and its history of being completed under King Suryavarman II in the 12th century. As Sasagawa Hideo states, a book from a French catholic priest described the court dance as an Angkorian tradition, an idea shared in the writings of the administrator of the French protectorate of Cambodia, Jean Moura, who insisted on the correlation between the dance form of the court dancers and that of the celestial dancers depicted in the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat.¹³

Visual illustrations of this idea circulated more widely than written accounts. Louis Delaporte, a French captain and participant of the French Mekong Expedition of 1866–1868 and the initiator of the Musée Indo-chinois in Paris, depicted Angkor Wat in his book *Voyage au Cambodge: L'architecture Khmer*¹⁴, published in 1880 (Fig. 5).¹⁵ As Michael Falser notes, the engraving contradicted the French discourse at the time. While other colonizers called for the reclamation and restoration of the allegedly deteriorated and abandoned temples, Delaporte portrayed the site in perfect condition, and crowded

13 Sasagawa Hideo, “Post/Colonial Discourses on the Cambodian Court Dance”, *Southeast Asian Studies* 42/4, 2005, 418–441, here 420f.

14 *Journey to Cambodia: Khmer Architecture* [author’s trans.].

15 Louis Delaporte, *Voyage au Cambodge: L'architecture Khmer*, Paris: Librairie Ch. Delagrave, 1880.

Fig. 5
Louis Delaporte,
engraving (1873)
showing a
procession with
dancers at
Angkor Wat as
published in his
1880 book
*Voyage au
Cambodge:
L'architecture
khmer.*



with people processing up the walkway or observing the spectacle from the sides.¹⁶ Part of the crowd is a group of dancing women in the front, whose skirts, adornment, and headgear are reminiscent of the costumes used for today's performances of the royal court dance. Delaporte stated that these dancers were the same as those represented in the bas-reliefs of the temple. For him, Angkor's walls did not depict heavenly dancers, but rather these corporeal women who, as the logic goes, consequently must have performed in the same way as when the bas-reliefs had been carved.¹⁷

The momentum of this image lies in its reflection of a colonial technique that staged and produced culture through world exhibition displays. Delaporte's depiction blurs temporal and geographical settings: Do we see his idea of Angkor Wat in

16 Michael S. Falser, "From a Colonial Reinvention to Postcolonial Heritage and a Global Commodity: Performing and Re-enacting Angkor Wat and the Royal Khmer Ballet", *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 20/7-8, 2014, 702-723, here 704.

17 Delaporte, as cited in *ibid.*

the past, or in the future, restored by French archaeology? Are his dancers performing this imagined cultural history in Northern Cambodia in the 12th or the 19th century, or in the heart of Marseille or Paris in the 1880s? Certainly, world fair displays resonated with Delaporte, but explicit Colonial Exhibitions only took place in France from 1889 (and, in the rest of Europe, after 1883). Taking up the visual rhetoric of industrial expositions and early European world fairs, Delaporte's engraving could be an important precursor of such later visual and performative spectacles that aimed to produce exotic culture.

Delaporte's combination of site and practice became powerful for decades to come, be it in French Colonial Exhibitions, where dancers from Cambodia performed in fake simulations of Angkor Wat, or in touristic displays of the early 20th century staged at the Cambodian site itself. Just as his contemporaries in Cambodia - French male travelers and officials - Delaporte never studied the cultural history or practice of dance itself, but stated its similarity with Angkor Wat's bas-reliefs based on subjective impression, as some scholars highlight. It was through personal imagination as part of a collective process of appropriation that a homogenizing view of culture evolved, in which tangible and intangible heritage were combined in a coherent exotic aesthetic. This visualized idea of coherence was so powerful that it still shapes today's cultural policy and production, both through Cambodian national heritage authorities and international organizations such as UNESCO.

Towards the end of the 19th century, retired court dancers helped spread their repertoire to rural areas, where it merged with local traditions. These forms were surveyed and documented as folkloric dance practices later on in the early 20th

century.¹⁸ In more urban settings, private dance troupes were established in the houses of court dignitaries and government officials, who wanted to partake in practices of courtly distinction through dance displays at private homes.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Orientalist imagination forged its own type of dance in France that resulted in a peculiar blend of both invented forms and fragments of different Southeast Asian dances. At times, this production of culture was remarkably contingent, as Jean-Pierre Chazal explains: When a fake Javanese village had been put up next to the Palais d'Angkor at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1889, prominent visitors, including Paul Gauguin as well as French journalists, mistook the Javanese dance – a performance of courtly prostitute dancers, as Chazal argues based on the four dancers' names – with the adjoining sacred Khmer traditions, relating the former to the reliefs of Angkor Wat.²⁰

The Colonial Exhibition at Marseille in 1906 again featured Cambodian dance performances (Fig. 6). What this fair staged as King Sisowath's (reigned 1904–1927) own royal dance troupe, though, was a completely different group of private dancers established by the French representative in Phnom Penh, George Bois.²¹ Not the king's, but colonizer Bois' private and recently formed group traveled to Marseille in 1906 to be misleadingly presented as Sisowath's dancers. This is an illustrative case of the performative dynamic of exhibition displays that often shape and constitute the cultural reality they assert to represent. As Timothy Mitchell highlights for the case of Egypt at the world exhibitions, the fairs created typical environments

18 Phim and Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia*, 73.

19 Ibid., 39.

20 Jean-Pierre Chazal, “Grand Succès pour les Exotiques: Retour sur les spectacles javanais de l'Exposition Universelle de Paris en 1889”, *Archipel* 63, 2002, 109–152, here 114, 131. Also Falser, “From a Colonial Reinvention”, 705.

21 Cravath, *Earth in Flower*, 124f.



Fig. 6
Front page of *Le Petit Journal*.
Supplément du dimanche, June 24, 1906.

Fig. 7
Auguste Rodin,
*Danseuse
cambodgienne
de face*, 1906.
Gouache,
graphite pencil,
and watercolor
on paper.



in which visitors coming from a displayed culture saw themselves represented and, in this very moment of becoming ‘objective’ onlookers of themselves and their status vis-à-vis other cultures and Europe as their center, were created as part of modernity, as well.²²

Indeed, Bois’ troupe had a lasting impact on modern European, and later Cambodian, culture that came through painting. The dancers’ acclaimed reputation in Marseille and beyond was quickly established through press reviews. Newspapers forged high colonial curiosity all across France that also led the dancers to travel to Paris in the middle of their stay, accompanied by a famous groupie. In the belief that he was encountering an authentic manifestation of ancient Cambodian culture, Auguste Rodin followed the group on their travels through France. He made and exhibited about 150 pencil and graphite drawings as well as watercolors of the Cambodian dancers, in whom he saw the principles of classical art materialized (Fig. 7).²³

“Il n’y a eu qu’elles et les Grecs,”²⁴ Rodin exclaimed, when he sketched the dancers with rough, animated lines of shapeshifting human bodies in many kinds brown shades. Rodin dressed the dancers not in their actual costumes, but in thin silk, linen, and heavier wool robes, placing in their hands statues and palms – Greek symbols of victory, as Erika Kinetz

22 Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 1f, 19f, 28.

23 Erika Kinetz, “Turn-of-the-century Apsara Drawings Come Home”, *The Cambodia Daily*, 2006, <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/turn-of-the-century-apsara-drawings-come-home-1160/> [accessed: 22.07.2019]; Thierry Bayle, “Rodin and the Apsara”, in: Stephanie Burridge and Fred Frumberg (eds.), *Beyond the Apsara: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 52–60.

24 “There have been only them and the Greeks [author’s trans.]”, Rodin, as cited in Claudie Judrin, *Auguste Rodin: dessins et aquarelles*, Paris: Hervas, 1982, 15.

explains.²⁵ Through his technique and subject matter, she concludes, Rodin Westernized and modernized the dancers. They were exhibited to great acclaim in France and Germany, generating as much publicity for Khmer dance as for Rodin himself, though the latter seems to have remained a rather Western success story. When in 2006, Rodin's drawings were exhibited at Phnom Penh's National Museum for the first time, one wing of the museum had to be extended by a humidity-controlled room to house the fragile paper drawings. As the French ambassador, Yvon Ro   d'Albert, declared that "France is attached to cultural diversity and to dialogue among cultures,"²⁶ Khun Samen, director of the National Museum, showed himself less engrossed in secular humanist ideologies of cross-cultural understanding through arts. His interests were more practical: "Though I have never heard of Rodin before, we permit the Rodin Museum to have an exhibit because we need the renovation of the room."²⁷

The exposition at Marseille prefigured what UNESCO still foregrounds today. It presented an imagined scenario of royal court dancers in an allegedly traditional setting of gestures, costumes, music, and environment. Prop temple architecture, which through a number of exhibitions from 1906 until 1931 gradually rendered the Cambodian imagery more alike, established a total environment for this performance of culture seen by Rodin as a shared heritage of antiquity. Interestingly, the Cambodian king himself took part in this heritage-making, as well, and his physical presence in France is an indispensable aspect of how the belief in witnessing an ancient dance tradition was orchestrated. As patron of the dancers, King Sisowath authenticated the art form through his own royal lineage reaching

25 For here and for the following paragraph, see: Kinetz, "Turn-of-the-century Apsara Drawing".

26 Ro   d'Albert, as cited in Kinetz, "Turn-of-the-century Apsara Drawing".

27 Samen, as cited in Kinetz, "Turn-of-the-century Apsara Drawing".

back to the same period as the allegedly ancient dance – a dynamic that echoes the concept of kingship through embodiment of the Angkorian period in modern terms.²⁸

Through cultural displays, art, and journalism, these practices became 'heritagized' and influenced common perceptions of what was to be conceived as authentic Cambodian tradition. In a colonial framework, the dance forms presented and reviewed in France did of course not remain in Europe. In fact, the exhibition displays impacted on practiced conventions of dance culture in Cambodia itself, as well, when one of the most central figures in the history of Cambodian dance, the French official George Groslier, took over the royal dance troupe in Phnom Penh in the early 20th century. Through a nostalgic ideology that longed for a purified colonial heritage freed from European and Siamese influence, Groslier crafted the genre's repertoire towards the goal of future performances in France's Colonial Exhibitions.²⁹

After the temples of Angkor Wat had become part of the French protectorate of Cambodia in 1907, the objective of homogenizing early 20th-century dance and 12th-century architectural culture reached unprecedented heights under Groslier's colonial enterprise. A French citizen born in Cambodia, who France sent to survey the monuments of Angkor Wat after their restoration had become of prime importance, Groslier was as devoted to the intangible cultural practice of dance as he was to monumental architectural sites. Based on a three-week research trip in 1911, he wrote the book *Danseuses cambodgiennes anciennes et modernes*.³⁰ Here, as in many following publications, he

28 Astrid Nor  n-Nilsson, *Cambodia's Second Kingdom: Nation, Imagination, and Democracy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2016, 75.

29 Sasagawa, "Post/Colonial Discourses", 424, 427.

30 George Groslier, *Danseuses cambodgiennes anciennes et modernes*, Paris: Chal-

used a rhetoric that emphasized the decline of court dance under its current practitioners, teachers, and institutional frameworks.³¹ The publication was illustrated with sketches of the dancers, through which Groslier implied their emergence from the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat (Fig. 8). Groslier imagined the existence of a pure – meaning ancient and unchanged – Angkorian dance tradition without foreign influences and consistent with tangible heritage – a discursive formation that had emerged in Europe through Rodin and others. He made the implementation of this colonial fantasy a prime goal of his future institutional and cultural engagement in Cambodia. Fashioning himself as beyond Eurocentric colonial agendas, Groslier criticized Western influence in Cambodia and the Europhilia among members of the royal court while taking over and founding essential cultural institutions in Phnom Penh to contain the cultural crisis caused, in his view, not by France, but by the influence of the Siamese court on Cambodian culture.³²

This essentialist logic that continues in many framings of Cambodian dance today dismisses a historic period of 400 years, in which Cambodian court dance had continued to be practiced at the Siamese courts of Ayutthaya and Bangkok, after the dissolution of Angkor in the 15th century.³³ Up until today, the questions of which elements of a previously-Angkorian dance form were preserved in Siam and how they were altered, which aspects of dance derived from indigenous ritual, and which components might have been influenced by the dance forms of ancient Indian or neighboring cultures, which might

lamel, 1913, trans. Kent Davis (ed.), *Cambodian Dancers: Ancient and Modern*, Holmes Beach, FL: DatASIA, 2010.

31 Sasagawa, "Post/Colonial Discourses", 423f.

32 Ibid., 425.

33 Julio A. Jeldres and Somkid Chaijitvanit, *The Royal Palace of Phnom Penh and Cambodian Royal Life*, Bangkok: Post Books, 1999, 96.

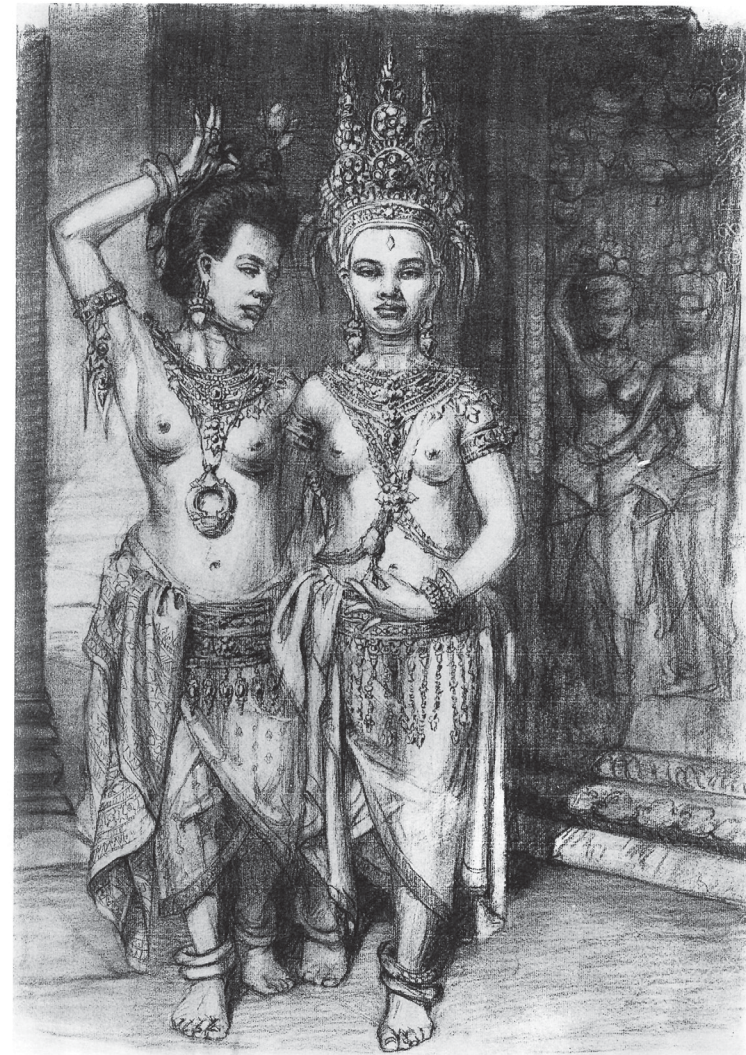


Fig. 8
George Groslier, sketch of Cambodian dancers in front of a relief at Angkor Wat as published in his 1913 book *Danseuses cambodgiennes anciennes et modernes*.

Fig. 9
Two Cambodian dancers, Nou Nâm (left) and Ith (right), on the same plate produced as part of George Groslier's photographic campaign (1927) documenting the postures of royal court dance in a studio at Phnom Penh's Musée Albert Sarraut (today's National Museum).



have already been under the cultural influence of India before possibly impacting Cambodian dance, remain unresolved.

Thus, thinking about Cambodian dance in a postcolonial perspective means to understand performance as a both regional and also transregional configuration established through possible influences from the Siamese court as well as broader regional culture and later French colonial imagination.³⁴ Certainly in this process and long before the colonial period, the archive of dance, composed of its practice and its practitioners, underwent substantial transformation in moments such as the arrival of Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia, out of which new dance genres and musical ensembles must have evolved. Following colonialism, this embodied archive was purposefully and forcibly restructured again, and several institutional meas-

34 These are two possible transregional elements in Khmer dance mentioned by Heywood, *Cambodian Dance*, 39.

ures were taken to guarantee France's control over this intangible cultural practice.

The School of Arts was founded in Phnom Penh in 1919 as a precursor of today's Conservatory of Performing Arts. In 1920, several other institutions emerged that were essential for the reshaping of court dance. The Musée Khmer was reorganized and Groslier founded the Musée Albert Sarraut, the predecessor of Cambodia's National Museum. He also became the first director of the Service des Arts Cambodgiens and surveyed the countryside to record artisanal and local practices.³⁵ With his newly gained political power, and after Cambodian dancers had again performed in a Colonial Exhibition in Marseille in 1922, unleashing unprecedented popularity in France, Groslier eventually assumed institutional control of the royal dance troupe to prevent its alleged decline.

Obscured through the rhetoric of reform, the royal palace was divested of its dance troupe in 1927.³⁶ The dancers were taken under the auspices of Groslier's Service through which he intervened in their training, education, and costume design. After photography had first played a crucial role in the early dissemination of Angkor-Wat's reliefs in 1866, Groslier used the photographic medium again in his attempts to dissect, survey, and systematize the artistic aspects of court dance in order to codify a classical canon of its practice. In a studio located in the Musée Albert Sarraut, Groslier produced an ethnographic series of hundreds of photographs of the various hand positions (*kbach*) and body postures that formed the vocabulary of court dance (Fig. 9). 892 negatives are preserved in the museum's holdings today. They represent an essential part of the colonial

35 Sasagawa, "Post/Colonial Discourses", 426; Heywood, *Cambodian Dance*, 46; Ingrid Muan, *Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration 1918-2000*, PhD Thesis, Ann Arbor, MI: Bell & Howell, 2001, 37ff.

36 Sasagawa, "Post/Colonial Discourses", 427.

Fig. 10
Harry Hervey,
Cambodian
dancer with a
costume
designed by
Groslier's
Service
performing at
Angkor Wat in
1925.



Fig. 11
George Groslier,
*Les ruines
d'Angkor
indochine*,
poster
advertisement
commissioned
by Résident
Supérieur
Antoine Georges
Amédée Ernest
Outrey in 1912,
printed by
Dominique
Daudé, Paris.



visual archive of Cambodian dance.³⁷

In the same period, private dance troupes had been founded all over the country and had started to perform at the Angkor temples in the wake of a rapidly growing tourism industry (Fig. 10). One of the prominent visitors (and photographers of Cambodia in the 1920s) was the American novelist and screenwriter Harry Hervey, who traveled to China and Southeast Asia in 1925 to find inspiration for many of his future novels and his popular movies that often presented its American audiences with Orientalist and highly sexualized tropes of the region.³⁸ Similar tropes underlie the paintings that Groslier executed for Résident Supérieur (governing Resident-General) Antoine Georges Amédée Ernest Outrey's campaign of promoting the dance performances and sites of Cambodia in touristic poster advertisements for river cruises printed in Paris (Fig. 11).

From 1900 onwards, this process also included the production of picture postcards that often showed dancers in front of the architectural backdrop of Angkor Wat and that are central for understanding the comprehensive scope and functioning of the colonial archive. With thousands of these new visual documents mailed home by members of the French military, civil

37 For Groslier's photographic survey, see: Lucie Labbé and Bertrand Porte, "Avec les danseuses royales du Cambodge": Photographier les postures de la danse", *Arts Asiatiques* 73, 2018, 155-170, here 160f. For John Thomson's early photographic documentation of Angkor Wat relating to dance, see: Heywood, *Cambodian Dance*, 30, 36.

38 Harry Hervey, *King Cobra: An Autobiography of Travel in French Indo-China*, New York: Cosmopolitan, 1927. Hervey shared the notion of colonial nostalgia expressed by Groslier and longed for a purified Cambodian heritage. A gay man himself and traveling with his young lover Carleton Hildreth, he was convinced that Angkor's reliefs of warriors proved the existence of homosexuality as part of the Khmer's "gallant history" and "similar to that of the Dorian Greeks." Hervey, as cited in Harlan Greene, *The Damned Don't Cry - They Just Disappear: The Life and Works of Harry Hervey*, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2018, 60.

Fig. 12
Fernand
Detaille
(illustrator),
postcard
produced for
Marseille's
Colonial
Exhibition in
1922.



servants, and tourists, they became an essential tool of popular communication that substituted the violent reality of French rule through a contrived and romantic image of the Cambodian protectorate. With some series of postcards picturing Cambodian displays at the French Colonial Exhibitions instead of at Angkor Wat itself, picture postcards were also a widely disseminated medium that contributed to blurring the actual Cambodian site and its French simulations in the European popular imagination (Fig. 12).³⁹

Tourism and the French Colonial Exhibitions generally had an ever-greater effect on the production of the dance practice in Cambodia: When King Sisowath succeeded in having his own dance troupe return to the royal court in 1930, Groslier chose one of the newly-founded private troupes to be sent to

39 For the history, visual configurations, and cultural impacts of picture postcards of Cambodia and of French world exhibitions in the first half of the 20th century, see: Joel G. Montague, *Picture Postcards of Cambodia 1900-1950*, Bangkok: White Lotus Co., 2010.

France's upcoming Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931.⁴⁰ Through the colonial machine that Groslier had established, noblewoman Soy Sangvong's dance group was fashioned as Cambodian heritage within months: The private dancers' repertoire was introduced as the same as that of the unique royal court dance troupe and they were provided with adornment and costumes fabricated by Groslier's Service (Fig. 2b, 2c). After their return from Marseille, this private dance group was granted the monopoly of performing for tourists at Angkor Wat.⁴¹

Looking at the history of dance prior to Cambodia's independence, Angkor Wat's central position in colonial discourses profoundly influenced the making of dance as heritage in the 19th and 20th centuries. Based in various visual media, French actors and institutions altered the practice of royal court dance in order to form an aesthetic unity with the temple site and eventually relocated a dance troupe to the site itself. Although the temporal and aesthetic convergence of Angkor's bas-reliefs and 19th-century dance choreographies was a constructed fantasy, official and academic debates have perpetuated the idea of a continuum across Khmer arts until the present day, with sculptures and reliefs allegedly bearing witness to early poses that are insinuated to still being present in modern Cambodian dance.

Appropriating Embodied Heritage: Dance in a Post-Genocide Nation

In the decade before independence, Princess Sisowath Kossamak, the mother of the young King Norodom Sihanouk (reigned from 1941), ushered in a new era of royal court dance through the

40 Sasagawa, "Post/Colonial Discourses", 428.

41 Ibid, 428f.

aesthetic appropriation of its former colonial forms. Starting in the early 1940s, she reconstituted the dance through its formalization, by introducing a new choreographic frame, as well as through shifting the social conditions of the dancers. For a century beforehand, the troupe had been exclusively female and had been confined to the palace realms. Kossamak now allowed court dancers to live in the city and to marry. She also invited men to take over the *Reamker's* monkey role. In her aesthetic reformulation of the dance, the princess added humorous and entertaining features to the choreography and significantly shortened the daylong performances to a couple of hours.⁴² Kossamak fashioned an artistic genre for a new national political and social context that was grounded in the purpose of experiencing pleasure. Dance became involved in the representation and construction of a changing social order of a young nation partaking in global politics.

This profound alteration has not been sufficiently recognized as postcolonial appropriation. While acknowledging the “major reconfiguration” that these shifts meant, Falser, for example, still sees Kossamak as mainly grounding her changes in the studies of Groslier, among others, and hence, to him they were “ironically based on French colonial ideas.”⁴³ But what is the essential idea of this performed cultural practice? I would argue that it does not relate so much to preserving the visual surface of dance, meaning its costumes, hairstyles, and jewelry. Rather, Kossamak subverted this colonial materiality by introducing novel choreographies, thereby shifting the inherent intellectual essence of dance to construct new meanings and a new objective through its linguistic potential, manifest in several thousand complex postures, positions, and movements.

42 Sasagawa, “Post/Colonial Discourses”, 434.

43 Falser, “From a Colonial Reinvention”, 712.

What Falser sees as irony is rather a subversive act of appropriating colonial records. Kossamak’s alterations signify a fundamental and effective reconstitution of the embodied archive of Cambodian dance, although (or precisely because) it followed newly nationalized royal agendas.

Already before Cambodia’s independence in 1953, Kossamak and her son, King Sihanouk, made this new, pleasurable form of heritage efficiently serve national interest through its utilization as a consumable spectacle raising national income in the growing tourism sector and as political tool in international diplomacy.⁴⁴ When the Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai visited Phnom Penh in November 1942, a court dance performance took place in honor of this occasion.⁴⁵ This first official performance in a diplomatic context of international politics initiated the role that court dance would adopt in Cambodia after independence.

In the postcolonial period, Kossamak continued to reconfigure royal court dance. Rationalizing her changes as being consistent to the Khmer past of Angkor, she created a new choreographic opening piece named *Apsara*, which is still often performed as the first episode of official court dance performances today. Just as in the case of its Angkorian prefiguration, dance, and thus embodiment, was newly rendered as a way of legitimizing political rule. As Astrid Norén-Nilsson explains, “historical Khmer conceptualizations of kingship emphasize the inherently incarnate role of the king. The idea of embodiment, rather than the idea of elected leadership, can be understood as the fault line between Western liberal notions of le-

44 The dance performed at Angkor Wat itself is shown in a video recording of 1945 that is available online [accessed: 10.03.2019], see: Sokmony Ros, “Cambodian Temple Dance 1945”, *YouTube*, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sf6FaQM61Cs&t=35s>.

45 Sasagawa, “Post/Colonial Discourses”, 434.

gitimate leadership and historical Khmer ideas of kingship."⁴⁶ The colonial narrative of the dance's roots in Khmer culture was now appropriated to consolidate the new nation state headed by the king, for which, as in the case of many other evolving modern nation states, a mythological and traditionalized past had to be created. The Angkorian concept of the unity of the physical and the mystical body of the king was modernized through a new correlation, the unity of the king's rule and the 'heritagized' physical bodies of his dancers. As Mitchell points out, such modernization relied on its staging as a representation meaning a distinction between image or meaning and reality.⁴⁷ In the case of dance, this altered the concept of embodiment substantially.

In order to capitalize on the imaginary already globalized by France's world fair systems, Kossamak made dancers not only imitate the depictions in the reliefs of Angkor Wat, but staged them in replicated temple facades in the beginning of her choreography. As the dancers now physically materialized from fake Angkorian niches, visual depictions in drawings and engravings were no longer needed to suggest this fantasy as a cultural fact. Legitimizing the royal family's rule through a continuity of performed heritage, Kossamak had Sihanouk's daughter, Princess Buppha Devi, become the leading court dancer, who was featured not only in political performances, but also in the widely-disseminated documentary film *Apsara* (1966), produced by Sihanouk himself.⁴⁸

This gradual process of forging dance for new political uses countered its purely folklorized displays. Under the over-

46 Norén-Nilsson, *Cambodia's Second Kingdom*, 75.

47 Timothy Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity", in: id. (ed.), *Questions of Modernity*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

48 The documentary film is available online [accessed: 09.03.2019], see: Devata.org, "Apsara Dance Bopha Devi 1966", *YouTube*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbhoH4UZjd8&t=328s>.

arching purpose of creating a perpetual source of sensory pleasures, a consumable form evolved that exposed new patterns of patronage and perception. In Cold War diplomacy, performance, as a cultural ambassador, was the preeminent medium for displaying the modern Cambodian nation through what Roger Nelson has termed the "triangulation of royal, political, and performative power."⁴⁹ Hence, the *Apsara* dance and prop architecture became an official dramatic event included in foreign visits, Olympic and other international sporting events, and political receptions in Cambodia. When Charles de Gaulle visited the country in 1966, an enormous performance took place at Angkor Wat, bathed in light designed by Vann Molyvann⁵⁰ and involving over 1,500 actors and dancers as well as fireworks.⁵¹

The royal dance troupe also performed for visiting US representatives in the *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship* when a US-sponsored highway was opened in 1959. For such occasions, the standardized dance performance that still implied its direct connection to the Angkorian past was ideologically modified. An aesthetic balance had to be assembled: It would need to include new and discernable elements addressing political agendas of specific bilateral relations, but the overall performance still had to persuade visitors of the authenticity of the dance as a historic legacy. Hence, the dancers' costumes, the music, and dance poses remained the same, allegedly-tradi-

49 Roger Nelson, "Pathways in Performance (in and around Cambodia)?", *Stedelijk Studies* 3, 2015, 1-17, <http://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/pathways-in-performance/> [accessed: 10.03.2019], here 2f.

50 Falser, "From a Colonial Reinvention", 714.

51 The performance is covered in a documentary film about the state visit that is available online [accessed: 09.06.2020], see: Monash University Research Repository, "State Visit to Cambodia by General Charles de Gaulle, President of France August 1966", *Monash Collections Online*, 2014, <https://repository.monash.edu/items/show/35008>.

tional ones as before. Groslier's fabricated exoticisms were still convincing for international eyes. Yet, the dancers integrated national flags and other modern symbols into their choreography, and special librettos, grounded in political narratives of alliance, were created.⁵² Through the appeal of the graceful movements of court dance, framed as ancient heritage, this edited montage inscribed an aura of grandeur in national Cold War politics.

In these theatrical performances, Sihanouk's administration capitalized on the high degree of narrative flexibility that an embodied practice such as dance offers. A slightly-altered version of the *Khmero-American Ballet* was performed in 1960 in the guise of the *Ballet of Khmer-Chinese Friendship*.⁵³ Dance was a particularly powerful tool within the king's policy of non-alignment. As Nelson notes, "just as the repetition of actions in rituals performatively reaffirms their spiritual power, the reiteration of these diplomatic or 'ambassadorial' performances, [...] serves to strengthen the symbolic bond between Sihanouk's regime, his dancers, and the newly independent nation of Cambodia."⁵⁴

After international geopolitics had resulted in the preliminary end of Sihanouk's reign and the Khmer Rouge had taken over Cambodia in 1975, court dance was banned and thousands of dancers were murdered as an attempt to invoke terror and to erase former cultural practices. Some dance forms continued to be part of public performances of revolutionary songs through which the regime attempted to indoctrinate children. Here, it served as a model for ideal revolutionary attitudes.⁵⁵ Yet, rare court dance performances with orchestras still

52 Nelson, "Pathways in Performance", 3f.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 4.

55 Toni Samantha Phim, "Terror and Aesthetics", *Yale Center for International*

took place in some provinces, arbitrarily granted by the political leaders. In her contribution on terror and aesthetics in the Khmer Rouge period, Toni Samantha Phim theorizes this as pointing to the "contradictions, the unexpected, which kept everyone in suspense and maintained the ever present possibility of arbitrary violence (and arbitrary benevolence)"⁵⁶ in a society of extreme intimidation.

When the Khmer Rouge had retreated in 1979 following Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and as the brutal regime continued to be supported by Western countries until the late 1990s, one of the first impulses among Cambodian artists and cultural policy makers was to revive dance in the construction of a newly evolving national culture.⁵⁷ Soon, the few surviving teachers, dancers, and young students joined together in Phnom Penh to start performing and training again. Senior dancers recorded their knowledge on tape to ensure its preservation, in light of the fact that thousands had been murdered and that the embodied archive of court dance had been almost entirely destroyed. Again, the dance repertoire was adapted to be in line with new state ideology, this time closely related to Vietnamese political narratives.⁵⁸ During this time, the refugee camps associated with factions allied against the Vietnamese became a central site for the preservation of the earlier court dance choreographies. Here, the dance forms of the 1950s were preserved. The exiled princess, Buppha Devi, frequently visited the camps and, as well, trained dancers in France.⁵⁹ The few surviving senior dancers such as Em Theay soon became iconic figures, with movies, documentaries, theatre plays, and books being created

and Area Studies Working Paper Series GS 06, 1998, 1-14, here 3.

56 Ibid., 10.

57 Heywood, *Cambodian Dance*, 82.

58 Phim and Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia*, 43.

59 Heywood, *Cambodian Dance*, 82ff.

that illustrated their work in rebuilding and preserving royal court dance forms from prior to the Khmer Rouge period.⁶⁰

Along with the temples of Angkor Wat, Cambodian court dance, which, contrary to the architectural site, had suffered near-extinction under the Khmer Rouge with less than 40 surviving dancers,⁶¹ again became a target of international control, now in the secular-universalist guise of salvage. Newly evolving international assessments of Cambodian culture relied on imaginaries grounded in the colonial archive. UNESCO framed the royal court dance of the mid-20th century – Princess Kossamak’s renditions of the 1950s – as an original practice dating back to at least a millennium, and highlighted, just as established through the French colonizers, how the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat witnessed this fact, as they allegedly depicted 12th-century dance practices of the same type that can still be seen nowadays.⁶² Since 2008, the court dance, termed ‘Royal Ballet of Cambodia,’ has been inscribed in the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.⁶³

The same narrative has been foregrounded by the national protection authority of Angkor Wat, APSARA (Authority

60 In 2014, UNESCO published one of the video documentaries on Em Theay that is available online [accessed: 15.03.2020], see: UNESCO PHNOMPENH, “Em Theay: The Master of Royal Ballet Dancer”, *YouTube*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGhsuagZjK8>.

61 Norodom Buppha Devi, “Royal Dances of Cambodia: Revival and Preservation”, in: Stephanie Burridge and Fred Frumberg (eds.), *Beyond the Apsara: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 1-13, here 2.

62 Falser, “From a Colonial Reinvention”, 716. This claim is especially foregrounded in UNESCO’s video portrait of Cambodian royal court dance available online [accessed: 09.03.2019], see: UNESCO, “The Royal Ballet of Cambodia”, *YouTube*, 2010, , <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-VrmGhheok>.

63 For the development of intangibility as a concept of heritage, see: Dede Fairchild Ruggles and Helaine Silverman, “From Tangible to Intangible Heritage”, in: id. (eds.), *Intangible Heritage Embodied*, New York: Springer, 2009, 1-14, here 3ff.

for the Protection of the Site and Management of the Region of Angkor), which has made it a historic temple site for mass cultural tourism, one of the most profitable forms of income for the nation.⁶⁴ However, the static preservation policies for intangible heritage, implemented by UNESCO and APSARA, resign immaterial practices to represent merely a folklorized and static past rather than sustaining the various kinds of knowledge embedded in them. They leave little potential for the epistemological dynamism of artistic practices to incorporate new realities. For Cambodia, this means that court dance, in its official form, could not immediately respond to the major collective physical and psychological experience of recent trauma.⁶⁵ APSARA itself claims, though, that a new program for sustainable development is being created based on the three main themes of temples, environment, and community – the latter of which is supposed to engage with the site through intangible means such as memories and storytelling.⁶⁶

Regarding the kinds of dance given access to and being displayed on stages at the cultural heritage sites, however, the ways in which APSARA integrates preservation, development, and community is not based on sustainability, but rather on focusing on one specific form of heritage among many, and thus on one narrow historical narrative. With the static views of preservation implemented by official Cambodian institutions,

64 Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier and Tim Winter, “Cambodia and the Politics of Tradition, Identity, and Change”, in: id. (eds.), *Expressions of Cambodia: The Politics of Tradition, Identity, and Change*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, 1-19, here 13; Surbhi Jain, “Cambodia: Textiles, Tourism, and Technology Deliver Growth Consistently Above 7%”, *Frontera*, 2017, <https://frontera.net/news/asia/cambodia-textiles-tourism-and-technology-deliver-growth-consistently-above-7/> [accessed: 22.07.2019].

65 Falser, “From a Colonial Reinvention”, 719.

66 This strategy was explained to our group during the Traveling Seminar in 2019 in a discussion with representatives of APSARA.

shared experiences of mass violence that a cultural practice such as dance could approach are marginalized to the benefit of a culturally affluent nation state establishing the community's identity preeminently out of a pre-traumatic past. Instead of enabling the dynamic continuity of embodied skills and establishing conditions for a creative appropriation of Khmer dance, heritage preservation fixes one specific set of cultural forms, which are at the same time local epistemes, in universal conventions that limit the potentiality of performative expression to engage with and dispute the younger past.

With a similar critique of court dance as being a colonial legacy, a nationalist display, a part of mass tourism, and being preserved in ways that limit its posttraumatic expressive potential, scholars have only focused on the official, institutionalized forms of dance. Yet, many modified practices do exist that continue to appropriate the genre. I would like to highlight a few of them in this final section in order to gain a deeper and more complex understanding of these forms of subversion, as they help us to complicate postcolonial approaches to culture in posttraumatic societies. The artistic work of non-institutional local groups also reorients our perspective toward a productive dynamic for theorizing contemporary culture made under the rubric of 'world heritage.' In the case of Cambodia, a critique that only takes into account official institutional narratives and cultural displays misses these diverse artistic practices on the ground, in backyard stages, and among less renowned dance groups that engage with and reformulate their heritage. Considering the archive of dance as being constituted both by the practice and the practitioners, focusing on marginalized performances or on alternative, non-official embodiments resonates with Ann Laura Stoler's suggestion of finding new, sustained ways of engaging with (post)colonial archives as "cultural

artifacts of fact production."⁶⁷ Stoler continues that this

may not only entail [...] attention to new kinds of sources, but also to different ways of approaching those we already have, different ways of reading than we have yet done. In turning from an extractive to a more ethnographic project, our readings need to move in new ways through archives both along their fault lines as much as against their grain.⁶⁸

This shift in perspective helps us to problematize conclusive views claiming that a "Khmer Ballet à la Angkorienne frozen in time helps to block the necessary artistic-performative expression of the recent postcolonial trauma of the Khmer Rouge genocide,"⁶⁹ as foregrounded by Falser. As dance is configured transregionally, it merges memory, history, and communal cultural knowledge in multifold, not only official, ways.⁷⁰ When traveling in Cambodia today, one encounters diverse contemporary dance groups and choreographers who use the court dance's vocabulary in compelling ways to engage in political activism in the post-genocide society. Even if official authorities attempt to impede these artists through bans and prohibiting financial support, they use the elements and meanings of court dance to forge an impactful contemporary culture.⁷¹ Contrary to

67 Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance", *Archival Science* 2, 2002, 87-109, here 91.

68 Ibid., 109.

69 Falser, "From a Colonial Reinvention", 719.

70 Stephanie Burridge, "Platforms for Change: Cambodia and Contemporary Dance from the Asia-Pacific Region", in: id. and Fred Frumberg (eds.), *Beyond the Apsara: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 121-139, here 121.

71 Fred Frumberg, "Beyond Revival and Preservation: Contemporary Dance in Cambodia", in: Stephanie Burridge and id. (eds.), *Beyond the Apsara: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 140-154.

assumptions asserting that UNESCO heritage entirely limits contemporary incorporation, the notion of world heritage establishes an extremely public site so valued and prominent that its subversion and contestation can effectively serve to heal trauma and socially emancipate various marginalized groups.

One of these contemporary artists is the choreographer Sophiline Shapiro, who since the early 1990s has explored questions of social justice through court dance. In 2017, she choreographed the piece *Phka Sla Krom Angkar* (Fig. 13) that narrates the gender-based violence of forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge – a reality experienced by half a million Cambodians in the 1970s.⁷² Shapiro, who was among the first generation to study and perform classical dance after the fall of the Khmer Rouge,⁷³ relied on interviews with victims and witnesses conducted by Theresa de Langis to develop her choreography. As she explains, “taking a story that has been a source of shame and anguish for so many and retelling it in a language usually reserved for the stories of gods and angels, well, that says, ‘this is important, pay attention’.”⁷⁴

72 Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, 27. Some video footage of Sophiline Shapiro’s piece was included in a Spanish report by the EFE news agency available online [accessed: 09.03.2019], see: AGENCIA EFE, “Una danza para sanar las heridas de los matrimonios forzados en Camboya”, *YouTube*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTF4UtTuX_w.

73 The rigorous 12-year training starts for young girls and boys in the age of 12 at the Royal University of Fine Arts. For its curriculum and other institutions involved in dance education today, see: Chey Chankethya, “Dance Education in Cambodia”, in: Stephanie Burr ridge and Fred Frumberg (eds.), *Beyond the Apsara: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 26–39; Hun Pen, “I am a Cambodian Classical Dancer: A Personal Story”, in: Stephanie Burr ridge and Fred Frumberg (eds.), *Beyond the Apsara: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 14–25, here 15ff.

74 Shapiro, as cited in Kristi Eaton, “Classical Dance Tells Story of Cambodian Genocide’s Forced Marriages”, *NCB News*, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/>



Fig. 13 The Sophiline Arts Ensemble performing their piece *Phka Sla Krom Angkar* (2017) about forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge.

In her work, Shapiro utilizes the layers of meaning incorporated in Cambodia’s admired art form to address an act of violence that was experienced by hundreds of thousands but was made a social taboo. The piece performed by her Sophiline Arts Ensemble reached traumatized women and men all over the country, and particularly those in rural towns, who, although often illiterate, are skilled in reading the language embodied in dance, especially in its hand gestures. For them, this language acquired an agency of healing. Through the project, the established capacity of court dance to transgress gender – all roles were performed by women – became a way to address and represent acts of sexual violence in a mythological language that made the performance tolerable to watch for many of the still-traumatized victims.⁷⁵ As the project initiator Theresa de Langis concludes, “because the ECCC reparations can only be symbolic

[news/asian-america/classical-dance-tells-story-cambodian-genocide-s-forced-marriages-n752516](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/classical-dance-tells-story-cambodian-genocide-s-forced-marriages-n752516) [accessed: 09.03.2019].

75 Ibid.

Fig. 14
Prumsodun Ok &
NATYARASA
dancers
performing *Drops
& Seeds* (2020), a
collaboration with
Ensemble KNM
Berlin.



Fig. 15
New Cambodian
Artists
performing their
piece *Snow
Whitening
Revisited* (2020).



and collective, I thought a dance based on the actual testimonies of the survivors – verbatim theater – would be especially significant in this context as a way to use cultural forms to transform cultural norms, especially around gender inequality and violence against women.”⁷⁶

The global recognition and local prestige attributed to Khmer dance through its courtly history as well as its inscription into world heritage are the conceptual premises used strategically to publicly acknowledge and memorialize forced marriage through contemporary incorporation.⁷⁷ As is the nature of all cultural practices, dance has to be performed in order to be preserved. This transforms the appropriation of poses and canonized gestures into acts of resistance and emancipation. Shapiro, for example, makes extensive use of asymmetry to subvert the meaning of classical dance and reflect on conflict.⁷⁸

Accordingly, many groups in Cambodia negotiate court dance traditions, charging the genre with new political and artistic meaning. Dance has become a way for subaltern groups to claim recognition and equality, be it Cambodia’s first all-male gay dance troupe NATYARASA founded by Prumsodun Ok (Fig. 14), or the all-female group New Cambodian Artists (Fig. 15), who attempt to reconcile classical and contemporary dance forms in new experimental ways, termed Apsara fusion. The fact that New Cambodian Artists are not allowed to perform at

76 De Langis, as cited in *ibid*. The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) is a Cambodian court supported by the United Nations Assistance to the Khmer Rouge Trials (UNAKRT). The ECCC was established in 2001 through the Cambodian National Assembly to try crimes committed under the Khmer Rouge regime.

77 For local views on classical dance, see: Pen, “I am a Cambodian Classical Dancer”, 14.

78 For this and other choreographic strategies that she uses, see: Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, “Dancing Off Centre”, in: Stephanie Burridge and Fred Frumberg (eds.), *Beyond the Apsara: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 109–120, here 109ff.

tourist sites or on hotel stages, after having been blacklisted in 2016 by APSARA, shows just how controversial such cultural practices are today in a country that has constructed much of its postcolonial identity through strict delineations of cultural heritage.⁷⁹ After the politicization of dance in the 1950s, today's dance groups connect to the political capacity of impermanent bodily practices in Cambodia and create a form of activism that unites place and performance through the human body.⁸⁰ This exposes the internal dynamics and controversies that play out between a dynamic society and a state concerned with establishing ideal systems of static cultural norms and social hierarchies.

Of course, however, recreating culture in an impoverished society that relies on the economic benefit of tourism comes with challenges for many of these contemporary artists.⁸¹ While some, such as NATYARASA, are celebrated in international festivals, others struggle for attention. Private international organizations that finance culture often favor so-called traditional performance practices, affecting contemporary and experimental arts. While dance artists in Cambodia generally have a low income, those engaged in touristic shows earn considerably more than those creating contemporary cultural forms.⁸² It is here, though, that national heritage in Cambodia is contested

79 Allegedly, New Cambodian Artists was banned because their style of dance was not "Cambodian enough, and because they didn't wear traditional costumes that covered the shoulders or skirts that hung below their knees." Peter Olszewski, "When Dancers Need a Permit", *Khmer Times*, 2019, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50578428/when-the-dancers-need-a-permit/> [accessed: 22.07.2019].

80 Nelson explores this connection in his article on activism, choreography, and passageways. Nelson, "Pathways in Performance".

81 Frumberg, "Beyond Revival", 151.

82 Kate Hodal, "Cambodia's Art of Survival", *The Guardian*, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/mar/28/cambodia-art-of-survival> [accessed: 22.07.2019].

and intellectually reworked – not only through dance, but also through art, theatre, rock and pop music.

Critique and Empathy: Reevaluating the Scholarly Paradigm for a Traumatized Postcolonial Society

Cambodia is a place in which political discourse has been tremendously culturized through heritage – large numbers of artists, cultural producers, and policy makers today reflect on their country's legacies through this discourse in their day-to-day work, whether in material or immaterial forms. Heritage is present in diverse debates as well as in artistic practices all over the country, negotiating how collectives are formed and how culture can be remade through appropriations of past cultural configurations.

It is through being there, through exploring the many hidden stages, small studios, and courtyards on the ground, and through finding today's central dance innovators that one gains a perspective that complicates and problematizes purely official narratives and that highlights the highly individual ways in which artists appropriate their national heritage all over the country. For court dance in a postcolonial and traumatized society, the idea that "the notion of heritage [...] is [...] a conceptual framework to assess, evaluate and act upon material and immaterial remnants of the past"⁸³ is manifested in how this heritage circulates and how this circulation gives actors the chance to intervene. Heritage, then, becomes a discourse that enables action through generating arguments and defining one's own position toward that heritage.

The historical specificity of Cambodian court dance is its

83 Van de Port and Meyer, "Heritage Dynamics", 12.

repeated constitution through and in relation with architectural and visual culture. Its colonial, early national, and UNESCO-related history explains its agency in Cambodia's post-genocide society. Angkor Wat's central position in French colonial discourses greatly influenced Cambodian dance practices of the 19th and 20th centuries, which were altered in order to form a closer aesthetic unity with this key cultural site. Today, Sophiline Shapiro, NATYARASA, the New Cambodian Artists, and the many others who intervene in the practice of court dance illustrate that its social and political agency is constituted through this very aesthetic intersection with architectural sites and visual media in the colonial and early postcolonial eras. Through various media, publications, and world fair displays, rather recent aesthetic inventions were enabled to signify authentically ancient traditions required for a modern self-fashioning. Through the discourse of heritage, court dance was politically authorized and emerged as an authenticated cultural practice. Today's potential of dance to serve as a form of activism continues to be constituted by this very heritagization established through its aesthetic intersection with architectural sites and manifold types of visual media. It is based on this heritage status that art activists can utilize a formerly colonial and now nationally and institutionally reclaimed dance form to address collective trauma and political concerns.

In Cambodia, the history of this appropriation and the shaping of a national, postcolonial Cambodian culture in its own right began in the 1940s with the work of Princess Kossamak. Viewed in a postcolonial theoretical perspective, this younger history of Cambodian dance challenges the assumption that cultural change in the 20th-century in a young Southeast Asian nation state could only be implemented by turning towards the colonial legacy of Europe. Assessing dance as embodied heritage rather requires a reassessment of the ar-

chive of dance and thus of the dominant paradigm of Westernization in cultural interpretations of the postcolonial period.

For a society that gives prime importance to impermanent heritage, the human body is the archive and the medium at the core of the production of cultural forms and knowledge.⁸⁴ The many dancing bodies in Cambodia make heritage a subject of processes of transformation linked to social change and exchange. Cambodian dance performance, just like architecture, is a contested site, in which meanings are generated, occluded, and orchestrated through ideology. The central part of this archive of court dance, even with its very close relationship to visual and architectural culture, is the body and mind of each practitioner – and thus, the use of the term 'intangible heritage' for such practices that suggests their non-physicality is slightly misleading. As an embodied and transformative archive, Khmer dance cannot be constricted to one static and homogenous form. Claims of the existence of this single form and of its domination often and too narrowly stabilize officially authorized constructions of heritage. This focus on institutional narratives disregards the diverse and complex dance environment that is found in the country today and that forms an essential part of its archive and practice.

How can research be pursued within this matrix? The approach I adopt in this essay toward studying culture in a postcolonial society that experienced the trauma of genocide reevaluates the relationship between critique and empathy as a scholarly paradigm. Such a reconsideration might prevent secular

84 For the human body as the medium of intangible heritage, see: Christoph Wulf, "Performativity and Dynamics of Intangible Cultural Heritage", in: Christiane Brosius and Karin M. Polit (eds.), *Ritual, Heritage and Identity: The Politics of Culture and Performance in a Globalised World*, New Delhi and Milton Park: Routledge, 2011, 76-94, here 77ff.

postcolonial scholarship from condemning a cultural practice such as court dance as an essentially colonial invention that was seamlessly taken up and formulaically perpetuated by national actors and heritage makers. Constructivist conclusions that perceive Cambodian dance as nothing more than a colonial invention and that sideline later modifications, even if these might seem very subtle from a distance, do not take into account how this performance has been authenticated as something real that is transformed and reconstituted over time, how it has become accepted and widely appreciated by Cambodians in both urban and rural areas, and, most importantly, how it has been used as a way of working through trauma. If such incorporations are disregarded, the critique of nationalism and colonialism fails to recognize how postcolonial cultural practices can function to reclaim autonomous identities and heritage from colonial powers.

Despite the many problems with applying the concept of empathy, an empathetic criticism shifts the scholarly focus to non-institutional practices (and thus archives) in order to register how cultural forms have been appropriated and how they are given new agency and meaning by being intellectually reworked and artistically transformed in postcolonial frameworks. An empathetic criticism aims to understand why, today, forms of heritage such as court dance possess such a popular appeal in a specific historical space. In order to effectively comprehend this, scholarship has to reflect on the bias embedded in its critique in which some patterns of method are so invested that it prevents the recognition of alternative, impactful meanings of cultural forms that are different from the conclusions that secular assumptions suggest.

One part of the analysis of heritage, then, employs the artistic and intellectual legacies underlying today's cultural practices of embodiment as an analytical paradigm. For Cambodian court dance, this is precisely the practice that local

contemporary dance groups pursue, which is why their work constitutes an archive that complements and complicates both official narratives of heritage and scholarly approaches to such cultural forms. When examining court dance through such regional legacies, our understanding will reach beyond interpretations highlighting the derivative construction of tradition, colonial invention, and modern heritage, and rather recognize how dance might still be operating through a spiritual agency and how embodiment counters fixed cultural readings and representations. While some critics have framed court dance mainly through a colonial framework, my approach questions the relevance of this interpretation for practitioners and Cambodian society at large, and emphasizes instead how intangible heritage is seen as a link to non-secular and decolonial understandings of the world.

Decolonizing knowledge in transregional research means acquiring generosity for a traumatized society, rather than merely undervaluing what this collective has produced and now holds as its heritage simply because it relies on a legacy of cultural forms produced through colonialism. Instead of dismissing all forms of embodied practice as conclusively defined by a colonial apparatus, a paradigm reframed through generous empathy enables scholarship to see how local cultural actors have established their intellectual and creative presence through these complex cultural forms, thereby acknowledging their full aesthetic, political, and spiritual range. For Cambodia, an empathetic criticism can show how this reclaimed and recreated heritage has enabled healing.

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