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PUPPETS, PIONEERS, AND SPORT:  
THE ONSTAGE AND OFFSTAGE PERFORMANCE  
OF KHMER IDENTITY

by  
Marel A. Stock

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of Theatre and Media Arts

Brigham Young University

August 2009

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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## ABSTRACT

### PUPPETS, PIONEERS, AND SPORT: THE ONSTAGE AND OFFSTAGE PERFORMANCE OF KHMER IDENTITY

Marel A. Stock

Department of Theatre and Media Arts

Master of Art

Most tourists visiting Cambodia only seek to visit the World Heritage Site of Angkor Wat. The Cambodian, or Khmer people are capitalizing on this booming tourist industry, but they are also disseminating a more complex Khmer identity through other sites and festivals. This identity simultaneously hearkens back to the affluence of the Angkor Period in Khmer history and looks forward to the modernization of the country. After the reign of the Khmer Rouge, from 1975-1979, which led to what is now called the Cambodian Killing Fields, the Khmer people needed to create a new, hopeful, peaceful identity for their nation. The new Khmer identity is still being created and strengthened today. This thesis is about performance and its intersection with identity. It argues that the Khmer are using performance—both onstage and offstage—as a means towards identity formation. The contemporary performance of Khmer identity is serving to

increase nationalism as well as raise interest and funding for Cambodia from foreign tourists. This thesis looks closely at three sites of Khmer performance: a Khmer performance enacted onstage entitled *Sokacha*, the Pioneer Day celebrations of the Khmer-Mormon community in Phnom Penh, and the yearly Water Festival. Each of these performance sites demonstrates the dual performance occurring—a performance to reify Khmer identity to Khmer people from around the world, and a performance of Khmer identity packaged for foreigners to purchase. Performance on stage has been altered, choosing only elements of traditional Khmer performance that emphasize the new identity. But the Khmer are using other venues, like festivals and celebrations, to perform identity. In adopting only elements of Khmer history that fit the hopeful trajectory of the new Khmer identity, the Khmer are creating and performing a new identity, both onstage and offstage, to fit the present and future Cambodia. Two identities of Cambodia are being performed: one aimed at Khmer to instill national pride, and one performed for the tourists that help fund that effort.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my little family

*Arkun Chraun*

To Tom, my husband, translator, and friend who introduced me to Cambodia.

To Celia Loey for loving Cambodia as early as seven months old  
and sleeping so I could write.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

In July of 2006, I was a tourist at the Cambodian Cultural Village in the Siem Reap Province of Cambodia. My husband, as the first white tourist to enter the pavilion, was invited to dress in Khmer robes and play the role of the groom in the performance of a traditional Khmer wedding (see Figure 1.1). Volunteered by my tour guide, I was chosen to play my husband's mother in the performance along with a Chinese tourist who played the father. The costumers were surprised to hear my husband respond to their English questions in Khmer and seemed relieved to be able to explain how to put on the robes and perform the wedding rituals in their native tongue.<sup>1</sup> The traditions of the wedding attire and rituals are translated into English (and other languages as well) to help the tourist enact the traditions.



**Figure 1.1** - My husband dressed as a Khmer groom with his hands in the *Sampeah* position. To the right, the Chinese tourist and I are pictured in the role of mother and father-of-the-groom.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Khmer” throughout in place of “Cambodian” since it is the identity of the Khmer people I am discussing and they call themselves “Khmer,” so it makes more sense for me to use this term as well. The word “Khmer” is the word for the people of Cambodia, the language of Cambodia, and is also part of the name of the Communist extremist group, the Khmer Rouge, that brought genocide into Cambodia in the 1970s. I use the word for all three things, but I try to make the distinction clear.

<sup>2</sup> All pictures used in this thesis are my own photographs.

The implications of tradition literally translated into English as well as we as tourists dressing as traditional Khmer (both literally as well as merely taking on a role such as mother-of-the-groom) made me question what was actually being performed. On top of the questions of colonialism, I began to wonder simple things such as: What does it mean to be Khmer? How is that identity different than my own? How do the Khmer people perform that identity through staged tradition and ritual? How do these performances of identity impact Cambodia both nationally and internationally? Are these performances aimed simultaneously at foreign tourists and native Khmer? How do sub-communities such as religious minorities perform both identities?

My exploration of these questions has resulted in this thesis about performance and its intersection with identity. I argue that the Khmer are using performance—both onstage and offstage—as a means towards identity formation. The contemporary performance of Khmer identity is serving to increase nationalism as well as raise interest and funding for Cambodia from foreigners. In this thesis, I will look closely at three sites of Khmer performance: a Khmer performance enacted onstage entitled *Sokacha*, the Pioneer Day celebrations of the Khmer-Mormon community in Phnom Penh, and the yearly Water Festival. Each of these performance sites demonstrates the dual performance occurring—a performance to reify Khmer identity to the tourist gaze of Khmer from around the world, and a performance of Khmer identity packaged for foreigners to purchase.

## Performance and Identity Formation

My methodology can be described as a form of analysis that endeavors to pinpoint intersections between theatrical performance and the performance of Khmer identity. Though I rarely outright address postcolonial theory, the ideas suggested by postcolonial studies influence all of my work. An analysis of Khmer performance by a white American has to keep questions of ethics and Otherness in the forefront. This means that I approach my research as a contributor to a greater discussion rather than an expert in the field. I also draw upon the ideas of both performance studies and critical historiography to help situate my arguments about identity formation.

Tamara Underiner introduces her work in *Contemporary Theatre in Mayan Mexico* with: “A favorite professor of mine, whose field is comparative religion, once put it in this way: ‘What theatre *isn’t* about cultural identity?’”<sup>3</sup> This statement serves as an introduction to my work as well. In this thesis, I discuss the performance of Khmer cultural identity. I use the term “performance” with two different definitions—“onstage” and “offstage” performance. The first definition is theatrical performance with performers and audience members in a more traditional sense. Theatre is a way for individuals to enact identity. Underiner argues the same: “Theatre is an important mode of cultural enactment, providing, as John MacAloon suggests, ‘occasions in which as a culture or a society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others.’”<sup>4</sup> The theatre has always been linked directly to the society by and for which it is being performed. “Theatre,” Underiner explains—and I

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<sup>3</sup> Tamara L. Underiner, *Contemporary Theatre in Mayan Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004),

4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

would specify theatrical performance—“participates in ongoing definitions of community and cultural identity.”<sup>5</sup> I apply these ideas about theatre and identity creation to the work of the Khmer. The Khmer are enacting, through theatrical performance, values inherent in Khmer identity. Through the enactment of episodes from the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, Khmer performers are demonstrating principles consistent with the Buddhist identity of Cambodia. Also, through Khmer Classical Ballet, or *Apsara* Dancing, Khmer performers are bringing the carvings on the walls of Angkor Wat to life to enact the pride of Cambodia’s past grandeur.

Stage performance, as a reflection of a culture, is a legitimate study. As Diana Taylor explains in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*:

Recognizing performance as a valid focus of analysis contributes to our understanding of embodied practice as an episteme and a praxis, a way of knowing as well as a way of storing and transmitting cultural knowledge and identity. Performance as a lens enables commentators to explore not only isolated events and limit cases, but also the scenarios that make up individual and collective imaginaries.<sup>6</sup>

This explanation of performance as a place that both stores and transmits cultural knowledge and identity fits an analysis of theatrical performance, but Taylor’s description of performance as a lens implies a second definition of performance that is much more far-reaching than performance enacted upon the stage.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>6</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 278.



The second definition of performance, “offstage performance,” acknowledges that while performance does occur in theatrical venues, it also occurs in everyday situations. Richard Schechner defines these two types of performance in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*:

Performances can be either “make-belief” or “make-believe.” The many performances in everyday life such as professional roles, gender and race roles, and shaping one’s identity are not make-believe actions (as playing a role on stage or in a film most probably is). The performances of everyday life [...] “make-belief”—create the very social realities they enact. In “make-believe performance,” the distinction between what is real and what’s pretended is kept clear. Children playing “doctor” or “dress-up” know that they are pretending. On stage, various conventions—the stage itself as a distinct domain, opening and closing a curtain or dimming the lights, the curtain call, etc.—mark the boundaries between pretending and “being real.”<sup>7</sup>

The performance of Khmer identity is both “make-belief” and “make-believe.” The Khmer are using theatrical performance to help perform elements important to the Khmer identity. In staged works for an audience, elements of traditional Khmer performance are shifted to redefine Khmer identity with the elements of theatrical performance. But there is also an offstage performance of identity occurring simultaneously which, as Schechner describes, is “make-belief” because it “create[s] the very social realities [it] enact[s].”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 42-43.

<sup>8</sup> See also “Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting” in Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

## Historiography and Performance

Critical historiography is the study of the writing of history as well as the idea that one can only create a specific history in the attempt to capture it. It challenges the idea of history as one single narrative and begins to question how the writing of history is affected by biases, word choice, socioeconomics, and target audience. Historiography suggests that a linear look at history favors the colonizing cultures writing that history. Linear history presents a singular point of view, and humanity is not a singular subject. A history cannot ever be fully understood as linear histories suggest, so it is best to approach it at all angles. All sides of the story should be examined and no one culture or individual should be favored over another.

Although my thesis does not claim to place contemporary Khmer performance into the historical trajectory of Cambodia, historiography, elements of Khmer history, and the problems faced when seeking to navigate the two are important to my discussion. Michel de Certeau states in *The Writing of History*: “Even by returning endlessly to the oldest primary sources, by scrutinizing the experience that linguistic and historical systems mask as they develop themselves, *historians never apprehend origins, but only the successive stages of their loss.*”<sup>9</sup> Origins are unattainable in two ways: first, a performance practice does not have a specific origin, but rather performances emerge out of many influences.

Secondly, origins are unattainable because one lacks the means to attain or decipher the influences and circumstances that make up the “origins.” No one attempting to draw on history is ever able to attain that true history. Only shards or traces of the past

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<sup>9</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*. Trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 22. Italics mine.

remain. The “origins” are with those today that seek to study and identify them. These people create the origins. Using de Certeau’s argument to situate Khmer performance, I argue that contemporary Khmer performers are creating the past through contemporary performance that claims to draw upon that past. “What disappears from the product appears once again in production”: the origins that remain unattainable throughout the process of study are created through the attempt to bring them to life in performance.<sup>10</sup>

De Certeau continues to explain the dilemma of a person attempting to study history by stating, “[T]he past is the fiction of the present.”<sup>11</sup> Attempts in the present to recall or define the past replace what actually happened in the past. Even if each of the “stages of loss” de Certeau describes could be removed from the research, historiographers would still not be able to recover the past in its entirety. De Certeau explains that there is an inevitable “selection between what can be *understood* and what must be *forgotten* in order to obtain the representation of a present intelligibility.”<sup>12</sup> This statement implies two separate problems inextricably linked together. The first problem is that in the very act of remembering something, we must forget the original. When we remember an event, we replace the actual event with our memory of it, and the original ceases to exist. The second problem is that we have to put things into our own words or mindset in order for us to remember them. In doing this, we have to decide—both consciously and subconsciously—what can be *understood* and what must be *forgotten*. We have to realize what has become unthinkable in order for a new identity to become thinkable. It is because of these two problems that a historian can never “apprehend origins” and therefore can only *create* history through attempts to understand it.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4.

To help frame the performances I explore in this thesis, I argue that present-day Khmer people use performance as a way to create Khmer national identity. One of their chief tactics is to appeal to a rich tradition of ancient performance practices and incorporate aspects of those practices in their contemporary performances. The aspects of the ancient practices that these contemporary performers gravitate towards raise interesting questions regarding what “past” it is that they are accessing. I argue that because contemporary performers have already set forth a clear trajectory by which to form their present and future identity, their appeal to past performance practices makes those practices merely a function of this trajectory. Thus, as they look to past practices, they only identify those aspects that fit their present concerns and, therefore, “produce” rather than reflect the past.

In performing Khmer identity both onstage and off, the Khmer are calling upon a past that fits their present identity. Rather than making actual connections with the past, as that is impossible, they are forcing connections between now and history. In this way, they are historiographers because they are creating the history as they enact it. They are simultaneously inventing Khmer history and identity so that the two will fit together. This dilemma of creating and replacing the past rather than presenting a true reality of the past is unavoidable. Recognizing this fact, I would assert that the work of contemporary performers in Cambodia is still important. Although they claim to be representing “tradition” or admit to being influenced by “the past,” the art that is created today serves a greater purpose than just attempting to represent this unattainable past. Contemporary Khmer performance is instilling national identity in a nation that has been struggling for an independent identity since the fifteenth century. It is impossible to know what

“traditional Khmer performance” ever was, but it nevertheless existed. Calling upon the mere fact that Cambodia had a unique identity in performance at some time in the past, contemporary performers can help establish that again today.

### **Khmer History and Sources**

Following the “successive stages of loss” as de Certeau describes helps give the general overview of Khmer history and serves to introduce the work that has already been done on both Khmer history and performance. There are two main losses or problems faced when discussing traditional Khmer performance practices: 1) the problems faced in the interpretation of artifacts and 2) the altering and destroying of physical archives and the loss of artifacts that results. De Certeau again provides a useful framework for discussing these problems of researching Khmer history. He explains that problems of history are places where the “study of the real” is situated “within the scientific process.”<sup>13</sup> My definition of “artifact” is what de Certeau explains as “the real insofar as it is the *known* (what the historian studies, understands, or ‘brings to life’ from a past society).” The problem of interpretation of these artifacts is described by de Certeau as “the real insofar as it is entangled within the scientific operations (the present society, to which the historians’ problematics, their procedures, modes of comprehension, and finally a practice of meaning are referable).”<sup>14</sup> In other words, discovering the “real” from the artifacts also brings up the problem of interpretations. A reading of the artifacts is muddled in modern understanding, scientific procedures, different ways of thinking, etc. Historians cannot separate the actual artifacts from their readings of the artifacts.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

There are many times in Khmer history where the physical archive has been altered, affected, or destroyed. The first of these events is during the fall of Angkor at the end of the Angkor period. In 802, Jayavarman II, the ruler of Cambodia at the time proclaimed himself a *devaraja* (“god-king”). This event marked the beginning of the Angkor period of Khmer history. This period was the most powerful for Cambodia. The nation during this era was known as “Cambodia the Rich” because of its great wealth and power. Although it is commonly accepted that Cambodia had influence during this time, the problems with subjective historical documentation begin to be realized. As David Chandler concludes in his *History of Cambodia*, “During the heyday of Angkor, we have only the kings’ own words to support the notion that they were popular.”<sup>15</sup> The evidence or accounts that remain from a destroyed archive demonstrate the problem of a lack of information. If we have only the accounts of the kings during the Angkor period, we have only their perspectives when attempting to create an account of what the Angkor period was actually like.

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<sup>15</sup> David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 98.



**Figure 1.2** - Angkor Wat is the pinnacle example of Cambodia's grandeur during the Angkor Period. Often included on lists of the "7 Wonders of the World," Angkor Wat is the largest stone structure built for worship purposes in the world.

This problem of nonexistent documentation or fact is much more influential in the study of the fall of Angkor, or the end of the Angkor period. Because there is not sufficient documentation, there is not one commonly accepted theory of how Angkor fell. Because of this, nearly anything could have happened to end the Angkor era. Martin F. Herz defines the problem in his *A Short History of Cambodia: From the Days of Angkor to the Present*: “In the place of history there are legends, but Cambodian and Thai legends become interchangeable and unreliable as sources for the historian.”<sup>16</sup> Creating a historical account requires the combination of evidence; however, for this specific event in Khmer history, as Ian Mabbett and David Chandler suggest in *The Khmers*, the “evidence is fragmentary and ambiguous,” and historians are “thrown upon speculations

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<sup>16</sup> Martin F. Herz, *A Short History of Cambodia: From the Days of Angkor to the Present* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958), 21.

that vary according to individuals' assumptions about the way history works."<sup>17</sup>

Historians put the stories together with the fragments that remain and are forced to guess the rest.

It is accepted by all scholars that the Siamese armies invaded Cambodia a number of times with one important invasion around the date 1431 (although that date is also disputed). However, what actually happened during these attacks is also in question. These attacks were extremely influential in the fall of Angkor. David J. Steinberg states it well in his *Cambodia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* that the conquest of 1430-31 "as nearly as one event can, marks the end of the magnificent Khmer era."<sup>18</sup> Because scholars argue about what happened during these Thai invasions, the results are also argued. Mabbett and Chandler assert, "[I]t is not clear that the Thais were overwhelmingly more successful than the Khmers in the wars between them [...] they were essentially looting raids followed by retreat."<sup>19</sup> Most other sources, including Michael D. Coe's *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, claim that the Thai proved to be much more powerful than the Khmer, "although the Khmer did occasionally strike back successfully."<sup>20</sup> During this major attack around 1431, historians claim that: the city of Siem Reap, or the area of Angkor Wat, was invaded and "sacked," a Thai prince put on the throne of Cambodia, and, as Madeleine Giteau explains in *The Civilization of Angkor*, "Angkor was despoiled of all its royal attributes which were carried off with the images that protect the monarchy."<sup>21</sup> This last assertion is the most important in a discussion of

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<sup>17</sup> Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1995), 216.

<sup>18</sup> David J. Steinberg, *Cambodia: It's People, It's Society, It's Culture* (New Haven: Hraf Press, 1959), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1995), 216.

<sup>20</sup> Michael D. Coe, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 208.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 196; Martin F. Herz, *A Short History of Cambodia: From the Days of Angkor to the Present* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958), 20; Madeleine Giteau, *The Civilization of Angkor* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1976).



Khmer performance as the dancers were arguably among those royal attributes carried off to Siam. This event affects the physical archive as well because other artifacts were inevitably carried off to Thailand.

The fall of the royalty impacts performance because performers were linked directly to religion, and with the declaration of the “god-king,” religion was linked with royalty. Because many performers were part of the court, they were considered part of the “royal attributes” that were taken from Angkor. Whether these “royal attributes” were taken by the Thai to Siam or by the rightful Khmer monarch to the new capital of Phnom Penh is uncertain.<sup>22</sup> Steinberg suggests, and many scholars agree, that “thousands of artists and scholars were carried away to slavery in Thailand.”<sup>23</sup> What is certain is that this invasion of the Thai marked the beginning of a blending of the two cultures.<sup>24</sup>

Michael D. Coe argues in *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization*, from this point on there is a “marked Thai (Siamese) influence on [Khmer] art, architecture, theatre and court life.”<sup>25</sup> Coe also suggests that the Thai, during the century of invasions “absorbed much of Khmer culture of the Classic period, including [...] Khmer music and dance.”<sup>26</sup> This introduction of a new culture affected both the Thai and the Khmer. Denise Heywood in *Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods* explains: “It is said that Siamese dancers emulated Khmer movements and Khmer dancers adopted Siamese costumes.”<sup>27</sup> Though there is speculation, it is now impossible to determine which artifacts and elements of the

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<sup>22</sup> Martin F. Herz, *A Short History of Cambodia: From the Days of Angkor to the Present* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958), 22.

<sup>23</sup> David J. Steinberg, *Cambodia: It's People, It's Society, It's Culture* (New Haven: Hraf Press, 1959), 11.

<sup>24</sup> David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 97.

<sup>25</sup> Michael D. Coe, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 195.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>27</sup> Denise Heywood, *Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods* (Bangkok: River Books, 2008), 35.

Khmer performance that exists today came from the Thai and what elements were preserved from the height of the Angkor period.

This event in history also brings up the problem of biased or differing views of history—a problem caused by the attempt to interpret the remaining accounts and artifacts. In analyzing accounts of what happened, it is hard to decipher which historians have been dominated by a Thai account of the history, which have been influenced by the Khmer viewpoint, and which historians are attempting to combine the two. Because of the restructuring of both cultures, the archive was drastically affected. It became impossible to tell which artifacts were Khmer originals taken to Thailand and which artifacts were originally Thai that may have helped influence Khmer culture. This shift in both cultures also changes the reading of these same artifacts. Before this event, it would have been less likely that Thai artifacts could affect Khmer culture and vice versa, but the cultures that emerge after this event prove that both cultures were impacted. The artifacts that were created after the culture merging in 1431 become hybrid artifacts that can no longer be read as strictly Thai or Khmer because both readings would be affected by the influence of the other country. No longer was Khmer culture entirely separate from the Thai. Although the two remained separate entities, much about them became the same. From 1431 forward, it is impossible to claim that Khmer artifacts come strictly from Khmer ideologies and that Thai artifacts are not influenced by the Khmer.

There are other problems that arise in the interpretation of artifacts from before the 1970s. For example, the main artifacts available that document “original” Khmer dancing are stone carvings on the temple walls (see Figure 1.3). The problem of interpretation of a dance from a stone carving is obvious: it is nearly impossible to learn

about a kinetic art form from stationary stone carvings. Sam-Ang Sam and Chan Moly Sam explain in *Khmer Folk Dance* that a study done by the National Conservatory of Performing Arts and the University of Fine Arts in the 1950s and 1960s tried to conform Khmer dance, returning to the original stone relief depictions of classical Khmer dance.<sup>28</sup> The result, however, became what Jukka O. Miettinen describes in *Classical Dance and Theatre in South-East Asia* as “hybrid compositions combining the traditional Thai-based style with poses, costume, and jewelry copied from ancient Khmer reliefs.”<sup>29</sup> It can be assumed from the relief sculptures that the classical form was highly codified, but there is no guarantee that those codes have been interpreted correctly. The only other thing that can be determined from the sculptures is something about the costuming and jewelry, but even that is difficult when it comes to reading textures and colors of fabrics and jewelry in stone. It is impossible to determine what remains from those stone carvings and what historians try to conform to fit them. James Brandon states in *Theatre in Southeast Asia*:

It is popular to claim that the dance style of Angkor’s apsaras of the twelfth century is perfectly preserved in the Royal Cambodian Ballet dance style.

Unfortunately, this is romantic nonsense. A world of difference separates the elaborately costumed, chaste, and refined Cambodian dancers of today from the bare-breasted, hip-swinging beauties of Angkor.<sup>30</sup>

Brandon’s statement raises questions about the influence of “origins.” Interestingly, this statement suggests that today’s Royal Cambodian Ballet style is not influenced by the

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<sup>28</sup> Sam-Ang Sam and Chan Moly Sam, *Khmer Folk Dance* (Newington: Khmer Studies Institute, 1987), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Jukka O. Miettinen, *Classical Dance and Theatre in South-East Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 145.

<sup>30</sup> James Brandon, *Theatre in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 59.

“origins” themselves, but rather by the constant attempt of modern performance to realign itself with those unattainable origins.



**Figure 1.3** - *Apsara* depicted on the walls of Angkor Wat.

These “origins” become even more unattainable when one realizes that the Thai influence in 1431 was not the only possible influence on Khmer performance. The history of Cambodia is one of being conquered. The change of name from Democratic Kampuchea during the Khmer Rouge to Kampuchea after its liberation to its current name: the Kingdom of Cambodia demonstrates the fluidity of Cambodia’s identity. Toni

Samantha Phim, a native Khmer, and Ashley Thompson, her associate, state in *Dance in Cambodia*, “To search for a single original source of Khmer dance is in many ways to miss the point, because each genre of Khmer dance constitutes a specific configuration of diverse influences over time.”<sup>31</sup> They also point out that performance is heavily dependent upon the performers for the continuation of performance tradition which gives them “conservative and innovative possibilities of cultural transmission.”<sup>32</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre* summarizes Cambodia’s colonized history: “Khmer influence plummeted after the fifteenth century.

In 1863, following a period of vassalage to the neighboring Thais and Vietnamese, Cambodia became a part of a French Protectorate. It finally achieved independence in 1953.”<sup>33</sup> The colonial period of Cambodia also greatly changed the country’s identity. Because the French had colonized Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the physical and ideological definitions of each neighboring country were reexamined, and borders were redefined. Pech Tum Kravel, a performer who survived the Khmer Rouge, describes the French Protectorate in *Sbek Thom: Khmer Shadow Theatre*, “The land under Khmer control was reduced from a vast area to nearly nothing.”<sup>34</sup> It is also interesting to realize that both Khmer and Thai performance began from Indian influences, so Khmer performance was impacted by Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, and French cultures before receiving independence. This independence was short-lived, and the greatest destruction of the physical archive began in 1975.

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<sup>31</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Eileen Blumenthal, “Cambodia.” *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre: Volume 1: A-N*. Ed. Samuel L. Leiter (London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 76.

<sup>34</sup> Pech Tum Kravel, *Sbek Thom: Khmer Shadow Theater*, Trans. Sos Kem (Cambodia: Cornell Southeast Asia Program and UNESCO, 1995), 2.

When the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975, genocide ensued. In the three years, eight months, and twenty-one days of the rule of the Khmer Rouge before the Vietnamese intervened, the nation of Cambodia had nearly been depleted. Many Khmer were murdered, beaten to death to save on ammunition, and thrown into mass graves that would later be known as the “Cambodian Killing Fields.” What began as a “cleansing of a nation” to rid Cambodia of the former government’s influence ended up becoming nearly the death of a nation. Among those that were murdered were the performing artists, because they were still linked to the previous government. James Brandon and Martin Banham describe the situation in *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*:

When performers returned to Phnom Penh to reestablish the performing arts after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, they discovered nearly ninety percent of their professional colleagues (dancers, musicians, actors and playwrights) had perished during the four years of murderous Khmer Rouge rule or had fled overseas.<sup>35</sup>

The archival problem with having ninety percent of the performing artists killed is obvious. The most influential and talented artists were among the first killed because anyone that had a recognized name in the Cambodia of the past was to be destroyed.

Kravel describes the devastation first hand:

This incredible loss happened so fast, as fast as the speed of a vicious tornado. I saw it with my own eyes in Cambodia. The war destroyed the customs, traditions, the moral precepts of a compassionate, tolerant, and empathetic society, and turned that society towards wildness, savagery, inhumanity, and

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<sup>35</sup> James Brandon and Martin Banham, *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23.

murder. The war turned a country, a peaceful and prosperous nation, into a shocking hell on earth.<sup>36</sup>

In 1975, what the Khmer Rouge renamed “Year Zero,” Cambodia’s entire identity was changed in an instant, and culture and customs from the previous Cambodia were banned and actively destroyed.

The Khmer Rouge also physically destroyed the archive by purging the country of historical documents. Brandon says that when the surviving performers came together after the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, they found that “virtually all documents on performance – libraries and photographs – had been destroyed.”<sup>37</sup> Just after Cambodia’s liberation from the Khmer Rouge, reporter John Pilger documented the destruction in the film *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia*. While standing inside the remaining shell of the National Library, he states: “This was the National Library. Almost as a symbol, the Khmer Rouge converted it into a pigsty and burned its books and archives. From Year Zero, all past knowledge was illegal.”<sup>38</sup> The Khmer Rouge mentality believed that to destroy all physical evidence from the previous Cambodia would make *that* Cambodia cease to exist.

This thesis is also inevitably impacted by the problems of the archive. Because of the lack of primary sources, I have to rely on the scholarship of others. This means that my study is affected by the biases of others as it is impossible for historians to separate themselves from their own interpretations of the artifacts. There are a number of losses a historian faces both to the physical archive and in the process of translating and

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<sup>36</sup> Pech Tum Kravel, *Sbek Thom: Khmer Shadow Theater*, Trans. Sos Kem (Cambodia: Cornell Southeast Asia Program and UNESCO, 1995), 1.

<sup>37</sup> James Brandon and Martin Banham, *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23.

<sup>38</sup> *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia*, Dir. John Pilger (ATV Network Limited, 1979).



interpreting the artifacts that remain. This thesis (as well as any other analytic document) is the result of my own attempt to piece together what remains of the artifacts and the interpretations of those artifacts by both myself and others.

### **Khmer Performers as Archives**

After all of these losses, a current study of Khmer identity and history is based on what we have left. The artifacts I use for my primary research are the performers themselves. In Cambodia, performers are primarily dancers, as Khmer theatrical performance is grounded in dance. In this thesis, however, my definition of performer extends to all those participating in the events. Because I was present at all three performance sites I discuss in this thesis, my discussion of the performative bodies I use for each event is based on my own observations.

More than just physical objects were destroyed with the reign of the Khmer Rouge. Jacques Derrida, in exploring the etymology of the word “archive” in *Archive Fever* states:

The meaning of “archive,” its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law.<sup>39</sup>

Because the *archons* were the ones that possessed, interpreted, and spoke the law, it was the house of the *archons* that became defined as the first archive. Using Derrida’s more

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<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2.



encompassing definition of “artifact,” the *archons* were the artifacts themselves and it was the house of the *archons* that was defined as an archive, so an archive is defined as merely a physical place where the artifacts are kept.

During the reign of the Khmer Rouge, the libraries with their books and other physical objects were destroyed. However, keeping in mind the wider definitions of both “artifact” and “archive” as described by de Certeau and Derrida, it is obvious that the archive does not cease to exist with the destruction of libraries. Although a library is the narrow definition of an archive, not all artifacts are in a library. The Khmer Rouge also realized that humans can be artifacts themselves as the *archons* were and so they set out to destroy those people who knew the most about Khmer performance practices so that the archive of knowledge about Khmer culture and customs would be destroyed. Even though most of the famous and influential performers were killed, every individual that knew something about Khmer performance practices was an artifact. Some Khmer Rouge refugees explain:

BEN: I tell my children, “Khmer culture so beautiful. Artist and dancer live well because they are like jewels. Live like jewels.” My teacher say, “Every dancer a book. Every great dancer a...a...many books. Every great dancer a...” Say?

RITH: A library.

BEN: Every great dancer is a library. Khmer Rouge kill the dancers, kill the books. All the books are killed.<sup>40</sup>

The body of the dancer is the archive. The way dancers are trained in Khmer performance emphasizes the importance of the body’s memory. Dancers continuously

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<sup>40</sup> Qtd. in Judith Hamera, “An Answerability of Memory: ‘Saving’ Khmer Classical Dance,” *TDR* 46.4 (2002): 72.

move to the music, and the instructor silently and physically corrects the form with a physical readjustment of the hands, the fingers, the hips, or the legs (see Figure 1.4). Another refugee, Sandy, explains: “There is only one right way, only one right way. You learn like in a mirror, repeat it like the teacher is your mirror, okay? It's hard ‘cause there’s just one right way, like math.”<sup>41</sup> The dancers do not learn through verbal instruction; their bodies memorize the correct movements until the body can feel what is correct and adjust accordingly. This training produces archival bodies. The performers cannot explain how to perform, but their bodies can demonstrate it. Ben, a refugee, describes: “We are book. Not just pictures like [holds up a magazine]. Not to look at only. We are...dance story, stories, not only nice good pictures.”<sup>42</sup>



**Figure 1.4** - A young dancer at the Apsara Arts Association being corrected by her instructor as she dances.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 74.

Diana Taylor applies the archive, or the “repertoire,” specifically to dance:

The repertoire, whether in terms of verbal or nonverbal expression, transmits live, embodied actions. As such, traditions are stored in the body, through various mnemonic methods, and transmitted “live” in the here and now to a live audience. Forms handed down from the past are experienced as present. Although this may well describe the mechanics of spoken language, it also describes a dance recital or religious festival. It is only because Western culture is wedded to the word, whether written or spoken, that language claims such epistemic and explanatory power.<sup>43</sup>

Just one example is Proeung Chhieng, a performer that survived the Khmer Rouge by feigning illiteracy and working diligently in a labor camp until liberation.<sup>44</sup> He and a few elderly survivors came together to start the University of Fine Arts. Together, they began reconstructing what had been forgotten for nearly four years. The founders estimated that they had a total of 4500 gestures to relearn in the codification of Khmer dance-dramas.

When Chhieng was interviewed by NPR in 1990, he estimated that they had recovered only 2000 of those gestures at that point.<sup>45</sup> Through a translator, Chhieng declared the importance of his task: “My life is valuable. But my culture, my art is more valuable than my life. I could be--I could be dead. I could die, but my arts and my culture

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<sup>43</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 24.

<sup>44</sup> For more examples of surviving performers from the Khmer Rouge, see Denise Heywood, *Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods* (Bangkok: River Books, 2008), Chapter 8: “Survivors and Rebirth: The Cosmic After the Chaotic.”

<sup>45</sup> For specifics on some of these gestures, see Denise Heywood, *Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods* (Bangkok: River Books, 2008), 110-113.

could not die.”<sup>46</sup> Catherine Diamond describes the devastating situation and even sees a possible hope amidst the terror in her article, “Emptying the Sea by the Bucketful: The Dilemma in Cambodian Theatre”:

During the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea (1975-1979)—the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge—the royal affiliation made the dancers and their teachers targets of the revolutionaries. The troupe was dissolved and, as the dancers were considered emblematic of the king’s legitimacy and suzerainty, their demise signaled the symbolic as well as actual collapse of Cambodian culture. This unfortunate time, however, did bring the rarefied dance closer to the common people, who previously had had little contact with it since it had existed solely within the palace precincts.<sup>47</sup>

Even with survivors such as Chhieng working together and exiled teachers attempting to teach others in labor camps, the work of reestablishing the classical dances is extremely difficult. It is plausible that the only performers that knew some of the advanced gestures were those that were so talented, they were known by name, and therefore killed among the first of those killed by the Khmer Rouge. Even with this bleak possibility, the archive was not destroyed because people came together and helped others become artifacts by teaching them as well. The archive—as a place that holds artifacts—ironically became the labor camps set up by the Khmer Rouge in an effort to maintain total control.

Many assert that the specific attack on dancers during the reign of the Khmer Rouge proves the importance of such art forms. Barbara Nowak states: “The Khmer-

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<sup>46</sup> “Cambodian Dance Troupe Faces Persecution,” *Morning Edition*, October 9, 1990.

<sup>47</sup> Catherine Diamond, “Emptying the sea by the bucketful: The dilemma in Cambodian theatre,” *Asian Theatre Journal* (Fall 2003): 153.

Rouge's brutal destruction of Cambodian court dancing and the resurgence of dancing through dedicated teaching by the few remaining master dancers is an example of the emotive and symbolically potent nature that dance can have in instilling national identity."<sup>48</sup> It makes sense then that the Khmer Rouge would target performers since they attempted to destroy all national identity and begin again at what they declared as "Year Zero."

### **New Interpretations for a New Time**

The Khmer Rouge attempted to destroy the Khmer identity and build up a new, communist identity for Cambodia. Though the Khmer Rouge did not succeed in establishing communism as part of the Khmer identity, their destruction and genocide destroyed much of what Cambodia claimed to be. After the Khmer Rouge years, the Khmer people needed to create a new, hopeful, peaceful identity for their nation. The new Khmer identity is still being created and strengthened today.

This thesis contributes to the academic discussions of both Khmer performance and the broader discussion of how performance and tourism contribute to the formation of cultural/national identity. While many scholars write about Khmer performance, are descriptive rather than interpretive. These secondary sources examine Khmer performance through conventional approaches to history and encyclopedic means of describing the different practices. While these sources are helpful in some ways, they also inevitably erase other things present in the performance. They fail to recognize that all accounts, even descriptive ones, are interpretive. My thesis will attempt to approach

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<sup>48</sup> Barbara S. Nowack, "Dancing the Main jo'oh: Hma' Btsisi' Celebrate Their Humanity and Religious Identity in a Malasian World," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* (2002): 333.

the discussion of Khmer performance through exploration and examination rather than prescription and definition, thereby attempting to maintain a stronger sense of representational ethics.

I recognize that this thesis is delimited by my own Western thought and the need to fulfill a specific set of requirements determined by the University. Despite these limitations, I hope to position myself more as an explorer rather than a colonizer in my research of Khmer performances. While I discuss how the Khmer people are creating a history to prove a strong national identity and selling a packaged version of that identity to tourists, the discussion is in no way derogatory. Cambodia has not had political autonomy, wealth, or power since the fifteenth century. In an effort to regain independence and solidarity, I agree with the performers who find that it is an important endeavor to create a national identity that is strong and unique, even if it requires the manipulation of a separate identity aimed at tourists in order to fund it.

As my thesis deals primarily with how the Khmer people *perform* their identities, Chapter Two will introduce the conventions of the four different Khmer traditional forms I discuss: court/classical dance (which includes the *Apsara* dance), all-male dance drama, folk dance, and shadow puppetry. Chapter Three will specifically address the Khmer identity that is being performed onstage. I use *Sokacha*, a puppetry dance-drama performance, as a way of accessing that identity. Returning to Diana Taylor and Tamara Underiner's discussions of identity, I argue that the Khmer identity disseminated through this performance to Khmer audience members specifically is three-fold: Cambodia as political, Cambodia as religious, and Cambodia as social. I also discuss the performance

of identity aimed towards the foreign audience members with the express intent of funding.

Chapter Four will address the specific sub-community within the Khmer identity of the Khmer-Mormon community. I will discuss how, through the adopted tradition of celebrating July twenty-fourth as “Pioneer Day,” they perform their dual identities as both Khmer and Mormon. Eric A. Eliason’s work, “The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-Fashioning: Mormon Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church,” is seminal to this chapter. His discussion of the celebration of Pioneer Day throughout the Mormon Church translates into the discussion of Pioneer Day celebrations in Cambodia. I also use the work of Anthony Shay, Stephanie Jordan, and Andree Grau who discuss dance as a way to choreograph identities.

The Khmer-Mormon community is performing an American folk dance to perform their Mormon identity. Using Benedict Anderson’s idea of “imagined communities,” I argue that the Khmer-Mormon community imagines the Mormons in America performing the same dance. I argue that the Khmer-Mormon community is both recreating the history of the Mormon Church in order to fit with their specific Khmer identity as well as adding the history of the Mormon Church to their own history as Khmer.

Chapter Five also discusses how the Khmer people reinterpret tradition to fit into the modern Khmer identity using the yearly Water Festival as an example. Though Chapter Three makes similar arguments using theatrical, or onstage performance, this chapter focuses on the offstage performances and how they are also being manipulated as a performance of Khmer identity. I argue that the Khmer use the Water Festival as a way

to perform their identities for both one another and the foreign tourists. The Water Festival shifts things such as the role of the King and the influence of theatrical performance to maintain a powerful identity founded in tradition. The Khmer also see the changing of the river as a metaphor for the hopeful future of Cambodia.

The performance for the foreign tourists is a much different performance than the main performance aimed at Khmer tourists and locals. With the help of John Urry and Dean MacCannell's works on the tourist gaze and the intersection of tourism and cultural identification, I discuss the impact of the tourist gaze on the Khmer identity being performed at the Water Festival. The performance to foreigners presents Cambodia as an exotic commodity. The Khmer identity is neatly packaged catering to the desires of the foreigner in order to assure funding from the tourist industry.

Cambodia is finally enjoying a state of independence. The Khmer identity, which has been directly linked to oppression in the past, is now being redefined. This independent identity is disseminated to foreigners and reified for the Khmer through the enactment and performance of it. Performance on stage has been altered, choosing only elements of traditional Khmer performance that emphasize the new identity. But the Khmer are using other venues, like festivals and celebrations, to perform identity. In adopting only elements of Khmer history that fit the hopeful trajectory of the new Khmer identity, the Khmer are creating and performing a new identity, both onstage and offstage, to fit the present and future Cambodia. Two identities of Cambodia are being performed: one aimed at Khmer to instill national pride, and the identity performed for tourists that help fund that nation.



## CHAPTER 2

### **Khmer Performance: An Overview**

To understand contemporary Khmer performance, an introduction to the different forms of ancient performance is necessary. Though each of these forms has an extensive history and includes many specific conventions, what I provide in this chapter are merely the things needed to understand what I discuss in the following chapters.<sup>1</sup> Each of these art forms, like all Khmer culture, ties back to the Angkor period of Khmer history. Many aspects of Khmer performance have shifted in the past century including the area of performance. Dance-dramas were either performed at the palace of the King or on temple grounds. Shadow puppetry and folk dance mostly occurred in public places, but none of the art forms used stages. The playing area of shadow puppetry was only defined by the shadow screen staked into the ground. Today, each of these forms can be seen on proscenium stages, which were not constructed in Cambodia until the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Khmer Folk Dance**

Khmer folk dance, like the folk dance of any nation, represents the general public. Khmer folk dances center on things that are specific to everyday Khmer life such as fishing and farming. Phim and Thompson describe one of the important elements of Khmer folk dance: “The choreography of folk dances created at the university is often based on the fundamental distinction between the sexes. Symmetry is a central motif, with men and women alternately separated according to sex and then paired off in

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<sup>1</sup> My bibliography serves as a more extensive list of resources on each of these art forms. This chapter is designed to aid in a reading of this thesis specifically, so the descriptions I give are quite reductive. A more complete, concise definition of each of these art forms can be found in Samuel L. Leiter, ed., *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007).

couples.”<sup>2</sup> Most Khmer folk dances are danced in partnerships and are performed at festivals and gatherings to celebrate Khmer heritage.



**Figure 2.1** - Dancers at the Koulen Restaurant performing a Khmer folk dance based on fishing.

### **All-Male Dance-Drama (*Lakhon Khol*)**

Khmer dance-drama is a codified performance that uses specific dance motions to tell a story. The stories are traditionally drawn from the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the *Ramayana* epic. The narration is usually chanted and the entire performance is accompanied by the traditional *Pin Peat* orchestra which is made up of instruments such as: an oboe, several types of xylophones, gongs, barrel drums, and brass cymbals. The

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<sup>2</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 78.

*Pin Peat* orchestra claims pre-Angkorean origins as well. Many of the instruments still used today in the orchestra are depicted on the walls of Angkorean temples.

Traditionally, as the name indicates, the performers of the all-male dance-dramas were men, and there was a separate form, called *Lakhon Kback Boran*, which was performed by all women. Today, however, Khmer dance-dramas have amalgamated. There are four character roles found in the dance-dramas: refined males, refined females, monkeys, and ogres. In today's dance-dramas, men usually play the monkeys, and the ogres and women play the royal men and women of the story. Normally a dancer will train for one of these roles and play it for his or her entire career. The costumes of most dance-drama characters are inspired by the traditional attire for the King's coronation. Dance-dramas were traditionally performed for the King but are now also performed at public venues and during festivals.

### **Court/Classical Dance or the *Apsara* Dance**

Court/classical Dance, more specifically *Apsara*, is the most prominent ancient Khmer performance, as *Apsara* dancers adorn nearly every temple and have become a national symbol for Cambodia. The *Apsara* dancer has become iconographic in Cambodia, and the word "*Apsara*" is the name of a multitude of things there: including bakeries, real estate agencies, motorcycle shops, cell phone shops, foot massage businesses, tour guides, and even one of the five TV channels Cambodia produces (see Figure 2.2). *Apsara* means "Celestial Woman," "Celestial Dancer," or "Celestial Nymph." Scenes depicting the *Apsara* often show them as angels aiding the Khmer

people in battle. The very presence of the *Apsara* on the walls of the temple shows that the temple is sanctioned by the gods (see Figure 2.4).



**Figure 2.2** - An *Apsara* on the sign for the electric company of Cambodia in Phnom Penh.

On the walls of Angkor Wat, the *Apsara* are depicted in the relief sculpture of the heavens as well as in the depiction of the legend of the Churning of the Sea of Milk (see Figure 2.3). In this Hindu myth from the epic of the *Mahabharata*, the gods and the demons pull alternately on a large serpent. This motion rotates the mountain around which the snake is coiled and churns the Sea of Milk. It takes one thousand years to churn the sea and create the elixir of immortality. This churning also mythically

produces the *Apsara*.<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of the *Apsara* in the *Mahabharata* does not specifically link them to Cambodia because many Asian countries claim the epic stories. Instead, the *Apsara* is linked more specifically to Cambodia through national legend.



**Figure 2.3** - Gods depicted on the walls of Angkor Wat pulling on the Naga churning the Sea of Milk. Above them, the *Apsara* that are produced in the churning are pictured.

The legend of the origin of the Khmer people is also inscribed in Sanskrit on the walls of Angkor Wat. The legend explains that the Khmer people were created through the union of Mera and Kambu, whose name is the foundation of *Kambuja*, the early Khmer name of the country. Mera, as the inscription describes, was “the most glorious of

<sup>3</sup> Michael Freeman and Claude Jacques, *Ancient Angkor* (Bangkok: River Books, 2006), 62.



celestial women.”<sup>4</sup> By this explanation, Mera was an *Apsara*. Phim and Thompson discuss Mera’s tie to Khmer dance: “These divinities have long been conceived by Cambodians as the model not only of femininity, but more specifically of dance. Thus, the first Cambodian woman, mother of the people, was a dancer.”<sup>5</sup> This legend ties *Apsara* dance directly to the Khmer identity and legitimizes the claim that while shadow theatre and dance-drama have similar counterparts in other Southeast Asian countries, *Apsara* dancing is uniquely Khmer.



**Figure 2.4** - *Apsara* on the walls of Preah Khan.

Because images of the *Apsara* adorn the temples of Cambodia, including Angkor Wat, the *Apsara* dance represents the affluence Cambodia once had during the Angkor period and the beauty it still possesses. The dance is defined by slow, precise movement. Female dancers stretch their wrists from a young age in order to have the physical capabilities to perform the difficult hand and wrist movements that characterize *Apsara* dancing. Representing angels, the *Apsara* nearly float around the stage. There is usually one central *Apsara* dancer that is surrounded by a “chorus” of others (see Figure 2.5).

<sup>4</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Though traditionally, the *Apsara* figure appeared in performances of all-female dance-dramas that were similar to the all-male versions of the same, the *Apsara* dance is now a separate form. The *Apsara* dance that is known today is attributed to Queen Mother Sisowath Kossamak. In the 1950s, Kossamak helped choreograph new dances that returned to the relief sculptures of the *Apsara* found on the temple walls. The *Apsara* dance that is seen today is the result of her efforts. This dance is more abstract and precise in its movements than the dance-dramas from which it emerged.



**Figure 2.5** - *Apsara* dancers at the Cambodian Cultural Village.

### **Shadow Puppetry**

There are two forms of Khmer shadow theatre: *Sbek Thom* (translated literally as “Big Leather,” see Figure 2.7) and *Sbek Touch* (“Small Leather”). *Sbek Thom* puppets are large leather panels depicting characters and scenes. They do not have moving parts, but each panel tells part of the story. For example, when two characters engage in a fight,

the two panels, each depicting one of the characters, are replaced with one single panel depicting the fight between the two. Eileen Blumenthal describes *Sbek Thom* as “picture-storytelling” rather than puppetry.<sup>6</sup> A *Sbek Thom* performance usually opens with a battle between a black monkey and a white monkey. Traditionally, the battle begins the show and after the black and white monkeys fight each other, they are told that they must learn to get along because they are both monkeys and thus, they are both brothers.

The story that follows usually comes from the *Reamker*. *Sbek Thom* performers, traditionally male, perform both in front of and behind the shadow screen. Though *Sbek Thom* performances were usually during religious festivals, they are now mostly public entertainment. *Sbek Thom* puppets are made from the hide of a cow or a water buffalo. The process in which the leather is involved from animal to final puppet has specific ceremonial mandates and meanings as well. Because some of the leather puppets depict gods, a great deal of care and reverence goes into the creation of a *Sbek Thom* puppet.



**Figure 2.6** - A *Sbek Thom* performance at Sovanna Phum Performing Arts Center.

<sup>6</sup> Eileen Blumenthal, “Puppet Theatre,” in Samuel L. Leiter, ed., *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 564.



Pech Tum Kravel, a Khmer Rouge survivor, is credited for saving *Sbek Thom*. He took a set of 147 shadow puppets to the National Theatre in Phnom Penh and hid them before the Khmer Rouge took over the city.<sup>7</sup> In his comprehensive book about *Sbek Thom* he writes:

[W]e are aware that our society is now moving at a faster pace; because we wish to popularize the *sbek thom* so that the general Cambodian public will be acquainted with their national heritage and because we wish to publicize this art in the international community, [...] we have actively chosen to produce only some short excerpts [...] Nevertheless, though we have proceeded carefully, through this shortening process some loss is inevitable. Perhaps this kind of loss is in line with the evolution of a developing society. As the society becomes faster and faster, the people's time becomes more and more regulated.<sup>8</sup>

The modern world is a lot faster than the society out of which ancient Khmer performance practices come. What Kravel describes as a “loss” of elements of traditional performance in the modern world, I would argue are merely shifts in purpose. The Khmer people have changed, so the performances have to change as well. The purposes that were once linked to rigid performance traditions such as *Sbek Thom* no longer exist, so performance has changed to meet the current needs of the people it claims to represent. Traditional *Sbek Thom* performances would often last seven nights. These same performances today have been cut down to one or two hours.

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<sup>7</sup> Denise Heywood, *Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods* (Bangkok: River Books, 2008), 120.

<sup>8</sup> Pech Tum Kravel, *Sbek Thom: Khmer Shadow Theater* Trans. Sos Kem (Cambodia: Cornell Southeast Asia Program and UNESCO, 1995), 33-34.



**Figure 2.7** –“Big Leather” being stretched for shadow puppets at the Sovanna Phum Performing Arts Center.

*Sbek Touch* features smaller leather puppets with movable parts. Each character has at least one movable limb and often even a movable jaw. Other intricate leather puppets create the scenery of the performance. Unlike the codified, religiously founded *Sbek Thom* that tells stories from the *Reamker*, *Sbek Touch* tells other tales of Khmer mythology, the life of the Buddha, and even incorporates or depicts more modern stories about the country’s politics or lifestyle. While *Sbek Thom* puppets are based in tradition with very little changes to the puppets themselves, *Sbek Touch* puppets change with the production. This form of shadow puppetry is the irreverent one of the two. Eileen Blumenthal explains that *Sbek Touch* “continually adds new figures, such as big-nosed

Westerners, motorbikes, and army tanks” and *Sbek Touch* performances often include “topical satire.”<sup>9</sup>

This thesis is about Khmer performance. I discuss both onstage and offstage performance throughout, but both are heavily influenced by traditional Khmer performance practices as I have just defined. The performance of Khmer identity uses elements from Khmer theatrical forms. Though each of these forms I discuss is based in an “original” form, they have been modified for modern consumption in a variety of ways. Most of them have been shortened considerably, have become more public, and end with applause and a curtain call as in Western theatre. There is also a great deal of overlap between the forms in theatrical performances seen in Cambodia today. Despite this, performances today are still touted as traditional because the notion of having unique, traditional performance forms is part of the modern Khmer identity that is being created for the Khmer and the foreigners.

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel L. Leiter, ed., *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 565, 77.

## CHAPTER 3

### ***Sokacha: Onstage Performance of Khmer Identity***

In 2006, I sat in an uncomfortable bench in Cambodia. Sick from the lunch that catered Khmer food to Western tourists, I listened to the "exotic" sounds of the traditional pin peat orchestra before the performance began. Presented as a traditional Khmer performance, the play, entitled *Sokacha*, introduced the intricacies of several different forms of Khmer performance into one palatable lot. Combining performance styles such as dance-drama, court/classical dance, and puppetry, *Sokacha* redefined Khmer traditional performance as the amalgamation of the individual styles. At the end of the performance, I, as an audience member, was invited to the stage to try out the puppets and get my picture taken with the costumed natives.

My questions about the Khmer performance of identity began as I was sitting in that uncomfortable bamboo bench at the Sovanna Phum Performing Arts Company on 20 July 2006 watching a performance entitled *Sokacha*. It became apparent that there were two separate identities being performed onstage. One identity was aimed specifically at the Khmer audience members. It performed the Khmer identity using the history and conventions of traditional Khmer performance as an identity that is political, social, and religious. Though foreign audience members were introduced to a taste of the performance for the Khmer, the second performance of Khmer identity, aimed specifically at tourists was mainly in an effort to raise monetary support for the organization. *Sokacha* altered traditional forms in several ways for the enjoyment (and donations) of tourists present.

Though I use *Sokacha* as a way to discuss this identity, it is also about the role of onstage performance in the creation and dissemination of Khmer identity. *Sokacha* serves as one example of what performance has become, but it is important to understand the role of Khmer performance generally in Cambodia's political, religious, and social identity in order to explain how this identity was disseminated through the specific performance of *Sokacha*.

The story depicted in the performance entitled *Sokacha* was a segment from the *Reamker*. In this portion of the story, Seda is kidnapped by the evil Krong Reap. In an effort to save her, Sokacha turns himself into a woman to woo the prison guard and succeeds. Seda then escapes from prison and is reunited with her husband, Preah Ream. In a traditional *Sbek Thom* performance, this story would have been enacted entirely through puppets, but in an effort to modernize Khmer traditions and keep foreign tourists interested, *Sokacha* mixed several genres and forms.

Specific elements of traditional forms were altered in *Sokacha* in order to emphasize specific aspects of Khmer identity. Although *Sbek Thom* is known for showing episodes of the fight between the honorable Preah Ream and the evil Krong Reap from the *Reamker*, *Sokacha* paid homage to the *lakhon khol*, or all-male, masked dance-dramas. There were several vignettes of masked fighting between the men of the company to the harsh beat of the drums. Also, this production played with gender roles in casting. The evil ogre, Krong Reap, was played by a woman, so was defined by more gracefully connected movements than the giants typically seen in masked dance-dramas. The monkeys were, however, all played by men, and so the movements of the monkeys

were more naturalistic than the dance steps that define the monkeys in the all-female dance-dramas of the past.

To emphasize further the beauty and singularity of Khmer performance, *Sokacha* cleverly combined elements of *Sbek Thom* and the dance-dramas. For example, the act of flying in Khmer dance-drama is one of the most difficult movements to perform. Characters fly when they are, in a sense, above it all—when they feel intense emotions of love, spirituality, or happiness. This movement is achieved by raising the back foot so that the heel is nearly touching the dancer's back and the sole of the foot faces upward. The wrist or elbow is rested on the upturned foot. In *Sokacha*, one of the female characters flew while interacting with a male character. To emphasize the beauty of the act of flying, however, the male character was merely a shadow puppet. If both characters had been played by dancers, the dancer flying would have been upstaged by the presence of another body on stage.

Modern performances of *Sbek Thom* retain many elements of tradition—the puppets themselves, the traditional music style, and the stories depicted—but the purposes and meanings have shifted. In the effort to popularize the art of *Sbek Thom*, create a national heritage of Cambodia for the Khmer people, and demonstrate that identity to foreign tourists, *Sokacha* modernized the elements of several Khmer art forms in order to create a performance that both hearkened back to Cambodia's grandeur of the past and looked forward to a hopeful future identity for the nation.

## **Cambodia's Identity as Religious: Performance as Religious Ritual**

Nearly ninety-five percent of Cambodia's population is Buddhist. Because Buddhism is practiced by nearly all Khmer and the religion is so imbedded in the culture, it has become a main part of Cambodia's identity. Khmer performance represents how the identity of Cambodia is tied to religion in both the way it is performed and the purposes it held in ancient Cambodia. In Cambodia, performance is a spiritual endeavor as well as a temporal activity. Performing artists in Cambodia rigorously train for years to master their roles in each of the art forms (see Figure 3.1). In the past, dancers began full-time training at the age of six. Today, training may start as early as six for some, but it is not full time. Rehearsal involves the performers dancing continuously while the instructor physically corrects the technique. There is little-to-no verbal explanation; everything is learned through the physical. After years of rehearsal, the dancers learn to *feel* what is correct. But this extensive training in the physical requirements of dance is not enough to prepare a dancer for performance. After invoking the gods for help, a good performance will elevate both performers and audience members into a realm not attached to this world.





**Figure 3.1** - Young boys at the Apsara Arts Association stretching as part of dancing training.

As tradition dictates, *Sokacha* begins with the *Sampeah Kru* (“properly salute a teacher” or “show gratitude for a teacher”) ceremony in which the gods and the teachers are thanked for their assistance and invoked for their continued aid during the evening’s performance. Incense is burned and other offerings are set before a representation of the characters in the performance. Phim and Thompson explain: “These rituals help the dancers prepare to transpose themselves into the characters they are about to portray, and to elevate the performance above the everyday world in which it is, yet, firmly rooted.”<sup>1</sup> This explanation of the *Sampeah Kru* demonstrates the belief in the strength of a good

<sup>1</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12.



performance. The *Sampeah Kru* at the beginning of *Sokacha* also demonstrated the way ritual has changed.

In *Sokacha*, items on the stage for the *Sampeah Kru* were merely present to invoke what would have taken place in a traditional performance in the past. In this ceremony, there was only one shadow puppet and only one mask (see Figure 3.2). Rather than invoking the aid of many of the characters in the mythology and many of the deities, there was only one god and one character represented. In some ways, this was still an active ritual, but in other ways, it was merely a way to help tourists get a sense of what they would have seen in a more traditional *Sbek Thom* performance.



**Figure 3.2** - The offerings placed in front of one mask and one shadow puppet for the *Sampeah Kru* at the beginning of *Sokacha*.

*Sokacha* depended upon the Western tourists in the audience, unfamiliar with Khmer performance, to help maintain the illusion of other-worldliness. Phim and Thompson guide foreigners into Khmer performance with the statement:

Many viewers unfamiliar with southeast or south Asia may find it difficult at first to appreciate the power of Khmer dance. [...] Corporal movement is in general relatively restrained. Facial expression can be extremely subtle. The lack of distinction between performance and audience spaces in some contexts, along with the slow rhythm and long duration of much traditional performance, differ from the modern Western experience of theatre. It is in fact these very characteristics, combined with many other elements, which contribute to the performative illusion of entering another time and space.<sup>2</sup>

The sense of “entering another time and space” in this description seems to be the inevitable effect of unfamiliarity. *Sokacha* helped emphasize this desired effect by opening the show with an overture of music from the traditional *Pin Peat*, or the Khmer orchestra. As the sound of the *Pin Peat* is unfamiliar to foreign tourists, it helped introduce the possibility of entering a time and place foreign to the present. This overture served a dual purpose. While the exoticism of the sounds may have helped foreign audience members prepare to be transported during the performance, the same effect was achieved for native Khmer audience members because of the familiarity of the sound. For the Khmer, this prelude invoked national pride in something that is Khmer.

In addition to the traditional sound of the *Pin Peat* orchestra, Khmer audience members understand the significant history of music and its link to religion. Music is sacred in Cambodia because traditional music is considered an offering to the gods, but

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 13.

more than just music ties Khmer performance with religion. Dancers seen on the walls of Angkorean temples are also identified as angels.

In *Sokacha*, the role of the *Apsara* was shifted. Rather than being a part of the court/classical dance, the main female character of the dance-drama became the *Apsara*. She did not have a chorus to back her up, nor did she perform the *Apsara* dance to the audience. The dance was performed behind the shadow screen where the specific hand movements of the *Apsara* dance were emphasized (see Figure 3.3). Her slow, exact movements were highlighted rather than her physical beauty and ornate costuming. In *Sokacha*, a set was creatively made out of shadows on the screen to frame the *Apsara* dance. This framing served to further emphasize the beauty of the dance. These staging choices honored the traditional form while simultaneously breaking from its usual performance structure.



**Figure 3.3** - Movements from the *Apsara* dance performed by the main female character in the dance-drama *Sokacha*. Because she is behind the shadow screen and framed in by a set made of shadows, the individual, codified movements are emphasized.

Because the *Apsara* is a representation of an angel, her very presence helps elevate a performance. Describing the effect of the *Apsara* dancers on audience members, Paul Cravath argues: “Their dazzling beauty and warmly distant, unchanging smiles; and their return through the same portal from which they first appeared—all this gives the dancers a quality of mystery. We are willing to believe that they inhabit all space but have appeared in the present stage as spirits who need nothing and who leave behind only flower petals and a vision.”<sup>3</sup> It is the combination of the history tied to the *Apsara*, her mysterious half-smile in performance, and the fact that the *Apsara* dancer never makes eye-contact with the audience that all seem to invoke deity. Her presence in *Sokacha* connects the Khmer identity to religion.

The presence of the *Apsara* is not the only reason Khmer performances are considered to be religiously elevated, however. The very subject matter of Khmer performance ties it to religion. Cravath explains: “Vishnu has always been identified with dance. It was he who presided over the ‘Churning of the Great Sea’ whose sole creation was the dancing apsaras.”<sup>4</sup> Because Preah Ream, or Prince Rama, is an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu in the *Reamker*, and the *Reamker* is the subject of most Khmer performance art forms, all Khmer performance is linked to deity. Because Cambodia is now predominantly Buddhist, lessons of the Buddha are also taught through the *Reamker*.<sup>5</sup> Cravath further explains, “[I]n Khmer the word for entering the stage is chaen (cena), ‘to go out,’ while leaving the stage is chol (cula), ‘to enter,’ as though suggesting

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Russell Cravath, “Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia” (PhD diss., University of Hawaii, 1985), 572.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>5</sup> It is logical for Buddhist lessons to be taught through the Hindu epic because one of the avatars of the God Vishnu is allegedly Buddha.

that the dancer goes somewhere in performance and upon her exit from the stage re-enters this world.”<sup>6</sup>

The study of the Hindu epic of the *Reamker*, and the application of Buddhist principles to the story, is an active process. The Khmer people are raised with the stories from the *Reamker*, but just being able to recite the plot lines does not qualify as knowing it. Phim and Thompson explain: “It is through the public act of devotion—walking through the galleries [of Angkor Wat], or attending a *sbaek* performance—that the epic comes to life. The re-enactment serves simultaneously to drive away evil spirits and to elevate human spirits.”<sup>7</sup> The *Reamker* requires action in order for its teachings to be understood. One must actually walk through the galleries of Angkor Wat and follow the stories depicted on the walls or be present in the audience during a performance of *Sbek Thom* or a dance-drama depicting parts of the *Reamker*. It is in the process of re-enactment of the epic that helps lift performers and audience members above this world and reach a taste of the divine.

It is through performing or witnessing a performance that an individual, either Khmer or foreign, is able to reach higher levels of spirituality. Performance is both a gift to the gods as well as an opportunity to teach and learn Buddhist principles for a better life. *Sokacha* was an opportunity for enactment of the epic. Because it was a story from the *Reamker*, audience members familiar with Buddhist teachings could make applications. Foreigners unfamiliar with Buddhist teachings or Khmer performance could simply learn from the story and be elevated through the performance. For me as a western audience member, it was assumed that the foreign nature of the performance

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 578.

<sup>7</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32.

style, music, and language of *Sokacha* would be enough to transport me to a different time and place.

*Sokacha* used different tactics to help spiritually elevate the foreigners. Elements most “foreign” to Westerners were emphasized in the performance. But *Sokacha* also seemed to be aware of the conventions of Western theatre and tried to fit Khmer performance into the structure of a play. The story was linear and had recognizable characters. Characters without masks used facial expressions blurring the lines between pure dance and acting. The foreign elements, such as the form of the *Apsara* dancing behind the shadow screen and the music of the *Pin Peat* orchestra inundated foreign audience members with the uniqueness of Khmer performance. *Sokacha* served as an introduction of the best of Khmer performance to the tourist gaze. Adding elements of dance-drama and the *Apsara* dance ensured that this performance was unlike anything else foreigners had seen. Concentration and meditation is a large part of Buddhist doctrine. Foreign audience members did not understand the language used in *Sokacha*, so they were forced to concentrate on the motions of the performance to understand it. The intricacies of the motions helped us foreigners in the audience reach a level of meditation. Because Khmer performance has always been linked to the religion of the country, performances such as *Sokacha* help demonstrate the religious identity of Cambodia. This religious identity is tied, through performance, directly to the political identity of Cambodia.

## Cambodia's Identity as Political: Performers as Ambassadors

The Khmer government, like most governments, has always sought to prove its political power in both the local and international arenas. Khmer political leaders have always seemed to recognize the power of Khmer performance and have wisely chosen to use that power for their benefit. Since the 9<sup>th</sup> century, female dancers were donated to the temples as “slaves to the god.” These temple dancers were adopted into the court and became part of the King’s harem. As early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, there were dancers attached to the court of the king. An inscription from the late 6<sup>th</sup> century or early 7<sup>th</sup> century lists female dancers among the slaves of the temple of a local deity. Another inscription from AD 611—the oldest inscription in the Khmer language—documents seven female dancers, eleven female singers, and four female musicians given as offerings to another temple.<sup>8</sup> This inscription also shows the importance of music with the dance and the ties of both to the court. During the reign of Jayavarman VII from 1181 to 1215 it was documented that there were over three thousand dancers tied to the temples of Cambodia and thus, to Jayavarman’s court. The presence of *Apsara* dancers in the court proved the legitimacy of the king in the eyes of the gods and the people.

Other than the association of female dancers with the King, connections between performance and royalty are built into the dance-drama. To make the connection obvious between the noble Preah Ream, or Prince Rama, and the Khmer monarch, the costume of Preah Ream and other princes in the dance-dramas are identical to the dress of the Khmer Kings at coronation.<sup>9</sup> Because of the connection of dance with gods and spirits, royalty wisely chose to connect itself with performance. Even today, this connection is not

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Russell Cravath, “Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia” (PhD diss., University of Hawaii, 1985), 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 522.



forgotten. “Dance is commonly perceived as innate to the Khmer people, and essential to the perpetuation of Cambodia as a cultural and political entity.”<sup>10</sup> An example of this belief is the reign of Ang Duong, 1841-1860.

Duong made several changes to Khmer performance including changes to both the costumes and the choreography in an attempt to make Khmer performance more of a symbol of the nation. The costumes were changed to ones that more closely resembled the relief sculptures of dancers adorning the temples of Angkor Wat. This change helped utilize “the court dance as a demonstration of the modern Cambodian throne’s legitimacy in the Angkorean lineage.”<sup>11</sup> Emphasizing the connection to the power of the Angkor period through performance was a smart political strategy for Duong. With his court performers reminding audiences of the largesse of Angkor Wat, Duong attached himself to the legitimacy of the throne of Cambodia and the uniting of government and religion with the declaration of the *devaraja* or “god-king” at the beginning of the Angkor period. In this way, court performers were used as representatives of the true and divine authority of the King.

During the years of Cambodia as a French Protectorate, 1863-1953, Khmer performance was used again to give power back to the royalty.<sup>12</sup> In 1906, the French decided to invite the Khmer King Sisowath to France so that he would bring his dancers. The dancers were introduced internationally in Marseilles in June 1906. Auguste Rodin was fascinated by the spectacle and drew several sketches of the Khmer performers. He

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<sup>10</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Russell Cravath, “Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia” (PhD diss., University of Hawaii, 1985), 153.

<sup>12</sup> On July 3, 1953, after much campaigning of the Khmer King Sihanouk to the French for independence, France declared that it would grant full independence to Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos.



said: “I contemplated them in ecstasy ... When they left, I was in the shadow and in the cold, I thought they had taken with them all the beauty in the world.”<sup>13</sup> In 1927, because of the popularity of Khmer dancers abroad, the French moved performers out of the King’s harem and sought to make them a state performance company. Sisowath Kossamak, the daughter of King Sisowath Monivong, formed a rival dance group within the court. The court dance group became the better of the two, the state theatre company was disbanded, and performers again represented the crown.

This changeover was a victory for the Khmer people. Although the French still maintained a firm grip on Cambodia, the King had won the performers back. Kossamak saw the potential of Khmer performers as ambassadors or representatives of the Kingdom of Cambodia. She furthered the changes Duong had begun by making performance more reminiscent of Angkorean dancers and is credited with making the *Apsara* dance what it is today. When Kossamak’s son, Norodom Sihanouk, ascended to the throne in 1941, Kossamak helped modernize the role of court performers. Cravath describes this:

In creating an international image for the Khmer royal dancers, Kossamak skillfully balanced their guarded palace life with carefully selected public appearance. Photo-journalists were permitted articles over the years, but these never involved interviews with the dancers themselves. While it is true that the dancers performed outside the palace during Sihanouk’s reign with a far greater frequency than ever before, Kossamak managed to perpetuate an image of the troupe as a precious jewel—highly revered but distant.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Denise Heywood, *Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods* (Bangkok: River Books, 2008), 50.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Russell Cravath, “Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia” (PhD diss., University of Hawaii, 1985), 219.

Kossamak changed the rigidity of the tie between the dancers and the King. Before this time, court dancers were strictly protected. The general public was not invited to performances. Performers were part of the King's harem and performed solely for the King, the court, and the gods. Not until the 1940s were performers allowed to live outside of the court and marry, although "their art was still needed as a sacred offering."<sup>15</sup> Kossamak also knew the power of Khmer performance as a symbol of the strength of Cambodia. This power could only be tapped if the performers were allowed public appearances while still maintaining an air of mystery and exclusivity. Phim and Thompson explain:

Kossamak knew that the dancers were Cambodia's best possible ambassadors. In allowing them to leave the palace and the kingdom, she understood that they lent authority to Sihanouk's presence. If he was willing to share his private dancers, including his own children, with another nation, and if those dancers were of rare quality, the likelihood of acceptance for the political friendship which he conjointly offered was increased.<sup>16</sup>

The use of Khmer dancers as ambassadors became desperately important in the early 1970s as a war in Cambodia was looking inevitable.

In 1970, after almost twenty years as king, Norodom Sihanouk was ousted by Prime Minister Lon Nol, who declared himself president of Cambodia. In taking over the monarchy, Nol was widely unpopular with his people, and this divide helped the Khmer Rouge gain more power in the midst of the chaos. Nol himself understood the importance of the royal performers and decided to maintain the court performers under

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<sup>15</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

his rule. The meaning attached to the court performers had to shift under the leadership of Lon Nol. Because Nol was not a King, the performers could not represent the legitimacy of the Khmer monarch as they had done in the past. Instead, they became more actively political rather than merely symbolically political. Before this time, Khmer performers stayed mostly on Khmer soil, proving to the gods and the Khmer people the power of Cambodia's political leaders. In the 1970s, Khmer dancers became literal ambassadors touring countries and pleading the cause of Cambodia rather than just local proof of Cambodia's greatness.

Nol could see that his grasp on Cambodia was weakening and the power of the Khmer Rouge was growing. The Khmer people did not like either option. King Sihanouk, as Khmer royalty, had been an advocate for the Khmer people. Nol stood in the middle of Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge. Through a coup, he had taken over the King of Cambodia and so could not represent the Khmer people, but he also wanted to maintain a republic—a government in opposition to Communism—and so Nol was also opposed to the Khmer Rouge. The unstable position Nol had within Cambodia made his position more vulnerable as the Khmer Rouge gained more power. Nol sought the assistance of the court performers. In 1971, Khmer court performers toured the United States in order to ensure the continued alliance between the two countries. This trip also served as a plea to the government of the United States not to forget Cambodia in her imminent time of need. A review in the *New York Times* described the New York performance by saying: “Its style, manner and unforced grace, are very impressive, and stay in the mind as a cool, almost untroubled memory, almost like a sky-blue patch of

childhood.”<sup>17</sup> Although the performance was well-received, the desperation of the plight of Cambodia did not come across through the peaceful, “sky-blue” performance, and in 1973, the United States suspended aid to Cambodia.

As time continued, the Khmer Rouge became more and more threatening and Nol used the court dancers one last time in desperation to maintain his power in Cambodia. In December of 1974, the classical dance troupe were sent by Lon Nol to Bangkok, which would be their last tour as ambassadors for the Khmer government. With Phnom Penh waiting, as Sihanouk said in Peking, like a ripe apple about to fall, Lon Nol sent the national dancers to Bangkok. As part of an intense plea for Thai assistance, this final appearance of the dance drama in the diplomatic arena seemed a last chance for help. This attempt also failed, and Nol gave up in the face of imminent destruction. On 1 April 1975, Lon Nol resigned and fled the country. Just two weeks later, on 17 April 1975, the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia’s capital city, Phnom Penh.

Though *Sokacha* was not overtly political, it was a reminder to Khmer and foreigners alike that Cambodia has gained independence and is again able to celebrate and perform Khmer identity onstage. The co-director of the Sovanna Phum company and the director of *Sokacha* is native Khmer and master shadow puppeteer, Mann Kosal (see Figure 3.4). Born in 1961, Mann Kosal was a teenager during the Khmer Rouge era, but did not begin to study performance until 1984. Although he did not study Khmer performance until after the war, his experiences during the Khmer Rouge cannot be separated from his work in the arts and *Sokacha* served as a performance of the post-Khmer Rouge identity that Cambodia claims. Kosal personally explained, in English, the goals of the Sovanna Phum company and provided a way for tourists to give donations

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<sup>17</sup> Clive Barnes, “Bas-Reliefs Come to Life,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1971.

both before and after the performance. *Sokacha* was a way for Kosal and his cast to introduce Khmer performance to foreigners and ask for the funds necessary to maintain it. Sovanna Phum Performing Arts Company could be defined as an NGO which, by definition, means they are not linked to the government. However, because Khmer performance is still directly linked to the King, any support of Khmer performance could be read as a support of Cambodia's non-communist government and with my five dollar entrance fee, the statement was made that I, as a foreign tourist, thought Khmer performance was worth supporting.

In *Sokacha*, the performers served as ambassadors for the cause of Khmer identity to the foreigners in the audience. Though the Khmer identity includes the government, the Khmer people realize that their identity is intrinsically linked to their culture. *Sokacha* premiered at Sovanna Phum in May of 2006, in an effort to raise enough money to keep the company running for the next three months. Keeping Khmer performing arts profitable to the artists is getting harder and it is entirely foreign funding that is keeping companies like Sovanna Phum alive. Part of proving the strength of Khmer identity is proving that Khmer culture is unique enough to be worth saving.

The artists in *Sokacha* had to get the foreigners passionate and excited about Khmer culture. The performance of *Sokacha* was a way to introduce foreigners to all of Khmer traditional performance in one event. In order to please tourists from the fast-paced, mediated world, *Sokacha* also had to make precise art forms more exciting. *Sokacha* had to have everything tourists expect from Cambodia and a performance: elaborate silk costumes, juggling clowns, a love story, orchestral music, less than two hour duration, a curtain call, and a chance to meet the cast. Foreigners were expected to

feel as Rodin did about the performance—that all the beauty in the world is connected to Khmer performance.

Though the Sovanna Phum’s goal of my visit to the theatre as a tourist was primarily financial, they had to please me in order to get more than just the five-dollar admission required. Khmer hospitality was shown through the kind, soft-spoken ushers, the gift shop worker, and the personable nature of the cast and director. I was treated as a friend rather than a foreign stranger. Cast members of *Sokacha*, as ambassadors of Khmer identity, had to prove both onstage and off that Khmer culture is friendly, beautiful, and worth discovering and sharing.



**Figure 3.4** - Mann Kosal singing at a drum performance at the Sovanna Phum Performing Arts Company.

## **Cambodia's Identity as Social: Performance as a Representative of the People**

A large part of the identity of Cambodia is the culture. The term “Khmer” describes the people of Cambodia as well as the language they speak. Therefore, Khmer identity, by definition, is the identity of the people. Khmer performance represents both the Khmer people and the culture that is included in the Khmer language. When the devastation of the Khmer Rouge ended in 1979, with the invasion of the Vietnamese, Khmer performance was in shambles. The Khmer people had to unite and piece together what had been lost with only ten percent of performing artists remaining. Speaking of the Khmer Rouge, Cravath describes: “It was, ironically, those years of corruption and depravity which insulated the classical dance tradition from its royal past and rendered it acceptable within the ‘new revolutionary culture’ as a symbol of the people’s creativity, spirit, and endurance.”<sup>18</sup>

In the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge, the people of Cambodia grasped onto Khmer performance as a symbol of their surviving culture. Although the Khmer Rouge had sought specifically to destroy anything that was uniquely Khmer, they had not succeeded. Khmer performance now represents the fact that the Khmer spirit cannot be quelled. Survivors of the Khmer Rouge came together and began performing. Phim and Thompson describe:

Cultural offices in provincial capitals recruited performers. Surviving professional artists as well as novices joined fledgling troupes that performed for crowds of hundreds. They danced with tattered bits of cloth and cardboard crowns as costumes. They danced to music made from whatever instruments they

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 256.

could find. People held many ceremonies, just to rejoice in their new-found freedom, inviting dance and theatre troupes to entertain them.<sup>19</sup>

Without all of the visual links to the king that Khmer performance once had, the Khmer people adopted performance as a representative of the majority rather than just the elite. In this regard, the Khmer people began performing their identity through dance. Performance became ritualistic in different ways than it had in the past.

Through dance, the Khmer people are performing what it is to be Khmer. They hearken back to how performance was before the Khmer Rouge, but the meanings associated with the performance have shifted. Cambodia does not have to prove its identity as it did after the Angkor period. Instead, Cambodia has to invent its identity. Diana Taylor, in discussing performance of the Americas observes something that is poignant to post-Khmer Rouge performance as well: “Identity, especially identity as ‘difference’ (original, unique—not Spanish, not indigenous) has to be performed to be seen.”<sup>20</sup> The Khmer identity has to be created in opposition to the influences that have been thrust upon it. It is not Indian, Thai, French, or Communist. This last opposition became the most important. The updated Khmer identity that is created based on these oppositions is disseminated through performance.

This literal performance of Khmer identity becomes a ritualistic healing process for the people. Taylor’s observations in the Americas continue to apply when she states:

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<sup>19</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 43.

<sup>20</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 98.

Although many scholars, such as Tamara Underiner and Diana Taylor, discuss the use of performance in a creation of identity, none of these discussions have been about Khmer performance. Because of this, I am applying what has been said about other identities to the Khmer identity.



Traumatic memory often relies on live, common interactive performance for transmission. Even studies that emphasize the length between trauma and narrative make evident in the analysis itself that the transmission of traumatic memory from victim to witness involves the shared and participatory act of telling and listening associated with live performance. Bearing witness is a live process, a doing, an event that takes place in real time, in the presence of a listener who “comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event.”<sup>21</sup>

The Khmer people perform for each other to show that they now have a collective memory of trauma. They have all lived through the same horrors, and their performance is now directly opposed to the genocide that had taken over Cambodia. The performances are also for foreigners who are almost solely responsible for the finances required to reestablish Khmer performance. In participating in these performances, foreigners are invited to understand the trauma that ravished Cambodia but also, more importantly, work to help define and perpetuate a new identity of hope and peace.

Since dance has been given to the people as a collective identity rather than just a symbol of the king, post-Khmer Rouge performance reifies the people as Khmer. Several elements of *Sokacha* are aimed specifically towards the Khmer audience members. For example, the ogre character displays the soles of his feet to the audience. In Cambodia, showing someone the soles of the feet is considered a harsh insult since the feet are the dirtiest part of your body and the furthest from the head, which is the most sacred part of the body. The use of this specific insult is an example of how *Sokacha* uses Khmer mythology and cultural understanding to create more meaning for Khmer natives

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<sup>21</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 167.

watching. The character of the ogre is more specific to Khmer audience members because of the cultural meaning of the soles of his feet.

The performance was also altered from “traditional” Khmer performance in order to change the messages to fit a post Khmer Rouge mentality. An example of this is the opening of the performance. In *Sokacha*, the battle between the black monkey and white monkey that traditionally opens a *Sbek Thom* performance was shortened considerably. The moral was not explained in *Sokacha* as it would have been in a traditional *Sbek Thom* performance; it was merely implied. Also, the seemingly unconnected story of the monkeys in traditional performance was made to seem like a part of the story. Echoing the fight between the good and evil monkeys, we saw the shadows of two men fighting—one representing Preah Ream’s brother and the other one Krong Reap’s son. Rather than being didactic with a moral against internal fighting, *Sokacha* updated both the performance elements and the message of this traditional opening. Phim describes how the battle between the monkeys has shifted: “Good, represented by monkeys who are nevertheless uncouth, has triumphed over evil, the ogres. Professional artists see this as a metaphor for the enlightenment that Cambodia needs in the face of destruction and loss engendered by war.”<sup>22</sup> Although the battle at the beginning of *Sokacha* was still monkey against monkey, it was implied that although the enemy is another monkey, it is a monkey so different that it could be recognized as an ogre. The Khmer Rouge was made up of Khmer people that sought to destroy other Khmer. Because of this, the lesson between the two monkeys is even more poignant to modern Khmer. The monkeys represent the defeat of the Khmer Rouge and the uniting of the people in the aftermath.

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<sup>22</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 63.

In addition to the change of the monkey allegory at the beginning, *Sokacha* creatively incorporated folk dance to prove that Khmer performance is now a representative of the people. Before the fall of Phnom Penh, Khmer folk dance was incorporated into the curriculum of the performing arts schools and was, for the first time, being studied and recorded. As the Khmer Rouge became more threatening, folk dance became more prominent as a symbol of the people. Cravath explains this: “On both sides of the war front that was continually tightening around Phnom Penh, the dancers and culture of the ‘people’ came to be a more acceptable symbol of the nation’s art than the remote and refined dancers of the former king.”<sup>23</sup> Because King Norodom Sihanouk had already been ousted and replaced, the dancers that were attached to him were now attached to Lon Nol. The general public did not align themselves with Lon Nol and so the court dancers now represented a government to which they were opposed. Folk dance took the place of court dance as a symbol of what is uniquely Khmer, since children grow up learning these dances from a young age.

*Sokacha* changes traditional folk dance to help change the meanings in the performance. Phim and Thompson explain: “It is not surprising that the messages conveyed in theatrical folk dances are subject to modification according to changing worldviews. Indeed the dances were created in a particular historical context, and though they were no doubt intended to serve primarily cultural ends, they stand as a good example of how inextricable the cultural and political are.”<sup>24</sup> By definition, folk dance applies to the people so it is more readily adapted to meet the needs of the people.

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Russell Cravath, “Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia” (PhD diss., University of Hawaii, 1985), 239-240.

<sup>24</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 81.

*Sokacha* used folk dance to incorporate the Khmer public into the performance so they could claim its beauty as part of the Khmer identity.

In *Sokacha*, the female dancers interacted differently with the shadow puppets than the men did. When women were the puppeteers, the shadow puppets—which depicted men—became the dance partners to the female dancers. Dancing in the style of many classic Khmer folk dances, the female dancers used the shadow puppets to play the male counterparts (see Figure 3.5). These women also wore dance rehearsal attire of a white blouse and a long piece of silk rolled together and pulled between the legs to create baggy trousers. Because these dancers did not wear the ornate costumes of the other characters, they were better able to represent the Khmer public.



**Figure 3.5** - The female dancers in *Sokacha* using the puppets as dance partners like in many Khmer folk dances.

The other characters that did not wear the ornate costumes of the dance-drama were the two clowns. In *Sokacha*, the creative way the clowns were costumed helped demonstrate that Khmer performance now belongs to and represents the people. In traditional shadow theatre, the monkeys that fight in the opening scene encounter a group of humble villagers. The point of this scene is to introduce the performance with the juxtaposition between the comic villagers and the tragic characters of the epic tale.<sup>25</sup>

To emphasize these ideas, *Sokacha* again borrowed from classic Khmer folk dances, specifically a contemporary version of the *Chhayam* dance. This is a lively, improvisational dance connected with the post-harvest celebrations. Dressed as clowns, dancers use drum beats to inspire comic scenes. The dancers speak in the Khmer vernacular to both relate to and entertain the audience members.<sup>26</sup> The villagers the two monkeys come upon in *Sokacha* were two clowns from the *Chhayam* dance (see Figure 3.6). Dressed in traditional *Chhayam* attire, the two clowns were thrown into the story. Unique to the clowns, their scenes incorporated juggling, tumbling, tricking one another, interacting with the audience and cracking jokes in modern Khmer language. They were then scared off by the entrances of other characters from the performance.

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<sup>25</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Sam-Ang Sam and Chan Moly Sam, *Khmer Folk Dance* (Newington: Khmer Studies Institute, 1987), 78.



**Figure 3.6** - Clowns from the *Chhayam* Dance in *Sokacha*.

Because these two characters became a part of the story but did not wear the costumes representative of royalty, the clowns represented the people. In this way they demonstrated that Khmer performance is now for all Khmer people. The frivolity of these two clowns and their vernacular language also clearly juxtaposed the serious themes and elevated language of the epic *Reamker* narrative. In the midst of war, death, and deception, the clowns celebrating tradition and harvest bounties entered the scene. These two clowns remained unaffected by the tragic tale in which they were players. The production ended with the two clowns tumbling around the stage with four comedic monkeys in the background. One of the clowns stopped tumbling and looked at the



audience. The other, in the Khmer language, said, “Why did you stop?” and his partner responded with, “Don’t you know – they’re finished with the show.” Then the two clowns helped the monkeys take off their masks and the curtain call began. The use of the Khmer vernacular to joke showed that the performance was for the Khmer audience members. Foreigners that did not speak Khmer were left out of the jokes because the performance they were witnessing did not represent them.

The foreigners were given the sense of the social aspect of Khmer identity in a different way. When the curtain call was completed at the end of the show, an announcement was made in English offering audience members the chance to get pictures taken with the cast and try out the shadow puppets behind the screen. Audience members were able to take pictures with the costumed dancers and play the role of a puppeteer. The photo that I took home shows my husband and me in the middle of the costumed Khmer cast (see Figure 3.7). This picture shows my husband and me as a part of the people. Though we are taller, whiter, and dressed as tourists, we were allowed to picture ourselves among Khmer and take home a piece of the social identity of Cambodia.



**Figure 3.7** - My husband and I pictured with the cast of *Sokacha* after the performance.

## Cambodia's Identity to Foreigners: Charge—Five Dollars

The Sovanna Phum Company who performed *Sokacha* defines itself as “an independent Khmer art association... created in order to give Khmer artists the opportunity to perform their art and to make a living.” The aims of the company are to “revive, preserve and promote the treasures of Khmer culture to local and international audiences.”<sup>27</sup> Although the founder, Delphine Kassem, is French, the company mostly consists of graduates from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, so each dancer had been carefully trained in the techniques of traditional performance styles.

The implications of foreigners sponsoring the creation of Cambodia's national identity are interesting. Performances done at Sovanna Phum are aware of the foreign money that sponsors the productions. Because the performers are native Khmer, the performances simultaneously aim towards the Khmer in the audience as well as the foreigners sponsoring the event. One of the main aims of Sovanna Phum is to allow artists to be paid for their art. Though the performances are also aimed at foreign tourists, this venue is better than what Bella Dicks describes as the alternative: “In many ways, where performance is voluntarily undertaken, is paid and provides employment, it seems at least more equal than the alternative – where locals are required simply to ‘be themselves’ for free in front of a curious, detached tourist gaze.”<sup>28</sup> At Sovanna Phum, artists volunteer to perform for the benefit of the tourist gaze. Sovanna Phum seeks to sustain and modernize Khmer tradition for the benefit of the Khmer and only cater to foreigners for the funds they provide.

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<sup>27</sup> Sovanna Phum's website is shadow-puppets.org. The website provides information about the company and gives ways for foreigners to help financially support their efforts.

<sup>28</sup> Bella Dicks, *Culture on Display: The Production of Contemporary Visitability* (London: Open University Press, 2003), 61.



Sovanna Phum depends on international aid, and performances always have the added purpose of obtaining the funding necessary for the company to continue. Tourists as audience members have responsibilities in addition to financial aid. Kravel mentions that one of the purposes of *Sbek Thom*, and other Khmer performances, is to “publicize [Khmer] art in the international community.”<sup>29</sup> The performance cannot ostracize foreigners or they will not understand it enough to talk about it at home. Underiner states that to performance in Mayan Mexico, “the tourist gaze is a powerful one, and it should not be underestimated.”<sup>30</sup> *Sokacha* proved that this is true for Khmer performance as well. Because of foreigners, *Sokacha* changed traditional performance to help tourists understand it.

The company also actively sought funding throughout the evening. To attend *Sokacha*, I paid five dollars for admission, and while perusing the modest gift shop before the performance, I paid another five dollars for a Gap factory reject shirt silk-screened with the image of a Khmer shadow puppet. After the performance, my Khmer driver told me that I paid too much, but I became a part of the machine. I was funding the performance. It was not my driver’s money that they wanted; it was mine. The performance of Khmer identity in *Sokacha* was mainly aimed at the Khmer audience members with an understanding of the political, religious, and social implications of the performance. Traditional Khmer performance styles were amalgamated to present an intricate, but palatable introduction to Khmer performance to foreigners. The important thing was that the foreigners in the audience enjoyed the performance enough to

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<sup>29</sup>Pech Tum Kravel, *Sbek Thom: Khmer Shadow Theater* Trans. Sos Kem (Cambodia: Cornell Southeast Asia Program and UNESCO, 1995), 33.

<sup>30</sup>Tamara L. Underiner, *Contemporary Theatre in Mayan Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 43.

recommend it, buy something in the gift shop, and maybe even go to the new performance the next night.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a scholar in Jewish studies and tourism, argues: “Theatricalized performances of heritage in developing countries exemplify the strategic use of the interface to convey messages of modernity that stand in contrast with the heritage on display.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, because *Sokacha* was performed on a built stage with benches for audience members situated under fans and near the gift shop, the performance placed historical heritage in a tourist environment. The actual performance reflected Khmer heritage and tradition, but the venue of the performance as well as the framing of the presentation indicated a modern Khmer identity fueled by foreign funds.

*Sokacha* did several things to placate the tourists in the audience without hindering the performance aimed at the Khmer. The programs, printed in English, explained the story of *Sokacha*, so foreigners could try to pull the story out of a form with which they were not familiar. With the addition of some Westernized elements to performance, audience members and performers alike now expect the performance to wrap up nicely with a curtain call and applause. This was true for *Sokacha* as well. My souvenir picture with the cast of *Sokacha* perpetuates the notion of Cambodia as a foreign, ethereal nation, dressed ornately for my benefit as a tourist.

John Urry argues that photography “gives shape to travel” and is a way to “appropriate the object being photographed.”<sup>32</sup> A photograph, such as mine with the cast of *Sokacha*, is a way for tourists to exercise ownership and power over those being

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 8.

<sup>32</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: SAGE Publications, 1990), 138-139.

photographed. The photographer has control over what is being photographed and how it is approached. The tourist/photographer then owns the photograph giving her further reign of appropriation; not only can the tourist photograph what she wants and how she wants, she can then use the photograph to tell stories of the things and peoples encountered. Sovanna Phum provided a photo-opportunity for the benefit of the foreign tourists seeking photo souvenirs, but they made sure the photo was somewhat controlled. The cast posed in costume with an opening for the tourists in the middle. Foreign audience members lined up to jump into the opening and have a member of the crew snap a photograph. Sovanna Phum allowed tourists to take photographs but maintained some control over the appropriation that occurs with photography.

Sovanna Phum also controlled the Khmer identity that would be disseminated by foreigners through the photographs by introducing a Khmer identity based on the amalgamation of art forms. *Sokacha* was a performance highlighting unique aspects from several styles of Khmer traditional performance. This production presented one understandable Khmer identity so foreigners would get a sense of Khmer spirit, support the arts financially, and go home and share their experience with friends. May Stevens states: “Art is political. But one also has to understand that the uses to which it is put are not its meaning. Its status as object and commodity is not its meaning: there are many objects and commodities. They are not all art. What makes art different? Exactly the ways in which it is not an object, can never in its nature be a commodity.”<sup>33</sup> Although Khmer theatre has become a kind of commodity to the “tourist gaze,” this added purpose to the performance is not its meaning. The performance itself of *Sokacha* was for the Khmer audience members.

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<sup>33</sup> May Stevens quoted in Trinh Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 230.

Diana Taylor explains, “Histories and trajectories become visible through performance.”<sup>34</sup> This was true for Sovanna Phum’s performance of *Sokacha*. The history of Cambodia was seen through the performance elements that mimicked the relief sculptures found on the walls of Angkor Wat. The use of tradition also hearkened back to the Angkor period when Cambodia was powerful and widely recognized. The trajectory of Cambodia was also seen in *Sokacha*. Traditional elements were changed to show the victory of the people over the Khmer Rouge and to emphasize that they will never be defeated. *Sokacha* performed a three-fold Khmer identity for Khmer audience members—political Cambodia, religious Cambodia, and social Cambodia. Though foreign audience members were given a taste of each of those identities, the performance of Khmer identity aimed at them was about monetary support. Khmer performance now belongs to the people of Cambodia rather than just the king and his court. It is now a demonstration to foreigners and a reminder to Khmer of Cambodia’s continual beauty and her undaunted spirit.

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<sup>34</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 267.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Khmer Mormon: Two Identities Defined Through Performance**

Ethnicity and nationality are two large parts of the identity of an individual, but within the Khmer community, there are subcultures that also have an identity to perform. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, that have joined the Church in Cambodia are a subgroup of Khmer identity.<sup>1</sup> On the twenty-fourth of July, Khmer Church members meet together to perform their Mormon identity and reify how that identity fits with their Khmer identity.

The 24<sup>th</sup> of July or “Pioneer Day” as it is called by Church members, celebrates the arrival of the Mormon pioneers into what is now called the Salt Lake Valley. On 24 July 1847, Brigham Young led the first group of Mormon pioneers into the area that is now Salt Lake and famously declared, “It is enough. This is the right place.”<sup>2</sup> In Mormon history, this event marks the end of many persecutions and the beginning of the settling of Utah. Because the Mormons had previously been driven out of several locations including Kirtland, Ohio; Jackson County, Missouri; and Nauvoo, Illinois, the “right place” indicated a “promised land” or “Zion” similar to the one referred to in The Book of Mormon, from which the Mormons would never be driven. Ether 2:7, a scripture found in The Book of Mormon, reads: “And the Lord would not suffer that they

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<sup>1</sup> Though the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints refers to its members as Latter-day Saints and the shortened version of the Church’s name is “the Church of Jesus Christ,” I use the term “Mormon” throughout because I am discussing “Mormon” as a culture as well as a religion and “Mormon” has become a cultural signifier for things connected to Mormonism. For specifics on official terminology, see: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Style Guide—The Name of the Church,” *Newsroom*. 2009. 5 May 2009. <<http://www.newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/style-guide>>

<sup>2</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Our Heritage: A Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 1996), 76. An interesting sidenote is that this is commonly misquoted among Church members and Utah residents as “This is the place” and there is even a monument and park entitled “This is the Place Monument” honoring the arrival Brigham Young and the pioneers.

should stop beyond the sea in the wilderness, but he would that they should come forth even unto the land of promise, which was choice above all other lands, which the Lord God had preserved for a righteous people.”<sup>3</sup> This “land of promise” described in The Book of Mormon is considered by Mormons to be America, but for the Mormon pioneers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this term was used to describe what turned out to be Salt Lake City. The canon of Mormon scripture includes a book entitled The Doctrine and Covenants. This is a collection of revelations given to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. In Doctrine and Covenants 136:10, described as “the word and the will of the Lord, given through President Brigham Young” about the pioneer trek, it states: “Let every man use all his influence and property to remove this people to the place where the Lord shall locate a *stake of Zion*.”<sup>4</sup> Just two years after the arrival of the first pioneers to Salt Lake, a day of memory was established, and the first Pioneer Day was celebrated on 24 July 1849, though it would not be called such until September 1850, when the last pioneers reached the Salt Lake Valley.<sup>5</sup>

According to Mormon scripture, a revelation was given to Brigham Young in Iowa on 14 January 1847 regarding the pioneer trek. It states, in part: “If thou art merry, praise the Lord with singing, with music, with dancing and with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving.”<sup>6</sup> Since this scripture is referring specifically to the pioneers, it is fitting that Church members around the world take this scripture as a guide about how to celebrate Pioneer Day, and more specifically, celebrate and reify their Mormon identity.

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Smith, ed. *The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), Ether 2:7.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Smith, ed. *Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 136:10, emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> Eric A. Eliason, “The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-Fashioning: Mormon Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28.2 (2002):146.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Smith, ed. *Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 138:28.

Though Salt Lake City still serves as the geographical headquarters for the Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sends missionaries ages 19-25 and retired couples, referred to as “senior missionaries,” to countries throughout the world. As the religion of Mormonism spreads, Mormon culture spreads with the religion, and although Pioneer Day is a government-recognized holiday only in the state of Utah, many Mormon congregations throughout the world choose to celebrate their Mormon identity in their own way on July twenty-fourth.<sup>7</sup> Eric A. Eliason, Associate Professor of American Literature and Culture at Brigham Young University, explains that in celebrating Pioneer Day, Church members adapt the celebrations to “affirm their Mormon identity while at the same time retaining allegiance to cultures very different from that of Deseret Mormons.”<sup>8</sup> Eliason also argues: “There can be no doubt that Mormon *religion* emerged in Joseph Smith’s era, but Mormon *ethnicity*, if there is such a thing, emerged in Brigham Young’s time with the Mormon trek and its resultant sense of isolation.”<sup>9</sup> Because “Mormon *ethnicity*” began with the Mormon pioneers, it is appropriate that Mormons in Cambodia take part in this identity affirmation each Pioneer Day.

To address cultural festivals by Mormons throughout the world, the Church has stated through publication:

As the Church grows throughout the world, all Latter-day Saints can be united.

Our hearts can be ‘knit together in unity and in love one towards another’ (Mosiah

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<sup>7</sup> The fact that Mormons choose to celebrate on July 24 every year is interesting. Though they do use the same calendar as we do, all Khmer holidays are celebrated based on the lunar calendar. The 2006 Pioneer Day celebrations I attended in Phnom Penh were actually held on 22 July because that was a Saturday and it was more convenient.

<sup>8</sup> Eric A. Eliason, “The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-Fashioning: Mormon Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28.2 (2002): 159.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 168, italics in original.

18:21). We appreciate cultural diversity and individual differences, but we also seek the ‘unity of the faith’ that comes when we follow inspired leaders and remember that we are all children of the same Father.<sup>10</sup>

This statement is published in a booklet entitled *True to the Faith* that sets out to explain basic tenants of Mormonism. This booklet has been translated into Khmer and is accessible to the Khmer-Mormon community. By my observation, Church members in Cambodia also strive to celebrate both cultural diversity and religious unity by performing themselves separately as Khmer and Mormon and then attempting to negotiate the two identities. This is a performance in that specific gestures are chosen to enact identity. The Khmer-Mormon community seeks to combine the Khmer identity with the Mormon identity through performances of music, dance, and pageantry. In the discussion of the tourist gaze and its impact of Khmer performance, the Khmer Mormon community acts as tourists to their own event. They are performing the history of Mormonism through a uniquely Khmer lens.

Eliason describes the difference between American and international Pioneer Day celebrations: “In areas outside the Mormon culture region, Pioneer Day celebrations do not claim the public space of Main Street as they do in many towns in the Mountain West but occur within the private religious space of LDS buildings or rented facilities.”<sup>11</sup> In Cambodia, several congregations meet individually in rented buildings used for Sunday church meetings to celebrate July twenty-fourth. Each congregation, called a “branch,” gathers, and individuals perform their identities as both Khmer and Mormon.

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<sup>10</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004): 183.

<sup>11</sup> Eric A. Eliason, “The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-Fashioning: Mormon Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28.2 (2002):159.



In 2006, I was able to attend two of these Pioneer Day celebrations in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Through theatrical performance of dance, music, and pageantry, the Khmer-Mormon community uses Pioneer Day as a way to enact the dual identity inherent in being a Khmer-Mormon. They are both recreating the history of the Mormon Church in order to fit with their specific Khmer identity as well as adding the history of the Mormon Church to their own history as modern Khmer-Mormon pioneers.

### **Performing Mormon History: A Parallel to Khmer History**

In the Phnom Penh Second Branch, after the “prayer of praise” was given by a member of the congregation, children under the age of twelve gathered at the front of the room.<sup>12</sup> In their mumbled Khmer singing voices, they sang a song entitled “Whenever I Think about Pioneers.”<sup>13</sup> The lyrics of the English version from which it was translated are as follows:

Whenever I think about the pioneers,  
I think of brave women and men.  
I like to remember that children came too;  
I would like to have been a child then.  
Yes I’d like to have learned to play the games they played  
And joined them in their fun.  
And I’d like to have slept under bright starry skies

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<sup>12</sup> Congregations in the Mormon Church are called “wards” with smaller congregations called “branches.” In Phnom Penh, the specific congregations are named numerically with the city name of Phnom Penh also in the title.

<sup>13</sup> This song and others found in the Children’s hymnal published by the Church are taught to children weekly in the Sunday School for children called “Primary.” These songs help children learn the basic history and doctrines of the Church.

When each day's measured journey was done.<sup>14</sup>

The children, dressed in their best clothes, sang proudly about how they would like to have lived as a pioneer “and joined them in their fun.” Words from the second verse describing the pioneers rang true for the children singing, “Joy and thankfulness filling their song.”<sup>15</sup> The lyrics are noticeably upbeat when discussing the plight of the pioneers, but the emphasis on the positive makes more sense when considering the role of modern converts to the Church as pioneers.

Church leaders focus on the sacrifices of the pioneers and then make correlations with Church members internationally today. In an article that appeared in the Church's international magazine, *Liahona*, in 1997, the bicentennial celebration of the pioneers, Elder Backman, one Church leader, states:

Pioneering is not finished! There are so many pioneers among us today. Across the world, I have seen modern-day pioneers who demonstrate the same steadfast faith and courage as did our ancestors. They have made the Church a worldwide movement in fulfillment of the prophecies of the scriptures and our prophets. They pioneer as they accept the gospel of Jesus Christ and are baptized into his kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

Megan Sanborn Jones discusses how modern American Mormons use pioneer stories to build community. Talking specifically about Mormon youth performing pioneer trek reenactments, Jones states: “Through the careful manipulation of the story to emphasize trials of modern-day teenagers, their enactment of the event creates a community

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<sup>14</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *Children's Songbook*. Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2000), 222-223.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>16</sup> Robert L. Backman, “Faith in Every Footstep,” *Liahona* (February 1997): 15. Robert L. Backman served in the Presidency of the First Quorum of the Seventy from 1982-1992.

bounded not just by homogeneity, geography, and a doctrine of unity, but in communion with a mythologized past.”<sup>17</sup> For the Khmer Mormon community, this “communion with a mythologized past” comes with the enactment of the Mormon pioneers.

Mormon missionaries did not start serving in Cambodia until 1995. The Church claims only 8,359 members from the over fourteen million people that live in Cambodia.<sup>18</sup> Because the Church is so small and new in Cambodia, every Khmer Church member sees him or herself as a pioneer of the faith. It is the identity of Mormon pioneer that the Khmer have adopted as their Mormon identity. The children’s singing emphasizes their connection with the pioneers of the past. To them, the “brave women and men” could be their parents. They sing about wanting to be a child with the pioneers because they *are* a child with the Khmer-Mormon pioneers. In a country that is primarily Buddhist, celebrating Christmas seems to counter the Khmer/Buddhist identity. Thus, “each day’s measured journey” for the children equates to fitting “Mormon” and celebrating Christmas into what it means for them to be Khmer.

In the Phnom Penh Second Branch, a playing space was set up with a curtain hanging on a clothesline to keep “performers” hidden. When the curtains parted, a white board was revealed, covered with depictions of pioneers crossing the plains with two large pictures of the prophets: one of the first prophet and founder of the Mormon Church, Joseph Smith, and the other picture of the prophet at the time of the performance, Gordon B. Hinckley. The presence of these pioneers and prophets as a backdrop for the performances helped emphasize the parallels between Khmer identity and Mormon

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<sup>17</sup> Megan Sanborn Jones, “(Re)living the Pioneer Past: Mormon Youth Handcart Trek Re-enactments,” *Theatre Topics* 16:2 (2006): 119.

<sup>18</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Statistical Information,” *Newsroom*. 2009. 22 May 2009. <<http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/statistical-information>>

identity as well as the parallel between the Mormon pioneers of the past and the modern-day Mormon pioneers in Cambodia.

The members of the Second Branch also reenacted several important moments from the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The youth portrayed important figures in Church history. The purpose of these reenactments was two-fold: first, to ensure that all branch members in attendance had an understanding of Church history and second, to incorporate that history into the identity of the branch as a whole. To adapt Church history into the history of the Khmer-Mormons, parts of the history being reenacted were altered. These changes were made to show that the performers are the equivalents of the pioneering Church members of the past.

The pageant of Church history vignettes began with youth depicting Joseph Smith's family. The boys worked together in the field and the women worked together in the home. Instead of using cotton cloth to show the family doing laundry, the Smith family washed their Khmer silks in the river which played up the parallel between then and now (see Figure 4.1). When the day of work was over—signified by every performer wiping his arm across his brow—the Smith family came together, with Joseph's mother and father at the head of the family, and they all read the Bible and prayed in a group. Joseph Smith was a young boy at the time of the Second Great Awakening—a time of spiritual obsession with many churches actively preaching in the streets.

This time was then portrayed with two people, dressed in long Khmer robes, at opposite ends of the playing area, each preaching a different Christian doctrine. Each preacher had a group surrounding him and the young man playing Joseph Smith stood center stage and shook his head in confusion. Joseph Smith was then shown, alone on

stage, reading James 1:5: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.” This scripture is significant to the inception of the Mormon Church because, as Joseph wrote himself: “Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. . . . At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God.”<sup>19</sup> It was this scripture that prompted Joseph Smith to go into the woods to pray about which religion he should join.



**Figure 4.1** - The “Smith Family” washing silks in the river.

As the young man depicting Joseph Smith went to his knees to pray, one of the young men dressed in half-on overalls and a painted black beard ran around him yelling.

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Smith, *Joseph Smith—History* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 1:12-13.

From the painted black beard and torn jeans, it was obvious to the Khmer people in the audience that the man was evil because of the “otherness” he depicted. The torn jeans and the painted beard greatly contrasted the clean skirts and slacks worn by everyone else and the clean-shaven faces of the other performers. Although the characters with torn jeans and painted beards later represented the mob that eventually shot Joseph Smith, in this scene the character represented the “thick darkness,” “enemy,” or “some power” that Joseph Smith describes “seized upon” and “entirely overcame” him until he “could not speak.”<sup>20</sup> The mob member became the visual representation of the unseen evil described in the story.

Culturally, the Khmer Mormon community is impacted by the Buddhist faith of Cambodia. Evil in Buddhist belief is not a characteristic or an external force as Western thought describes. Buddhism is about actions and reactions. People are not intrinsically evil nor is there a devil externally forcing evil upon them. Instead, people create evil because of their own actions. In Mormon theology, though evil is not an intrinsic characteristic of man, there is a devil, and evil is an external force created by him. The mob member personified the evil in the enactment of Joseph Smith’s experience with the “enemy” he described. The “darkness” in Smith’s description had to be embodied to indicate that it was not an evil Smith created as a consequence or reaction to his own actions, as Buddhism would explain. Instead, it was a force of evil acting upon him.

According to Mormon history, after Joseph Smith was martyred, the Church members saw that they would soon be forced to leave Nauvoo, Illinois. Despite this realization, they continued to labor on the temple in Nauvoo that they had already begun

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1:15.

to build. This dedication to the building of the Nauvoo temple was shown in this performance as performers stacked white lawn chairs on top of one another to create a towering white structure signifying a temple. Because the chairs used were unoccupied chairs from the audience space, the modern audience was paralleled with the people in the scene. The people building the Nauvoo temple were ordinary people just like all of us sitting and watching. The Khmer-Mormons in the audience were implicated in the scene and urged to have enough faith to build up the Church regardless of the sacrifice required.

After the Church members were driven from Nauvoo, the last scene to be depicted was the pioneer trek across the United States. This scene was the most indicative of the identity of the performers as modern equivalents of the pioneers. Every performer participated in the trek across the stage, including those that were still dressed as mobsters and Joseph Smith, who had already been killed. Characters from previous scenes were erased, and performers became themselves standing in for those that actually took the trek to Utah. The performers were still in their pioneer outfits—cowboy hats and suspenders for the boys and aprons and Khmer silk skirts for the girls—but the things they carried represented their modern Khmer identities. Some had modern backpacks and plastic water bottles; others had modern handbags and small luggage (see Figure 4.2). One person carried a large, stuffed, Khmer rice bag so that the audience could read the Khmer writing across the front.

A tableau was created of the youth sitting, clinging to one another, gathered around the temple made of chairs in the middle of the stage. This pause in the action and the scene that was created helped emphasize that two stories were being shared through

the pageant: one of the pioneers of the past crossing the plains towards Utah, and the other story of modern Khmer youth sacrificing every day to make “Mormon” fit with “Khmer.” The temple of chairs in the center did represent the physical temples built by the pioneers, but it also stood for the strength of the Khmer-Mormon community. The show ended with the youth reaching “Salt Lake,” making a pile of their bags next to the temple, and grasping hands.



**Figure 4.2** - The portrayal of the pioneer trek with modern bags and backpacks.

By embodying the pioneers and prominent Church leaders of the past, Khmer-Mormons literally embodied themselves as Mormon. By including things specific to the Khmer identity, the Khmer-Mormon community showed that the identities of Khmer and Mormon fit together. Through this representation, they combined Mormon Church history and Khmer history and used the conflation of the two to perform themselves as modern Khmer-Mormon pioneers.



### **Khmer Folk Dance: A Reification of Mormon Doctrine**

The youth and young adults ages fourteen and up in the Second Branch also performed the Peacock Dance—a traditional folk dance that Khmer youth learn at a young age. Khmer dance scholars, Sam-Ang Sam and Chan Moly Sam discuss the importance of Khmer folk dance in the following way: “Khmer folk dance is solely of peasant origin and use, and is considered to be a part of the peasants’ lives. . . . In the villages there grows a spirit of intimate understanding and candor amongst performers and spectators.”<sup>21</sup> Folk dance represents the everyday lives, so participating in Khmer folk dance is a way for the Khmer to literally perform their identity as Khmer. The “Peacock of Pursat” Dance is a celebration of the diverse wildlife found in Cambodia’s jungles. Sam and Sam explain this specific dance: “During the performance, dancers with full green costumes and headgear of peacock tails floating in the air depict couples of peacocks and peahens playing with one another.”<sup>22</sup> One branch member performing in the dance made the traditional costumes so that the performers could dress themselves with Khmer tradition (see Figure 4.3).

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<sup>21</sup> Sam-Ang Sam and Chan Moly Sam, *Khmer Folk Dance* (Newington: Khmer Studies Institute, 1987), 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.



**Figure 4.3** - Youth of the Second Branch performing the Peacock Dance.

Anthony Shay posits that folk dance is a way for communities to create “highly visible and embodied images” of identity, or, more specifically, “choreograph their ethnic identities.”<sup>23</sup> Shay further explains, “The costumed dancing body provides an immediate and embodied colorful ethnic identity, one that communicates subtle, and not-so-subtle, semiotic messages of ethnic identity to the observer.”<sup>24</sup> Participating in Khmer folk dance allows an individual to perform his or her identity as Khmer. Dressed in the traditional costumes of the Peacock Dance, the youth participating interacted through traditional Khmer music and movement. Movements from folk dances that had been memorized by the body served as a recital of how it “feels” to be Khmer. Performing movements that had become intuitive to the dancers demonstrated how intrinsic their Khmer identities had become. Adding the traditional costumes to the folk dance added

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Shay, *Choreographing Identities: Folk Dance, Ethnicity and Festival in the United States and Canada* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 33.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

the visual identifier of the ethnic identity. Though neither the dance nor the costumes of the Peacock Dance were altered at the Pioneer Day celebration, because the community in which the performance was occurring was Mormon as well as Khmer, the Peacock Dance helped demonstrate the ideals that the identities of Mormon and Khmer share such as the importance of community.

The structure of the dance and the interactions between the dancers reflected Khmer cultural values as well as Mormon ideology. Sam and Sam explain an important value of Khmer folk dance:

Khmer folk dance is a group activity in which there is neither hero nor protagonist. “Grouping” is very significant in the Khmer traditional society. People live their lives as a unit—be it a community unit, kinship unit, or family unit. This “unit” or “grouping” is reflected in the Khmer social life. [...] Groups work together to build houses, to plant and to harvest, as well as to perform folk dance. Working as a group is thought to be a conventional necessity, and almost all types of dances in Cambodia invariably respect this tradition. It is “we” and not “I” that dominate the show.<sup>25</sup>

The Peacock Dance, like most other Khmer folk dances, has no prominent characters. Each dancer is part of the overall product. As described, most Khmer folk dances help emphasize the importance of the community as a whole. Individuals must do what is best for the whole.

Mormon theology also teaches that community needs take precedence over individual needs. A common scripture taught to Mormon youth explains that “the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart, and one mind, and dwelt in

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<sup>25</sup> Sam-Ang Sam and Chan Moly Sam, *Khmer Folk Dance* (Newington: Khmer Studies Institute, 1987), 3.

righteousness; and there was no poor among them.”<sup>26</sup> Teenagers are urged to memorize this scripture to remember the importance of unity and equality. These beliefs are translated in the Peacock Dance from Mormon performers to a Mormon audience as well. Youth in the Church are encouraged: “Choose friends who share your values so you can strengthen and encourage each other in living high standards.”<sup>27</sup> As the youth in the Phnom Penh Second Branch performed the Peacock Dance, they were demonstrating that they were united; they were of “one heart and one mind” because they shared the dual identity of being Khmer-Mormons. The uniform costumes emphasized that each dancer was equal, or that there were “no poor among them.”

The inclusion of the Peacock Dance at the Pioneer Day celebration reifies the identity of Khmer-Mormons as modern pioneers. Because they are the ones pioneering the Church in Cambodia, it is appropriate to celebrate their collective Khmer identity alongside their celebration and memorial of Mormon pioneers of the past. Sam and Sam state, “In times of peace, folk dance is seen as a form of entertainment to which its form and theme totally conform. Aside from entertaining, folk dance is used effectively as a means of reinforcing people’s beliefs.”<sup>28</sup> The Peacock Dance reinforces the beliefs of the people as Khmer by demonstrating the importance of the community as a whole over the individual. The emphasis on community and the friendships the dance portrays echo with Mormon theology as well. The dancers used a traditional Khmer folk dance to perform how their Mormon identities coincide with their Khmer heritage. The two

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph Smith, ed., *The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), Moses 7:18.

<sup>27</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *For the Strength of Youth: Fulfilling our Duty to God* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2000), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Sam-Ang Sam and Chan Moly Sam, *Khmer Folk Dance* (Newington: Khmer Studies Institute, 1987), 14.

identities the Khmer Mormon community is seeking to negotiate were performed through the pairing of the Peacock Dance in the Second Branch with an American folk dance.

### **American Folk Dance and Imagined Communities**

An American folk dance performed to the tune of “Turkey in the Straw” was performed by the Phnom Penh Second Branch as well as the Phnom Penh Ninth Branch at the Pioneer Day celebrations. Several years ago, a senior missionary couple from the United States introduced the dance to a few branches. Church members in Cambodia have continued to teach and perform the dance every Pioneer day, assimilating this dance into the repertoire of folk dances of the youth. “Turkey in the Straw” has become one of the folk dances the Khmer Mormon youth are taught from an early age, along with the other Khmer folk dances children are raised learning. In this way, they are producing the past in order to justify their present and future identities as both Khmer and Mormon. The “Turkey in the Straw” dance is a square dance in the general sense that it has a caller. The dance itself is performed in a line of couples to a recording of “The Turkey in the Straw” with the senior missionary recorded over the song calling out each step (see Figure 4.4).

The Khmer are not the only ones appropriating dance to meet their needs. As Stephanie Jordan and Andree Grau explain: “The arts, including dance, can reflect, reinforce, prompt, challenge as well as be appropriated in the quest for identity,”<sup>29</sup> just as the Khmer-Mormon community is doing. Discussing folk dancing, Shay states: “Rarely do entire communities make decisions regarding communal representation; individuals or

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<sup>29</sup> Stephanie Jordan and Andree Grau, Introduction, *Europe Dancing: Perspectives on Theatre Dance and Cultural Identity*. Ed. Andree Grau and Stephanie Jordan (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

perhaps committees of individuals, make these crucial decisions.”<sup>30</sup> In the case of “Turkey in the Straw,” the senior missionaries were the ones that decided how Khmer-Mormons would perform their “communal representation.” The Khmer-Mormon community cannot change the choreography because of the recorded voice that dictates each step every Pioneer Day. The steps are called in English, which gives the Khmer a greater sense of the “imagined community” performing the same dance in America at the same time.

Benedict Anderson defines his term “imagined community”: “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>31</sup> Anthony Shay applies this idea of imagined communities to refugees performing folk dance. He argues, “Viewers and participants in ethnic enclaves viewing and performing folk dances imagine parallel and similar events occurring in the homeland. They imagine that the villagers of the appropriate ethnicity are dancing the same dances in the same way that the members of the ethnic-immigrant community perform them at ethnic celebrations in America.”<sup>32</sup> The Khmer-Mormon community is an example of how imagined communities impact the performance of identity. They imagine, as they celebrate Pioneer Day in Cambodia through American folk dance, that their American counterparts are doing the same thing.

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<sup>30</sup> Anthony Shay, *Choreographing Identities: Folk Dance, Ethnicity and Festival in the United States and Canada* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 224.

<sup>31</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions, 1983), 15.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Shay, *Choreographing Identities: Folk Dance, Ethnicity and Festival in the United States and Canada* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 13.

This idea accompanies the assumption that Americans are raised learning the same American folk dances just as most Khmer individuals could join in the Peacock Dance at any time. Because I was American and Mormon, it was assumed that I would know the dance as well. In the Ninth Branch, every American in the audience, myself included, was brought up to join the dance. The minstrel roots of “Turkey in the Straw” are erased in Cambodia and the song becomes one of Apple Pie Americanism. As a participant, I embodied the identity of American Mormonism and helped legitimize the performance of Mormon identity for the Khmer congregation.



**Figure 4.4** - Members of the Second Branch dance to "Turkey in the Straw."

Both branches incorporated costumes with this dance as well. The Ninth Branch girls had matching aprons over their street clothes and matching scarves on their heads, literally dressing themselves as Mormon pioneers. The boys in both branches emphasized this identity by dressing in cowboy hats, suspenders, and scarves around their necks. The Second Branch female dancers dressed as pioneers with matching aprons, but under their aprons, each girl wore her own skirt made of brightly-colored Khmer silk (see Figure 4.4). The identity implied in this costuming choice was that underneath the

Mormon identity is the Khmer identity. Each girl was first Khmer and each chose to add the Mormon identity over the top of it. Because these costumes were also from the previous pageant, the parallel of the performers as modern Mormon pioneers was continued in the performance of the square dance in the Second Branch.

The tape of the music with the missionary caller recorded is kept and used each year because it is the only copy of the song the Khmer Mormon community has. But the continued presence of the recorded American missionary caller year after year also demonstrates the unity of Khmer-Mormons “that comes when we follow inspired leaders.”<sup>33</sup> The voice of the caller represents the voice of the leaders in America because it is the voice of a missionary speaking English. The image of the Prophet Gordon B. Hinckley behind the dancers emphasized this parallel. The first rule of square dancing conduct, according to Clayne R. Jensen and Mary Bee Jensen, is to “listen carefully to the calls. . . . Think of the caller as the quarterback. He gives the signals; you execute the movements as he calls them.”<sup>34</sup> Later in the Jensens’ book on square dancing, the rules are set out more definitively in the “ten commandments of square dancing.” The first commandment is: “Thou shalt honor thy caller and hearken to his voice, for thy success depends greatly upon his words.”<sup>35</sup>

Though the Jensens’ commandments carry a humorous tone, this particular “commandment” is poignant when considering the parallel between the caller on the recording and the voice of Church leaders in America. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believes in a modern prophet that presides over the Church and speaks

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<sup>33</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 183.

<sup>34</sup> Clayne R. Jensen and Mary Bee Jensen, *Square Dancing* (Provo, Brigham Young University Press, 1973), 61.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



for God on the earth.<sup>36</sup> A popular children's hymn that has been translated as part of the Khmer children's hymnal dictates the importance of heeding the words of this leader: "Follow the Prophet; don't go astray. Follow the Prophet; he knows the way."<sup>37</sup> The prophet resides in Utah and speaks in English. His words are then translated into the 166 languages in which the Church has membership.<sup>38</sup>

The presence of the English-speaking caller in the "Turkey in the Straw" dance could be read as a metaphor for the obedience to the counsel of the prophet. As in all square dances, the caller makes a call and the dancers obediently respond through movement. This follows the pattern of "follow[ing] inspired leaders." Church members are expected to listen for the call from the prophet and his twelve assisting apostles and then respond through action on the call. One difference makes this performance more easily adaptable into the series of Khmer folk dances: because the majority of the youth performing the dance do not speak English, they have memorized the movements and merely wait for the caller's voice to cue the next move. The recording does not change each year which makes it easier for the Khmer-Mormons to assimilate the dance into the repertoire of Khmer folk dance.

Interesting resonances occur when considering the adaptations made to square dancing to fit the identity of Khmer-Mormons as pioneers. Just as the Peacock Dance helped demonstrate values common to Khmer culture and Mormonism, square dancing also shows similar values. To echo the community effect apparent in Khmer folk dance,

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<sup>36</sup> At the time of this Pioneer Day celebration, the prophet was Gordon B. Hinckley. After Hinckley's death on 27 January 2008, Thomas S. Monson became the next prophet and remains so at the time of this writing.

<sup>37</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Children's Songbook* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2000), 111.

<sup>38</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Statistical Information," *Newsroom*. 2009. 22 May 2009. <<http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/statistical-information>>

the Jensens argue that square dancing has social value. Because of the pairing that occurs in square dancing, the activity “fosters wholesome relationships and desirable patterns of conduct.”<sup>39</sup> The Jensens also argue that the fourth rule of conduct in square dancing is to “be cooperative. The greatest pleasure in square dancing comes when each person does his share to help the set function smoothly. Do not try to steal the show, but contribute your part.”<sup>40</sup> These ideals represented in square dancing align perfectly with Khmer folk traditions, so the inclusion of the “Turkey in the Straw” dance to folk dances representing the identity of the Khmer-Mormon community is a logical result.

Benedict Anderson explains: “An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity.”<sup>41</sup> By the same token, the Khmer-Mormons will never meet or know the names of more than a handful of the 13,508,509 Mormons.<sup>42</sup> In most cases, they will only meet some of the other Khmer-Mormons and the missionaries that serve missions in Cambodia. But the Khmer-Mormons are constantly aware of the existence of other Mormons worldwide, and especially those that reside in the country of the Mormon genesis—America.

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<sup>39</sup> Clayne R. Jensen and Mary Bee Jensen, *Square Dancing* (Provo, Brigham Young University Press, 1973), 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>41</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions, 1983), 31.

<sup>42</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Statistical Information,” *Newsroom*. 2009. 22 May 2009. <<http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/statistical-information>>

## The Conflation of “American” and “Mormon”

Edward H. Andersen explains the three reasons for the first Pioneer Day celebration in 1849. American patriotism is the first, followed by the anniversary of the arrival of the first Pioneers to Salt Lake and then “the hope of entering the Union with the autonomous rights and privileges of a full-fledged state.”<sup>43</sup> Two of the three reasons are linked specifically to the position of Utah within the United States of America. Eliason argues that for Mormons, “celebrating their identity as Americans and what they saw as the ideals of Americanism have been inextricably linked to and have shaped Pioneer Day celebrations since their inception.”<sup>44</sup> Some sources suggest that early Church members celebrated both Independence Day and Pioneer Day together in one celebration on the twenty-fourth of July. Brigham Young is recorded to have wittingly said: “The reason we are celebrating the twenty-fourth instead of the Fourth of July is that twenty more days were needed for some of our vegetables to mature. We waited so that we could have beets and cucumbers for our feast today.”<sup>45</sup> Thus the celebration of the pioneers on the twenty-fourth of July has always been tied to the celebration of the independence of America. Because of this connection, some suggest that Pioneer Day is not a holiday that should be recognized by Mormons outside of America because of the holiday’s emphasis on American patriotism.

It is difficult, however, to disassociate the Mormon Church from its American inception and center. Although there are now more Church members outside of the

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<sup>43</sup> Qtd. in Eric A. Eliason, “The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-Fashioning: Mormon Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28.2 (2002):145. The Utah territory was still part of Mexican territory when the Mormon pioneers settled there. It was not adopted into the Union until the beginning of 1896.

<sup>44</sup> Eric A. Eliason, “The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-Fashioning: Mormon Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28.2 (2002):145.

<sup>45</sup> Qtd. in Eric A. Eliason, “The Cultural Dynamics of Historical Self-Fashioning: Mormon Pioneer Nostalgia, American Culture, and the International Church,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28.2 (2002):148.

United States than there are within them, the Church still maintains its Utah center and all Church leaders address the Church as a whole in English regardless of whether it is their native language. Several factors, including those just mentioned, make it difficult to differentiate between what about Mormon culture is “Mormon” and what is “American.” Male missionaries throughout the world wear ties and white shirts. This uniform is also expected of male Church members serving in many positions such as an Apostle or Bishop. Where those items are not available, ties and white shirts are exported to missionaries and Church members.<sup>46</sup> Although not every male member of the Church is expected to wear a white shirt to Church meetings, Khmer Mormon men have adopted the white shirt and tie as the appropriate attire for Sunday meetings. Though the men still wear Khmer traditional clothing for other parties and events, for Church on Sunday, the men wear white shirts to emulate the missionaries.

Also, most buildings the Church constructs for meetinghouses throughout the world include basketball hoops because the prototypes for Mormon Church buildings were created with Americans in mind. Although the Khmer do not typically play basketball, the Phnom Penh Church building was built with an indoor basketball court with two hoops and then an extra basketball hoop outside.<sup>47</sup> In 2004, there was only one Church meetinghouse owned and constructed by the Church in Phnom Penh. There are now three Church buildings in Phnom Penh that have been built by the Church and each has an indoor basketball court. Mormon youth in Cambodia use the Church buildings as a type of community center and often meet there after school. Though they do not know the rules of basketball, they often still shoot hoops. Because of Mormon culture,

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<sup>46</sup> In Cambodia, because of a large number of factories, white dress shirts and ties are widely accessible at the markets.

Mormonism is continually tied to America regardless of where the majority of Church members live.

One of the ways in which the Khmer-Mormon community performs its identity as Mormon on Pioneer Day is through “dressing” American. In some ways, this dressing is literal such as the costumes for the “Turkey in the Straw” dance. The matching aprons and scarves worn by the Ninth Branch female dancers were made from SpongeBob Squarepants material (see Figure 4.5). Because most Khmer have factory rejects of name-brand clothes popular in the United States, the material chosen for this occasion had to be more distinctively American, like SpongeBob Squarepants. The decision of fabric helped link the performers to America and thus, the Church. Also, because the identity of Cambodia is primarily Buddhist, the Christian identity is linked to America because America recognizes Christmas as a national holiday. Echoing the children singing about joining the pioneers “in their fun,” one Church member conveyed to me his dream of visiting America during Christmas to see what it was like to be in a country that recognized Christmas as a national holiday.<sup>48</sup> The Christian identity of America is part of the reason why dressing as American equals dressing as a Mormon in they eyes of the Khmer.<sup>49</sup> The visual ethnicity of the performers does not translate their Mormon identity, but once the SpongeBob Squarepants fabric is added, the connection to America equates to their Mormonism.

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<sup>48</sup> Every year around Christmas time, more and more expat and tourist hotspots in Cambodia decorate for Christmas. In 2008, one Lucky Burger restaurant even had a decorated Christmas tree with wrapped presents underneath. Outside of places frequented by foreigners, very little is seen indicating Christmas as very few Khmer actually celebrate it.

<sup>49</sup> Though there are continual arguments in some countries about whether Mormonism is considered a Christian faith, to the Khmer-Mormon community, Mormon equals Christian because of the celebration of Christmas.



**Figure 4.5** - SpongeBob Squarepants pioneer costume worn by a member of the Ninth Branch.

The dressing as American is less literal in other decisions made for the Pioneer Day celebrations. Although it was the decision of the senior missionaries and not the Khmer Church members, the choice of square dancing rather than other forms of dance ties the celebration more closely to American culture. In 1982, after it was put forward four times to Congress, President Reagan signed a bill that designated the square dance as the official folk dance of the United States of America “because it was seen as representing universal ‘American’ values cutting ‘across all of the ethnic backgrounds that make up [US] society.’”<sup>50</sup> Hank Greene agrees with the patriotism of square

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<sup>50</sup> Stephanie Jordan and Andree Grau, Introduction, *Europe Dancing: Perspectives on Theatre Dance and Cultural Identity*, Ed. Andree Grau and Stephanie Jordan (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

dancing: “I’m not exaggerating when I say it’s patriotic to join a square dance.”<sup>51</sup> And Margot Mayo adds: “You know intuitively, that here is something distinctly American and truly democratic, full of friendliness and good fellowship. Here is the genuine ‘social’ dance!”<sup>52</sup> The “Turkey in the Straw” dance, because it is a square dance, automatically ties the performance to American identity. By participating in the square dance, the Khmer youth are dressing themselves as American in order to link their identities to the Mormon Church.

### **The Internal Tourist Gaze**

The Khmer Mormon community acts as tourists to their own performance on Pioneer Day. The Mormon history and American identity they are performing are through the specific Khmer lens. Our presence as Mormons from America was not anticipated at the Pioneer Day festivals. But because we were there, we became the authorities of the performance. We were brought up to square dance to authenticate the “Americanness” of that performance. We were asked obscure Church history questions because, as American Mormons, we were expected to know the answers. But the performance was still aimed at the Khmer Mormon audience.

Presentations of Church history and Americanism were through the perspective of the Khmer. Cultural distinctions were made between Mormonism and Buddhism through the mob member’s personification of evil in the enactment of Joseph Smith’s experience. Parallels were also made with the Mormons in the past in American and the Mormons today in Cambodia. Youth added Khmer rice bags to the luggage carried by the Mormon

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<sup>51</sup> Hank Greene, *Square and Folk Dancing: A Complete Guide for Students, Teachers and Callers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 3.

<sup>52</sup> Margot Mayo, *The American Square Dance* (New York: Sentinel Books, 1943), 4.

pioneers on their way to Utah. The Smith Family washed traditional Khmer silks and Khmer silks were used to make pioneer costumes. American identity was also performed through a Khmer perspective. Since American cartoons are often broadcast on Khmer television, cartoons have become a representation of America. The SpongeBob Squarepants fabric became a quick cultural indicator for America along with cowboy hats, scarves around the neck, and square dancing.

By celebrating Pioneer Day through American and Khmer folk dance, the Khmer-Mormon community has added a holiday on which to celebrate their sub-culture identity as Mormon. For the Khmer-Mormons, the Mormon identity is part of their identity as Khmer. In order to perform the dual identity, an American folk dance has been adopted into the repertoire of Khmer folk dance. Youth have also performed themselves as Mormon pioneers through a pageant of events from Mormon Church history. Khmer additions to the American history help Khmer-Mormons claim the history of the Church as part of their own history as modern pioneering Church members. To link themselves more closely to the Church's headquarters in America, this community has also dressed themselves as American both literally and figuratively. In these ways, the Khmer-Mormon sub-community of Khmer culture comes together to reify through performance their identities as both Khmer and Mormon.



## CHAPTER 5

### **The Water Festival: Offstage Performance of Khmer Identity**

The *Reamker*, with its depictions of Ream as an avatar of Vishnu teaches the importance of paralleling stories and natural phenomena with real life. Historically, the Water Festival was paralleled with the Churning of the Sea of Milk. Paul Cravath explains the difference between the Indian telling of this myth and the Khmer telling:

The sea depicted here is not one of milk containing the twelve precious objects of the Indian myth, but is very much a Khmer sea filled with the fish that represented Angkor's food and livelihood. In the Indian myth the serpent is wound around the upturned Mr. Mandara which is used as a churn, with demons pulling the serpent's head and gods on the tail. In the Khmer myth the churning is certainly the main action—as seen by the turbulence among the fish, but in no way do the two contending forces show hostility. They are both moving to the left in unison and look more complementary than conflicting. The focus of this contest is not the two groups doing the churning, but, rather, the serpent and the central figure appearing in place of the churn...this central figure represents both the king and the mountain, which, by convention, he symbolized.<sup>1</sup>

The Water Festival is a perfect demonstration of the teamwork between the King as the mountain and the fish in the waters helping to churn Cambodia's livelihood, which they represent. Because a large number of Khmer are fishermen and those that are not still depend on the river for food, the fish represent prosperity. With Cambodia adding independence to its identity and setting itself in opposition to both colonization and

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Russell Cravath, "Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia" (PhD diss., University of Hawaii, 1985), 61-62.

communist extremism, new parallels have been added to the modern celebration of the Water Festival. Rebuilding Cambodia and the Khmer identity after the Khmer Rouge has been difficult. The Water Festival, however, has become a place for Khmer to perform what they hope Cambodia will become.



**Figure 5.1** - The 2008 Water Festival.

This chapter is primarily about the 2008 Water Festival, though I will begin with a history and context of the Water Festival and how it fits into Khmer history. The history of the festival itself is important because it helps define what has shifted in the festival. The things that are emphasized in today's Water Festival celebrations, such as the presence of the King and the Khmer Government and the influence of theatrical

performance, show what is important to the offstage performance of Khmer identity. This performance is directed at both other Khmer and foreigners that may be in attendance, though the offstage performance of Khmer identity, like the onstage performance, includes a separate performance aimed at foreigners.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of the “tourist gaze,” as explained by John Urry, helps define a marketable Khmer identity to deliver to foreigners at traditional events such as the Water Festival. The tourist gaze simply refers to the awareness that people have of being watched by visiting outsiders. The presentation of a place or a culture is inevitably altered to cater to the “gazing” tourists.<sup>3</sup> Dean MacCannell’s idea of “staged authenticity” helps explain that while the Water Festival may have elements of true authenticity for native patrons, there is also an element of staged authenticity for the benefit of tourists seeking a native experience as part of their travels. MacCannell explains:

Touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences, and the tourist may believe that he is moving in this direction, but often it is very difficult to know for sure if the experience is in fact authentic. It is always possible that what is taken to be entry into a back region is really an entry into a front region that has been totally set up in advance for touristic visitation.<sup>4</sup>

The Water Festival presents both the front region and back region that MacCannell describes. It serves as a platform to perform Khmer identity to Khmer festival-goers while simultaneously performing a neatly-packaged, marketable version of the same to

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<sup>2</sup> For more explanation on the two definitions of “performance” that are used in this chapter, see Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: SAGE Publications, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 101.

the foreigners in attendance. The performance of Khmer identity to Khmer locals and tourists celebrates and enacts Khmer tradition. The performance of Khmer identity to foreign tourists is specifically constructed condensing Cambodia to a nation of exoticism and wonder.

### **Water Festival: History and Premise**

Cambodia lays claim to a natural wonder: The Tonle Sap River is the only river in the world that changes directions twice a year. During the monsoon season, the Tonle Sap rises, floods much of the country along its shores, and fills up the Tonle Sap Lake at the end of the river. When the rainy season is over, the Tonle Sap Lake begins to drain and the Tonle Sap River changes directions and begins flowing back into the Mekong River. With the changing of the river and the emptying of the Tonle Sap Lake comes an abundance of fish in the river. For hundreds of years the Khmer have celebrated this change with what is now called the Water Festival, or *Bohn Om Touk* (literally translated to mean “Boat Rowing Festival”). Celebrating both the fish that come with the changing of the river and the river itself whose natural phenomena is uniquely Khmer, the Water Festival is a celebration of Khmer identity. Though the conventions of the festival have changed through its continued enactment, the basic elements have remained the same. Some elements of past festivals have been removed and others brought into the spotlight to fit with the new Khmer identity being performed.

The Water Festival is three days long. The first day celebrates the water, which incorporates the river as a natural wonder of Cambodia as well as the fish that the river provides. The first two days of the Water Festival are situated on the last two days of the waxing moon, with the third day of the festival on the first day of the waning moon. The

second day of the festival, which lands on the full moon in the month of *Khè Kadek* (the last month of the lunar calendar), celebrates the moon. This is called *Ak Ambok* (“eat flattened rice”) and *Sampeah Preak Khe* (“Festival of the Full Moon Salutation”).

The reason for the two names comes from the legend of the Buddha upon which the festival is founded. As the legend tells, a Buddha was born as a rabbit, named Pouthesat, and every full moon he dedicated his life to someone that wanted to become a Buddha. The god Preah Ean found out about this, disguised himself as an old man, and asked Pouthesat if he could eat him. Pouthesat agreed to give his life so that the old man could eat, but the old man said: “This rabbit has observed moral precepts for a long time, so he cannot be killed.” Then the rabbit jumped into the fire so that the old man could eat him, but as he jumped he secretly wished he could live on the moon after his death. It is said that Pouthesat, in the shape of a rabbit, can still be seen on the face of the moon today.<sup>5</sup> This event is observed with the Water Festival at the end of the lunar calendar because it celebrates the moon. Also, during *Ak Ambok*, the Khmer honor Pouthesat by eating flattened rice with foods loved by rabbits such as bananas, coconuts, and yams because these foods are ripe during the lunar month of *Khè Kadek*. The third day of the Water Festival celebrates the farmers. The monsoon season floods much of the country providing flooded fields for rice production. In November, when the changing of the river marks the end of the rainy season, the farmers can prepare to harvest their crops of rice.

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<sup>5</sup> This story, like most Khmer folklore, is passed through oral tradition. The version told in this chapter is based on the written English version from which I learned the story. It seems only one English translation has been written, as the exact same wording of the story is found in the brochure published by the Mittapheap Hotel as well as several websites explaining the festival.

Cambodia's Ministry of Tourism published a pamphlet in English (and several other languages) about the history and significance of the Water Festival. According to this publication, there are three different histories to the Water Festival. Though each history is distinctive, the three have amalgamated into the way the Water Festival is celebrated today. The first history links itself to the changing of the river: "The festival represents a thanksgiving to the Gods of Water and Earth for providing the livelihood and welfare for the Cambodian people. This [...] translation follows the tradition of Brahmanism and relates to the practical geography and the daily life of the farming community."<sup>6</sup> The name "Boat Rowing Festival" comes from the three days of dragon boat competitions that are held during the Water Festival. This tradition encompasses the other two histories of the Water Festival.

First, the boat races are a way to enact the defeat of King Jayavarman VII over the Chams. Champa was a nation that occupied the geographic area of what is now central and southern Vietnam from about the seventh century through the eighteenth century. The Chams invaded Cambodia in AD 1177 by land. In 1178, they invaded Cambodia twice more by sea.<sup>7</sup> The Chams mounted the first attack against the Khmer on long boats and won. When the Chams attacked the second time by boat, the Khmer, under the direction of Jayavarman VII were prepared. As engravings on the walls of the Bayon Temple indicate (and tour guides recite), the Khmer were able to defeat the Cham army because they had built even longer boats (see Figure 5.2). Today, the boat races feature both long boats and short boats, which help parallel this historic battle with the Water Festival as it is now enacted.

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Tourism, *11-13 November 2008 Water Festival, Phnom Penh, Cambodia*, 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 59.





**Figure 5.2** - The sea battle between the Khmer and the Chams depicted on the walls of the Bayon Temple.

The third history of the Water Festival—also an explanation for the dragon boat races—comes from a tradition documented in the Bassak Region of Cambodia. The pamphlet from the Ministry of Tourism explains that sometime during the Longvèc Era (2071 BC-AD 1528):

The Regional King [of Bassak] assigned a royal administration to defend his region. He divided his navy into three parts boarding different types of boats. [...] The navy was ordered to a boat race on the River Peam Kanthao in Khleang Province at a junction of the rivers. Racing at the junction allowed easier access

for many provinces. The event became an annual tradition providing the navy with the opportunity to show its military prowess.<sup>8</sup>

As the Water Festival today takes place at the junction of the Mekong and the Tonle Sap and features three days of boat races, it is easy to compare modern festivities with the Bassak navy tradition.

The dragon boat races have long since been an element of the Water Festival, but the modern celebrations have made the dragon boat races the main event of the daytime. In the 2008 Water Festival, over four hundred dragon boat teams competed in the race. The boat teams came from provinces throughout Cambodia to compete in the name of Cambodia as a whole as well as in the name of their individual provinces.

The main event of the Water Festival after sunset is the parade of the boats, or the Festival of Illuminated Floats (see Figure 5.3). As the Ministry of Tourism explains: “This festival consecrates Preah Changkaum Keo (the main parts of Buddha) in the Naga World and the Buddha’s footprints in the five directions. [...] The Khmer people conduct this festival during the full moon of November. It is believed that great merit and prosperity will be provided to the country.”<sup>9</sup> The way these things are consecrated is through a parade of boats that begins after sunset. Scaffolding is built on individual boats and lights are hung and arranged on the scaffolding to depict pictures and words. These boats are constructed differently every year and the 2008 parade featured twenty-one boats compared to the eight boats seen in the 2007 parade. The Festival of Illuminated Floats is accompanied by an impressive display of fireworks which attracts festival goers to the waterfront nightly.

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Tourism, *11-13 November 2008 Water Festival, Phnom Penh, Cambodia*, 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.





**Figure 5.3** - The 2008 Parade of Illuminated Floats.

During the Water Festival, the capital city, Phnom Penh, crowds with people from all the provinces of Cambodia as well as foreign tourists and expatriates who come to see the races. Most businesses close and crowds gather at the river banks (see Figure 5.4). The population of Phnom Penh more than doubles to an estimated three million people during these three days.<sup>10</sup> Today, this festival also serves as an example of reclaimed tradition as it was one of the first traditions that reemerged soon after both the French Protectorate and the Khmer Rouge. In this sense, the Water Festival is much more than just an enactment of tradition and has moved towards a way for the Khmer people to perform their identity as Khmer for one another and foreigners that may be in attendance. To fit this new purpose, the Water Festival has shifted and now contains both important elements from the traditions of the past as well as added modern elements. The Khmer people reinterpret this tradition to fit it into the modern Khmer identity. The Water Festival celebrates the changing of the river as a metaphor for the hopeful future of Cambodia, and it also becomes the grounds on which the Khmer explore what it means to be Khmer.

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<sup>10</sup> Neou Vannarin, "Water Festival Crime, Accidents See Decrease This Year: Police," *The Cambodia Daily*, November 14, 2008.



**Figure 5.4** - Crowds gathered on the banks of the Tonle Sap River to watch the boat races at the 2008 Water Festival.

### **The Presence of the King and the Government**

One of the conventions of tradition that has both remained and shifted in today's Water Festival celebration is the presence of the King. Paul Cravath explains the King as a convention of past Water Festivals: "The dominant presence at the Water Festival was the king who moved his residence to the royal houseboat, central to all the river-oriented rituals and contests. On the last day of the Bonh Om Touk the king presided over a great regatta of huge canoes in the ancient style, followed, finally, by the climax of the week-

long festival, the viewing of the royal dancers.”<sup>11</sup> Though the King appears for only a few hours a day for the Water Festival today and no longer maintains a constant physical presence in a houseboat on the river, the modern adaptation of the Water Festival tradition still puts the King and the Royal Family at the center of the tradition.

The importance of the King at the Water Festival helps introduce the reality of two separate tourist gazes: the gaze of foreigners and the gaze of the Khmer tourists coming to the Water Festival either from outlying provinces in Cambodia or from countries to which they have immigrated. The role of the King in the performance of Khmer identity at the Water Festival recognizes both of these presences and caters to each. For the Khmer tourist, the King performs solidarity of nationality that encompasses both ethnicity and cultural heritage. For the foreign tourist, the King performs an elite taste of “authentic” Khmer culture that can be captured in photographs and taken home.<sup>12</sup>

The presence of the Royal Family was particularly emphasized in the 2008 festivities because the Water Festival began just two days after the fifty-fifth anniversary of Khmer independence from the French. King Norodom Sihanouk, the self-proclaimed “father of Cambodian independence” succeeded in gaining independence from the French on 9 November 1953.<sup>13</sup> Though this victory was won by negotiation, the fifty-fifth anniversary banners that lined the streets around the palace and the waterfront featured a picture of King Norodom Sihanouk in his military uniform in the stance of a salute (see

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Russell Cravath, “Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia” (PhD diss., University of Hawaii, 1985), 207-208. There is no indication in any source as to when the festival moved from being a week-long festival as Cravath describes to the current, three-day festival.

<sup>12</sup> Greg Richards provides an interesting discussion of the definition of both “local” and “tourist” in modern festivals in his essay, “The Festivalization of Society or the Socialization of Festivals? The Case of Catalunya,” in *Cultural Tourism: Global and Local Perspectives* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Hospitality Press, 2007), 257-280.

<sup>13</sup> David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 188.

Figure 5.5). The image on these banners gave Sihanouk full credit for the country's current independent state.



**Figure 5.5** - King Father Norodom Sihanouk in his military uniform and the Independence Monument pictured on the banner celebrating the 55th Anniversary of Khmer Independence. These posters were hung around Phnom Penh during the 2008 Water Festival.

Any celebration of independence in Cambodia also includes a celebration of independence from the Khmer Rouge. The genocide of the Khmer Rouge ended in 1979, with Vietnamese forces invading Cambodia and defeating Khmer Rouge leaders. Other than those aligned with the Khmer Rouge, “Nearly everyone else welcomed the Vietnamese invasion and accepted the puppet government swiftly put in place by the



invaders as preferable to what had gone before.”<sup>14</sup> It is true that the Khmer were grateful to be saved from Khmer Rouge forces. However, Cambodia’s relations with the Vietnamese are not amicable.<sup>15</sup> The Vietnamese invasion of 1979 did end the genocidal government associated with Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, but it did not restore power to the King. It was not until 1993 that Norodom Sihanouk’s title officially returned to “King.” Shortly after his reinstatement as King, the Water Festival was revived. Sihanouk’s face on the banners of the fifty-fifth Independence Day represented both the independence from the French as well as the independence from the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese.

Sihanouk abdicated the throne in 2004, giving the throne to his son, King Norodom Sihamoni, but Sihanouk is still known as the King Father, and his visage remains framed in businesses throughout the country. King Norodom Sihamoni was born in 1953, so his very existence is equated to Khmer independence. The Independence Day banners remained up through the Water Festival, emphasizing the importance of the Royal Family to the nation’s identity. The finish line for the boat races is situated at the seat of the King (see Figure 5.6). During the 2008 Water Festival, King Norodom Sihamoni appeared for a few hours every day to watch the afternoon boat races from his seat at the finish line. A smaller Water Festival is celebrated in Siem Reap, the province that is home to Angkor Wat. King Sihamoni also attended one day of festivities there in 2008.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>15</sup> The Vietnamese have invaded Cambodia several times throughout Khmer history. David Chandler even defines the period from 1835-1840 in Khmer history as the “Vietnamization of Cambodia” (123). The invasion of 1979 did end the genocide of the Khmer Rouge, but it was also another attempt at colonization.



**Figure 5.6** - A heat of boat races ends at the finish line of the two red boats. In the background is pictured the Royal Palace and the King's Pagoda on the river. The finish line is in line with the King's seat in the pagoda on the river.

The King is central to the structure of the boat races. His seat was the finish line for the races. Two boats served as the King's boats and the boatmen dressed in the traditional costumes of royal servitude. The two boats carried the King's visage (along with the visages of the King Mother and King Father) out onto the water, taking the place of the King's houseboat in historical festivities (see Figure 5.7). These royal boats were publically sent out onto the water by the King himself on the shore. Carrying the authority (and face) of the King, these two boats rounded up all of the competing boats at the end of the races and led a processional of all competitors from the starting line to the finish line before the winner was officially announced. A representative of the winning boat ascended the red velvet steps from the river up to the palace pagoda to receive a token from the King.

The King literally marked the end of each race and the Royal boats, acting on behalf of the King, brought the three-day races to an end. The win was acknowledged by a royal token given by the King himself. The iconography of the King performs a Khmer identity hearkening back to the days of the Angkor period when Khmer royalty declared themselves “god-kings” and instigated the Divine Right mentality understood today. The face of the King represents the government that fits Cambodia best and is a symbol for the independent state of Cambodia.



**Figure 5.7** - The two Royal boats carrying the visage of the King and the King Father.

King Norodom Sihamoni links his own identity as King to his role in the Water Festival. The Royal Palace features a pavilion dedicated to the reign of Sihamoni. Since Sihamoni has only been King since 2004, this pavilion spotlights a display replica of his

royal coronation processional. The two walls along the procession replica have painted murals. Lining one whole wall is a mural of the Water Festival (see Figure 5.8). The pamphlet given to tourists at the Royal Palace explains that people gather to the Water Festival because they wish “to see His Majesty the King with their own eyes.”<sup>16</sup> Because the presence of the King authenticates the Water Festival, it is documented as an important part of his reign. This reflects the gaze of the Khmer tourist at the festival. The Water Festival provides an opportunity for the King to perform the authority of Khmer royalty to Khmer from all over both the country and the world at one time. The King’s performance to the Khmer tourist as well as the Khmer local emphasizes the legitimacy of the Khmer throne. The King’s presence at the yearly festival provides him with the largest audience of Khmer to which he disseminates the Khmer identity through a performance of royalty.



**Figure 5.8** - King Norodom Sihamoni depicted at the Water Festival in a mural at the Royal Palace.

<sup>16</sup> *Welcome to Preah Borom Reach Veang Chatomuk Mongkul The Royal Palace*, 43.



Though the King is the public figurehead of the government, Cambodia is a democratic monarchy, so it also has a prime minister and the branches of government work closely together. The presence of other governmental branches has become increasingly important as Cambodia attempts to disseminate its identity to Khmer natives and foreigners. The Festival of Illuminated Floats has become the stage upon which the government is able to perform itself. In 2008, the first boat depicted the coat of arms for Cambodia and stated “Royal Palace” written in Khmer script made of lights. This boat featured several couples dressed in the traditional Khmer silk posed in a *sampeah* (palms together with fingers pointing upwards) to the spectators. This first float also took the place of the King’s houseboat that was present in past Water Festivals. It represented the Royal Palace and was the only boat with people as part of the display to represent the physical presence of royalty at the festivities.

The Royal Palace boat was followed by the Senate boat and the National Assembly boat. The other boats represented different ministries and branches of the government and displayed, along with Khmer flags and maps of the country, what the ministry is doing to help Cambodia modernize. For example, two floats—one representing the National Bank of Cambodia and the other representing the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning, and Construction—depicted the building of Phnom Penh’s first sky scraper (which was still being built during the 2008 Water Festival). The National Bank of Cambodia’s float also featured an ATM (see Figure 5.9). In 2006, Phnom Penh only had one ATM, and now there are dozens. Another part of the modernization of Cambodia is the restoration of Cambodia’s temples. The float of the Apsara Authority (whose full name is: The Authority for Protection and Management of

Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap) showed the Bayon temple as it is one of the most popular among tourists and was currently being restored by the Apsara Authority. The Ministry of Industry, Mines, and Transportation depicted power lines and trains as their emphasis is on modernizing infrastructure and unifying transportation.



**Figure 5.9** - The National Bank of Cambodia's float in the Parade of Illuminated Floats. An ATM is pictured to the left and the construction of Phnom Penh's first skyscraper pictured to the right.

The Festival of Illuminated Floats held each of the three nights of the Water Festival, helps solidify the power and presence of both the King and his government. Though the presence of the King has shifted with modern enactments of the Water Festival, his presence is still central to Water Festival activities and his visage represents Khmer independence. The addition of the other branches of government helps emphasize Cambodia's identity as a democratic monarchy.

## Influence of Theatrical Performance

As stated earlier, Cravath explains that in the early days of the Water Festival, a performance done by the royal dancers marked the “climax of the week-long festival.”<sup>17</sup> Following the history of Khmer performance troupes, Cravath states: “In the 1930s most sizable Cambodian villages still have troupes of female dancers who presented classical scenes from the Reamker and other legends, tutored in some instances by retired palace dancers. ...The highlight of the year for the most accomplished of these troupes was the summer Water Festival known as Bonh Om Touk.”<sup>18</sup> By this description, the Water Festival in the early to mid twentieth century served as a competition of boat races as well as of dancers from throughout the country. The emphasis of the Water Festival has shifted with the interests of the new generation of Khmer. For example, the climactic performance that Cravath describes as performed by the royal dancers has been replaced by a rock concert of Khmer pop stars near the Independence Monument; but the influences of traditional Khmer performance are still present in the Water Festival.

The boat races themselves prove how deeply theatrical performance is embedded in Khmer culture. The finish line of the races is marked by two red boats, each with a drummer. Each drummer spots one of the boats in the race. As soon as the boat being spotted passes the front of the finish line boat, the win is marked by a drum beat. The drums are two different pitches, so the spectators can decipher which boat won in a close race. The influence of dance-dramas is also present in the Festival of Illuminated Floats. One specific example was the float of the Ministry of Defense. To illustrate what the ministry does, the figure of Hanuman was depicted in lights on the float (see Figure

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Russell Cravath, “Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia” (PhD diss., University of Hawaii, 1985), 207-208.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 205-206.

5.10). Hanuman, a character from the Khmer epic the *Reamker*, is a monkey king known for helping Prince Ream battle the demon and his army. This legendary fight was defensive as the demon had kidnapped Prince Ream's love, Sida. Hanuman is considered deity in Hindu mythology. He has superhuman strength, is devoted to spirituality, and is known to have overcome evil and triumphed in battle. With just the visage of Hanuman, the Ministry of Defense was able to easily depict their role in the Khmer government by using references from Khmer theatrical practices.



**Figure 5.10** - Hanuman pictured on the float for the Ministry of Defense in the Parade of Illuminated Floats.

The most prominent influence of theatrical Khmer performance on today's Water Festival is the religious nature of Khmer performance. Because religion is such a large part of Khmer culture and identity, religion is a part of the boat races as well. Offerings to the gods are placed at the bow of each boat. Along with the usual fruits found in an



offering, some boats still have an *Apsara* dancer physically present at the bow of the boat to help guide them quickly towards the finish line (see Figure 5.11). Other boats simply paint an *Apsara* onto the side of the boat. The presence of an *Apsara* dancer on some of the competing boats serves the function of an offering to the gods through theatrical performance and is an iconic way those competing on the boats can link themselves to the Khmer identity.

These elements of traditional Khmer performance practices in a setting outside of the theatre indicate that the performance of Khmer identity has moved beyond the stage. Part of the new Khmer identity being performed at the Water Festival paid homage to the icons of Cambodia's powerful past. Characters from Khmer performance became the representation of the strength and longevity of the Khmer identity in the performance of that identity to both Khmer and foreigners present at the Water Festival.



**Figure 5.11** - An *Apsara* dancer with other offerings at the bow of a competing boat in the 2008 Water Festival.

## Performance of Khmer Identity to Khmer

The Khmer calendar has two main traditional festivals each year: The Khmer New Year and the Water Festival. At the Khmer New Year which happens around April each year, the Khmer people return to their families in their respective provinces. During the Water Festival, everyone that can comes from the provinces into the city of Phnom Penh to collectively celebrate. Many of those that cannot make it to Phnom Penh celebrate in festivities held in North Cambodia in Siem Reap, or in Southern Cambodia in Sihanoukville. Even Khmer living in Vietnam celebrate the Water Festival in the Mekong Delta in Southern Vietnam. In 2008, it was reported that up to one million Khmer living in Vietnam gathered in Vietnam's Soc Trang province to celebrate. The Vietnamese government limits the Khmer festivities because of the distinctly Khmer identity that is performed through the Water Festival. Yeoun Sin states in the *Phnom Penh Post*, "We have to organize the Water Festival every year to remember our traditions and cultural practices."<sup>19</sup> He further argues the importance of the festival in maintaining a Khmer identity inside the borders of Vietnam. The very enactment of the Water Festival, however small in size, is a way for Khmer to gather and perform and reify their collective identity. It is a time to define, through sport, what it means to be Khmer.

In the main Water Festival held in Phnom Penh, these gestures are enacted based on the geography of the city. Because part of the Water Festival is about celebrating the natural phenomena of the Tonle Sap River, the boat races follow the flow of the fish from the Tonle Sap Lake back into the Mekong River. The races stay Khmer because they

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<sup>19</sup> Kay Kimsong, "Khmer Krom gather in Mekong Delta for festival celebrations," *The Phnom Penh Post*, November 14, 2008.

restrict their use of the river to only Khmer geography. The races begin just after the only bridge in Phnom Penh. Built by the Japanese, the bridge is known as the Japanese Bridge in English so its existence demonstrates the reality of the foreign aid that helps Cambodia maintain its infrastructure. The races also end at the chair of the King which is just before the Tonle Sap meets up with the Mekong. Much of Asia is dependent on the Mekong for livelihood. With its source in the Tibetan Plateau, the Mekong River flows down through China, along the border of Laos and Thailand, through Cambodia, and finally ends at the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam. The Water Festival boat races follow a stretch of the Tonle Sap River that is untouched by foreign identity because it starts just after the Japanese Bridge and just before the Mekong River.

Gathering to Phnom Penh becomes a sort of pilgrimage to participate in the performance of Khmer identity. To attend the Water Festival with the King and his palace as a backdrop, and to see the banners celebrating Khmer independence and the Independence Monument lit up is to remember the social, political, and religious identity of Cambodia. Douch Thorn came to Phnom Penh for the Water Festival from Kompong Speu with ten members of his family. When interviewed by the *Cambodia Daily* he said, “I spent a lot of money to join this traditional ceremony [...] and I don’t know yet how much I’ll have to spend to get home.”<sup>20</sup> People come from the provinces with provincial allegiance to their hometown boat teams, but the Water Festival is also about communal celebration.

Some use the Water Festival as an opportunity to make money selling things among the crowds, but the vendors always take time to watch the races and converse with

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<sup>20</sup> Phorn Bopha and Rollo Romig, “Too Soon for Some, Water Festival Ends,” *The Cambodia Daily*, November 14, 2008.

those around them about the results. Unless they are selling to a foreigner (and sometimes not even then), the Water Festival is not a time to be pushy. People attend the Water Festival with families and they take the opportunity to meet those around them. Around three in the afternoon, families start pulling out their plastic or bamboo mats for dinner and by five o'clock, the street, the sidewalks, and the grassy areas lining the river are covered with families on mats eating dinner (see Figure 5.12). Everything is communal during the Water Festival. Races are celebrated together, dinner is eaten together, and the fireworks are enjoyed together.



**Figure 5.12** - Several bamboo and plastic mats are set out for dinner in the late afternoons of the 2008 Water Festival.



The boat races are taken very seriously by spectators and competitors alike, but when the race is over, the teams celebrate. As the winning team from each race passes in front of the crowd, a call and answer takes place with the announcer over the loud speaker and the competitors on the boat. It involves shouting, in Khmer, “Hooray for Cambodia” and raising oars to celebrate. In between heats, competitors sit on shore or in their boats and watch the other races. Because each team wears matching shirts (usually of the boat’s individual sponsor), it is easy to pick out those competing in the races, and the team members are proud to be noticed (see Figure 5.13).



**Figure 5.13** - One competing boat team, sponsored by the Apsara Dental Clinic, wore matching shirts with the logo of their sponsor.

Part of the performance of Khmer identity at play during the Water Festival is a celebration of the river as a spatial metaphor of Cambodia’s future. The rainy season in

Cambodia is half of the year, but at the end of the rainy season, the rice can be harvested. Also at the end of the rainy season, the abundance of fish brought by the Tonle Sap River provides for all those that live along its shores. The Khmer Rouge could be equated to an extended rainy season. It was a long rainy season of genocide, but when it finally ended, the river changed directions. This change is the hope for Cambodia. Cravath describes the Tonle Sap River change as a “life-bringing miracle”:

Each year as the monsoon-flooded Tonle Sap pours northward, it empties into a vast natural reservoir known as the Great Lake—a food source so filled with fish that at lower water levels, the oars of boats are impeded. Like a channel of energy entering the womb, the river pours itself into the Great Lake, and near the northernmost shore, where the energy can expand no farther, the great city of Angkor was born.<sup>21</sup>

The shift in the river and the fish it brings serve as a spatial metaphor for the hopeful and prosperous future of Cambodia.

The new Khmer identity hearkens back to the greatness of the Angkor Period—the period in Khmer history that produced Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. When the water from the Tonle Sap changes directions, it moves from the area of Angkor Wat back towards today’s capital city, Phnom Penh. The new parallels of the Water Festival include the hope that the river will bring some of the grandeur of Cambodia’s past, found at Angkor Wat, back down to the current political and cultural hub of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. The fact that the Water Festival was quickly restored after the King’s reinstatement in 1993 indicates that the Cambodian people were anxious to celebrate the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 46.

change and the hope that perhaps just as the river is changing directions bringing the fish into the city, the future of Cambodia could be abundant again as well.

The performance of Khmer identity for Khmer locals and Khmer tourists involves celebrating things that are unique about Khmer culture. The Khmer tourist gaze prompts a performance of definitive Khmer culture that can help reify the collective Khmer identity of those living in Phnom Penh and elsewhere. The Water Festival is constructed towards the performance of Khmer ethnicity and cultural identity. The very premise of the Water Festival celebrates the proud moments of Khmer history and a Khmer river that is globally unique. Its importance is solidified by the fact that the Water Festival is depicted on the largest amount of Khmer currency commonly used. The Festival celebrates the Khmer King (who is pictured on the other side of the Khmer currency) and his government, has elements of Khmer theatrical performance that would not easily translate to foreigners, and the full moon festival celebrates with unique Khmer foods (*Ambok*). The Khmer tourist gaze is the primary target audience for the performance of identity at the Water Festival. The commonality of a single language and a collective cultural history provides an opportunity for a celebration of identity in which all Khmer can participate.

### **Performance of Khmer Identity to Foreigners**

The performance of Khmer identity targets mainly the audience of Khmer locals and tourists. But the Khmer are aware of the foreign tourist gaze and the economic power of the foreigners present at the festival. Therefore, the performance of Khmer identity to expatriates and foreign tourists is a different performance than the one aimed

at the Khmer. Foreigners are made comfortable and given a commercial sense of “Khmer.” Cambodia is presented as a commodity that can be purchased through hotel reservations, restaurant meals, and admission fees.

In 2008, The Ministry of Tourism launched a new campaign with the slogan “Cambodia: Kingdom of Wonder.” This slogan, written in English, is on billboards, banners, and, during the Water Festival, it was seen on balloons, brochures, and even the float for the Ministry of Tourism during the Festival of Illuminated Floats. This campaign sponsored a tourist pagoda, situated right next to the palace pagoda, which provided tourists a comfortable place to sit with a great view of the finish line. While native Khmer packed onto the banks of the river and struggled to find a good view (or even a place to sit down), the tourist pagoda offered tourists chairs covered with traditional Khmer-print silk. The welcoming banner stated, in English: “Welcome to the Ministry of Tourism’s Pavilion. No Admission Fee for International Visitors.” The pagoda was roped off, guarded by Khmer policemen, and only foreigners were allowed in (see Figure 5.14).



**Figure 5.14** - The Ministry of Tourism's booth on the waterfront for the 2008 Water Festival.

Once inside, young Khmer women dressed in ornate white blouses and traditional silk skirts and sashes welcomed us and gave us brochures published by the Ministry of Tourism (offered in several languages) explaining the Water Festival and giving an overview of the sites to see in Cambodia. One of the hosts offered me Pepsi, beer, or water with the assurance, “Free for you.” MacCannell suggests that tourists that visit other countries go on a pilgrimage not to find one specific site but to find authentic experiences outside the normal realm of the traveler. In this way, the foreign tourist can accumulate “realities” of others. The Water Festival, as a traditional festival, attracts tourists seeking an experience of Khmer authenticity. The Ministry of Tourism’s pagoda at the 2008 Water Festival provided a space in which the performance of Khmer identity to foreigners could be controlled. MacCannell explains: “Cultural productions are powerful agents in defining the scope, force, and direction of a civilization. It is only in the cultural experience that the data are organized to generate specific feelings and beliefs.”<sup>22</sup> The cultural production of the Water Festival in the Ministry of Tourism’s pagoda was clearly defined in order to produce specific “feelings and beliefs” about Cambodia. The tourist pagoda allowed the Khmer government to stage the authenticity the tourists were seeking.<sup>23</sup>

The tourist pagoda also had a view of the King in his neighboring pagoda, emphasizing to foreigners the importance of the King, as well as treating the tourists themselves as dignitaries (see Figure 5.15). Our perceived economic power was recognized, however. The understanding was that I deserved to be in the presence of the

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<sup>22</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 29.

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion on the appropriation of cultures through art and tourism, see Deborah Root, *Art, Appropriation, & the Commodification of Difference* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), particularly the chapter: “Conquest, Appropriation, and Cultural Difference.”



King because the \$20 I paid to get into the country and the \$25 I would eventually pay to leave helped fund the event. Where Khmer have opportunities to see the King at many events throughout the year, I deserved a souvenir picture of the King because I paid for it. As with the photograph of me pictured with the cast of *Sokacha*, the photograph of my view of King Sihamoni is a symbol of tourist appropriation and power. I was able to capture and take home a picture of the Khmer King; in that sense, I own a piece of Cambodia. The photographs with which I return home become the definition of Khmer identity that will be disseminated to others outside of Cambodia.



**Figure 5.15** - My view of King Norodom Sihamoni from the Ministry of Tourism's waterfront pagoda at the 2008 Water Festival. King Sihamoni is seen in the *Sampeah* position bowing to the King's boats to send them off to start the processional of boats. The scaffolding in the background is on the floats that make up the Parade of Illuminated Floats after sunset.

Can-Seng Ooi uses the term “place-product” to describe how the “identity of the destination is asserted through its branding.”<sup>24</sup> The performance of Khmer identity to foreigners at the 2008 Water Festival was branded—Cambodia: Kingdom of Wonder. No intricacies of Khmer culture, such as language, custom, or religion, were performed. Ooi continues by explaining, “the [branded] identity often supposedly condenses and describes the culture of the destination as a whole.”<sup>25</sup> The performance of Cambodia as a “place-product” is a production with two desired outcomes. Foreigners should first visit Cambodia and spend their money there and then go home and tell their friends to visit Cambodia as well. Though international visitors were treated well at the Water Festival and kept comfortable in the tourist pagoda, they never understood much of the actual event. After the boat races ended, there was a general sense of confusion among the foreigners as to who won, and many had to pick up the English-language newspaper, the *Phnom Penh Post*, the next morning to find out.

The translation of events occurring at the Water Festival was not part of the performance. It did not matter if the foreigners understood the conventions of the tradition, as long as they were made comfortable enough to bring home a glowing recommendation about the country. MacCannell explains: “The tourists return home carrying souvenirs and talking of their experiences, spreading, wherever they go, a vicarious experience of the sight.”<sup>26</sup> This “vicarious experience” MacCannell describes

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<sup>24</sup> Ooi, Can-Seng. *Cultural Tourism & Tourism Cultures: The Business of Mediating Experiences in Copenhagen and Singapore*. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press, 2002), 123. For a full discussion of the place-product, see the chapter “Mediated Sense of Place: Destination Branding” in the same book.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 158.

becomes Cambodia for those that have not been there. The Ministry of Tourism works to control the vicarious experience foreigners share at home.

“Exoticism” was the focus of the performance of Khmer identity aimed to foreigners. With the slogan “Kingdom of Wonder” comes the inference of an exotic, unknowable land that is ready to be explored. Foreign tourists seek an exotic identity that can be sought out, captured and shared with family and friends through photos, emails, and postcards sent home. The stereotypes associated with Southeast Asia were almost emphasized in the tourist pagoda. Each of the hostesses was young, beautiful, and dressed traditionally. Alcohol was free. And the front-row view of the festivities, granted to foreigners based entirely on their looks, promoted the belief that everything in Cambodia was organized to satisfy the foreigners. Through photographs, foreigners can capture and own a piece of Cambodia. If foreigners are under the guise that Cambodia is a purchasable commodity, they are much more likely to visit and spend money.

After 2007’s disastrous Water Festival that saw a Singaporean boat capsize in the races and five Singaporean racers die, 2008’s Water Festival only had Khmer boat teams. “We didn’t have any foreign boats this year because we didn’t invite them,” states Bou Chomsarey, an undersecretary of state with the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport.<sup>27</sup> Though three boats capsized in the 2008 festival and one Khmer racer died, the 2008 Water Festival was considered a success. The foreign deaths in 2007 made global news that ruined the performance of Khmer identity as a Kingdom of Wonder. The one death in the 2008 Water Festival, because it was a Khmer racer, only made local news.

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<sup>27</sup> Qtd. in May Titthara, “One Death, Three Sinkings This Year,” *The Phnom Penh Post*, November 14, 2008, In Brief.



For foreigners, as MacCannell explains: “The value of such things as programs, trips, [...] events, sights, spectacles, scenes and situations of modernity is not determined by the amount of labor required for their production. Their value is a function of the quality and quantity of *experience* they promise.”<sup>28</sup> The death at the Water Festival was downplayed to foreigners so much so that very few foreigners even knew of its occurrence. Foreign tourists sitting comfortably in the tourist pagoda did not discuss or consider the labor and sacrifices required to put on the event before them because the event was measured by the “quality and quantity” of authentic experience it provided.

The performance of Khmer identity to foreigners was carefully designed. From what was translated into foreign languages to the hostesses of the tourist booth, the performance constructed Khmer identity as one of exoticism, beauty, and wonder. Depending on tourism for the nation’s economic base, Cambodia is recruiting tourists to come and add a few dollars to the economy.<sup>29</sup> And the performance of Khmer identity assures those foreigners that beautiful Khmer girls dressed in traditional silk offering free beer will be the ones to greet them.

The enactment of the Water Festival has changed with the identity of the nation. In place of the King’s houseboat on the water, the King is accompanied by the parliamentary government. The festival maintains elements of Khmer theatrical performance in order to emphasize Cambodia’s affluent and ornate past. Though Khmer locals attend the festival, the majority of the Khmer in attendance are Khmer tourists

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<sup>28</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 23, italics in original.

<sup>29</sup> I use the term “dollar” because Cambodia’s economy is as much (or more) dependent on dollars as on the Khmer currency of *riel*. The largest denomination of *riel* commonly in use is 10,000r, which equates to about \$2.50. Most business is conducted in dollars with *riel* as the change (as there are no coins in circulation in Cambodia—either Khmer or American).

from outside Phnom Penh and many from outside Cambodia altogether. The performance of Khmer identity at the Water Festival foregrounds the intersection of the two tourist gazes present at the event.

The Water Festival as a performance has two separate audiences. First and foremost, the Water Festival is a performance meant for other Khmer; the festival is mainly a reification of a complex Khmer identity, not a definition of it. The second audience is an audience of foreigners where Cambodia is presented as a place-product. For a few dollars, Cambodia will cater to the foreign tourist. Though carefully scripted, the performance of Khmer identity to foreigners is not the main performance. The main performance is rooted in Khmer history and theology and includes parallels between the river and the future of Cambodia. Today's Water Festival celebrates a hopeful future that changes directions from the colonization and genocide of the past and brings in a plentiful economy and future defined by modernity.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Conclusion: The Cambodian Cultural Village**

As Cambodia rebuilds after the genocide of the Khmer Rouge and the instability that followed, a new Khmer identity is being created—one that is separate from the Khmer Rouge, separate from the French, and separate from the neighboring countries of the Vietnamese and the Thai. The new Khmer identity hearkens back to the days of Angkor Wat and the Angkor Period in Khmer history where Cambodia was known for wealth and power and beauty, but the new Khmer identity also includes a promise of modernization. The performance of Khmer identity is two separate performances: a performance reifying Khmer identity to Khmer and a performance packaging Khmer identity for foreign consumption.

*Sokacha* is an example of Khmer identity performed on the stage, but the performance of identity happens much more broadly as well. Khmer people are also performing Khmer identity offstage through celebration and tradition. Through celebrations such as the Water Festival and Pioneer Day, specific identities are performed and reified. By performing identity, the identity itself is created and solidified.

In the examples discussed in this thesis of both onstage and offstage performances of Khmer identity, the identity performed to Khmer was a complex one comprised of several sub-identities and branches of identity. But in the examples of *Sokacha* and the Water Festival, the foreign tourist gaze demanded a separate identity that could be summarized in photographs and souvenirs. A popular tourist destination in Siem Reap, the Cambodian Cultural Village demonstrates the complexity of the Khmer identity

performed to Khmer locals and tourists and the commoditization of Khmer identity for foreign tourists.

Opened in 2003, the Cambodian Cultural Village is set up as a theme park of Khmer identity. The park is divided into villages and tourists move en masse from village to village to see staged performances representing each specific identity. For example, in the “Millionaire’s House,” a traditional Khmer wedding was performed, and in the “Chinese Village,” representing Khmer of Chinese descent, a performance of Chinese acrobatics was presented. Through the individual performances, the Cambodian Cultural Village seeks to present a complex Khmer identity to Khmer patrons and provide enough photo-opportunities and souvenirs for foreigners to help define Cambodia upon returning home. Though the definition of Cambodia the Cambodian Cultural Village is attempting to give to foreign tourists is more complex than a mere trip to Angkor Wat, it is still a condensed identity that can be packaged in trinkets and sold in the gift shop.

### **Performance of Khmer Identity to Khmer**

When I went to the Cambodian Cultural Village in 2006, the majority of patrons were Khmer and all shows were performed in the Khmer language. Though the shows depicted the individual identities that comprise the collective Khmer identity, the performers were in all of the shows despite their specific heritage. In the “Kroerng Village,” performers demonstrated a tribal wedding ceremony though none of them were of the tribe represented. This performance would equate to white Americans performing Native American traditions though the performance at the “Kroerng Village” is not

considered unethical to the Khmer performers involved. For the Khmer, the Cambodian Cultural Village is about reifying a complicated identity comprised of several parts. Because Khmer performers perform parts at each of the villages, a cohesive Khmer identity is performed that includes all Khmer despite where they are living. The Khmer tourists at the Cambodian Cultural Village experience a communal celebration of identity.

One of the “villages” tourists can visit in the Cambodian Cultural Village is named “Khmer Association Oversea [*sic*].” In this village, Khmer refugees that are now living in other countries are acknowledged. Khmer think primarily of the Khmer community in Long Beach, California when considering Khmer communities outside of Cambodia. The “Khmer Association Oversea” has a cul-de-sac of small-scale suburban American houses and a Christian church. Khmer-Americans are thus considered one of the “villages” that comprise Khmer identity. If the Khmer performers are representing all of the peoples that make up a collective Khmer identity, that identity can be a part of the individual identity of the Khmer tourist as well. The Khmer tourists are not outsiders to the Khmer identity, they are an integral part.

The Water Festival also celebrated a complex Khmer identity to the Khmer festival-goers and recognized the presence of the Khmer tourist gaze. Using the framework of a tradition and shifting elements within it such as the presence of the King, the influence of theatrical performance, and the promise of modernization, the Water Festival defined and reified the Khmer identity. The Water Festival is a more national performance of Khmer identity in that people come from regions throughout the country and gather to the river in Phnom Penh. Although smaller festivals do happen in

Sihanoukville and Siem Reap, Phnom Penh becomes the center of Khmer identity since the King is there and his palace is situated on the river where the festival takes place.

The Water Festival is a way for the Khmer, in several ways, to perform and enact Khmer history on the river as well as celebrate the river, which is itself, uniquely Khmer. It is also a time for conviviality. It is a time for Khmer to gather from throughout the country and the world to Phnom Penh to have dinner together, watch the races together, and share in the collective Khmer identity.

*Sokacha* was an onstage example of the same performance of Khmer identity as the Water Festival. Khmer audience members were reminded, through performance of the three branches of Khmer identity: political, religious, and social. Onstage performance was used as a vehicle of dissemination and elements in the performance were used to emphasize Cambodia's unique political and religious history. The new Khmer identity was also performed in which the social identity of Cambodia, or the Khmer individual, is given more power and importance. The new Khmer identity that modern Khmer are trying to create is at the same time, political, religious, and social. These three branches of Khmer identity are crucial in the rebuilding of the strong identity of Cambodia as an important nation on the world's stage. Through onstage performance, Cambodia is attempting to make an international presence as well as build up national patriotism. *Sokacha* presented highlights of several Khmer art forms to celebrate Khmer heritage. But specific changes such as the inclusion of the clowns from the Khmer folk dance, the *Chhayam* dance, helped modernize Khmer identity and aim it towards Khmer audience members. The foreign tourists in the audience were left out of their witty jokes but could still enjoy their slapstick routines.

The inclusion of the Khmer living in America among the villages at the Cambodian Cultural Center informs my discussion of the Pioneer Day celebrations among the Khmer-Mormon community as well. The Khmer-Mormon community is attempting to figuratively place themselves among the villages represented at the Cambodian Cultural Village. By so doing, they are trying to reconcile the Khmer identity and the Mormon identity that they share. They have created a new Mormon history about Mormon pioneers. The Khmer-Mormons have latched on to the specific part of Mormon history that describes Mormon pioneers choosing to cross the plains into Salt Lake City to be obedient and to blaze the trail for future Church members. The Khmer-Mormon Community has appropriated and assimilated that history into its own collective history. They now perform themselves as Khmer pioneers heading into the new hopeful future of Khmer identity as well as Mormon pioneers, since they are the pioneering generation of the Mormon Church in Cambodia. The Mormon Church began there in 1995, and is still fairly new. The Khmer-Mormons are performing their identity as hopeful Khmer and hopeful Mormons that the dual identity of Mormonism and Khmer will continue onward—that they will blaze the trail for the Mormon Church in Cambodia and help blaze the trail for the new Khmer identity.

Though the performance of Khmer identity is aimed primarily at the Khmer in the Water Festival, in *Sokacha*, at the Pioneer Day celebrations, and at the Cambodian Cultural Village, the presence of foreign tourists (and their money) is recognized. A separate performance of Khmer identity is meticulously created for tourists with the intent purpose of building up the economy through the spending of foreigners.



## Performance of Khmer Identity to Foreigners

Dean MacCannell explains: “Tourists make brave sorties out from their hotels, hoping, perhaps, for an authentic experience, but their paths can be traced in advance over small increments of what is for them increasingly *apparent* authenticity proffered by tourist settings.”<sup>1</sup> The pilgrimage tourists take to participate in “authentic” experiences accounts for the majority of Cambodia’s tourism. Angkor Wat, the pinnacle representation of Cambodia’s affluence of the past, is a popular World Heritage Site. Greg Richards cites a study that “indicates that for 28 percent of tourists visiting Angkor Wat this was their only reason to visit the country.”<sup>2</sup> Many foreigners choose to vacation in the more popular destination of Thailand and cross over into Cambodia just to see Angkor Wat. Though the new Khmer identity pays homage to the grandeur represented at Angkor Wat, it strives to emphasize the *current* strength and complexity of Cambodia. Located in Siem Reap close to Angkor Wat, The Cambodian Cultural Village is trying to draw in the tourists from Angkor Wat in order introduce them to the multi-faceted identity of Cambodia. The Cambodian Cultural Village features a miniature area where all the famous buildings and structures of Cambodia can be seen in one location. The Royal Palace, the National Museum, Wat Phnom, The Central Market, and the Independence Monument, all located in Phnom Penh, can be seen in one display. Though significant sites near Siem Reap, such as the Reclining Buddha, found near the Bayon Temple, are also depicted in miniature, a model of Angkor Wat is not a part of the display. It is assumed that all patrons to the Cambodian Cultural Village have already

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<sup>1</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Richards, ed., *Cultural Tourism: Global and Local Perspectives* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Hospitality Press, 2007), 12.

been to Angkor Wat. The notion of presenting a miniature version of other significant destinations in Cambodia at the Cambodian Cultural Village implies that everything “worth seeing” in Cambodia, other than Angkor Wat, can be seen (albeit in miniature) for the price of an admission to the Cambodian Cultural Village.

Christopher Balme, discussing similar occurrences the Polynesian Cultural Center, explains that audience participation “provides the necessary means by which the tourist gaze can best be exposed to other tourists.”<sup>3</sup> Balme continues: “the tourists become the spectacle they have paid to watch.”<sup>4</sup> Audience participation is an integral part of the Cambodian Cultural Village and the inclusion of the foreigner demonstrates the intersection of the Khmer tourist gaze and the foreign tourist gaze on the performance of Khmer identity. For the Khmer audience members, the foreign participant proves the unique intricacies of Khmer identity. Because the performance is entirely in the Khmer language and the foreign volunteers are not given any instructions, the performance of the foreigners is a confused attempt to replicate tradition “correctly.” The Chinese tourist and I, as parents-of-the-groom in the traditional Khmer wedding performance, were expected to follow the lead of the parents-of-the-bride who were played by Khmer performers. When those on stage turned and looked at us, we attempted to repeat what the parents-of-the-bride had just done. Our comic performance emphasized that the Khmer identity is complex and cannot be easily replicated by foreigners. Because we did not know the language, our inadequacies could be pointed out as a part of the performance to Khmer audience members. But our presence in the performance also provided a photo-opportunity similar to my photograph with the cast of *Sokacha*.

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher B. Balme, “Staging the Pacific: Framing Authenticity in Performances for Tourists at the Polynesian Cultural Center,” *Theatre Journal* 50:1 (1998): 62.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The photographs from my two trips to Cambodia reflect a Khmer identity aimed at me specifically as a foreign tourist. Pictures of my husband dressed as a Khmer groom with me in the role of his mother, the two of us with the costumed cast members of Sokacha, and me as a puppeteer of Sbek Thom show an ethnic identity that is assumable. John Urry argues:

Photography *seems* to be a means of transcribing reality. The images produced appear to be not statements about the world but pieces of it, or even miniature slices of reality. A photograph thus seems to furnish evidence that something did indeed happen – that someone really was there or that the mountain was actually that large. It is thought that the camera does not lie.<sup>5</sup>

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Michel de Certeau argues that one must forget an event in order to produce a memory of it. For tourists, photographs and other souvenirs replace the realities of a destination and become the means of remembering the experience. The Khmer are aware of this reality and provide souvenirs and photo-opportunities that neatly package Khmer identity for foreigners to take home.

MacCannell suggests: “While the attraction is the more authentic, the memories and other souvenirs are more important in establishing society in consciousness. The society remains superior to the souvenir. But the souvenir, because it is more immediate and intimate, constantly threatens the ascendancy of the attraction.”<sup>6</sup> Because of the cultural and linguistic barriers in place between Khmer performances and foreign tourists, the photographs often replace the memory of the actual event. The foreigners in the

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<sup>5</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: SAGE Publications, 1990), 139.

<sup>6</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 158.

Ministry of Tourism booth at the Water Festival did not understand the boat races but were able to take a picture of King, so for them, that photograph replaces the enactment of the Water Festival tradition. The foreigners in the audience of *Sokacha* did not understand the Khmer language used in the performance but were able to take a picture with the costumed cast, so for them, that photograph replaces the example of Khmer traditional performance they saw enacted. And for me, because I did not understand the Khmer language used in the performance of the traditional wedding ceremony at the Cambodian Cultural Village, the photograph of my husband dressed as a groom and the Chinese tourist and I in our street clothes playing his parents replaces my experience of the wedding ceremony. The identity of Cambodia as a place-product was emphasized at the Water Festival, the performance of *Sokacha*, and the Cambodian Cultural Village. With souvenirs and photographs of the experiences, foreign tourists can return home and introduce friends to an exotic place catering to foreigners complete with free beer, costumed natives, and the opportunity to get married to a beautiful Khmer girl. These photographs construct a Khmer identity worth funding and emphasize Cambodia's dependence on foreign aid.

The reason this work on Khmer performance as a platform for the performance of identity is important is that the rebirth of Khmer identity is happening now. The Khmer Rouge ended in 1979, and Cambodia nearly had to start over. Seeing Khmer performance reemerge after ninety percent of performing artists were murdered is both traumatic and hopeful. Khmer performance now cannot help but perform echoes of that traumatic history, but the focus of Khmer performance is also to put an emphasis on the new hopeful identity of Khmer history. The offstage performance of Khmer identity also

maintains echoes of trauma and the past, but the people are struggling to change that performance to one of hope and the future. That is why I am passionate about the topic of Khmer identity and find the work in this field important. I plan to return to Cambodia and continue my work there. As Cambodia modernizes and becomes a more popular tourist destination, the performances of Khmer identity aimed at Khmer and foreigners will inevitably shift. Documenting these shifts in identity through the performance of it will serve as a trajectory for Cambodia's future identity. The plight of Khmer identity has not ended, it is continually being written.

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