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The Legend of Apsara Mera: Princess Norodom Buppha Devi's Choreography for the Royal Ballet of Cambodia

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The conception and development of The Legend of Apsara Mera, a new choreography by Princess Buppha Devi of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, gives insight into how contemporary work is generated in the court ballet repertoire.

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The Royal Ballet of Cambodia, under the leadership of Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, daughter of the late king Sihanouk and sister of the present king, Sihamoni, performed an extraordinary dance-drama, *The Legend of Apsara Mera*, for three nights (2–4 May 2013) to a sold-out audience each night at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). This dance-drama, choreographed by Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, was one of the highlights of the Season of Cambodia, an arts festival in New York City that lasted from 23 February to 19 July 2013. The festival sought to showcase the creative role played by Cambodia's civil society in the process of nation building after three decades of war that

began in 1970 with the civil war, which culminated with the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979). During the Khmer Rouge regime, the royal troupe lost 90 percent of its members due to execution, malnutrition, and forced labor. That was followed by ten years of latent war between contesting Khmer armies. It was only in 1991 that a peace agreement was signed and a democratic election was organized under United Nations' supervision. Through a combination of cultural and scholarly events chosen for their social significance, Season of Cambodia aimed to celebrate this present transformative moment in the history of the country in which its civil society, in its diversity, has redefined Cambodia through numerous modes of artistic and cultural expression. One of the major artistic expressions of Cambodian cultural identities is its court dance, and the Royal Ballet of Cambodia plays a major role in preserving this important identity in the post-Khmer Rouge period.

The last time American audiences saw a dance performance by the Royal Ballet of Cambodia in the United States was in 1971. The group was composed of palace-trained dancers, and it called itself the Classical Khmer Ballet, as Cambodia had become a republic in 1970 and hence the title, though not the personnel, had changed. Cambodia was under Vietnamese control during an occupation that lasted from



FIGURE 1. Dancers from the Royal Ballet of Cambodia in *The Legend of Apsara Mera*. (Photo: Anders Jiras. Courtesy of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia)

1979 to 1989. In 1990, the troupe was renamed the Classical Dance Company of Cambodia and performed at the Joyce Theater. This 1990 group was being rebuilt by the few royal dancers who had remained at the end of the 1970s. It was only in 2001 that the troupe regained its former name, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, with the reinstatement of Norodom Sihanouk as king of Cambodia. In short, the multiple name changes of the royal dance troupe reflect the political instability and tragic events that afflicted the modern history of Cambodia and interrupted the continuity of Khmer court dance.

Princess Norodom Buppha Devi and the Preservation of Khmer Court Dance

Princess Norodom Buppha Devi (b. 1943) was a prima ballerina whose artistic lineage harkens back to a long line of court dancers and musicians. Her mother was Neak Moneang Phat Kanhol, a star ballerina, and her grandmother was Queen Sisowath Kossomak Nearyroth, who was a major patron of the Royal Ballet from 1953 to 1970. The princess was raised among the ballet troupe and became the prima ballerina of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia at the age of sixteen. After the coup d'état in 1970, she went into exile in France. In 1991, when a peace agreement was signed among contesting parties, the princess eventually made her way back to Cambodia. She was appointed Minister of Culture from 1999 to 2004 and successfully lobbied UNESCO to have the Royal Ballet inscribed in the list of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity proclaimed in 2003 (see UNESCO 2008).

This new dance-drama, *The Legend of Apsara Mera*, choreographed by Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, is derived from two different tales—*Churning of the Ocean of Milk* and *Kambu and Mera*. The royal ballet performs only mythical stories because court dances were and are seen as offerings to the gods and not to humans. Therefore, its repertoire is derived from Hindu-Buddhist stories such as *The Ramayana* (the Cambodian version of the *Ramayana*) and Buddhist *Jatakas* (stories of previous incarnations of Buddha). However, this traditional repertoire is by no means fixed or timeless. Indeed, Khmer court dance can harken back to the Angkorean traditions, but it also has adapted itself to different venues and different audiences over the years.¹ In brief, there is room for revision and innovation within this prescribed tradition of dance as ritual and courtly entertainment. A case in point is the aforementioned dance-drama *The Legend of Apsara Mera*. The princess wanted to create a new dance-drama that combines the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*—a story that is an important feature of the east gallery of twelfth-century Angkor Wat in particular and Angkor-period temple sculpture in general—and the long-established *Apsara* dance—again

linked to Angkor-period imagery—to form a new and coherent narrative. The *Apsara* dance was conceived in 1962 by the late Queen Kosomak, Princess Buppha Devi's grandmother. It was choreographed for an event in 1964 in honor of General Charles de Gaulle at the Opera de Paris in France, and the lead role of the white Apsara was danced by the then teenaged princess. Queen Kossomak's innovative costumes, which were copied from the friezes of Angkor, and the delicate female dance technique impressed all who saw it. While a new creation, the choreography gave viewers a sense of continuity of this 1960s contemporary dance with the legacy of a millenium. Since then, the *Apsara* dance has become a symbol of Khmer cultural identity, performed in the homeland as well as in the Cambodian diasporas around the globe.

The Inception of *The Legend of Apsara Mera*

As a scholar of Khmer dance and theater I participated in the project as a translator and an ethnographer. *The Legend of Apsara Mera* was conceived at Princess Buppha Devi's home in Phnom Penh in January 2010.² The commitment to take the Royal Ballet on a tour to France and especially to Salle Pleyel (Paris) in October of the same year prompted the princess to create a new dance-drama. I submitted the first draft of the story and the synopsis for the staging of this dance-drama to the princess. Subsequently, she gave it further edits. Below is the narrative of the story, which is followed by a synopsis for the staging of the dance-drama and my review of the dancers' technique, costumes, musicians, singers, and staging.

The Legend of Apsara Mera narrates the founding of the Khmer kingdom by two mythical figures, Prince Kambu and the nymph Apsara Mera. The first part outlines the birth of *apsaras* (nymphs), these beautiful celestial dancers who are associated with the wonder that emerged from the *Churning of the Sea of Milk* carried out by giants and gods. The second part depicts the queen of the *apsaras*, who descended to earth to embody Apsara Mera, the daughter of the *naga* (serpent/dragon) king, lord of the water and the land. From her union with the foreign prince Kambu came the Kingdom of Cambodia and thus the Khmer ethnic group.

Divided into two acts, the dance-drama was rich in its variety of scenic effects, which enacted traditional pieces of ballets shortened and rearranged and reworked to fit the story.³ Act 1 of *The Legend of Apsara Mera* is divided into four episodes and begins with the myth of the *Churning of the Sea of Milk*. The first episode depicts the eternal battle between gods and giants incarnated by four pairs of dancers—all dressed like figures in the bas-reliefs of Angkor. This episode was followed by a two-man combat between Asura (Giant) and Hanuman

(Monkey). The mix of traditions, the Asura from *lokhon khol* (a village dance tradition that traditionally does only *Ramayana* episodes) and one from court dance (Hanuman), was extremely innovative and features a succession of athletic and rapid gestures during the combat.

The second episode narrates the god Vishnu standing on his vehicle, the turtle that supports the world. In order to represent the god with his numerous hands, two dancers were standing behind the main character, moving their hands slowly up and down, each hand holding an arm. The illusion worked well and gave a lively picture of the god. To stop the fighting, the god Vishnu suggested both camps (giants represented by Asura and gods represented by Hanuman) churn the Sea of Milk in order to get the elixir of immortality, *amrita*, which would give supremacy for whoever possessed it. Thus, gods on the right side and giants on the left side started to churn the sea. The scene was superbly lit with dancers lined up in one row, giants facing gods. Their legs firmly anchored into the ground, they slightly leaned their bodies from left to right miming the gestures of churning accompanied by a deep melancholic sound made by the buffalo horn instrument. This direct visual reference to Angkor's east gallery was an exciting instance of sculpture coming to life that would be recognized by all who have visited that World Heritage site. The *Churning of the Sea of Milk* is a mythological process whereby all good things, including dance and musical arts, are generated by the joint effort of the opposite forces (demons and gods), and it served here, perhaps, as a metaphor of how peace and concord might lead to positive developments in cosmic and human existences.

The third episode depicts the jewels that poured out of the sea after a thousand years of churning. While these jewels were projected images on a screen at Salle Pleyel in 2010, at BAM in 2013 they were replaced by traditional Khmer large leather puppets (*sbek thom*, whose images again reflect the visuals on temple walls) manipulated by three dancers behind a scrim. This change made this scene even more effective. Among these jewels emerged the white elephant, the eternal tree, the white horse, and, eventually, the elixir of immortality, *amrita*, held by the god Vishnu. But next appeared the giant Asura, who managed to steal it. The goddess Mohini was thereupon called upon by Vishnu, who gave her a magic crystal ball to fight against the giant to get the elixir of immortality back.

The fourth episode narrates the combat between the goddess Mohini and the giant Asura. Mohini provoked Asura into combat, which ended to her advantage. She threw her magic crystal ball before Asura's face, which blinded him. She could then get the elixir of immortality back. The scene was an adaptation of the ballet *Mohini*

Mekhala and Ream Eysa and allowed the interpolation of the important idea of the traditional clash of Moni Mekhala (a goddess associated with lightning) and Ream Eysa (the god of thunder), who appear in a venerable dance-drama *Buong Song*, a performance to induce rain and fertility. Interpolating parts of this traditional choreography into the *Churning of the Sea of Milk* narrative was a choice that would be evocative for viewers aware of the origins.

Chap Chamroeuntola, who incarnated the beautiful Mohini, was impressive in her technique. The role of the goddess tossing her crystal ball is considered to be one of the most difficult in the repertoire, and it seemed to be tailored for her. Her admirable fingers bowed backward toward her wrists, her toes curled upward, and the accentuated curve in the small of the back surpassed the interpretation of her giant partner in the duet. The voice of the noted Pich Chakriya, although she is still young, was admirably strong to accompany the whole episode beautifully.

Act 2 is divided into five episodes, where the *apsaras* (celestial nymphs) dominated, creating a more delicate, intimate atmosphere. Here we moved away from the story of cosmic creation and discord toward a story of how the Khmer nation originated.

The first episode superbly depicted the nymph Apsara Mera, the daughter of the king of *nagas*. This princess of *apsaras* emerged slowly from blackness in the middle of the darkened stage and moved softly to the center, where light revealed her radiant beauty. Apsara Mera was crowned in a newly designed headdress representing a *naga* or serpent head—it seemed to be directly carved out from the bas-reliefs of Angkor. She was dressed in a skin-colored corset and a white skirt, literally radiating light through the glittering ornaments on her torso, wrists, and ankles. The lovely Meng Chan Chara, who danced Apsara Mera, was almost sublime. Her dance rhythm, seen in a subtle movement up and down made by her supporting knee and by an internal flow of her shoulder blades, gave the impression of a reptile's undulations. The suave male voice of singer Ek Sidé contributed to the opening of this serene and graceful solo dance. Then, six women as her ladies-in-waiting framed Meng Chan Chara in a lovely choreography celebrating the beauty of nature. The dance ended with the seven *apsaras* gliding softly to the back of the stage and facing the audience: they took a posture just like *apsaras* in the temples of Angkor Wat. They resembled living goddesses more than mere mortals.

The middle scenes showed the first encounter of *apsaras* with the human world. The second episode depicted Prince Kambu (danced by Chen Chansoda), who left his realm along with an army and set sail. He

approached an island named Kok Thlok (the ancient name of Cambodia) and decided to settle there. In order to represent a boat, two male dancers—one in the front and the second in the back—mimed the movement of the boat on the sea. The third episode again showed Apsara Mera, this time performed by another dancer, Chap Chamroeunmina, as she prayed to the gods for the sake of her kingdom. The scene allowed us to admire the ballet *Chhouy Chhay* (Gracious Walk), which has rarely been presented in a tour abroad. The fourth scene staged Prince Kambu courting the nymph Apsara Mera. The scene conformed to the prescribed codes of court dance, eye contact followed by hand contact before the nymph fell in love with her suitor.

Then followed the final episode, the celebration of the union of Kambu and Mera, the founders of the kingdom of Kok Thlok/Cambodia. Eight pairs of deities framed the couple, who glided slowly to the front row. The group executed a complex choreography with perfect synchronization. The stage suddenly became a radiant heaven where deities in shimmering embroidered costumes and regal headresses danced gracefully around the mythical couple. The birth of the nation was evoked in this choreography by Princess Buppha Devi to celebrate the successful rebirth of civil society that has taken place in the country. The arts of music and dance, which mythologically were considered treasures coming from the *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*, were celebrated in this dance-drama as part of the solution to the devastating history that the country has managed to surmount.

Tradition, Invention, and Challenges

I followed, step by step, the rehearsals for each of the performances in Paris, Monte Carlo, and Brooklyn. I would like to point out some of challenges that Princess Buppha Devi and her assistant, Master Proeung Chhieng, former vice rector of the Dance Faculty at the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, faced in creating this new dance-drama. *The Legend of Apsara Mera* is one of the most ambitious productions ever undertaken by the royal troupe. The final product demonstrates the princess's artistic vision, narrative strategy, and stylistic technique and is an invention of tradition. It demonstrates the reinvigoration of what thirty years ago was an endangered art.

First, as I have mentioned earlier, *The Legend of Apsara Mera* is entirely conceived as a new dance-drama, with new lyrics, as well as new costumes and props. A large part of the time was devoted to researching at the temples of Angkor for the design of costumes and props. Soum Sinoeum was responsible for making new headresses. Lim Sylvain, designer, and Sim Montha, embroiderer, were in charge

of making new costumes. In particular, Lim Sylvain had to conceive new design prototypes for the *Apsara* dance. In Khmer court dance, each costume has to be sewn directly to fit the body of each dancer. It usually takes four hours of preparation before each performance to get each dancer ready. Thus one of the major challenges was to find a solution so that dancers could change their costumes between scenes. Each dancer had two different roles to play in this drama; for example, the Asura and Hanuman the Monkey later became the two boatmen when the Prince set sail. As the number of dancers was limited by the organizers, the princess had to conceive each episode long enough to allow the change of costumes. That is why the timing of each episode was so important. Male roles, for example, appeared only in the beginning and very late in the second part of the drama as the sewing of their costumes took more time than for the female roles.

Second, assembling artists of sufficient caliber was difficult; for example, finding dancers to take the leading roles was a challenge. The current troupe comprised twenty-one female and three male dancers, five musicians, four singers, and four costumers/dressers. Among the dancers, the seven *apsaras* were the youngest and most inexperienced. In fact, none of these seven young women had ever been on stage before 2013. It was the princess's choice to have a group of newly trained *apsaras* for the chorus. She explained, "It is better to start from scratch. I prefer to teach a group of inexperienced students who are on the same level than a group with different levels" (personal communication). These dancers were selected personally by the princess from the School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. According to the princess, "An *apsara* dancer should have delicate and fine arms and legs, with a small figure, and her face should look enhanced by the *apsara* headress" (personal communication). A major innovation was the introduction of a *lokhn khol* dancer playing a giant role and *sbeik thom* (leather shadow) puppets into the story.

Third, a newly woven tale required the writing of a new libretto. To this end, the princess sought the help of master songwriter, Soth Somaly, to compose the lyrics, and the melodies were discussed collectively among masters of dance and music. While the *pinpeat*, the traditional court orchestra, accompanied the dance, the preference of male over female singers also showed the princess's signature. Traditionally, women were chosen to sing in the ballet as they had the strong and high voices to be heard by the dancers and the audience. The first person to introduce male voices was Queen Kossamak in the 1960s: she called upon pop singer Sinn Sisamouth, the Cambodian crooner, to accompany the *Apsara* dance. His smooth and sweet voice accompanied the

dance beautifully.⁴ Following her grandmother's legacy, the princess chose Ek Sidé, one of the most famous present-day Cambodian pop singers, to be the lead male singer of the new libretto. She even went further than her grandmother by giving the leadership in the overall singing to male voices, while female voices were limited to accompanying as a choir. This gave an intimate, precious, and languid color to the story-drama. In short, the princess privileged the male voice over the traditionally preferred female singers to accompany the *pinpeat*, showing again her revision and innovation in Khmer court dance. Moreover, the accessibility of technology and media to project subtitles contributed to her desire to make the highly poetic Khmer lyrics comprehensible to both Cambodian and foreign audiences. Thus care was taken to ensure the Khmer songs that narrate the story (while the dancers mime/dance) were understood. It was my task to translate the poetry into French and provide subtitles. These were then rendered in English by Fred Frumberg for the BAM.

Last, according to the ritual of Khmer court dance, each performance opened with a tribute to the dance teachers and the spirits (Pithi Sampeah Kru, or the Ceremony of Paying Homage to the Spirits and Teachers of the Dance) who embodied the deep-rooted art transmitted from generation to generation. This ritual was traditionally performed behind the curtain, backstage. For this performance, however, the princess wanted to make this ritual visible to the audience. Thus an altar display with masks and headresses was erected on the left side of the stage with offerings, candles, and flowers. On the right side of the stage, one saw the *pinpeat*, musicians, and singers. Dance master teachers and sisters Pen Sok Huon and Pen Sok Chhea, dressed in traditional costume (a white shirt and a *sampot* or Cambodian tube skirt), came onto the stage and started to make offerings to the dance spirits and ancestral teachers. Four dancers appeared, holding their respective masks or their headresses, and the group sat down in two rows. Musicians began to play the sacred music of "Sathuka" (Blessing), which opens every performance. All artists bowed down, doing the *sampeah*, the traditional salutation, by joining their hands together to honor the spirits of dance. Then, the two master teachers, who are both survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, moved forward to put each mask and headress representing each role type on each of the dancers who were kneeling down in respect. This ritual gesture encapsulated the very symbolic survival and renewal of the court dance: the older generation passing the knowledge down to the younger generation. They exemplified exactly the kind of celebration of survival and new growth that the whole Festival of Cambodia in 2013 represented.

The three-night performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music concluded a series of tours that started at the venues of Salle Pleyel (Paris) in 2010 and Salle des étoiles (Monte Carlo) in 2013. In retrospect, I noticed that the set of subtitles for each of these performances was different from the previous one as the princess continued to modify and to rearrange the order of scenes to make the story more coherent.

In sum, *The Legend of Apsara Mera* is an embodiment of the challenges that one faces in preserving and revising the long-established and yet fragile tradition of Khmer court dance in the twenty-first century. With a mixture of revised and new choreography, Princess Norodom Buppha Devi brilliantly demonstrated her ability to not only preserve and to honor the late Queen Kossamak's legacy of invention of new traditions like the *Apsara* dance, but also her capability of being innovative in her own right. For instance, the princess welcomed and integrated other traditional performative arts such as *lokhn khol* and *sbeik thom* into her newly conceived dance project. Yet tradition was firm: she did not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The princess succeeded in updating this conservative court dance by telling the stories she selected—traditional tales, yet new to the Khmer dance repertoire. She presented the narratives in novel ways, but preserved the core values of the genre.

NOTES

This report owes very much to Boreth Ly, who generously reviewed and enriched it.

1. For discussion of continuity and changes see the considerable scholarship on the royal dance: Cuisinier (1951); Cravath (2007); George Groslier (1913); Bernard-Philippe Groslier (1969); Jiras (n.d.); Nut (2012–2013); Phim and Thompson (1999); Anonymous (1963); and Thiounn (1930).

2. The discussion was filmed as part of the Khmer Dance Project. http://dancingacrossborders.net/press/downloads/KDP_FINAL_4-15-09.pdf. All the video archives are available at the New York Public Library online website and, in Cambodia, at the Bophana Center in Phnom Penh and the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap.

3. As this report will clarify later, segments from other ballets, such as *Moni Mekhala and Ream Eysa*, *Apsara*, *Chhouy Chhay*, and *Tep Monorom*, were inserted in the story.

4. Unfortunately, there are very few archives depicting Sinn Sisamouth—one of the greatest singers that Cambodia has ever had—singing for the Royal Ballet. A short excerpt from the film *Apsara*, directed by the chief of state and former king Sihanouk, showed Sinn Sisamouth singing from *Apsara* accompanied by the *pinpeat* orchestra.

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