

Indic Influences on Dance as Devotion in Angkor

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This paper contends that dance was practiced as a devotional union between the ancestral and earthly realms through ritualistic performances in architectural spaces with its genesis in India extending into Southeast Asia. I will examine the bronze figures of deities, relief carvings and architectural layouts of tantric temple centres in Angkor, Cambodia in relation to ancient Hindu traditions of South India; pronouncing the affinity between the dancer and the temple.

The synthesis of physical and spiritual power with intention becomes a practice of transcendental impulse. The creator of Hindu cosmology, Brahma, produced the *Natya Veda*, the science of dramatic performance, which was passed onto the sage Bharata whom presented the three fold of performance: drama, music and dance to Shiva, Lord of dance and destruction. Shiva then instructed his chief attendant to pass the dance of bliss, *anadatandava* to Bharata. Bharata then wrote the *Natya Shastra*, an ancient Indian scripture on the performing arts which admitted artistry to all with reasons of performance as an experience of spiritual transmission.¹ Essentially, dance is an offering to maintain harmony with the spirits through the ritual of service, by which the human body as the medium is translated into an expression that speaks beyond language and literature. The written word and spoken word are instruments of communication; yet, movement defies language by means of example.² Dance is intangible and momentary; as it is expressed and appreciated at its paramount in transitory. According to Cravath of *Earth in Flower*; dance has been fundamental to societies throughout history, as dance physically expresses a response to cultural, political and social progression that relates to the perspective of the audience.³ Dance must be received by the audience through emotional states experienced with the body, known as *rasa*. In Sanskrit, *rasa* translates as the sap of a plant; it is the quality of an aesthetic pleasure derived from art shared with the artist and the audience. As Denise Heywood refers to Khmer mythology, it is believed that performers emit energy through rituals to satisfy the ancestral spirits, creating a bond between the earthly and heavenly, invoking the presence of God through a temporal state of trance.⁴

¹ Samson, Leela, 1987 “*Rhythm in Joy*” pp. 9

² Schwartz, Susan, 2004 “*Rasa*” pp. 2, 4

³ Cravath: 2007

⁴ Heywood, Denise, 2009 “*Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods*” pp. 11

Lord of Dance



Figure 1. *Nataraja*, Bronze, Chola Dynasty AD1100, Tamil Nadu, South India, British Museum, London

The originator of all forms of performing arts, the world destroying Hindu deity symbolizing the rhythm of the universe, Shiva, the most prominent presentation of dance as divine totality, as worshiped in temples he represents Indian tradition, cosmic principle, Tamil identity and classical dance.⁵ In figure 1, Shiva as *Nataraja* is dancing the dance of bliss, *anandatandava*, denoting vicious movement of the body. As Shiva takes the form of a graceful dancer, the result is cosmic destruction. Shiva dancing the *anandatandava* is associated with sacred temple traditions of Chidambaram, as the mythology and iconography of *Nataraja* is unique to Chidambaram. In the 6th century, the *Nayanars*, authors of Tamil hymns were known to celebrate the dance of Shiva; the recovery of these hymns are said to be in the Chidambaram temple. *Nataraja* was especially announced during the 10th – 12th century, rule of the Chola kings in Tamil Nadu. The Chola dynasty compelled the *Nataraja* image as the supreme shrine and a symbol of their imperial ambitions; several bronzes were commissioned, famous until today and an iconic imagery of India.⁶ *Nataraja* in figure 1 shows a sense of forceful rhythm, as Shiva is portrayed in a dynamic position, his ascetic hair flows outwards and in his hair is the goddess personification of holy water, as well as the crescent moon and intoxicating datura flower, symbolizing his wild nature. An arc of flame surrounds Shiva, a signifier of destruction, in his upper right arm; he holds the *damaru* or celestial drum that creates the primordial sound, *adi nada*, and the other right hand is raised in the gesture of reassurance and protection. In his upper left hand, he holds the same flame, the lower left hand pointing to the raised left foot, signifying the way to release from the bondage of karma. Beneath the foot of Shiva, he tramples upon the dwarf of ignorance, *Apasmara*.⁷ As dancers feet sink into the soil of the earth, precipitating existence, each step echoes the sacred space of which the performance is held in. The soles of the dancer's feet in India are painted red, an auspicious colour of growth and fertility.⁸

⁵ Freer Sackler: Iconography of Shiva

⁶ Nanda, Vivek and Michelle, George, 2004 "*Chidambaram*" pp.45

⁷ British Museum

⁸ Shwartz, Susan 2004 "*Rasa*" pp.31



Figure 2. *Nataraja*, Bronze, 14th – 15th CE, private collection. Photograph courtesy Andrew Rogers.



Figure 3. Dancing Shiva, Bronze, 12th–13thCE Angkor period, private collection. Photograph c/o Andrew Rogers.

It was said that during the 11th century, the Cholas displayed their central might when Tamil traders and theologians had a strong presence in Southeast Asia. According Nagaswamy; “*Nataraja* images, undoubtedly from Tamil Nadu were probably brought by priests’ families who said to have migrated from Ramesvaram or Chidambaram during that period.” *Nataraja* was presented in sculpture and architecture of the Angkor Empire from the 9th to 14th century.⁹ Figure 2 shows the appearance of a small dancing Shiva in a private collection in Bangkok, depicting a modest attempt by a Thai artist to recreate the *anandatandava* form of *Nataraja*, but with modification in gestures and posture, which indicates that the Thai artist was familiar with the form but did not work directly from a model. Figure 3 is a Khmer bronze figure of dancing Shiva with his legs in the *ardhaparyanka* position, a typically tantric pose and common posture for celestial dancers. The iconography of Figure 3 is distinctly Khmer, he is adorned with a high crown, sacral cord across his chest and a short *sampot*. His figure is robust with a dynamic and forceful energy to that of Shiva *Nataraja*. His face is square with Khmer features of thick lips, rigid nose, strong eyebrows and wide eyes. Figure 2, 3 and 4 highlights the circulation of the *Nataraja* image from South India into Southeast Asia. Figure 4 is a tableau on a predicament of the Khmer temple, Phnom Rung in Phimai, Northeast Thailand. It was said that figure 4 is the only direct reference to the iconography of the Tamil *Nataraja* image from Chidambaram.¹⁰ Figure 4 demonstrates Shiva dancing on a pedestal and a group of headless figures as the audience, including the female saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar. The Phnom Rung was built in the 10th – 13th centuries as a Hindu shrine dedicated to Shiva, symbolizing his heavenly dwelling place, Mount Kailash.

⁹ Mehta, Julie 2001 “*Dance of Life*” pp.12

¹⁰ Nanda, Vivek and Michelle, George, 2004 “*Chidambaram*” pp.134



Figure 4. Pediment with dancing Shiva, 12th CE Angkor Period, Prasat Phnom Rung, Thailand

Divine Geometry

The Khmers strived to recreate the myths of Hindu cosmology; Angkor Wat was built as the peaks of Mount Meru; constituent with sacred geometry of the Himalayas. Mount Kailash, is known to be Shiva's abode and the inspiration for Khmer State temples.¹¹ In Hindu and Buddhist cosmology, Mount Meru is the centre of the universe, the peaks arranged in a quincunx, the mythical summit penetrates the heavens creating a bond between the world of man and the gods. The architectural plan of Angkor is of a *mandala*, a ritually traced diagram drawn on the ground, representing a field of energy that reveals the natural forces of the terrestrial realms, based on mystical numerical charts of the universe translated into static form. This diagram as the outline of the land is perceptible only from above, by the Gods. These symbols withheld potency that was fundamental to political unity and architectural construction. Angkor outlined the contours of the soil from which it derives efficacy as an irrigation system that harnessed the waters of the river. Angkor as a system of hydraulics was designed to break the seasonal cycle of drought followed by the monsoon; requiring assistance in obtaining water. It was said that one of the primary elements in the rites of communication was dance.¹² The *Natya Shastra Sangraha* is a compendium of all the important parts of the Indian scripture *Natya Shastra*; categorizing the poses, detailing of isolated body joints in a single movement. If the movement involves both feet, it is referred to

¹¹ Freeman, Michael, 2003 "*Angkor: Icon*" pp.12

¹² Cravath, Paul, 2007 "*Earth In Flower*" pp.38-40

as *karanas*, the combination of three *karanas* is a *mandala*.¹³ This reflects the notion of the human body as a responding spectacle to the surrounding space, the microcosm and the macrocosm, the affinity between the dancer and the temple.

Architecture and the Human Body

Figure 5 demonstrates a line drawing exemplifying the template layout of *purusa*, primeval cosmic man in a diagram that would have been used for the architectural structuring of Indian temples. The body of *purusa* reverberates into the creation of the universe, laying the foundation for all Indian temples.¹⁴ The imprint of the body is in accordance with the template for the temple. Figure 6 illustrates the South Indian Dravidian style temple and its correlation with the human body. The summit of the tower is equated to the head, the tower to the body's trunk, the sanctum as the nerve centre that houses the soul, the pillars of the hall of dancers, *nata mandap*, are the outstretched hands and the platforms as grounded feet. Figure 5 and 6 reflect on the human body in parallel progression with the construction of temples, aligning with the use of the human body as a vehicle for worship. Dance and architecture both share parallel motives of space and rhythm, known in ancient times as the two most sacred forms of art. Dance embodied the cosmic rhythms and patterns as it evolved along with the construction of Hindu temples. According to the *Rig Veda*, historical Sanskrit text, ancient hymns were performed in Indian temples between 1500-1200BC.¹⁵ The stone structures in Southeast Asia is significant as a cultural form of fundamental homogeneity, an element of megalithic ritual that was developed as early as 2500BC.¹⁶ Susan Schwartz states that South Asian temples were dedicated to divine forces to effect transformation, embodying creative energies of fertility and regeneration.¹⁷

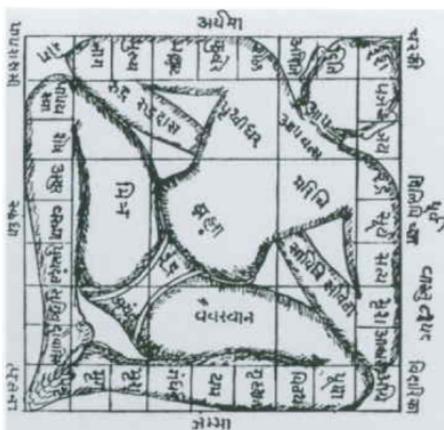


Figure 5. *Purusa*, Primeval Cosmic Man. Line drawing courtesy of A. Volwahren

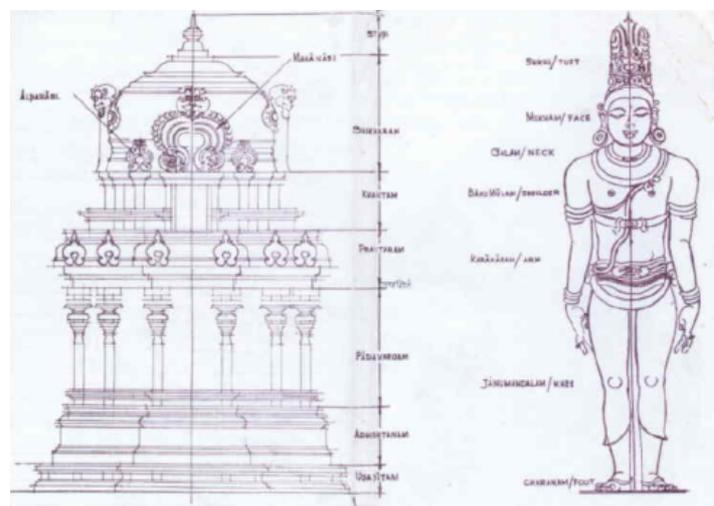


Figure 6. Elevation of South Indian Dravidian style architecture and its relationship to the human body. Line drawing courtesy of Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, Mumbai

¹³ Samson, Leela, 1987 “*Rhythm In Joy*” pp.23
¹⁴ Guy, John, 2007 “*Indian Temple Sculpture*” pp. 68
¹⁵ Heywood, Denise, 2009 “*Cambodian Dance*” pp. 12-14
¹⁶ Cravath, Paul, 2007 “*Earth In Flower*” pp.17
¹⁷ Shwartz, Susan 2004 “*Rasa*” pp.26

Traditions in Temples

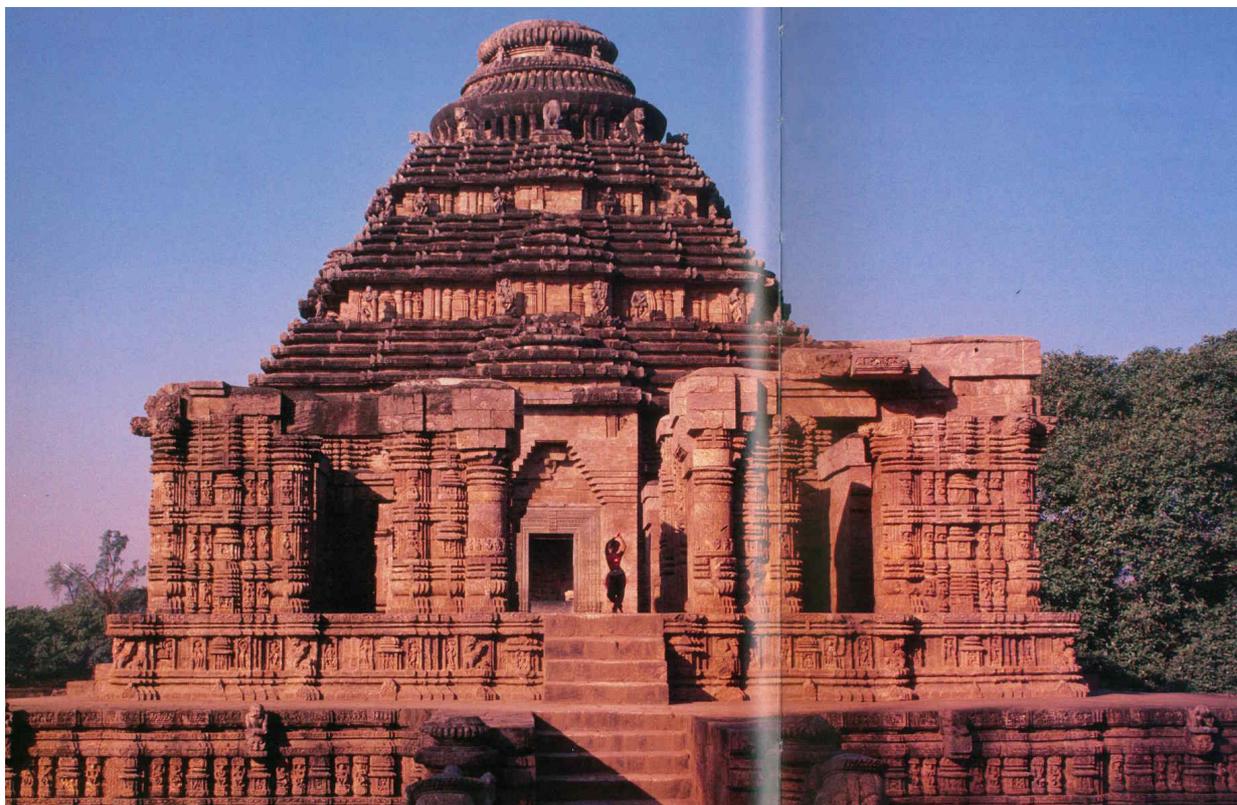


Figure 7. A dancer performing on the *nata mandap* of Jaganmohana temple in Konarak, Orissa

Ritual action and architectural forms are expressed as one with the same meaning; the architectural structure translates into rhythmic formulas.¹⁸ *Bhakti* saints persistently sing of offertory hymns that enunciate the body as one's temple of the god. It is believed that movement is the meditation of the god within and is known to be a higher state of worship in contrast to *darsana*, visualizing the deity. The 10th century Saiva saint, Nayanmar Basavanna, echoed the concept of the human body as the highest abode for worship. He values the living devotee who carries god in his heart as he is in movement, in comparison to a structured static form.¹⁹ Swami Chemburkar states that in the 11th and 12th centuries, the resurgence of the *bhakti* devotional movement in India brought direct connection to the deity through the form of dance and music in temple rituals. The *bhakti* devotional revival in Hinduism homogenously had an impact on the kingdom of Jayavarman VII, as he brought the *bhakti* movement into Angkor. Buddhism belonged to the Tamil devotional sects; Buddhism berthed a new form of *bhakti* aligned with the Bodhisattva, the concept of compassion to help all creation. Along with the stipulation for ritual dance ascended, the 11th century Bribdishvara Temple in Rhanjanvur had large hall of dancers, *nata mandap*. In parallel relation, the largest temple in Angkor was built under the reign of Jayavarman VII to define the Buddhism ascendancy among the Khmers.²⁰

¹⁸ S. Kramrisch

¹⁹ Guy, John, 2007 "*Indian Temple Sculpture*" pp. 69

²⁰ Chemburkar, Swati "*Banteay Chhmar*" pp.169

The earliest Khmer inscription, AD611, describes dancers and musicians being donated to serve the local deity within the temple.²¹ The erection of monolithic monuments increased with the intention of cultivating ritualistic performances within temples during the 8th – 13th centuries, following *sastric* literature. The textual evidence that provided codified devotional structure for temple worship is the *agama sastra*, closely correlated with Saiva worship in South India.²² Found throughout Hindu temple structures in India, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia is the *nata mandap*, derived from South Indian Dravidian architecture; as exemplified in figure 7. Figure 7 shows the Jaganmohana Temple in Konorak, Orissa, as a dancer is on the *nata mandap*, surrounded by elaborately carved walls of dancers. The architectural structure of figure 7 corresponds to figure 6. Leela Samson states that when the Odissi style of classical Indian dance declined and eventually faced extinction, scholars revived the tradition by investigating the forms of dancing figures that embellished temple walls to supplement the vocabulary of the repertoire of Odissi. The 8th – 11th century rulers of Orissa were distinguished builders and devout Saivites. They were immortalised by the construction of temples. Between the 4th and 12th centuries, historical evidence suggest that the Pallava and Chola dynasties of South India expanded their temple ritual dances accompanied by the philosophy and religious beliefs onto Angkor, corresponding to the rise of Cambodian classical dance in the 5th century. The *nata mandap* of Subramanya temple of the Chola dynasty, the Krishna temple at Nellore and at Udayagiri seems to have a strong affiliation with the *nata mandap* of Jayavarman VII.²³



Figure 8. Relief carving of dancers in the *ardharpariyanka* pose, AD1191, Preah Khan, Angkor, Cambodia

Leading into the *nata mandap* of Preah Khan are several carvings of dancing *apsaras*. Figure 8 shows a relief carving on the top lintel of the doorway as you enter the eastern entrance of Preah Khan. The *apsaras* formed the national identity of Khmer culture; as it is the most common image in Cambodia today. In contemporary, dancers of classical tradition breathe life into the ancient *bas-reliefs* of *apsaras* in Angkor; they hold the reservoir for the past and bring a sense of continuity of culture.²⁴

Through the temple runs the vertical axis known as *brahmasutra*, uniting earth and sky, anchored by the central sanctuary of the temple descending to the third realm, the underworld. Abiding and dominating in this fluid level are the *nagas*, serpent genies. The core mythology of *nagas* originated in India, based on the myth that an Indian Brahman, Kaundinya, married

²¹ Thomspson, Ashley and Phim, Toni, 1999 “*Dance in Cambodia*” pp.2

²² Guy, John, 2007 “*Indian Temple Sculpture*” pp. 91

²³ Chemburkar, Swati “*Banteay Chhmar*” pp.157

²⁴ Thomspson, Ashley and Phim, Toni, 1999 “*Dance in Cambodia*” pp.1

a *naga*-princess and founded the Khmer royal line. This union of hero and serpent goddess is also found within the origins of the Pallava dynasty.²⁵ Geoffrey Benjamin states that the cosmos are set apart into two planes; of existence and of essence, of the seen and unseen, of materialization and matter verses the spirit and the soul. Figure 9 is the most common carving surrounding the walls of Angkor, the churning of the sea milk based on Indian mythology. The rhythm of duality contending as two opposing forces, churning the universe, the act of transforming potential into fulfilment as symbolized by celestial dancers, *apsaras*.²⁶ Dance is the focal point because of its hypnotic nature of suspension and balance, masculine and feminine, terrestrial and celestial. Dance became the instrument to project the cultural superiority of Cambodia.

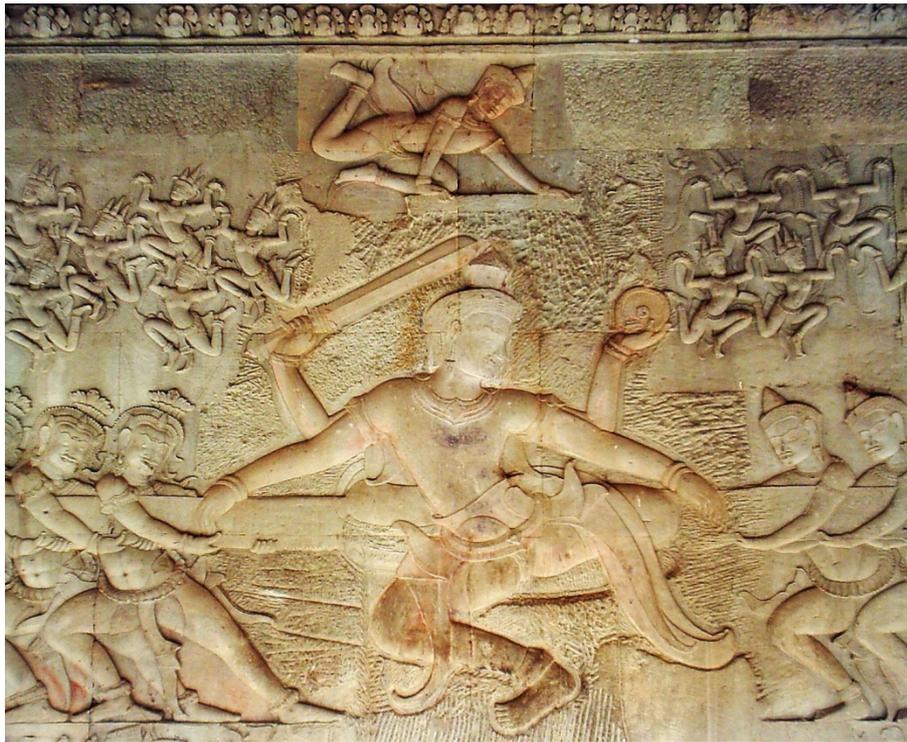


Figure 9. Relief carving of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, Angkor, Cambodia

In the Khmer adaptation of the Indian mythology of churning the ocean of milk; thousands of *apsaras*, heavenly dancers and playmates of the *gandharvas*, divine musicians emerge from Indra's heavenly paradise as seen in Figure 9.²⁷ Julie Mehta states that the holy river of the Hindus, the Ganga, played a crucial role in the Khmer rulers' psyche. As the Khmer kings alluded to the authority of the *Brahmanas*, in Brahmanical rituals, water had a significant function, as it was used for consecrating the monarch, bathing the deities or anointing of the king. In Angkor, the Tonel Sap River and the Mekong River provided fish, which constituted the most important sources of a Cambodian diet, providing protein and energy for the builders of the temple. The primary task of the monarch was greater than regular water supply; it was to create a holy shelling that regularized water flow when there was none.²⁸

²⁵ Freeman, Michael, 2003 "Angkor: Icon" pp.42

²⁶ Cravath, Paul, 2007 "Earth In Flower" pp.46

²⁷ Mehta, Julie B., 2001 "Dance of Life" pp 149

²⁸ Mehta, Julie 2001 "Dance of Life" pp.279

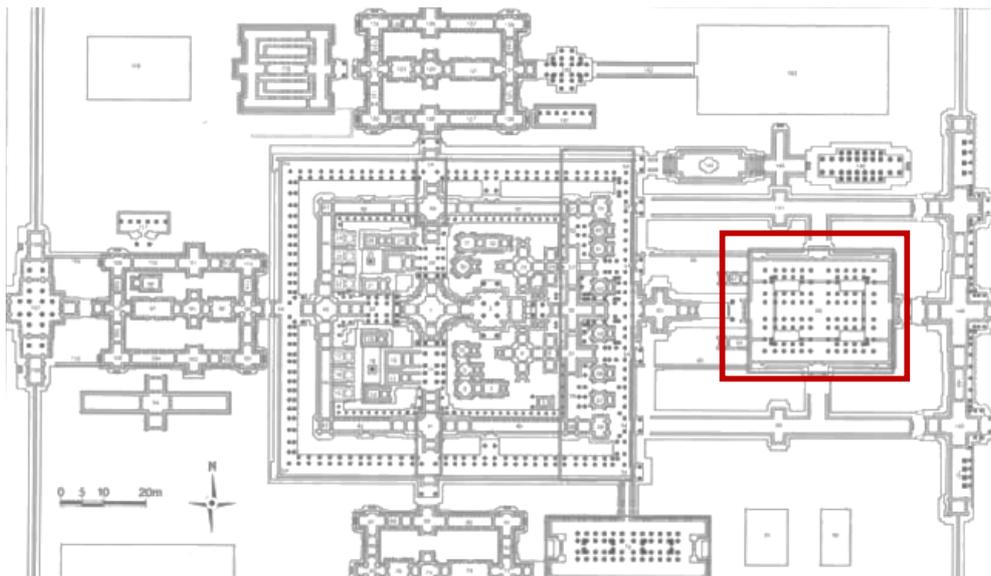


Figure 10. Hall of dancers, *nata mandap*, AD1191, Preah Khan Temple, Angkor, Cambodia

Figure 10 shows an image of the *nata mandap* of Preah Khan as highlighted in red; the inner courtyard in the shape of a crucifix with four slightly smaller courtyards framed by columns and galleries. The *nata mandap* of Preah Khan provides the largest covered open space constructed with stone, assumed with the purpose of ancient ritual performances. Based on the 1191AD inscription of Preh Khan, there were 1000 dancers.²⁹ The *nata mandap* can be found in numerous temples in Angkor, such as the Banteay Kdei and Ta Prohm. Similarly, the Brihadesvara temple in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu and the Sun Temple at Konarak in Orissa both known to have a *nata mandap* for dancer performances with temple walls decorated in elaborately carved dancers and musicians, homogeneous to Angkorean temples in Cambodia.

The integration of Indian philosophy and ritual of dance through the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism by traders, travellers, nobility and preachers who settle onto new lands contributed to the birthing of a cultural identity we know today as Southeast Asia. According to Solange Thierry, curator of Cambodian National Museum and a scholar of Khmer art, “*Everything comes from India, but all is transformed, all is Khmer.*”

²⁹ Chemburkar, Swati “*Banteay Chhmar*” pp.163

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Illustrations:

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