

EARTH IN FLOWER

THE DIVINE MYSTERY OF
THE CAMBODIAN DANCE DRAMA



PAUL CRAVATH

Earth in Flower

The Divine Mystery of the Cambodian Dance Drama

បុព្វលោកយ

អាថ៌កំបាំងអធិទេពនៃរាំកម្ពុជា



Paul Cravath

ប៉ូល ក្រាវ៉ាត

Introduction by Kent Davis

គ្រឿងគ្រឿងដោយ ខិន ដេវីស



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ABOUT THE COVER

“Saem in Her Festival Attire” By Jean Despujols

In the 1930's, Saem was a dancer with Princess Wongat Say Sangvann's royal troupe in Phnom Penh. The princess married the youngest son of King Sisowath, Prince Yong Kath, when she herself was a royal dancer. Saem's skill impressed the princess, who adopted her as a foster child. In 1937, Despujols painted Saem on the Rainbow Bridge at Angkor Wat where special dance performances were held; she holds her right hand in the classic gesture symbolizing a flower.

Saem's "Cinderella story" embodies the history of the Cambodian dance tradition and the hope of Cambodia's future. In ancient times, girls from all levels of society pledged their service to temples and to learning the dance. Saem's devotion to the art led to her royal adoption. Her story speaks to the modern Spirit of Cambodia, empowering women and men from every level in society to participate in the Khmer Renaissance.

THE ARTIST - JEAN DESPUJOLS

In 1936, the Société des Artistes Coloniaux in Paris selected Despujols to travel throughout French Indochina to record his impressions on canvas and paper. His evocative works were only exhibited a few times until 1969 when they became part of the permanent collection of the Meadows Museum of Art at Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana. Special thanks to the Meadows Museum of Art for their kind permission to feature this artwork: www.centenary.edu/meadows



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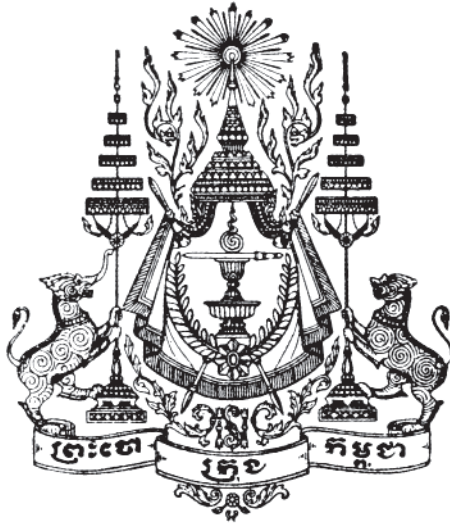
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DEDICATION

This historic edition is dedicated to
Her Royal Highness Norodom Buppha Devi
in honor of her vital contributions in
developing, preserving and perpetuating
the classical dance tradition
of the Kingdom of Cambodia.



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“The Cambodians have shown us all that antiquity can contain.... It is impossible to see human nature brought to a higher state of perfection. We have only the Cambodians and the Greeks. They have found postures which we had not dreamed of, movements which were unknown to us, even in ancient times....”

Auguste Rodin, 1906

PUBLISHER’S INTRODUCTION

Like an elegant Khmer silk, *Earth in Flower* weaves the complex fields of dance, history, art, music, culture and religion into a captivating, coherent tapestry. Dr. Cravath’s study reveals spiritual subtleties about the Khmer relationship between heaven and earth, illuminates the Cambodian views of Masculine and Feminine balance in the universe, and showing how dance is essential to perpetuating Khmer cultural identity.

This book resulted from years of hard work and so many unlikely events that it is a miracle that it exists at all.

It is amazing that the new government of a country in the midst of a civil war, indeed *surrounded* by war, recognized the necessity of preserving ancient dance traditions.

It is amazing that their efforts attracted a competent scholar to collect and organize an esoteric body of research at such a troubled time and place.

It is amazing that one man spent more than a decade preparing this work; then, it essentially vanished for twenty years.

Finally, it is amazing that my life’s circuitous path led me where it did, and blessed me with the opportunity to complete the process of sharing his research. At the end of this book, I’ve added a more detailed account of these events for interested readers.

Preparing this book for publication has been a labor of love for me, as it

was for the author to create. It has been an exhilarating project that has rewarded me with many new friendships. True teachers are both mentors, who lead by example, and muses, who inspire students to seek knowledge. My gratitude goes to these special people who helped me make this book a reality:

Dr. Paul Cravath – www.EarthInFlower.com

I approached Paul as a researcher seeking guidance on my own project. Soon, we were both irresistibly drawn into a mission to complete the work he began in 1974. Despite the twenty year delay, Paul participated wholeheartedly. He found time for my demands in his busy schedule as a college professor, even when this meant many long, pre-dawn telephone proofing sessions from his home in Hawaii. Thank you, Paul, for letting me help you give your gift of history back to the Khmer people.

Mr. Bernard Krisher – www.CambodiaSchools.com

Since “retiring,” this remarkable man has secured donations to build more than 300 Cambodian schools. With his help, my wife Sophaphan and I built *Srei Devatā Secondary School* in Kampong Thom province, which opened in July 2006. His organization makes it easy for individuals to make a huge difference in many lives.

In Phnom Penh, Bernie’s staff, particularly Mr. Meng Dy, helped me immensely with translations and in arranging my audiences with Princess Buppha Devi for the dedication. Thank you, Bernie, for giving expression to our love for the Cambodian people.

Dr. Helen Jessup - www.KhmerCulture.net

Helen is a dynamo, with pro-active educational projects supporting the Cambodian National Museum, Heritage Watch, Reyum Institute, Angkor Wat preservation, and many key causes. Her credentials as a scholar, curator and author result in a demanding schedule, but Helen was always generous with her time, helping me with countless contacts and details in arranging this publication. You are an inspiration Helen, and I am grateful to you for opening so many doors for me.

Dr. Jaro Poncar – www.Poncar.de

A professor at the University of Applied Sciences Cologne, Jaro acquired his PhD in theoretical physics before gaining renown as a photographer. Since 1993, his brilliant imaging work has defined Angkor Wat and the Bayon for the world. Jaro's logistical support helped me capture thousands of images in Siem Reap and his global network of friends provided key photos to complete this book. Thank you, Jaro, for all your kindness.

I am grateful to have been small part of this book's story. I sincerely hope it inspires readers, writers, and heavenly dancers who live with us here on Earth, for years to come.

Kent Davis
Anna Maria Island, Florida
April 14, 2007



NOTES ON CONTENT AND TRANSLITERATION

In publishing *Earth in Flower* the intent was to remain true to Dr. Cravath's 1986 doctoral thesis without modifying, deleting or rewriting content which reflects attitudes or conventions of use that have changed in the past twenty years. At the time of original submission, the author had spent ten years immersed in his topic; his paper accurately reflects the prevailing academic standards of that time.

Modern historians may question some cited research; for example the Javanese connections of Jayavarman II described in Chapter 2. While newer theories conflict with some items, we chose to maintain the paper's integrity by presenting it as it was written between 1975 and 1985. The original also uses Sanskrit terms now referred to by Khmer words; original terms remain intact.

The thesis was completed before word processing gained popularity and the 659 page manuscript was manually typed. It contained eight languages and thousands of diacritical marks, most of which the author painstakingly added by hand. If, as Churchill observed, "Americans and English are two peoples separated by a common language" then even thornier issues arise when transliterating Asian tongues. Many phonetic methods are used to write Khmer, Chinese, Sanskrit or Thai in English. To simplify the typesetting process the publisher chose to keep French, German, Dutch and selected Sanskrit diacritical marks while eliminating Chinese characters and Pinyin tonal marks, as well all marks for transliterated Asian languages. Only the original alphabets or characters will reveal their true pronunciation and etymology.

Transliterations of Khmer spellings, when available, appear in parentheses following the phonetic transcription. Non-English terms are italicized throughout the text (e.g., *robam*) unless they appear in proper names (e.g., the dance Robam Tewet). In some cases, the author included alternate English renderings of Khmer and Thai words revealing hidden letters to help linguists locate the originals.

Grammatically, the Sanskrit words *apsara*, *apsaras*, *devatā*, *nāga* and *yoginī* may indicate singular or plural.

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

My initial objective in undertaking this study was to document the history and performance style of the former Royal Ballet of Cambodia. My research in Phnom Penh convinced me that broadening the scope of my inquiry was essential to achieving the well-developed portrait that this dance tradition deserved. The resulting work necessarily went far beyond documenting the costuming, music, staging, training, choreography and history; by examining the inner dimensions of this tradition I discovered the dancer as not only an historical figure, but also as a ritual figure and an artistic figure portraying a mythic role in the Khmer court dance.

From January-August 1975, I conducted my field work in Phnom Penh and Bangkok, and over the next nine years I organized my primary documentation, interviewed refugee dancers in the United States, and conducted library research at the University of Hawaii and elsewhere. Personal observation of performances and scrutiny of earlier French studies expanded my view of the dance drama within a broad cultural framework. *Earth in Flower* reproduces, with only minor alterations, my complete text, originally submitted for a degree in Asian Theater in November 1984.

I chose to employ what was, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a “new” interpretation of Southeast Asian history posited by Wilhelm Solheim and others towards understanding early Cambodian culture. This view rejected orthodox theories of an historical “Indianization” of Southeast Asia in favor of emphasizing a continuity of indigenous cultural forms and rituals from pre-Angkorean times. Indeed, while analyzing modern forms of the dance, any discernible Indian similarities became a “thin, easily flaking glaze” on the vast ritual-fulfilling body of Cambodia’s indigenous dance; hand movements do not function as a “language” of gesture but as an ornament to narration; both melodies and the instruments that create them are clearly autochthonous; choreographic patterns and the presentation of emotions refute Cœdès-like claims that they are done “exactly as in Indian choreography.” Cambodian dance was a tradition onto itself. My goal, therefore, was to define the truly “Cambodian” image, as opposed to “foreign,” “exotic,” or “derivative” alternatives.

In the protohistorical, early-Christian era, dance flourished in a culture dedicated to extensive navigation throughout the Indian Ocean and, at home, to the engineering of large stone works to control water and fertility. The Khmer dancer as a ritual performer in the court of that world is seen as early as the third century B.C. when dance appears to have been associated with large bronze drums, with funeral rites, with ancestor worship associated with stones, with a fertility cult likewise associated with stone structures, with a serpent/earth-spirit cult, and with a pattern of kingship incorporating communion with the ancestor/spirit realm in order to assure sufficient rains for the earth's fertility. Dance was primarily performed in temples dedicated to ancestral spirits residing in stones. With the adoption of Sanskrit and Brahmanic rites in the fifth century A.D., these deities, like the dancers themselves, often took on a Sanskrit name in addition to their original Khmer name. Dancers were highly respected "slaves" of the deity. It was a golden age for sculpture, and the quality of Sanskrit epigraphy was a match for the best India ever produced.

Earth in Flower presents a Jungian interpretation of the Feminine-centered mythology, the foundation of the dance drama itself. This is discernible in the performance repertoire and early Chinese accounts of the area, suggesting that the tension between Feminine and Masculine—cosmically, architecturally, and socially—was viewed as the source of continued fertility. Within this rich matrix of myth, the royal dancers traditionally acted as a ritual conduit to the nurturing energy of natural and ancestral spirits. Long associated with trance and spirit mediumship, their dances remained both an offering and an invitation to the spirits to assist in bringing rain, thereby perpetuating the fertility of the land through semi-mystical union with the king. Court dancers, as ritual artists, were members of the royal harem well into the twentieth century, and certain dances continue to function as sacred offerings even in modern times.

In the Angkorean period we see the elaboration of a Tantric symbology of the archetypal Feminine-Masculine contest and union: in architecture, in the bas-reliefs, in public celebrations, and in dance. Thousands of dancers served in the temples as an offering to the ancestral spirits, who could

influence the cosmic interaction, particularly, of earth and water. Angkor Wat, for instance, gave form to the Myth of the Churning of the Ocean by placing the king in union with the *nāga* earth spirit; from their interaction the waters poured forth on the land and myriads of *apsaras* dancers emerged as the embodiment of the highest spiritual energy that can be created through the union of Feminine and Masculine.

At Angkor, the dancer clearly emerges as an historical figure; however, the evidence negates overly romantic claims that the modern dance preserves Angkorean movements. At Angkor, she and her male counterparts served the temples; her art was practiced even by the monarch; she performed Buddhist dramas as early as the twelfth century; and ultimately she was abducted by conquering Thais when they overran the Angkorean civilization in the fifteenth century. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries she performed indigenous, Khmer versions of the *Rāmker*; danced the *robam* in seventeenth-century funeral rites; and, by the nineteenth century, not only maintained an important ritual function within the court but also had become a powerful symbol of the monarchy and a pawn in French-Khmer political struggles. Her art reached its modern zenith during the reign of King Norodom (1860-1904), gaining European recognition in Paris starting in 1906. Finally, she achieved world acclaim during the Sihanouk era with numerous international tours during which the Cambodian dancers came to be recognized as one of the most refined performance troupes in Asia.

In its final form, *Earth in Flower* presents a comprehensive picture of the subtle nature of the dancers' mysterious elegance as well as their historical, ritual, political, and aesthetic power in traditional Cambodia. My sincere wish is that this knowledge will empower the Khmer people and their dance in the 21st century and beyond.

Paul Cravath
Honolulu, Hawaii
April 2007

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To those in the West, deepest thanks; to those in the East, sampeah; to all, Aloha.

Paul Cravath
Honolulu, Hawaii
August 1985

PREFACE

When Chief-of-State Norodom Sihanouk was deposed in 1970, the government of the new Republic of Cambodia continued to support a number of institutions previously of royal prerogative. One of these was the “Royal Ballet.” As the civil war intensified, and a Khmer Rouge victory appeared increasingly probable, the Ministry of Culture perceived that it was the caretaker of an art form which stood little chance of survival intact, should a communist regime come into power. The Ministry wished to document this embodiment of Khmer culture which it was protecting, but there was little money available, and cooperation with foreign scholars or foundations was made difficult by the ever-tightening circle of war surrounding Phnom Penh.

In 1973 I wrote to the Ministry proposing to undertake as comprehensive a study as possible of the classical dance drama and in March of 1974 was invited to do so. That decision was made by Mr. Hang Thun Hak, the most respected authority on the dance drama in Cambodia and at the time a political adviser to President Lon Nol. The war pressure increased, but I was unable to reach Cambodia until January 1975, eleven days after the Khmer Rouge began the siege of Phnom Penh on New Year’s Eve.

Rockets falling into the city almost hourly—one injuring a dancer within the palace grounds—had forced the “corps du ballet” into temporary inactivity, but the training classes at the Université des Beaux-Arts continued daily. I was able to watch rehearsals, conduct interviews with the aid of a tri-lingual translator provided by the Ministry, and gather written material—hampered only by the dancers’ understandable distraction. Although advised in writing by the American Embassy on 14 February to depart, I remained in Phnom Penh until the forced military evacuation to Bangkok on 5 April 1975.

In addition to that twelve-week foundation of direct observation in Cambodia, and some five months of less intense, comparative research in Bangkok, this dissertation is a synthesis of all available previous documentation of the classical dance drama in French and English. Chinese sources referring to the early historical period have been re-examined. Relevant Sanskrit and

Khmer epigraphy have been examined in French translation. Access to Dutch sources was limited to those in English translation.

The range of inquiry is limited to only a single form of theatre known during the Republic (1970-1975) as *lakhon kbach boran* (Ikhona kpa'ca purana) or “ancient drama,” but often called, as formerly, *lakhon lueng* (Ikhona hlwna), “the king’s drama.” Historically, the dance drama was also referred to as *lakhon preah karuna* (Ikhona brah karuna), “the drama of the king” or *lakhon preah riec traui* (Ikhona brah raja drabya), “drama which is the fortune of the king.”

Generically, the *lakhon* is a performance by non-speaking dancers to the accompaniment of an orchestra and a chorus of narrators. Almost all roles, including the masculine ones, are played by women. In 1975 it was performed only by the resident troupe of the “ex-palais royal” in Phnom Penh and by the student company of the Université des Beaux- Arts (UBA).

The purpose of this study is four-fold: to demonstrate that Khmer dance embodies indigenous cultural patterns dating from before the Christian era, to summarize the history of the dance drama in Cambodia, to describe the production elements in performance as of 1975, and to show the function of Cambodian dance within Khmer society. This study will not include either a musicological analysis or labanotation of movement.

Although the classical dance drama contains elements common to other performing art forms both in Cambodia and beyond, cross-cultural analogies will be of only secondary interest in the present study—the first written in English and the last examination of the dance drama as it existed in 1975. At that time it was one of the more refined theatre forms of Southeast Asia and, as one of the few remaining court traditions, one of the great performing arts of Asia.

The thesis of this study, stated in the most general terms, is that the royal dancers fulfilled a ritual function in the Khmer kingdom from pre-Angkorean times until the demise of the monarchy. In union with the king, the dancers—as his harem—continually provided a mystical regeneration of the fertility of the land, and their dances were offerings to the spirits of deceased kings to intercede with cosmic powers in providing rain.

The dancers’ hand gestures are traditionally considered to be flowers

and the dancers themselves the fairest flowers of the race. Embodying the energy of the fecund earth and in union with the king throughout his reign, they remained for hundreds of years the primordial Khmer symbol of the earth in flower.

Today Cambodia is a dry and barren land, ravaged by war and at the mercy of an ancient enemy (Vietnam). Classical dance selections are only a small item on proletarian entertainment programs. While we hope for rebirth, I have often heard in my mind the words of a French scholar writing of Khmer dance in an earlier bleak period: "I should have put all the verbs of this chronicle in the past."





INTRODUCTION: SOURCES OF THE STUDY

ការបង្ហាញ: ប្រភពនៃការសិក្សា

The rulers of Democratic Kampuchea, despite the barbarity of their 1975-79 control of Cambodia, attempted to re-educate the Khmer people in a number of areas including the knowledge of their past. Shortly before the demise of that regime at the hands of the Vietnam-led government of the People’s Republic of Cambodia, an official in the Foreign Ministry of Democratic Kampuchea, Ok Sakun, told a *Washington Post* reporter who had been allowed into the country to visit Angkor, symbol of the nation, “When we were children, the French told us that the Brahmans of India were responsible for these monuments—that they were not ours.” Another official, in speaking of the government’s radical education policies, said, “Our civilization is 8800 years old, and we have a tradition of being independent, sovereign and self-reliant. I would like to stress to you that the civilization of Angkor is not a copy of any civilization, not in its architecture, nor its engineering, or its irrigation.”¹

Compare their attitude with the opening statement of a folk dance publication prepared by the faculty of the Université des Beaux-Arts in 1969 when Norodom Sihanouk was still Chief-of-State: “The Khmer

civilization of which Cambodians of the present time are the trustees, was born about two thousand years ago,”² i.e., with the supposed beginning of Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia.

The problem is that neither dating has much meaning. The royalists were trustfully repeating the theories of their former French colonial overlords, while the revolutionaries, in rejecting their definitions, resorted to a specificity that was compensatory and misleading. In broad scope, the conflicting views of Khmer “history” espoused by the revolutionary and by the colonially-educated bureaucrats illuminate the fundamental problem inherent in discussing any aspect of Cambodian cultural history: does one begin with an India-centric view or a Southeast Asia-centric view of cultural advancement? Or, if neither, how does one avoid the subtle prejudices which so often inform the past century’s scholarly interpretations of inadequate data? This chapter will briefly survey the primary historians and their points of view regarding the early cultural history of Cambodia and the region. The point of view operating in the historical segment of the present study regarding the relationship between Southeast Asian and Indian culture will be clarified. The chapter will then conclude with brief comments on the methodology and content of each chapter’s attempt to set forth the history and nature of Cambodian dance drama up to the present time.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE PRESENT THESIS

The historiography of Southeast Asia is a drama unto itself.³ The early historians—for the most part, individuals in the colonial service of the Netherlands, Great Britain or France—tended to manifest what has been called a “Europe-centric”⁴ bias from which we have only recently begun to free ourselves. Because the present thesis reflects a newer attitude, it is important to understand what is meant by that term. Wilhelm G. Solheim II has noted that a Europe-centric view is based upon the primary notion that

...Southeast Asian cultures lagged far behind those of the rest of the world and that all progressive culture change came into Southeast Asia from outside. Neolithic culture (horticulture and agriculture, polishing

of stone tools, pottery manufacture and other crafts) was presumably brought in by migrations from Japan and/or China. Metallurgy and the primary Southeast Asian art style, spread in Southeast Asia by the so-called Dongson (Bronze Age) Culture of northern Vietnam was said to have originated because of contacts with Chou China in the 3rd century B.C., or alternatively around the 8th century B.C. because of a migration from eastern Europe. Political organization leading to empires of one sort or another, monumental architecture, and writing (let's call it civilization) were brought in from India and China around 2000 years ago. The only culture truly of Southeast Asian origin was the Hoabinhian of northern Vietnam and farther afield, which was considered a late and very primitive Mesolithic culture....

This general conclusion that the Southeast Asian cultural region was backward was based not on an objective and independent analysis of the data, but on the prevailing philosophy of the late Victorian Age and the unconscious predisposition of the European and European-oriented archaeologists who were doing the research in and on Southeast Asian prehistory. The culture of western Europe was considered as the peak of civilization to that time, with the known cultural history which led to that peak—including the early historic Middle East to Greece to Rome—being the ideal path for culture to follow. The greater the difference and distance of a culture from that path, as expressed in the prehistoric artifacts and known history, the farther behind the ideal that culture was. What was known of Southeast Asian prehistoric artifacts and living ethnic groups indicated that they were very different from those of Europe, and thus were primitive.⁵

Southeast Asia has long been identified, on the basis of superficial similarities, with India. In the eighteenth century the area was known by such names as “India beyond the Ganges,” “Ultra-Gangetic India,” the “East Indian Islands,” and even “East India.”⁶ In the nineteenth century, to English writers at least, “its mainland part was called either Further India or the Indo-Chinese peninsula, while its islands, save for the Philippines, were usually dubbed the Indian Archipelago.”⁷

The Dutch called their empire Netherlands India, and when the area gained independence in 1949 it “perpetuated the erroneous concept of [its] Indian-ness”⁸ by taking the name Indonesia, “The Indian Islands.” Indian historians of the twentieth century, taking their cue from the Europeans, began to claim most of Southeast Asia as “Greater India,” a term popularized

by those historians who viewed “the early civilizations of Indochina and Indonesia as branches springing directly from the main trunk of Indian civilization.”⁹ Foremost among these was George Cœdès.¹⁰

The Cœdès canon at the time of his death (in 1969 at the age of 103) was enormous. His contribution to a knowledge of early Southeast Asia by way of translations, particularly regarding Cambodia, remains without equal. The editors of the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* have called him “the father of Early South-East Asian History.”¹¹

Cœdès’ point of view has been clearly stated. “It is interesting to note that even in prehistoric times the autochthonous peoples of Indochina seem to have been lacking in creative genius and showed little aptitude for making progress without stimulus from outside.”¹² In the introduction to his history of Southeast Asia in the early Christian era, the most comprehensive text on the subject to date, Cœdès stated that “my purpose is less to produce a history presenting all the details than to offer a synthesis showing how the various elements of the history are related.”¹³ Given all the details, alternate syntheses are possible.¹⁴

The debate concerning the nature of so-called “Indianization” is fundamentally relevant to any inquiry into the historical roots of Southeast Asian performing arts—including the Cambodian dance drama—inasmuch as Cœdès’ belief regarding them has been highly influential. In discussing the Indian epic literature, he wrote that

in all of the Indianized mainland, in Malaysia, and on Java, this epic and legendary literature, to which was added the Buddhist folklore of the *Jātakas*, still makes up the substance of the classical theater, of the dances, and of the shadow-plays and puppet theater. From one end of Farther India to the other, spectators continue to weep over the misfortunes of Rāma and Sitā and to be moved by the virtues of the Bodhisattva, and the theatrical performances they attend have retained their original character of pantomime: the positions and the movements of the arms and legs and the gestures of the hands constitute a silent language capable of suggesting a subject, evoking an action, or expressing a sentiment, exactly as in Indian choreography.¹⁵

The present study will demonstrate that, aside from the versions of the Indian epics being used as the textual basis for performance, Cœdès’ claim

is largely inaccurate.

In fairness to Cœdès, we must acknowledge that his translations and editing of Khmer epigraphy and his discovery of other primary materials remains an invaluable service to many areas of Southeast Asian scholarship. The present study is indebted to his collation of a vast body of data; as will be seen, however, a very different interpretation of the data will be formulated.

By comparison, the Dutch historians appear more sensitive to the probable nature of cultural interaction between Indian Brahmans and Southeast Asian courts. F.D.K. Bosch, for instance, held that the

awakened Indian spirit fecundated the living matter of [Southeast Asian] society, thus procreating a new life that was predestined to develop into an independent organism in which foreign and native elements were to merge into an indissoluble entity.¹⁶

While such an argument may appear persuasive, one also senses that it is inadequate when we consider the ruins of Cambodia's great Angkorean cities, to which there is nothing comparable in India.

A truly different interpretation of the prehistory of Southeast Asia, however, first appeared in the writings of the Dutch sociological historian J. C. van Leur, who called for a radical transformation in colonialist views. His untimely death in 1942 at the age of thirty-four limited his work to a doctoral dissertation and a handful of articles, and not until a collection of his work was translated into English in 1955 did he begin to have a broad influence. In a uniquely eclectic style, his writings "gave body to his heretical views by an astonishingly vivid evocation of an historically autonomous 'world of Southeast Asia.'" ¹⁷

Van Leur wrote that

all history, as a history of mankind, is of equal value. To allow a religious, a philosophical, or a biological attitude to prevail means to bring in a value judgment. To have a Christian concept of history, or a humanist one, or a progressive, or a racist, means to abandon the exact positivistic science of history.¹⁸

But few are free from “value judgment,” and van Leur himself was perhaps premature in attributing to Southeast Asia what the historian Harry Benda has called “a highly developed, well-integrated and virtually monolithic civilization.”¹⁹ Still, Benda himself stands in van Leur’s debt when he writes that “Southeast Asia’s history must be written ‘from within’, in other words, in terms of the area’s internal developments, and not in terms—or periodizations—derived from the history of other parts of the world.”²⁰ Van Leur’s criticism of India-centric views is perhaps encapsulated in his oft-quoted dictum that in Southeast Asia both Hinduism and Islam were a “thin, easily flaking glaze on the massive body of indigenous civilization.”²¹ In the present study, Khmer cultural elements that are clearly borrowed from an Indian context will be viewed from that perspective.

Until recently, the available archaeological data were inadequate to accomplish the ascendancy of a Southeast Asia-centric interpretation. All of that has been changed dramatically by Professor Wilhelm G. Solheim of the University of Hawaii, together with a widespread network of colleagues. Acclaimed as “Mr. Southeast Asia” by some and “the van Leur of prehistory” by the more subtle, he has advanced a series of

claims which uncompromisingly assert the primacy of Southeast Asians in all major Asian technical innovations and thus deny the region’s dependence upon diffusion from China, India, the far West or anywhere else. On the contrary, many things are held to have been transmitted to parts of China, Japan, and the coasts of the Indian Ocean by Southeast Asian sailors and traders.²²

In order to demonstrate the nature of Southeast Asian culture prior to the fourth century A.D., Chapter II of this study will briefly summarize the work of Solheim and his associates.

Acknowledging these influences, the present study assumes that historical scholarship must begin from the premise that the culture of Southeast Asia, like all cultures, regardless of age, material stature, or relationship with neighboring cultures, has an inherent unity, integrity, and unique identity. Sanskrit and Brahmanism provided a language for the

transformation of the indigenous spiritual symbology of Southeast Asia. For Khmer dance drama, India may have provided a literary medium for mythological expression, and in a much later period the Thai influenced it as well. But in form, in structure, in spirit, and in the selective process operative in its evolution, the dance drama—like the culture in which it flowered—is exclusively a reflection of the Cambodian people. Beyond that, only the world as a whole may lay claim to it.

STRUCTURE OF THE PRESENT DISSERTATION

Accounts by envoys preserved in the Chinese dynastic annals and the increasing number of Sanskrit and Old Khmer inscriptions thereafter, provide the basis for reconstructions of pre-Angkorean history. From these, Chapter II will present an image of the function of Khmer dance from the fifth to the ninth centuries under a Brahmanic influence.

Dancers and musicians carved in bas relief on the temple walls during the Angkor period (Fig. 1-1), conventionally dated from 802 to 1431, furnish the primary data for Chapter III. The epigraphy further illuminates the status of singers, dancers and musicians involved in temple ritual.

Chapter IV will describe as completely as possible the fortunes of the royal dancers through the multi-demise of Angkor, kingdom, and republic, up to the present time. Late nineteenth-century accounts by a number of French explorers who passed through Cambodia, recent re-dating of texts, and Khmer oral traditions regarding the artistic evolution of the Khmer dancers into the performers we know today are examined in this section. Written descriptions of the dance drama by French colonial officers around the turn of the century have been invaluable to this study; the best is a twenty-five page article published in 1911 by Adhémard Leclère entitled *Le théâtre cambodgien*.

Further commentary was offered by a group of French scholars whose interest in the dance drama was tangential to their study of the sculpture and architecture of the Khmer Empire. Best known of these works is George Groslier's *Danseuses cambodgiennes anciennes et modernes*, published in 1913—a 175-page discourse on the dancers themselves as

living embodiments of Angkorean sculpture. The romanticism inherent in this approach is common to numerous, brief re-countings of performances seen by other colonial bureaucrats and travelers who were guests of the Cambodian king in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the 1920s a more scholarly approach to the dance drama can be seen in the writings of Sappho Marchal and Jeanne Cuisinier. Each undertook to delineate the form by describing and cataloguing a number of production elements such as hand gestures and character roles. In 1930 Cuisinier assisted Samdach Chaufea Thiounn, a former Cambodian Prime Minister, in the preparation of *Danses cambodgiennes* which was re-published in 1956 by the Institut Bouddhique in Phnom Penh and remains the most complete study to date of the classical dance drama.

Danses cambodgiennes is also representative of a small body of scholarship produced by the Cambodians themselves who have, in general, been concerned with performance descriptions rather than with analysis. Since the dance drama lay under the king's patronage until 1970 and could be viewed only by royal invitation, scholarly criticism, whether Cambodian or foreign, was inappropriate. Consequently, from 1930 to the present, there are only brief photo-journalistic treatments of the dance drama, the most informative being a twenty-four page pamphlet entitled *The Royal Cambodian Ballet* published by the Ministry of Information in 1963, virtually the only publication of any significance on the subject written in English. Two photographic studies from different periods have provided visual documentation: Raymond Cogniat's *Danses d'Indochine* (1932) and Charles Meyer's "Cambodian Dances" in *Nokor Khmer* (1970).

Chapter V stands apart as a survey of the mythological foundation of the dance drama repertoire and, particularly, of the four major groupings of roles—female, male, monkey, and *yakkha* (giant or ogre). The chapter takes as its focus the five forms of a "Myth of the Primordial Maiden," the first having been recorded in the third century A.D. in the area that is today Cambodia. The story of this myth is still performed in the contemporary repertoire of the dance drama.

The dramas (*roeung*) and the dances (*robam*) performed today or in recent



1-1. **Three *Devatā* in Dynamic Positions at Angkor Wat, 12th Century.**
Photo by Kent Davis.

memory within the classical tradition will be summarized in Chapter VI. Plot résumés gleaned from performance programs in the Royal Palace Library were the primary source of data used in creating this survey of the repertoire.

Chapters VII and VIII describe production elements, divided somewhat arbitrarily between those which are teacher-focused (music, choreography, and staging) in Chapter VII and those which are dancer-focused (life style, training, and costumes) in Chapter VIII.

The final chapter will describe those elements of performance—such as ritual function within the court and the dancer’s face makeup—which appear to be vestiges of ancient, indigenous rites for the purpose of renewing the society and assuring the fertility of the soil. Specifically the nature of communication between the royal dancers (as the King’s harem) and the world of ancestral spirits (*neak ta*) will be examined.

Sources of information contained in the latter chapters include an array of eye-witness accounts, my own observations, and interviews with dance teachers. Foremost among these was Chheng Phon, a professor at the Université des Beaux-Arts (often called, after 1970, the University of Fine Arts, but usually just “UBA”). Surviving all disasters, he became Minister of Culture and Information in the early years of the Vietnamese regime in Phnom Penh. Hopefully the following chapters reflect his compassionate objectivity.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Becker, "A Firsthand Report from Angkor Wat," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 December, 1978, p. 15.
- 2 Hang Thun Hak, et al., *Folklore Khmer* (Phnom Penh: l'Université Royale des Beaux-Arts, 1969), p. 1.
- 3 An introduction to the more elder players, who until very recently continued to perform major roles, is available in D.G.E. Hall's *Historians of South East Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), hereinafter cited as *HSEA*.
- 4 A term coined in 1948 and given currency in D.G.E. Hall's *History of South-East Asia* (1955). See John R. W. Small, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 2, No. 2 (1961), p. 72. This journal hereinafter cited as *JSAH*.
- 5 Wilhelm G. Solheim II, "Reflections on the New Data of Southeast Asian Prehistory: Austronesian Origin and Consequence," *AP*, 18, No. 2 (1975), pp. 146-47.
- 6 B. Harrison, "English Historians of 'The Indian Archipelago': Crawford and St. John" (Hall, *HSEA*), p. 245.
- 7 D.G.E. Hall, "The Integrity of Southeast Asian History," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 4, No. 2 (Sep. 1973), p. 159.
- 8 D.G.E. Hall, "The Integrity of Southeast Asian History," p. 159.
- 9 George Cœdès, *The Making of Southeast Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 55. This text translated by H. M. Wright from *Les Peuples de la Péninsule Indochinoise* (Paris: Dunod, 1962) will be cited hereinafter as *MSA*.
- 10 Cœdès' view of Indian historiography is significant. "Curiously, India quickly forgot that her culture had spread over such vast domains to the east and southeast. Indian scholars have not been aware of this fact until very recently; it was not until a small group of them...studied with the professors of the Universities of Paris and Leyden that they discovered, in our works...the history of what they now call, with justifiable pride 'Greater India'" (*The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* [Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1968], p. xvii). Translated by Susan Brown Cowing from *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1944; revised 1964), this text is hereinafter cited as *ISSA*.
- 11 *JSAH*, 4, No. 2 (1964), p. 1.
- 12 *MSA*, p. 13.
- 13 *ISSA*, p. xv.
- 14 The one which—for its well-reasoned and impartial scholarship—has most influenced the present study is Anthony Christie's "The Provenance and Chronology of Early Indian Cultural Influences in South East Asia," in *R. C. Majumdar Felicitation Volume*, ed. H. B. Sarker (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay), 1970, pp. 1-14. Christie acknowledges that his conclusions are "far removed from the presently accepted view."
- 15 *ISSA*, p. xvii.
- 16 "The Problem of the Hindu Colonisation of Indonesia," *Selected Studies in Indonesian Archaeology* (The Hague: M. Nijoff, 1961), pp. 20-21. This paper was initially delivered as an

inaugural address at the University of Leiden on 15 March 1946.

17 Smail, p. 72.

18 *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History*, trans. James S. Holmes and A. van Marle (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1955), p. 31.

19 Harry J. Benda, "The Structure of Southeast Asian History: Some Preliminary Observations," *JSAH*, 3, No. 1 (1962), p. 118.

20 Benda, p. 118.

21 van Leur, p. 169.

22 I. W. Mabbett, "The 'Indianization' of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the Prehistoric Sources," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 8, No. 1 (Mar. 1977), pp. 5-6. Part Two of this synthetic study is "The 'Indianization' of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the Historical Sources," *JASAS*, 8, No. 2 (Sep. 1977).



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