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From Ritual Form to Tourist Attraction: Negotiating the Transformation of Classical Cambodian Dance in a Changing World

Celia Tuchman-Rosta

According to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage website, classical Cambodian dance is a sacred practice that embodies the spiritual essence of the country's values and traditions. This article asks, What happens when the sacred becomes the profane, the normal, the everyday? It explores how the sacred classical dance form of the past evolved into the entertainment genre it is today. Focusing on the dinner-dance show phenomenon, the author investigates negotiations that are taking place between the preservation and development of the arts in Siem Reap after decades of civil war decimated the artist population. The tourist shows both provide some economic stability for dancers and strip away some sacred aspects of the art form. The article gives insight into how a ritualistic performing art form adapts to changing environments while maintaining social relevance.

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Face flushed from her climb up the long narrow stairway leading up to the performance area at Temple Balcony restaurant, Ouk Rany¹ looked frantically around (Ouk 2012). She saw me and, gesturing wildly, rushed to where I was standing in the middle of the restaurant and opened her mouth to emit a strangled squawk. Rany² and I had been trying to set up an interview for several weeks, and finally she had found time in her busy schedule—only to develop laryngitis the day of our appointment. I offered to reschedule, but Rany insisted we proceed. We climbed up a second worn concrete stairway to the

roof. We sat next to each other, and Rany grabbed my notebook and wrote, "I want to say that I can write the answers to the questions that you want to ask me." Frustrated by my slow-paced reading, she asked one of the other dancers to sit with us and read the Khmer out loud as we talked. Rany told me the story of how she learned classical dance and her experiences performing the ritual dance practice at tourism venues. She was eager to offer her insights and knowledge about *robam boran* (classical Cambodian dance) and its importance for the preservation of Cambodian cultural heritage, insights that I now want to pass on to readers.

Robam boran is a ritual and spiritual movement practice (Cravath 2007).³ But decades of war and uncertainty, followed by rapid and uneven economic growth in the country, require performers, who had been supported by the royal family and other wealthy dignitaries, to search for new forms of financial support (Frumberg 2010; Heywood 2008).⁴ Siem Reap's dancers in particular have turned to tourism to find a source of economic stability. Today the area is known by both tourists and many Khmer nationals as the center for Khmer culture because of the great Angkor temple complex just outside of town and the ease of access to cultural performances.

In the past, the government pointed to the dangers of using classical dance as a tourist attraction because of the risk of disrespecting its spiritual integrity (Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts 2009).⁵ At the same time, however, the government emphasized the value of cultural performances to the economy and to identity construction, a frustratingly ambiguous position that turns tourist performers in Siem Reap into iconic symbols of cultural heritage while perhaps unintentionally denigrating their contribution to classical dance (Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts 2008). While mentioned casually by scholars, performance in Siem Reap is neither a central concern for tourism scholars, who are more interested in Angkor and tangible cultural heritage, nor dance scholars, who tend to focus on the government-sponsored school and performances in Phnom Penh (cf. Winter 2007; Cravath 2007; Heywood 2008).⁶ In this article I aim to give voice to the performers in Siem Reap, even those with laryngitis.

Why are these performers so much in demand? What draws tourists to this sacred practice as opposed to other unique cultural traditions in the country like *lakhon khol* or *yike* (Diamond 2003)?⁷ John Urry's (1990) work on the "tourist gaze" provides some insight here. In his pioneering theoretical discussion of the impact of sensory experience in touristic encounters, he argues that tourists are searching for new experiences outside the everyday, and that they choose places to "gaze upon" (1990: 3) because there is an anticipation of pleasure

involving a different set of sensory perceptions. Thus the sacred court rituals of Cambodia capture the imaginations of tourist visitors (cf. Winter 2007). The “gaze” gives preeminence to the visual interpretation of culture, but all the senses—touch, smell, taste, hearing, and even the kinesthetic sense (the feeling of movement that occurs within the body when watching an activity)—are equally important to the tourist experience, or the desire to travel would not be so strong (Crouch and Desforges 2003).

Tourist spaces are imagined worlds that are constructed using hegemonic narratives that guide the visitor to idealized imaginary spaces, which appear to be within the realm of possibility (Edensor 2001; Causey 2003; Ness 2003). These sites are the product of a negotiation between the consumptive desire of the tourist and the history and culture of the local population (Eriksen 2007). This negotiation often involves the transformation of ritual practices for secular entertainment (cf. Picard 1990). In Cambodia, the mixing of tourism and ritual practice is not so readily accepted. In Hawai‘i, hula underwent this shift over an extended period as “hula girls” became romanticized in the United States and beyond. In the 1850s hula dancers began performing on the mainland, leading to increased interest in the tourism industry and the exoticization of the female Polynesian body. These performances were contentious, and court dancers who performed outside of the country in overly sexualized manners were shunned upon their return to Hawai‘i. Hula has become a staple of the luau feast designed for touristic consumption, but the tourist luau performance generally does not contain ritual dances from the genre (Desmond 1999). In late nineteenth-century Hawai‘i, hula was divided into ancient and modern forms that have, since Hawai‘i’s cultural renaissance in the 1970s, been referred to as *hula kahiko* (“ancient hula”) and *hula ‘auana* (“modern hula”). *Hula kahiko* combines previously distinct traditions, sacred dance for the gods, and historical legends, while *hula ‘auana* involves hula movements and gestures based on previous dance traditions performed to popular music genres (Stillman 1996). Categorizing dances as ancient or modern forms of hula continues to be a problematic endeavor for performers and teachers of the practice.

A bit closer to the Cambodian experience is the rise of tourism performance in Bali. With the beginnings of mass tourism in the 1920s, a sense of crisis about the disintegration of Balinese culture loomed. Leo Howe (2005: 134) calls this a “paradox of tourism.” There was a general consensus spanning several decades that Balinese culture was resilient to outside influence, and yet there were fears that the culture would degenerate. Under the Soeharto regime of the 1970s, the cultural tourism doctrine promoted Bali as an earthly paradise. Foreign

investors and national and local government officials saw tourism as an opportunity for economic gain, but local communities saw mass tourism as potentially pernicious. As a result, local officials encouraged the Balinese to decide what types of performances were appropriate for tourists' consumption. Similar to hula in Hawai'i, performance practices were characterized according to their level of sacredness. Yet the question of what to designate as tourist performance and what to reserve for more sacred occasions has been continually contested in Bali, especially as some dances created for tourists in the 1920s are now used for sacred ceremonies and sacred ceremonial dance has been reimagined for the stage (Talamantes 2004; Picard 1990).

Picard (1990) points out that locals present their culture in ways that mediate between what they see as important and what tourists expect. In Cambodia, the dance form is being used as an ideal tourist experience along with visits to the Angkorean temples to provide a real taste of Cambodian culture (Winter 2007). This proves to Cambodians that their culture remains strong regardless of the recent devastating war. If their ancient dance tradition is acknowledged internationally, it means their culture is resilient (Chheang 2008). Cambodian cultural practices are constantly evolving and being marketed to tourists, and I prefer to explore the Cambodian classical dance canon as a set of contemporary ritual practices that have multiple meanings for tourists and the tourism producers (cf. Bruner 2005). With no definable original, these practices have continually been invented and reinvented while retaining elements of what came before. The practices are historically rooted and bound by fluid regulations that define their sacredness.

The Origin and Evolution of an Art Form

Classical Cambodian dance, a deeply ritualistic and political art form, has evolved over centuries, transmitted through embodied practice from teacher to performer (Shapiro 1994). Cambodia has been cast as a changeless society, a belief fostered by the French colonial empire, but in reality it has undergone many cultural revolutions (Chandler 2008). Throughout these cultural shifts, *robam boran* has been continually adapted to society's needs. Paul Cravath (2007) provides a detailed history of the performance genre that begins before the Angkorean period.⁸ For the purpose of this article I will focus on historical moments that have caused tension for tourist performers, the ritual nature of the dance as it was conceptualized in the nineteenth to twentieth century, and more recent attempts to sever the connection between the dance form and the royal court.

In 1863 King Norodom signed a treaty of protectorate with France rather than accepting Siamese control. The French believed

that they had a duty to help Cambodia because it was static and had an inefficient social structure that the society had devolved since the Angkorean period (Chandler 2008).⁹ Perceiving a direct connection between *robam boran* and the Angkorean civilization, they wanted to prevent the art form from disappearing (Hideo 2005).¹⁰ During this period, people began to link the art form with “pleasure, performance, profit, and politics,” pulling away from the ritual and spiritual aspects of the dance (Davis 2011: 243). The dance form and the dancers became a legitimizing symbol of royalty through their connection to Angkor. This trend continued until 1970, when the royal family was exiled during a peaceful coup d’état.¹¹ For five years, the dance practice remained an icon of nationhood, but was severed from its traditional links with the monarchy, a separation that still exists (Turnbull 2006).

After decades of civil war¹² King Sihanouk returned to Cambodia in 1993, and dancers again began performing rituals, including the *buong suong* ceremony (to bring rain) said to have originated during the Angkorean period (Shapiro 1994). The dance also became increasingly important in cultural tourism and for showcasing the resilience of the country to the world. Both Angkor and classical Cambodian dance were placed on UNESCO’s heritage list, and as a result the art form became a major economic boon (Turnbull 2006). This dialectic of sacred versus secular is unresolved and a source of ongoing stress to the dancers in the tourist industry. They dance in a triangulated space as they negotiate the ritual-political-commercial in the theatres of Siem Reap. French-inspired ideas of the “glory of Angkor” meet with a desire to forget the traumas of the recent past (cf. Hideo 2005). Today, because of the “Angkor” ideology, some artists feel that although the tradition has always evolved, without royal approval, change now is unacceptable, making experimentation difficult. Tourism performances are simultaneously a source of pride that Cambodian culture remains vibrant and a source of despair that epitomizes the disappearance of spirituality (cf. Chheang 2008; Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts 2009).

Tourism, Angkor, and the Economics of Dance in Siem Reap

At Siem Reap’s cultural performances, like Temple Balcony’s dinner-dance show, Apsara dance is an icon of the tourist understanding of Cambodian culture. Almost all tourists I spoke with cited Angkor Wat as their main reason for visiting the country, but whether or not they ever attend a performance, everyone visiting Siem Reap comes away with the image of a young woman in a white *sampot* with a two-tiered crown adorning her long black hair covered with frangipani. The temples are a reference point for tourist conceptions of Khmer

culture. The perceived connection between classical dance and the royal courts of the Angkorean period gives the dance practice provenance, legitimizing it as an obligatory tourist experience (Winter 2007; Ministry of Tourism 2012).

In the mid 1990s the world heritage site of Angkor became a major focus for tourism and preservation because of its ability to weave together the key agendas of restoring cultural institutions and economic structures in Cambodia (Winter 2007). Tourism is now hugely important for the country's economy, with 2,881,862 foreign visitors in 2011, close to five times the number just ten years earlier (Ministry of Tourism 2012). Once direct, indirect, and induced profits from tourism are combined, tourism accounted for \$2 billion, an estimated 22.5 percent of Cambodia's 2011 GDP and more than six hundred thousand jobs that year (World Travel and Tourism Council 2012; Ministry of Tourism 2012). Predictably, much of this tourism revolves around Angkor National Park, located just minutes away from Siem Reap center, which drew approximately 1.6 million tourists in 2011.

With the focus on cultural tourism in the Siem Reap area, classical dance shows are promoted as ideal evening entertainment for tourists (Chheang 2008). This has led to a proliferation of private dance troupes (approximately thirty) in Siem Reap. Smaller groups range in size from four to twenty dancers, and musicians and large groups can have as many as a hundred performers on call. It is very difficult to extrapolate the exact number of dancers performing at all the dance shows, but I estimate that there are more than one thousand. New dancers are always in high demand, although not highly compensated.

Employment opportunities follow a hierarchical system of training and experience. At the bottom level are the youngest dancers with little experience trained at the NGOs in Siem Reap. Those without steady jobs may be affiliated with multiple private groups and are called two or three times a month to work for about us\$2 per performance. Next are regular performers at the markets and restaurants who perform every night for a monthly salary of us\$30–45. Performers who work at dinner-dance buffets make us\$45–80 per month. At the top are performers and teachers at the Cambodian Cultural Village (an ethnic theme park with daily performances) who work full time for us\$80–300 per month. Also, at *Smile of Angkor*, a spectacle run by a Chinese company that includes a waterfall and laser light show, performers are on stage every night and earn us\$160–200 per month.

Profits at Kulen II, one of the dinner-dance buffets, give an indication of the disparity between the revenue at the tourist locations and dancers' compensation. At this venue attendees pay us\$12 for the show and the meal (not including drinks). Every year approximately

146,000 tourists attend the dinner-dance show, bringing in more than us\$1,752,000. There are around thirty performers at the venue, who earn a yearly salary of approximately us\$720 each, so the entire art troupe makes about us\$21,600, or just 1.2 percent of earnings.

Modern Day Apsaras: Dancers at Tourist Events in Siem Reap

In Siem Reap, I conducted extensive research in 2011 and 2012 with two private dance troupes that perform special shows for large tour groups and at four established tourist venues, Kulen II, Temple Balcony, the Cambodian Cultural Village, and *Smile of Angkor*. The experiences of performers give insight into the tensions between sacred movement practices, economic realities, and tourism in Cambodia.

Ouk Rany, who talked to me so patiently about her experiences even with laryngitis, is twenty years old and has been studying classical dance since she was twelve. She fell in love with traditional Cambodian dances on TV and asked her parents to let her take lessons. She learned both classical and folk dance at the home of her *nekru* (teacher) Narin in Wat Damnak and adores both forms of dance. In 2005, when Temple Balcony opened, Narin agreed to prepare her young ensemble to perform six dances at nightly performances in the restaurant. At age thirteen Rany, with her pale skin, slender frame, and heart-shaped face, drew the attention of the restaurant management. Rany signed a ten-year contract with the restaurant and currently makes \$45 per month performing every night from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.

Before performing she prays to the spirits of the dance at a small, makeshift shrine, a shelf in the dressing room with the monkey and giant masks, flowers, and incense inserted into repurposed coffee cans. As the *m'kot* (crown) for the opening “Blessing Dance” is affixed to her head, she brings her palms together, her fingertips grazing her forehead in respect for the ancestors and spirits of the dance (see Fig. 1). Each night, she dances in “Blessing Dance,” “Apsara Dance,” and two folk dances called “Pailin Peacock Dance” and “Fishing Dance.”¹³

Temple Balcony is a club and restaurant with two floors. Walking up the stairway, guests emerge next to the kitchens of Temple Balcony restaurant. In front of the stage, there are a few long tables that have unobstructed views of the performance. These are often reserved for large tour groups. Other tables are blocked by columns dispersed throughout the space. The result is that throughout the performance, tourists mill about the restaurant, struggling to get the one perfect photo that documents their foray into Cambodia’s cultural traditions. For the most part, those not photographing are noisily eating and chatting with each other, paying little attention to the performance taking



FIGURE 1. Ouk Rany fully costumed for “Blessing Dance” in the makeshift dressing area at Temple Balcony restaurant. Note the costumes for the rest of the show hanging to the right and the dancer in the background retrieving her *m'kol* headdress from the cupboard. (Photo: Celia Tuchman-Rosta)

place in front of them. After the show, tourists clamber onto the stage to take pictures with the dancers. Dressed in her folk dance outfit, few recognize Rany as the young woman who portrayed Apsara Mera, the dance goddess who is the mother of the Khmer people. Tourists prefer to take pictures with the dancers who remain dressed in the shimmering classical dance costumes, and Rany fades into the background. She doesn't mind taking pictures with tourists but is uncomfortable with male tourists touching her.

Fading into the background reflects the rest of Rany's life as well. She has five siblings—two sisters and three brothers. She left school after eighth grade so she could earn money and help keep her younger siblings in school. Like any “good” Khmer woman,¹⁴ Rany has

stepped back and yet remains an integral part of her family's resources. She thinks that the classical dance form is important for promoting Cambodia's national identity and that it is vital that both Cambodian people and foreigners understand the art form. Her dedication comes in part from her understanding of classical dance as being a direct link to Cambodia's ancient history based on the depictions of dancing figures gracing the walls of Angkorean temples and from knowing that classical dance nearly disappeared during the Khmer Rouge regime, a lesson taught by Rany's teacher. She dislikes the low pay at Temple Balcony, but she truly enjoys presenting classical dances for foreigners, explaining that as long as the dance is performed correctly, it is good to share it. Unfortunately, Rany does not feel that all the dancers at Temple Balcony perform well, and she has expressed a desire to leave. She has forgotten the *kbach bat*, the basic sequence of movements for each dance character, because she doesn't have time to practice. Still, she teaches dance at an orphanage in Siem Reap because of her desire to pass on the limited amount of Cambodia's cultural heritage that she has learned.

Like Rany, Nop Nita deeply believes in the importance of understanding cultural heritage through classical dance. Nita graduated from an NGO-run dance school in 2010 after training for four years. She often goes back to the dance school to help out when they need dancers who are capable of performing some of the more challenging male roles, such as Rama, the prince from the Ramayana epic. She used to train at the dance school even after graduation, but later became involved with another NGO that teaches drawing and English. Like many disadvantaged children in Siem Reap, Nita attaches herself to any NGOs that can help support her family.

Nita is fifteen years old and working for one of the largest private groups, Deva Angkor, which has about eighty artists. Nita performs two or three times a month at hotels around the Siem Reap area (see Fig. 2). Sometimes she has to wait for more than an hour for the tour groups to arrive and does not return home until after 11 p.m. She comes from a very poor family, and they need the us\$4–8 that she brings home each month to continue paying school expenses and to have enough to eat. The performances can be trying, with managers at hotels lashing out at the young performers. Nita loves performing and learning dance, however, because she says it teaches her about Cambodian culture. She feels that most young people in Cambodia do not know enough about Cambodian culture or history, in part because of new media such as K-pop-style music that infuses popular culture, and in part because of the Khmer Rouge. She says performers learn about Cambodian history as they learn about dances and feels strongly that dance should be



FIGURE 2. Nita and others perform “Blessing Dance” at a private performance organized for a large tour group. (Photo: Celia Tuchman-Rosta)

respected, but she is not overly concerned about performing for tourists. Nita is more concerned about having the opportunity to continue dancing while meeting financial expectations at home.

For Kim Sophors dancing is no longer a financial necessity (Kim 2012). She is twenty-six years old and learned how to dance at Kulen II, where she currently makes us\$55 a month, but she earns more money elsewhere. Kulen II is a large open-air restaurant that is canopied to allow breezy cross ventilation while providing protection from the rain. The backdrop features a replica of Angkorean temples with the iconic four-headed Bayon in the center. Tourists sit at long communal tables stretching back toward the buffet area. The dancers always perform “Coconut Dance,”¹⁵ “Fishing Dance,” and the iconic “Apsara Dance” (see Fig. 3). They are allowed to choose the other dances that they will perform each day from their wider repertoire, giving them some flexibility. At the end of the performance, tourists come on stage, often impatiently, for photos with the dancers and quickly leave to get on their buses.

Sophors started performing when she was fourteen years old, after just a few months of training, and used her salary to pay for school.



FIGURE 3. Kim Sophors and other dancers at Kulen II performing “Apsara Dance.” Note the Angkorean motifs of the stage set. (Photo: Celia Tuchman-Rosta)

Graduating from technical school with a degree in tourism has allowed her to find good employment working the phones at a tour agency, earning more than US\$200 per month. Considering that the average annual income in Cambodia is US\$675, she is doing very well. Sophors feels it is important for everyone to know about classical dance, and tourism is one way the art form can gain international appeal. For Sophors, technique level is not a particular concern as it is for other dancers, nor is prayer before a performance. Yet Kulen II does have a makeshift shrine to the ancestors similar to the one at Temple Balcony. It also does not bother her that the dance teacher does not come to performances every night, something that is highly frowned upon by performers at other venues. Sophors is more concerned that her work as a performer is undervalued. She senses the ambiguity in the way dance is discussed in national discourse and the way performers and artists are compensated and treated. She questions whether the dance form is adequately valued.

Orn Sophearika (Nekru Pich), age thirty, feels that the symbolic value of the classical dance form is intrinsically related to training

and technique (Orn 2012). With a bachelor's degree from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, her background sets her apart from the performers discussed so far. She currently performs at the large laser light show, *Smile of Angkor*. This is a Chinese-produced show that takes place at the Siem Reap Exhibition Center. One side of the center is a space for festivals, fairs, and exhibitions. In the center is a large buffet dining area, and on the other side is a large air-conditioned 904-seat theatre. For a us\$38–48 ticket, visitors eat in the buffet dining area before entering the theatre for the performance at 7:30 p.m., a seventy-five-minute show with 104 performers. The performance features six acts. Each concerns various aspects of the history of the Angkorean civilization as imagined by the show's producers. This representation has been changing slowly because the head of the Department of Culture in Siem Reap is trying to correct mistakes made by the Chinese company.¹⁶ The performance is accompanied by supertitles in English, Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese and narrated in English to allow audience members to follow the roughly hewn story line. The performance does not incorporate live musical accompaniment, but it does include an excerpt of "Apsara Dance," *buong suong*, laser lights, a massive waterfall, and a giant animatronic talking replica of the iconic four-headed tip of the Bayon (see Fig. 4).

Nekru Pich and her mother moved to Siem Reap from Phnom Penh and have been able to make a living performing and teaching. Her mother is a famous *yike* performer from before the Khmer Rouge and her father is a consultant for the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. Nekru Pich teaches every day, earning us\$155 per month, and then performs each night at *Smile of Angkor* (us\$200 per month). She has strongly negative opinions of many of the dance troupes in Siem Reap, pointing out that they generally tend to have low levels of technical ability and that some, like Kulen II, even lack teachers. She finds these troupes disrespectful to the dance form but, on the other hand, acknowledges their importance for the livelihoods of some of the dancers that she has taught, including her former pupil Nop Nita. She prefers *Smile of Angkor* to other tourist performances in the area because the show is performed in a real theatre. The visitors eat, but the dining area is separate from the performance space so all the attention is focused on the artists. The show also has professional lighting, and the dancers have higher technique levels. While the show features several excerpts of classical dances, Nekru Pich considers the performance to be contemporary because it blends these excerpts with new styles of movement developed by a Chinese choreographer. She does not see this as problematic, observing that attendees, particularly foreign tourists, find the slow classical dance form alone to be boring.



FIGURE 4. The Hindu myth of the churning of the Sea of Milk in *Smile of Angkor*. In the foreground male performers portray gods and demons engaged in a tug of war that churns the sea to bring forth the *apsaras* (moving images on the screen). (Photo: Celia Tuchman-Rosta)

Tourism and the Sacred

Performers in Siem Reap, such as Rany, Nita, Sophors, and Nekru Pich, have a strong desire to share their cultural practices with tourists, both international and local, taking pride in their ability to demonstrate the resiliency of Cambodian culture. They feel that the costumes, the grace of the movements, and the historical importance of the tradition draw tourists to *robam boran*. In a world that appears to be increasingly homogenous due to the heightened interconnectivity of globalization, practices perceived to have historical roots such as *robam boran* become integral to national identity and simultaneously become ideal attractions for the tourist imaginary (cf. Salazar 2010; Causey 2003). Tourists desire to see unique culture traditions, helping to solidify these practices as icons of nationhood (Harrison 2003).

Artists in Siem Reap today are deeply invested in the continued practice of Cambodia's cultural traditions. They acknowledge that performing at tourist venues is not ideal, that technique levels are low, that food and alcohol should not be consumed during performances, and that their bodies are put on display in ways that are not always comfort-

able. At the same time, they see no other way to support themselves or pass along the cultural knowledge that they have gained through their dance training. With ritual dance practices disconnected from the royal family, most artists cannot find a steady salary any other way. Diamond (2003) discusses how the dance form has become a viable source of income for women, as it has for the four young women discussed in this article. Each of them is behaving in accordance with idealized gender expectations in the country. They are emanating the grace and quietness that a Khmer women should have when performing on stage, while providing economically for their families (Derks 2008; Ledgerwood 1994).

The value of *robam boran* also is contested by these artists. Performers in Siem Reap are paid dramatically less than the artists in Phnom Penh. At us\$45 per month and us\$2 per performance, respectively, both Rany and Nita felt that their work was worth more than they were receiving. While the current government extols cultural performances as the spirit of the country and incorporates performance as a part of diplomatic events, the arts are underfunded, with only 0.25 percent of the strained national budget going to the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, just enough to pay employee salaries. Turnbull (2006) points to the destruction of the Preah Suramarit Theater in 2008 and the embezzlement of funds meant to restore this 1,200-seat home of the royal company in Phnom Penh in his pessimistic outlook on the future of classical dance. Sophors recognizes the lack of support for dancer training and low salaries and feels that this points toward ambivalence regarding the importance of the genre. For her, symbolic and economic value are intertwined, so the lack of financial support begins to lessen the significance of the practice.

The government is unable to provide financial support to performers, forcing them to look elsewhere for work, but officials also expressed fear that *robam boran* will be diluted by the pollution of mass tourism. This fear is similar to that of the Balinese community in the 1970s (cf. Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts 2009). In Bali the tourism industry is a source of disagreement as the local community debates about what is appropriate for tourist consumption, yet tourism also has inspired creativity in the dance community, increased the level of dance technique, and increased the popularity of the traditional arts among the local community (Picard 1990). Heywood (2008) has argued that this is the case in Cambodia as well, that some dances are preserved as sacred rituals and that dancers are able to “maintain a sacred dimension of the dance while also marketing it for commercial purposes” (p. 135). But Heywood is referring to dancers from the national company who occasionally perform for tourists on cruise ships, not to per-

formers in the buffets and hotels of Siem Reap. My research indicates that it is too soon to tell. Most performers in Siem Reap come from poor families and are unable to train for extended periods of time, generally decreasing their levels of dance technique. Foreign agencies train orphans and underprivileged children to perform in hotels and restaurants (Diamond 2003), and, as Nekru Pich discussed, this training always falls short. There also has been a trend to perform *buong suong*, an important ritual dance, for tourist audiences. However, while Nita does not think that Cambodian youth are interested in the traditional arts, I have found that given the opportunity local children crowd free market shows and tourist performances that are rekindling local interest in the traditional arts.

This ambivalence is seen in Ministry of Culture officials' responses about tourism when interviewed in the summer of 2012. Rather than rejecting tourism performances as unsavory imitations of sacred practices, like the performers in Siem Reap, officials indicated that performing for tourists was a way to keep dance practices alive, to economically support Siem Reap's artists, and to promote intercultural understanding. Yet they also noted that the cultural tourism market had spun out of control and that they are unable to adequately monitor the tourist shows. Ideally Ministry of Culture employees are supposed to attend tourist performances regularly to make sure that the technique level is high, the dancers perform at the right height above the audience, and certain key traditions are in place. But with a staffing shortage at the Department of Culture and Fine Arts in Siem Reap, and with many unregistered groups and performances, it is impossible to keep track of all cultural activities.

The sacredness of *robam boran* is at stake after decades of civil war. In Hawai'i and in Bali the use of ritual or ritual-inspired performance for commercial entertainment has been controversial and complicated, yet local communities strove to create new forms of dance that they could simultaneously separate from their sacred practices and promote to tourists as pieces of traditional culture (cf. Howe 2005; Talamantes 2004). The generation of new cultural material is not an option for classical dancers in contemporary Cambodia, where changing the art form is discouraged, allowing mass tourism to possibly strip the ritual practice of its essence. This reluctance toward change comes in part from the French colonial ideology that positioned classical dance as a living remnant of the magnificence of Angkor rooted in the distant past. This idea was subsequently strengthened by the art form's placement on UNESCO's intangible heritage list for humanity and a misunderstanding of what this means for movement innovation in the genre. There is also continued reluctance toward innovation in the art

form without royal permission regardless of the maintained separation of the classical dance form from the monarchy. Classical dance is no longer taught in the palace, and the dancers work for the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, a separate branch of government from the royal family. The former Minister of Culture and current royal patron of the arts HRH Princess Norodom Buppha Devi acknowledges that while her grandmother Queen Kossamak made significant changes to the classical dance form, her place is to maintain and preserve the tradition after the devastating losses of the Khmer Rouge (Norodom and Sellars 2013). Nita, Rany, and Sophors have heard of contemporary dance, but the very idea of changing any aspect of *robam boran* was abhorrent to them. Nekru Pich proved an exception to this, yet while she approved of the use of contemporary dance in *Smile of Angkor*, this was in discrete sections apart from the classical dancing.

The dancers in Siem Reap and elsewhere insist that rather than becoming a shell, a form stripped of its essence (see Diamond 2012), their practice is still spiritual even if they are performing for tourists. They offer incense and pray before they dance, backstage areas incorporate rudimentary shrines to the ancestors, and at minimum most groups organize yearly ceremonies to honor the spirits of dance. The fluid nature of the artistic practice and the nature of overlapping ideological construction allow *robam boran* to serve dual duty as sacred ritual and as a form of secular entertainment because the boundaries and culturally constructed prohibitions set around the dance form continue to operate, even though they may be invisible to the foreign spectator.

NOTES

1. In accordance with the human subjects protocol approved by the Human Research Review Board at the Office of Research Integrity at the University of California Riverside, all participants in this research project who were sixteen or older at the time of research were given the option of anonymity. For those who chose to remain anonymous a pseudonym has been chosen to protect the identity of participants. Data regarding those who were under the age of sixteen was collected through observation and everyday conversation and all remain anonymous to protect their identities.

2. Khmer names are written with family name first, then given name. In this case the performer's given name is Rany.

3. Toni Shapiro (1994) also highlights the spiritual aspects of *robam boran* in her dissertation.

4. Frumberg (2010) details the various NGOs and international governmental organizations that have provided funding for the performing arts and artists.

5. At UNESCO meetings Cambodian delegates have been particularly vocal about the sacrality of classical dance and the dangers of tourism. In fact, placement on UNESCO's intangible heritage of humanity list contributes to the hesitation to create new work in the classical dance cannon (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004).

6. Winter (2007) briefly mentions "Apsara Dance" in his discussion of heritage tourism in Siem Reap. Cravath (2007) discusses the touring of the royal dancers, but never modern-day tourism. Heywood (2008) mentions tourism periodically, comparing its effects on classical dance to those of French colonialism, yet she focuses her work on Phnom Penh and doesn't give the performers in Siem Reap a voice. In their collection of essays, BurrIDGE and Frumberg (2010) highlight the voices of classical dancers in Phnom Penh who are negotiating their desire to experiment with contemporary dance. BurrIDGE mentions tourism in the introduction, but the negotiations that performers in Siem Reap make when they perform sacred dances at tourism venues is not illuminated in the compilation.

7. *Lakhon kohl* is an all-male dance-drama that performs excerpts of the *Ramayana* (Phim and Thompson 1999). *Yike* is a form of dance-drama and music thought by Khmer to have been brought to Cambodia from Java in the eighth or ninth century C.E. and performed at Angkor. In its current form, it was likely influenced by Malay *bangsawan* groups that toured the region in the late nineteenth century (Cambodia Intangible Cultural Heritage Committee 2004; Diamond 2012). Catherine Diamond (2003) discusses uneven national and international support for Cambodia's performing arts.

8. The earliest evidence of dance in Cambodia is from 500 B.C.E. in the form of elaborate motifs found on bronze kettledrums, but most scholars point to the Angkorean period as the origins of the classical dance genre (see Cravath 1986; 2007).

9. In the mid nineteenth century, King Ang Duong (r. 1848–1860) ascended the throne and inspired a period of cultural renaissance prior to the country's inclusion in French Indochina. In Ang Duong's court, dancers performed rituals to bring the god-king closer to the spiritual realm and bring balance to the earth. Ang Duong was raised in the Thai court, and the cultural revival in the nineteenth century was aided by a troupe of Thai court dancers that he brought with him when he assumed the throne. Thai and Khmer dancers continued to migrate between these courts throughout the colonial period (Diamond 2012; Hideo 2005). The intertwined histories of Thai and Khmer traditions have led to artistic and cultural conflict at times.

10. French mystique regarding the disappearance of Cambodian court dance comes from colonial-era scholars such as George Groslier, who wrote, "They're dying! The charming traditions and poetry of yesteryear are dying! . . . Soon, mysterious actresses, we will no longer see you gather the ancient poems and lost beauties floating thick in the air of festival nights" (Groslier 2011: 107). According to Heywood (2008), Groslier was dedicated to finding support for the dance troupe, and as a result they were placed in the École des Beaux Arts. Davis (2011) refutes this claim, interpreting Groslier's

statement about the death of the dance form as a cry to reserve the sacrality of the art form, which he felt was deteriorating. Davis argues that Groslier was deeply perturbed by the French attempt to take over the royal dance troupe in 1927.

11. During the independence period (1953–1970) the use of the *robam boran* to connect Angkor to the current monarchy continued. Queen Kossomak (King Sihanouk’s mother) choreographed fifteen new dances highlighting the ancient glory of Cambodia (Phim and Thompson 1999; Hideo 2005), including the iconic “Apsara Dance” in 1957.

12. On 17 April 1975, revolutionaries marched on Phnom Penh. Because of dancers’ connection with elite culture, they were symbols of everything the revolutionaries were against. All traditional arts were banned, and approximately 90 percent of all dancers were killed (Cravath 2007). Although the restoration of the arts began in the early 1980s, civil unrest continued through the early 1990s.

13. The Khmer names for the dances Rany performs are as follows: “Blessing Dance” = “Robam Chun Por”; “Apsara Dance” = “Robam Tep Apsar”; “Pailin Peacock Dance” = “Robam Kngork Pailin”; and “Fishing Dance” = “Robam Nesat.”

14. Chbap (Cambodia’s moral codes) include the Chbap Srey and Chbap Bro for women and men, respectively. The female codes, outlining how a proper woman should behave, are better known and were learned by rote in Cambodian schools. The ideal woman outlined is a contradictory symbol: soft, sweet, pure, a hardheaded businesswoman, and family caretaker (Derks 2008; Ledgerwood 1996).

15. The Khmer name for “Coconut Dance” is “Robam Kuos Tralork.”

16. The head of the Department of Culture and Fine Arts in Siem Reap has worked with the Chinese company to increase the number of Cambodians performing and create costumes more appropriate for the Angkorean period.

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