

The Dancer and Cambodian History

BY TONI SHAPIRO-PHIM, © 2007

In late 2006, dancers and musicians of Cambodia's classical arts tradition premiered an evening-length dance-drama at the [New Crowned Hope Festival](#) in Vienna, Austria, based on the Mozart opera, *The Magic Flute*.¹ Entitled *Pamina Devi* (after the name of the central character), the cast included only women as dancers, playing both female and male roles, as is the convention in Khmer classical dance.² A leading "male" character — Preah Arun Tipadey, ruler of the Realm of the Sun (Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*) — was danced by Pen Sokhuon. Now in her 50s, Sokhuon has thought at many points over the years that her performing career had come to an end. Yet, time and time again, even when she imagined she was past her prime as an artist, her expertise and presence were needed, in both ritual and theatrical contexts. And, here she was, in her fifth decade, taking a central role on the international stage in a tradition that generally prioritizes youth.

Sokhuon's centrality to Cambodia's dance world stems in part from her continued technical prowess and expressive elegance. But it also reflects a broader truth: Cambodia's tragic twentieth-century history has had an enormous impact on the cultural life of the country, leaving alive perhaps only a tenth of the nation's professional artists by the end of the 1970s. Teaching new generations of dancers under the daunting conditions of continued civil war and extreme poverty has resulted in the graduation of persevering, accomplished younger performers, some of whom have stayed in Cambodia and continued to dance, and many others of whom have left the arts for better-paying work, or left the country altogether. The wide impact of recent history on the lives of artists is brought into high relief when we trace the experiences of a prominent dancer such as Pen Sokhuon.

Shortly before Sokhuon was born in 1950, her grandmother had an unusual dream. In it, several people emerged from the throne hall of the royal palace and asked Sokhuon's mother to accept a unique diamond ring. This ring, they claimed, possessed great significance for their country. At first, the young woman demurred. Eventually she gave in, and held out her hand to receive the precious gift. Not long after the grandmother had this dream, her daughter gave birth to Sokhuon, who was to become a principal dancer in Cambodia's royal troupe. Pen Sokhuon believes the ring was a symbol of the dancer about to take her place on this earth, and that is was, as well, a reminder of the value and potency of her art.



Pen Sokhuon as Preah Arun Tipadey in *Pamina Devi*, New Crowned Hope Festival, Vienna, 2006; choreography by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, photograph by John Shapiro, © John Shapiro, 2006.

Born into Cambodia when it was a kingdom, Sokhuon studied dance in the royal palace, under the watchful eyes of her teachers, and Queen Kossamak Nearyrath, the mother of then-reigning Norodom Sihanouk.³ Though the Queen was not a dancer, she took it upon herself to oversee not only many classical dance rehearsals, but also the development of new choreography within the traditional canon.

The official history of Cambodian court (or classical) dance is linked with that of temples and monarchs.⁴ Inscriptions from as early as the seventh century reveal that dancers were important in temple life. From the ninth through the fourteenth century, the Khmer (or Angkorian) Empire, based in the Angkor region of northwestern Cambodia, spread over much of mainland Southeast Asia. Angkorian kings conducted elaborate rituals to represent their concentration of power, and hence, ultimate control over the productivity and security of the realm. Their dancers were part of their regalia, used in symbolic display of their hegemony.



Chan Chhaya Pavilion at the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where dancers, including Pen Sokhuon entertained members of the royal family and their court.

Both images photographed in 2006 by Toni Shapiro-Phim, © Toni-Shapiro-Phim, 2006.

For centuries, it was through the medium of the dancers that royal communication with the divinities was believed to be effected to guarantee the fertility of the land and the well being of the people in the king's domain. At least once a year the dancers would perform an elaborate ritual prayer, a ceremony of supplication that presented sacred dance and music in exchange for nourishment and protection of Cambodia and her people.

The gestures, movements, and costuming of the court dance were codified in the mid-nineteenth century, based on interpretations of the sculptures of celestial dancers that adorn the walls of the twelfth-century temple complex of Angkor. The images of Angkor and its attendant celestial dancers—carved in stone—were manipulated especially successfully both within Cambodia and abroad by Prince Sihanouk and the Queen Mother in the middle of the twentieth century as part of their nation-building efforts. Earthly dancers were still performing many ritual functions in concert with the ruler, yet there was a growing emphasis placed on secular concerts held on a proscenium stage. Performances included excerpts of lengthy mythico-historical dance-dramas and short pieces with no story line that were, nonetheless, evocative of the divine. The royal dancers developed into the living symbols of the country itself as, representing the nation-state of Cambodia, they accompanied royalty on state visits overseas.

Pen Sokhuon would practice daily in the dance pavilion of the Royal Palace. Type-cast early on as a "male" character (longer face, shorter torso than dancers who play the "female" roles)⁵, she underwent years of rigorous training in basic movements and gestures before she was allowed to perform full dances. When she reached a notable level of technical accomplishment, she was invited to dance the coveted role of Preah Leak (Prince Laksmāna), the brother of Preah Ream (Prince Rama), in the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the Ramayana epic of Indian origin, the *Reamker* being central to the Khmer classical dance repertoire.



"Apsaras" are celestial dancers. In the 19th century, aspects of classical dance costuming and movements were codified, using as models the carved images of apsaras that decorate some of Cambodia's ancient temples, including the 12th century Angkor Wat, seen here. Photo by Toni Shapiro-Phim, 1991.

After Prince Sihanouk was ousted by a United States-backed coup d'état in 1970, Sokhuon and the other dancers continued practicing in the palace, touring abroad, and dancing for state guests as civil servants under Prime Minister Lon Nol (who served 1970-75). Some also spent time teaching at the dance department of the University of Fine Arts, founded as the Royal University of Fine Arts in the mid-1960s. With the royalty in exile, however, they were no longer called upon to be the monarch's mediators with the gods. Yet they were still civil servants, earning salaries that helped them support families and plan for the future. Sokhuon herself married and had children. An intensifying civil war, though, forestalled the envisioned future, disrupting lives and livelihoods throughout the early 1970s, and culminating in the victory of the communist Khmer Rouge in April of 1975.



Pen Sokhuon (left) performing as Preah Leak, the brother of Preah Ream (Prince Rama) in the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the Ramayana epic of Indian origin in the Chan Chhaya Pavilion of Cambodia's Royal Palace. Uncredited publicity photo, c. 1970.

Democratic Kampuchea, the official name of the country under Khmer Rouge control, unleashed unfathomable suffering upon the populace as the upheaval and destruction started during the civil war continued, but on an unprecedented scale. Policies of mass relocation and family separation tore people from their communities as the regime's leaders sought to force loyalty to themselves alone. Religious worship, markets, schools, and free association were banned. Constant surveillance was the norm for the masses. Forced hard labor, lack of access to modern medicine and adequate food, and brutal punishment led to the death of close to two million people, about a quarter of the population. The victims died from overwork, starvation, disease, torture, and execution, in just less than four years of Khmer Rouge rule.

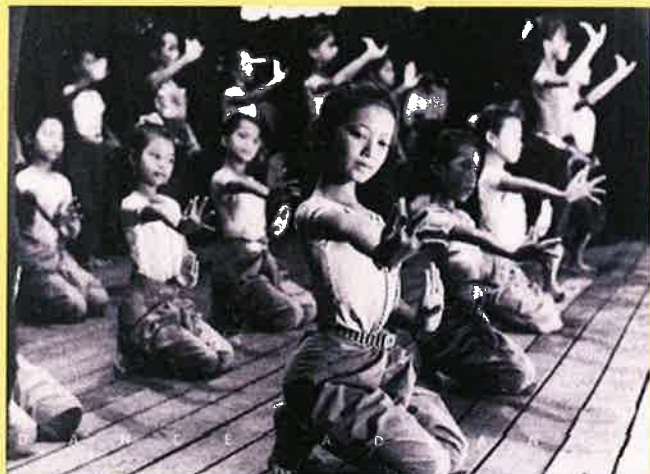
Recognizing the signifying power of dance and music, Khmer Rouge leaders created and organized public displays of revolutionary songs and dances through which they attempted to define reality and indoctrinate their subjects accordingly. Meanwhile, they forbade the practice of dance as Cambodians had known it, in all its variety, and allowed no performance of pre-revolutionary popular, folk, or ritual songs, though they often used familiar melodies to accompany new lyrics.

Pen Sokhuon, exiled to the countryside along with most other city dwellers, survived the Khmer Rouge years in a mobile work brigade, doing farm labor. She feared the Khmer Rouge would kill her if they knew of her previous connections to the palace. Sokhuon recalls being marched and forced to watch a performance of revolutionary dance. "They wore only black and danced and sang glorifying manual labor. It was terrible. But I must admit, a part of me felt excited. I could sit back and recall the beautiful memories of my past, when I was practicing or performing, guided by my teachers. And I could imagine what it would be like to be dancing again."

After the fall of that regime in 1979, surviving artists who made it back to the capital recruited children of dancers and musicians and started teaching—immediately. By 1980, Pen Sokhuon joined them and became a teacher at the newly reconstituted School of Fine Arts. Soon after her return to Phnom Penh, the Minister of Culture and Information asked her to perform for state visitors as Preah Ream, the central character in the *Reamker*, a role in which her teacher Sam Sakhorn had starred. Sokhuon was, by that time, a shell of her former self. She and her surviving colleagues had just emerged from the terror and desperation of the Khmer Rouge years. The professional artists who gathered to recreate the nation's rich artistic heritage estimated that between eighty and ninety percent of their peers (dancers, musicians, playwrights, poets, painters, sculptors, etc.) had perished under the harsh conditions imposed by the Khmer Rouge. All those who had survived had lost family members and friends; Sokhuon's husband and three children were among those who did not make it. In the face of such extensive loss and destruction as experienced in Cambodia, the country's dancers, immediately following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, endeavored to heal themselves and the nation by imparting vision and guidance, and by connecting people with a shared history and spirituality through what they knew best: the dance.



Dancers performing in the Pocheny Pavilion of the Royal Palace, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. From Raymond Cogniat, *Danses d'Indochine*, 1932.



Students at the University of Fine Arts dance program actually enter when they are about eight years old. (Dance studies continue from primary and secondary school through university.) Dancers practice stretching exercises and a series of basic gestures and movements (pictured here) each morning as class opens, moving on to three hours of technique specific to the role or character-type for which they have been selected. In the afternoons, they study academic subjects, following the national school curriculum. Photo by Toni Shapiro-Phim, 1992.

In preparation for that 1980 performance, Sokhuon lit incense and whispered prayers to the spirits and teachers of the dance, as is the custom prior to all performances. She sought their aid in remembering the intricate gestures of her role, and in recreating the controlled yet fluid movement required of her art. She was emaciated, and stiff. But her fingers maintained their flexibility—she was still able to curve them back into a crescent—because she had secretly massaged and bent her hands into dance positions when she found herself alone during her years of toil under the Khmer Rouge. Upon entering the stage for the first time in so long, "there before me appeared a vision of my teacher [Sam Sakhorn], leading me through every step, every choreographic pattern." Her teacher had perished in the Khmer Rouge's prison and torture center in the capital city, a fact Sokhuon would learn only later.

During the 1980s, Sokhuon and her colleagues painstakingly recreated as much of the repertoire as they could, piecing together their individual and collective embodied knowledge. Very few written, filmed, or photographic records of the dance survived the ravages of the Khmer Rouge years, and so many dancers and musicians with knowledge and skills had perished. They also trained a new generation of artists, graduating the first class in 1986. All of this was done against a backdrop of continued civil unrest as royalist, republican, and Khmer Rouge armies fought the new communist regime in control of the country following the ouster of the Khmer Rouge.

In 1991, subsequent to a United Nations-brokered peace agreement between all these warring factions, members of Cambodia's royal family returned home after twenty-one years in exile. Dancers performed a sacred dance-drama as part of the ritual prayer ceremony on palace grounds, welcoming Prince Norodom Sihanouk, his daughter Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, a former star of the royal dance troupe, and other dignitaries, with Sokhuon, at age 41, in the lead male role.⁶ Sokhuon and her colleagues were restoring this ancient ritual tradition, linking heaven and earth, as dancers and musicians had done in Cambodia for centuries before the late-twentieth-century wars and revolution halted the practice.



Pen Sokhuon dancing as the deity Vorachon in a ritual dance-drama presented on the occasion of the royalty's return to Cambodia after twenty years in exile. Photo by Toni Shapiro-Phim, 1991.



Pen Sokhuon (right) and Sophiline Cheam Shapiro (left) in rehearsal for *Pamina Devi*, 2006; photograph by John Shapiro, © John Shapiro, 2006.

While it was not unheard of to see a dancer in her 40s perform in earlier decades, it was not common either. But the loss of so many with so much expertise has pushed some artists to be simultaneously senior teachers, administrators (Sokhuon was, for a time in the 1980s and early 1990s, director of the classical dance division of the University of Fine Arts), and principal performers. Their command of technique and emotional maturity in conveying expression from within gives them a kind of potency on stage that still mesmerizes audiences.

In 1993 Cambodia became, once again, a Kingdom, following United Nations-organized elections. The dancers are, therefore, once again officially known as "royal," performing in both ritual and theatrical contexts. But an end to war doesn't necessarily erase the damage of decades of poverty, international isolation, and social, cultural and ecological devastation; an AIDS epidemic, pervasive violence, and poor quality education and health care systems, among other problems, fuel contemporary strife. In addition, civil servants' salaries are so low, and have been since the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, that almost everyone who works for the state—artists included—must take on additional paid work. Sokhuon is a seamstress on the side.

Today's dancers in Cambodia, based either at the Royal University of Fine Arts or the Ministry of Culture's Department of Performing Arts, maneuver through these realities while benefiting from opportunities to perform abroad, and to attend regional and international workshops and conferences. A new generation with no experience of the Khmer Rouge atrocities is coming of age. Yet, the legacy of loss colors so much that it is hard to escape its impact, even when attempting innovation.

Pen Sokhuon has been one of the senior advisors for several projects undertaken by choreographer [Sophiline Cheam Shapiro](#), including *Pamina Devi*, mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Sophiline's work has stirred up great controversy. Immigrating to the U.S. in 1991, she studied at UCLA's World Arts and Cultures program. She returned to Cambodia several times to develop new work and set the pieces on dancers there, and now lives permanently back in her homeland. With every attempt to conceive of choreography in slightly new ways, or to introduce pioneering thematic elements or storylines of foreign provenance, her efforts have been met with both delight and respect from some of her fellow artists, and criticism from some arts administrators and local journalists.

Warnings raised by some Cambodians point to scarce resources being spent on something new, when traditional knowledge is moving beyond their grasp each day, as the surviving elders who embody that knowledge continue to pass away. "If we change things, the original will disappear," one administrator announced—a comment which ignores the dance's long history of adaptation and the fact that many now-sacrosanct dances were created as recently as the 1950s with the blessing and guidance of Queen Kossamak. It is within this conflict between preservation and originality—even originality within a strict canon overseen by Pen Sokhuon and her peers—that contemporary Cambodian artists must find a path.

Sokhuon, whether onstage in *Pamina Devi*, teaching dances of old to students who offer her incense and candles as a form of respect, or, offering the same to the spirits of the dance, sees potential in both preserving aesthetic (and sometimes sacred) practices and repertoire and pushing the tradition to new ground. But, she is haunted by losses (of members of her family, her teachers, stories and dances, and so on), and wary of what further damage continued political and social instability might engender.



Pen Sokhuon rehearsing (top) and performing (bottom) in *Pamina Devi*, 2006; photograph by John Shapiro, © John Shapiro, 2006.

Biography of Toni Shapiro-Phim

Toni Shapiro-Phim is a dance ethnologist and anthropologist whose research focuses on dance and cultural/political upheaval, and gender issues, with a specialty in the arts of Cambodia. Co-author of *Dance in Cambodia* (Oxford 1999), she received her Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Cornell University. Shapiro-Phim undertook three years of dissertation research in Cambodia, and spent several years working in Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand and Indonesia as well. Her writing is included in the collection, *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (2002), as well as in *Shifting Sands: Dance in Asia and the Pacific* (2006), and *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre* (2007), among other publications. Ms. Shapiro-Phim is currently co-editing a book entitled, *Dignity in Motion: Dance and Human Rights*. She has taught in the department of South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and in the department of dance at San Jose State University, and was a research scholar at Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program. She is currently Associate Director of the Philadelphia Folklore Project, an arts and social justice organization.

Cambodian chronology:

Kingdom of Cambodia

Cambodia was a kingdom for centuries until a coup d'état in 1970, after which the royalty went into exile.

Khmer Republic (1970-75)

Continued civil war and spillover from the conflict in neighboring Vietnam.

Democratic Kampuchea (1975-79)

A communist regime headed by Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge that came to be known as the time of the "killing fields."

People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979-91)

A second communist regime that, with the backing of Vietnam, overthrew the Khmer Rouge. Civil war ensued.

State of Cambodia (1991-93)

An interim government formed as part of a peace agreement until United Nations-supported elections were held.

Kingdom of Cambodia (1993-present)

Norodom Sihanouk became King again until abdicating in favor of his son Norodom Sihamoni in 2004. Hun Sen, a leader of the People's Republic of Kampuchea regime, is Prime Minister.

Further Reading:

Dance in Cambodia by Toni S. Phim and Ashley Thompson, Oxford University Press, 1999. Offers a view of diverse performance traditions in which dance plays a major role, and of the powerful creative force dance has maintained in Cambodia over the centuries.

A History of Cambodia by David P. Chandler, Westview Press, 1992 [1983]. Presents a detailed historical picture, from the ancient Khmer Empire through the development of the modern nation state of Cambodia.

Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea, by Eva Mysiwienc, Oxford, 1988. A portrait of the country as it emerged from the devastation of the Khmer Rouge regime. Includes pieces on agriculture, the economy, health and education, as well as cultural and spiritual legacies of war and revolution.

The Royal House of Cambodia, by Julio A. Jeldres, Monument Books, 2003. Covers individuals in the Royal Family from the mid-19th century to the early 21st century. Chapters present biographical details and photographs of Norodom Sihanouk, Kossamak Nearyrath, Norodom Buppha Devi, and the current monarch, King Norodom Sihamoni.

Footnotes:

1. Internationally renowned theater director Peter Sellars commissioned Cambodian choreographer [Sophiline Cheam Shapiro](#) to create this new work for the festival honoring the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth. (Sophiline Cheam Shapiro is the sister-in-law of the author of this article.)
2. The words "Khmer" and "Cambodian" are interchangeable in common English usage. "Khmer," however, technically refers to the majority ethnic group of the country.
3. Norodom Sihanouk was crowned King in 1941. In 1955 he abdicated the throne in favor of his father, who became King. Sihanouk took the title of "Prince," and eventually became Head of State.
4. Hinduism, and to a lesser degree, Mahayana Buddhism, dominated official Khmer religious practices from at least the sixth through the thirteenth centuries. Though Cambodia is today a Theravada Buddhist country, spirituality and worship there often involve a seamless combination of animist, Hindu/Brahman, and Buddhist practices.
5. A cast of archetypal characters populates Cambodia's court dances and dance-dramas: the graceful and gentle female (a princess or goddess); the brave and noble male (a prince or god); the forceful and often fearsome ogre; and the sprightly monkey. Since the 1940s, men have danced the latter role. For about a hundred years prior to that, women danced all the roles.
6. Forced into exile in 1970, Norodom Sihanouk was crowned "King" again—for the second time—in 1993, after United Nations-backed elections. He abdicated his throne in October, 2004, and his son, Norodom Sihamoni, became King. A ballet dancer trained in Europe, King Sihamoni had previously been Cambodia's ambassador to UNESCO. Princess Buppha Devi served as Cambodia's Minister of Culture and Fine Arts from 1999 until 2004.



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