Choreographing neutrality: dance in Cambodia's Cold War diplomacy in Asia, 1953-1970

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Abstract

This article examines the role of dance in Cambodia's Cold War diplomacy in Asia from 1953 up until the establishment of the Khmer Republic in 1970. It explores how Sihanouk leveraged Cambodian dances to enact Cambodia's neutral stance during the Cold War and forge cordial relations with other Asian states. Through an examination of the myriad of dance performances of the Royal Ballet and other Khmer dance troupes within the context of Cambodia's diplomatic relations in Asia, this paper demonstrates how dance afforded a space for Inter-Asia referencing amidst the Cold War tension in the region. Premised on an interdisciplinary approach, this paper underscores dance as an active political space where two historical phenomena merged: decolonisation/nation-building and the Cold War. In doing so, it places dance as inevitably entangled with diplomatic history and sheds light on its role in reifying the newly constructed, albeit nebulous, national identity of postcolonial Cambodia.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, neutrality, Cold War, Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodian dance

In the next shot, the camera goes black; when the light turns back on, at the centre is a beautiful dancer. She moves softly and gently towards the stage, where the camera focuses on her radiant beauty. She is adorned with glittering jewels and a golden headdress and is wearing a golden intricate costume. White frangipani flowers are tucked along her long black hair. Her movement perfectly follows the music being played, subtle yet purposeful, she moves up and down as her hands, head and hips sway. She glides gracefully and with every move, her impressive technique undeniable. Her slender fingers curl backward in an almost unnatural way, her feet firmly planted on the ground, and her toes curl upward as she steps slowly forward. When the dance ends, the whole auditorium rises in applause. The dancer's perfect, gentle and measured movements, as if by magic, seemingly lift the audiences out of the everyday worries, into the heavenly spheres. This is perhaps one of the most striking scenes in the 1966 movie entitled Heavenly Dancers, also known in Cambodia as Apsara.[1] Produced and directed by none other than Norodom Sihanouk himself, Heavenly Dancers is essentially a historical film of the Cold War in 1960s Cambodia and offers a glimpse into the country's domestic concerns and foreign policy outlook amidst the rising tension in Asia. Concerned about Cambodia's international image, Sihanouk aimed to depict the country as peaceful (despite being threatened by its neighbours, Vietnam and Thailand)

vibrant and modern while keeping intact its traditional culture. The movie begins with scenes of cosmopolitanism—expensive and nice cars navigating streets that were wide and paved; tall buildings, manicured lawns, and beautiful parks; actors wearing Western-style clothing and flashy jewellery; and displays of Cambodia's fleet of fighter planes. These images are not so subtle indications of Cambodia's drive towards modernisation and development and are projections of its spirit of self-determination. But perhaps, the most cogent element that showcases the modern, postcolonial Cambodian identity is the inclusion of *Apsara*[2] dance in the film, performed by Princess Buppha Devi, the *prima ballerina* of the Royal Ballet, and daughter of Sihanouk.

Capturing the spirit of Khmer, royal classical dance celebrates the long history, rituals and tradition of the monarchy in Cambodia beginning in the Angkorian period, when royal court dancers were regarded as intermediaries between the king and the gods in heaven. As Shapiro (1994, 4) argues, "[classical] dance has become a key symbol for the Khmer, and as such, constitutes one focus of their efforts to assert and recreate their culture, their identity, and history." The inclusion of this albeit new choreography becomes more pertinent considering that under the French Protectorate, such classical dance performances were, in fact, mostly reserved for and conducted inside the palace for the royal family and visiting dignitaries.[3] The addition of the *Apsara* performance in the film made classical dance (i.e. high cultural tradition) accessible to the ordinary Cambodian people and, indeed, the rest of the world. This piece of choreography is one of the many ways Cambodia employed dance to project a renewed sense of self-confidence and national identity deeply rooted in the glorious past of Angkor, of a new Cambodia that is modern, inclusive, sovereign, and self-assured. This article is an investigation of Cambodia's political vision and realities following its independence from France by way of examining the country's dance performances and repertoire from 1953 to 1970.

Dance, politics, and the Cold War

Put simply, the world of politics is a world in constant movement. Bodies in motion are continuously visible in collective spaces performing politics, articulating the political, and interrogating power. Political ideas are in constant movement too; continuously percolating into new and various forms of expressions and practices. One of such practices, where bodies in motion and political ideas are entangled, is dance. While few would contest the subversive power of dance, scholars have only recently paid attention to the role of dance in domestic politics and foreign affairs. In the case of Cambodia, while much has been written about the history, choreography, and circulation of Cambodian dance[4], a majority of these works really focus on the Royal Ballet and classical dances (Groslier 2011; Burridge and Frumberg 2015 [2010]; Heywood 2008; Cravath 2007, 1986, 1985). A quick survey of recent works indicates that they are mostly concerned about the impacts of Khmer Rouge on dance, its revival, preservation, and its more contemporary features (Chemburkar 2015; Falser 2014; Loviny 2002; Ly 2020; Lytle 2020; Metha 2001; Nut 2014; Shapiro-Phim 2020, 2008; Shapiro 1994; Sasagawa 2005; Shapiro-Phim and Thompson 1999; Stevens 2015). Among these published works, perhaps Paul Cravath's works provide the most comprehensive exploration of the place of Khmer dance in Cambodian culture, society, and politics. He arrived in Phnom Penh in 1975 and was given access to the royal palace and archives by the Ministry of Culture of the Khmer Republic, and was able to interview dancers, artists and musicians in Cambodia as well as those who left for the US as refugees. In his PhD dissertation, "Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia," Cravath argues that the "royal dancers fulfilled a ritual function in the Khmer kingdom from pre-Angkorean times until

the demise of the monarchy" and "provided a mystical regeneration of the fertility of the land … providing rain" (Cravath 1985, xxii). Writing about dance during Sihanouk's rule, Cravath construes that royal dancers served as ambassadors in the pursuit of Cambodia's foreign policy and describes the various locations where dances were conducted, the creation of "friendship dances," and the important role played by Queen Kossamak in fashioning the royal dance in post-independence Cambodia. While Cravath's provocations are central to our understanding of the intersection between royal dance and politics, he did not offer an in-depth analysis of the Cambodian dance within the broader discourse and context of the Cold War in Asia and the strategic culture that defined and reinforced the political significance and meaning of Cambodian dance during Sihanouk's rule. This is where I hope this paper will offer further insights.

The Cold War has kept the curiosity and attention of various scholars from various disciplines. Many like Gaddis (1972) and Leffler and Painter (1994) were concerned with examining the origins of the Cold War while others focused on the relationships between and among states. In the last two decades, however, we are seeing more and more works that go beyond state narratives and place the focus instead on constructivist approaches, exploring how people, ideas, cultures, and mobilities shape aspects of foreign affairs and international relations (Saunders 1999; Klein 2020; Lee 2020; Yangwen, Liu, and Szonyi 2010). In this vibrant part of Cold War scholarship, there is an emerging body of works that looks into the intersections between dance and the Cold War from multiple perspectives such as the developments and transformations in the aesthetic of dance, the dance networks that formed during the Cold War, and those works that place dance as an ideological tool in winning the battle of hearts and minds. David Caute's (2003) book has a chapter that looks at the high-profile defections of Soviet dancers like Rudolf Nureyev while Naima Prevots' *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War*, published in 1998, was the first book to examine dance as a part of the cultural Cold War industry that received huge financial support and backing from the US government. Anne Searcy's (2020) book examines US and Soviet ballet performances as part of the Soviet-American cultural exchange. So far, the majority of works on dance and the Cold War focused on the US, Soviet Union, and other Western countries.

Recently, however, scholars are looking into dance in Cold War Asia. Paving the way in this field is Emily Wilcox whose book *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (2018) frames Chinese dance as a legacy of Socialism in China. She has also written articles (2017, 2020) on the place of Chinese dance in Third World politics in 1949–1965 and in China's diplomatic efforts towards India, Indonesia, and Burma. Jennifer Lindsay's (2012) article "Performing Indonesia Abroad" that traces Indonesia's cultural missions to China, Sri Lanka, USSR, Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, and the United States, to name a few as well as Nan Ma's work (2020) that locates Chinese ballet during the height of the Cold War are examples of the growing literature on the subject. My work contributes to this nascent field by putting Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia at the forefront of inquiry. This article looks into the specific case of Cambodia after its independence from France, arguably the period where Cambodian dance performances became an integral part of post-colonial Cambodia's diplomatic affairs. This paper probes into the role of dance in Cambodia's Cold War diplomacy in Asia and interrogates how dance incorporated and embodied Cambodia's evolving political interests, ideologies and expressions. It looks into the dynamic relationship between dance and politics from Sihanouk's rise to power in 1953 up until the establishment of the Khmer Republic by General Lon Nol in 1970, and explores how Sihanouk leveraged Cambodian dances in forging foreign relations with other Asian states. In this paper, I demonstrate that Sihanouk used dance to project and embody Cambodia's Cold War

strategy of neutrality throughout his diplomatic visits as well as the visits of foreign delegates to Cambodia, and in the process engaged in Inter-Asia referencing in diplomacy.

Premised on an interdisciplinary approach engaging historical analysis, cultural studies, and constructivist international relations approaches, this paper underscores dance as an active political space where two historical phenomena merged: decolonisation/nation-building and the Cold War. In doing so, it places dance as inevitably entangled with diplomatic history and sheds light on its role in reifying the newly constructed, albeit nebulous, cultural identity and national image of post-colonial Cambodia. Borrowing and adapting from Mills' argument, I read dance as a "sustained method of communication" where "questions regarding human beings' political lives within its own signification" can be examined and explored (2017, 2). In other words, the repertoire of Cambodian dances represented both the material and symbolic elements of Sihanouk's Cold War diplomacy, and were a means to communicate, invoke, and enact neutrality.

Cambodia's Cold War diplomacy: realities, fears, and hopes

At the end of the Second World War, a new era in Southeast Asian decolonisation and nation-building emerged. Newly independent and sovereign nations began to navigate the international arena with a renewed sense of political confidence and national identity. In the case of Cambodia, upon the demise of Japanese occupation, France attempted to restore its colonial sovereignty and was met with fervent nationalist resistance and anti-colonial sentiments. Young Cambodians who studied in France were exposed to radical politics, anti-colonial ideas, as well as nationalist and communist ideologies. They were among the new voices demanding for political reforms and autonomy under the French Protectorate while others insisted on outright sovereignty and independence. In 1946, a *modus vivendi* was signed providing the king some autonomy in domestic administration and opening the path for further negotiations, including drafting a constitution. A few months later, an election was held and among the three political parties at that time, the Democratic Party won the majority of the votes. But, political instability and economic woes continued to plague Cambodia's path towards full independence.

Amidst this turbulent period, the region also experienced the burgeoning Cold War, characterised by bipolarity and great power competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, shaping the foreign policy approaches and strategies of the Southeast Asian states. In Cambodia, some of the young Cambodians who studied in France in the 1950s embraced Marxist-Leninist ideologies and eventually organised Cambodia's Communist Party. As for Sihanouk, beginning in 1949, Chandler notes that he took "command over Cambodian political life" and declared his "Crusade for Independence" (1993, 46–47). According to Osborne (1994), Sihanouk catapulted himself at the centre of Cambodia's independence campaign and promised to gain independence in three years' time. Sihanouk was a staunch postcolonial nationalist who argued that the French presence in Cambodia was, in fact, strengthening communist groups in the country and that full and complete independence was key to safeguarding Cambodia. In 1953, France granted Cambodia's independence and Sihanouk cemented his place in the country's postcolonial trajectory.

When Sihanouk abdicated the throne in 1955, he already had a clear idea on what Cambodia needed to do to propel forward. For Sihanouk: "The nature of Cambodia's problem has changed … . There's urgent need for administrative reforms, economic development and advances in social welfare—all necessary to enable us to improve the standard of living and happiness of the ordinary people … " (as quoted in MacDonald 1961, 147–148). In 1955, Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (Popular Socialist Community) was established as an alliance among the

Khmer Revolution Party, Sam Sary's rightist party, the Victorious Northeast Party and Sihanouk's government. The *Sangkum* was a national political movement aimed to "attain the aspirations of the Little People, the real people of the Kingdom of Kampuchea." It vowed to defend Cambodia "against injustice, corruption, exactions, oppression and treason" (Chandler 1993, 79).

The *Sangkum* was premised on two key principles: Cambodian neutrality and Khmer Socialism. This neutrality was soldered at the 1955 Bandung Conference where Cambodia affirmed to follow a "Third Way" amidst the apparent bipolarity of the Cold War. The second principle pertains to "the system in which the state takes over the direction of the national economy, and protects man from the exploitation of his labour by a privileged class, safeguards his livelihood and his dignity and strives to give him the material means of finding happiness" (Buchanan 1962, 5). These two principles are highly intertwined. Cambodia's non-alignment was predicated on its economic objectives and aspirations as a modern and independent state, while at the same time, Cambodia sought to achieve its economic objectives and aspirations by maintaining a neutral position.

Among Sihanouk's foremost concerns was the territorial integrity of Cambodia. He recognised both the Communist led North Vietnam and the South's National Liberation Front primarily because they have guaranteed the integrity of Cambodia's borders. He feared that Communist-dominated Vietnam would threaten the sovereignty of Cambodia's borders (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 November 1968). His efforts to establish amicable relations with its Asian neighbours had worked, at least for a while. But at the centre of Sihanouk's foreign policy is to secure the interests of Cambodia—its independence, sovereignty, and path towards economic development and modernisation. "I believe in a 'sawtooth diplomacy,'" Sihanouk asserts, "the path to diplomacy is never a straight line … . Cambodia still needs and wants foreign aid, but it must be free of strings. The Americans have helped generously—to protect us, they say, from Red China. But it is Thailand and Laos who look covetously at our frontier provinces; it is South Vietnam, aided by massive military assistance from the United States, who attacks our border villages—not Red China" (Abercrombie 1964, 521-522). In other words, Sihanouk's Cold War strategy was one that was heavily determined by its own national and postcolonial interests of maintaining its territorial sovereignty, advancing the country's economic and political interests, and constructing a modern and inclusive Cambodian nation in peaceful co-existence with all countries.

Choreographing neutrality: dance in Cambodia's Cold War diplomacy

Sihanouk's Cold War position of neutrality, entangled with the country's renewed national and postcolonial spirit was embodied and reinforced in Cambodian dance. The elegant performances of dancers in jewelled costumes floating on stage, reminiscent of the deities on the bas-relief of Angkor Wat, became a focal part of entertaining foreign diplomatic visitors in Cambodia and the international state visits by Cambodian officials abroad. Various Asian delegations, including heads of state, visited Phnom Penh in the 1950s and 1960s and were treated to and enamoured by the performances primarily of the Royal Ballet. These performances were not only meant to introduce and accentuate Khmer cultural prowess and antiquity to these Asian leaders but also served as a crucial platform for Cambodia's cultural diplomacy with its Asian neighbours. The political role of these dance performances can be categorised into three, though they are definitely intertwined. First, Cambodian dance was utilised to embody a renewed self-confidence and identity of the new Khmer nation—one that is modern and inclusive and yet deeply anchored in its glorious Angkorian past. Secondly, these performances were more than just a means to entertain the foreign

audience, but were perceptively conducted as a way of legitimising Sihanouk (and by extension, the royal family and the monarchy) and, indeed, Cambodia's international standing. Finally, these performances were deployed as a platform for Inter-Asia referencing, as a tool to establish goodwill and solidarity in the Asian region and beyond. Subtle adjustments and changes in the dance performances were made to accommodate the interests and agendas of the various countries they were hoping to engage. While at the same time, Cambodian dance performances established or sought to conjure a common/shared culture and history between Cambodia and its Asian neighbours. This was evident in the way each dance programme was curated and modified to suit the interests and message that Sihanouk wanted to express to the specific audience. Specific performances were meticulously planned, and new choreography and dances were invented or recreated to appeal to the senses and sensibilities of foreign dignitaries. As an important tool of Cambodia's cultural Cold War diplomacy in Asia, Cambodian dance played a crucial role in the theatricality of diplomacy, in which Sihanouk's political message was conveyed and communicated to his Asian neighbours.

Choreographing the nation: dance in Cambodia's nation-building

In the early years of independence, Sihanouk was able to navigate the postcolonial era well. Focused on nation-building and increasing Cambodia's international status, Sihanouk established diplomatic relations with other Asian states. British diplomat and politician Malcolm Macdonald (1961, 135) opined that Sihanouk "was instinctively a Cambodian patriot, sincerely eager to serve the well-being of his countrymen; and he was therefore a representative type of modern Asian, inspired by the desire to end alien rule and achieve self-government." Various heads of state visited Cambodia and by 1965, Cambodia had established embassies in various Asian cities including Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila, Jakarta, Rangoon, Vientiane, Beijing, Tokyo, and New Delhi, among others. During this vibrant period in Cambodia's diplomatic history, the role of Cambodian dance, and in particular, the royal dancers was undeniable. Sihanouk entertained both local and foreign dignitaries with elaborate performances mainly by the members of the Royal Ballet. Indeed, no visit to Cambodia was complete without witnessing a performance by the country's cultural ambassadors, the Royal Ballet. On 22 November 1956, China's Zhou Enlai toured the ruins of Angkor Wat and was treated to a series of performances such as the Legend of *Preah Saing*, Rooster Dance, and Ballet of Naga as part of his state visit. On 20 June 1959, Sukarno and his wife visited Cambodia and then again in 1962 (during the second visit, Sukarno apparently professed his love and admiration to Princess Buppha Devi). Other Asian delegates who visited Cambodia include Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Aiichiro Fujiyama, who witnessed the Legend of *Preah Saing* and the *Tep Monorom* Ballet on 14 May 1959; Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew visited on 25 September 1962; and on 21 April 1964, a dance programme that included *the Legend of Preah Somut*, the *chhayam*, *thevet* ballet in front of a delegation of the Supreme People's Assembly of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The list goes on, but suffice to note at this point that in these performances, Sihanouk sought to convey Cambodia's renewed self-confidence as a modern and inclusive nation in two ways: (1) the inclusion of folk dances in the repertoire of performances and (2) the key role of the members of the Royal Ballet and their classical dance performances.

Firstly, one of the ways in which these dance performances embodied a modern and inclusive Cambodia was through the inclusion of a range of popular dances and folk dances from various ethnic groups (which were performed by dance troupes other than the members of the Royal Ballet). When the Vice-President of India, Zakir Husain visited Phnom Penh in 1966, the members of

the Folklore Group of the Royal University of Fine Arts performed the *Kap Krabei Phoek Sra*, a traditional dance of the Khmer-Leeu people from the province of Rattanakiri when harvesting rice or choosing their land for planting. According to the programme, "When the crop has been harvested, the Khmer Loeu celebrate the occasion by dancing around a jar brimming with alcohol to the accompaniment of drums." The same choreography and performers were deployed when Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew visited in 1966 and again for Adam Malik, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia in 1967. Another folk dance called *trott* dance was performed for Indonesian President Sukarno's wife when they visited Siem Reap in 1962. According to the programme, *trott* is a traditional folk dance performed at Angkor Wat and surrounding villages to celebrate the Cambodian New Year by dancers wearing antlers and masks, and in huntsman costumes.

The programme explains that this particular dance "had originally a religious or magic significance; and it is still performed for the purpose of collecting funds for the restoration, or construction, of local pagodas." *Chhyam* was another folk dance that was incorporated in Cambodia's repertoire of dance diplomacy. Described as "essentially comic in character" where the dancers and the accompanying musicians carrying drums, wooden clackers, and cymbals are free to improvise, the *chhyam* was performed mostly for religious or ceremonial processions, but was also incorporated in secular events and, in this case, diplomatic activities. The inclusion of these folk dances in the repertoire of Cambodian dance performances is revealing for two reasons. First, while the members of the Royal Ballet were often the main features of Sihanouk's dance diplomacy, he was also very mindful to include folk dances that represented and were meaningful to the broader Cambodian nation, including the indigenous ethnic minorities such as the Khmer-Loeu people. In doing so, these dance programmes, taken collectively, attempt to construct and envisage an image of Cambodia as a modern and inclusive nation—one that comprises several culturally diverse ethnic communities, yet maintains a coherently Khmer national identity. Second, these folk dances also provide the audience, particularly foreign dignitaries and visitors, a glimpse of Cambodia's national culture and identity that goes beyond the confines of the royal palace and its high culture.

Secondly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the Royal Ballet, as the foremost symbol of Khmer culture and identity, played a crucial role in introducing Cambodia as a modern nation to other Asian states. Understanding the relevance of royal dancers in projecting Cambodia's image to the rest of the world, Queen Kossomak dedicated herself in reforming the Royal Ballet. Her contribution cannot be understated and is considered as a "turning point because with her tremendous energy, dedication and imagination … [she] not only rekindled a dying art but reformulated it for the twentieth century. Cambodian dance was elevated to new heights" (Heywood 2008, 70). Under her supervision, a new shortened format of performance program was introduced. Lasting for about two hours, it consists of an opening dance, followed by a main dramatic piece, and then a closing dance. Some of the longer dramatic pieces were also trimmed down and other dances, like *Tep Monorum* which was initially performed only by two people, were expanded into large and theatrical group-precision dances. She was inspired by the stylistic tradition of the ancient religious offertory dances to the spirits and included a total of twelve dancers moving in choreographed synchrony (Cravath 2007, 217–218). She added a new ethos of theatricality in the performances making the roles of the monkey and the male or female roles more distinctive. She also invited men to join the royal troupe to perform the monkey role. In 1962, recognising a need to have a Khmer dance representing Cambodia's modern aspirations as a sovereign nation, Queen Kossomak created the *Apsara* dance, inspired by the sculptures of *apsaras*, the celestial dancers in Angkor's walls. It took about six months to create as the Queen made sure that despite being a new creation,

Apsara continued to follow classical gestures and techniques and was very meticulous in crafting the costumes and headdresses for the dancers. *Apsara* costumes had to be researched properly from the leading roles' costumes to the secondary roles' jewellery.

According to Princess Buppha Devi, during this period of revival, there was a real effort to differentiate Khmer and Thai gestures and "unlike the Thais, we, Khmers, prefer to use the pattern '*Pka Chan*,' bigger patterns for Male and Giant roles and smaller patterns for female roles" (Jerome Robbins Dance Division 2008). Queen Kossomak understood the political and cultural importance of keeping the unique tradition of classical dancing as it is a part of the national prestige but also of the power and authority of the monarchy. Indeed, Princess Buppha Devi herself became the *prima ballerina* of the country in the 1950s to 1960s. As the most admired dancer and a member of the royal family herself, Princess Buppha Devi became the face of Cambodia, performing in different parts of the world. Princess Buppha Devi performed as an *apsara* dancer in a film by Marcel Camus, *L'Oiseau de Paradis* (Bird of Paradise) in 1961. Queen Kossomak reportedly only allowed the filming to take place in Angkor Wat as the dance itself embodies Khmer cultural identity. Performing it in the ruins of Angkor only solidifies the image of the nation as a modern nation coming out of its colonial shadow, legitimised by its own glorious Angkorian past. However, this quest towards modern aspirations, nation-building and decolonisation was complicated by the political realities on the international stage. In 1953, as Cambodia entered international affairs as an independent state, the Cold War was in full steam in Asia.

Royal rituals: the royal ballet and legitimising Sihanouk's *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*

At this juncture, it is important to note that Cambodia's Cold War policy at the peak of Sihanouk's rule was inevitably shaped and influenced by Sihanouk's own political views and international outlook. His leadership and governance were, in part, determined by his ability to harness his royal upbringing (although he abdicated the throne) and legitimise his power and authority based on the long history of Cambodian kings of the Angkorian monarchy. Through dance performances, specifically by the Royal Ballet, Sihanouk was able to exemplify his personal desire to safeguard, legitimise his role in post-colonial Cambodia, and assert Cambodia's sovereignty amidst the Cold War. Although Sihanouk (cited in Osborne 1994, 159) once claimed that he "wanted to stand on my own feet politically and measure myself against my opponents in the political arena instead of basing my authority on my heredity," his entourage displayed his royalty and accentuated the symbolic power of the monarchy everywhere he went. As Heywood (2008, 71) writes: "the dancers, who accompanied him everywhere, were like his ambassadors, reprising the status they had had at the height of the Khmer empire. Few rulers could have boasted a more enchanting or alluring entourage, domestically and internationally, than Sihanouk and his dancers."

However, the performances of the Royal Ballet were conducted not only for what they represent (or least in the passive sense); rather, the purpose of royal dance in Cambodia is in fact more active, interventionist. Its purpose is embedded in its function as a ritual, a performative practice in which the Cambodian nation accomplishes its objective. The royal classical dance "balances" the universe, and when performed in front of dignitaries from other Asian states, fosters good will and solidarity. This idea of Khmer royal dance as a ritual for pragmatic, not simply emblematic, reasons, is captured in Princess Buppha Devi's words: "With correct training and technique, our dance rituals bring blessings to our King, harmony to the governance of our land and prosperity to our people. The dancers accomplish this embodying the essence of purity and strength of our Khmer race … [T]his art empowers them to earn these blessings. Their grace and ancient choreography actually

balance the universe, bringing us into harmony with the powers of nature, ensuring fertility, health, and abundance for our land and people" (in a written interview conducted by Paul Cravath in 2010). In other words, performing royal dances are supposed to empower the king and his governance; it allows him to advocate for and achieve the interests of his people. As the foremost political figure in postcolonial Cambodia, Sihanouk largely framed the nation's political objectives.

Take for example the inclusion of Fan dance, Thevet ballet, and Tep Monorum Ballet in Cambodia's cultural diplomacy—these classical dances are traditionally performed in homage to Khmer kings, but they were performed to welcome foreign dignitaries from Asia such as Adam Malik, Lee Kuan Yew, and Diosdado Macapagal, to name a few. By extending these performances to foreign dignitaries, Sihanouk not only acknowledged the visitors' elevated status in regional politics, but at the same time, he also elevated himself as a member of the royal family. Indeed, Sihanouk took it a step further by sending his children to perform in China. During his 1956 visit, Zhou Enlai and his delegations were introduced not just to Cambodia's culture and history, but they also visited a rubber plantation, a medical school (which was constructed with US aid), and the city of Phnom Penh. Sihanouk and Zhou Enlai discussed issues related to international affairs and mutual interests. At the end of the visit, both reaffirmed their emerging relations by signing a joint declaration based on the principles of peaceful co-existence, mutual respect for territorial integrity, non-aggression, and non-interference. The following year, Sihanouk sent his daughter, Princess Buppha Devi and her brother, Prince Sihamoni to Beijing to perform in front of Chairman Mao Zedong. When they came back, Sihanouk's children shared that Zhou Enlai "had treated them just as a father would treat his own children" (Jacobsen 2018, 128). Indeed, Sihanouk did not just permit classical dance meant for Cambodian kings to be performed in front of foreign dignitaries, he was also willing to send his own children, members of the royal family, to perform overseas. According to Cravath (2007, 165), "In allowing them to leave the palace and the kingdom … they lent authority to Sihanouk's presence. If he was willing to share his private dancers, including his own children with another nation, and if those dancers were of rare quality, the likelihood of acceptance for the political friendship which he conjointly offered was increased." Simply put, Cambodian dance and the dancers themselves carried with them the material and symbolic power of the monarchy from which Sihanouk drew his legitimacy and authority.

Inter-Asia references in Cambodia's dance diplomacy

Cambodia's dance programmes during the Cold War also afforded a cultural platform for Inter-Asia referencing in Cold War cultural diplomacy. As mentioned, subtle adjustments and changes in the dance performances were made to accommodate the interests and agendas of the various Asian countries that Sihanouk was hoping to engage. While at the same time, Cambodian dance performances established/sought to conjure a common/shared culture and history between Cambodia and its Asian neighbours.

At this juncture, it is important to note that the history and development of Cambodian dances have long been influenced by other Asian societies. Charles Meyer (1969, 8) recounts that when King Norodom rose to power in 1859, "classical dancing had recovered some of its prestige of old; so much so that there was no greater honour for ministers and top dignitaries than to have their children admitted to the palace school of dancing." The popularity and fascination toward the royal ballet were not only seen from within the Cambodian society but also from the French and other neighbouring Asian states. Artists from Laos, Burma, China, and Vietnam visited the palace and "were given the opportunity to learn Khmer dancing, or to cultivate their own art

and prepare short spectacles for the king" (8). While these interactions undoubtedly served as a platform for early intra-Asian cultural exchanges, in fact, they were not new. Scholars have long debated the extent to which Siam influenced Cambodian dances and vice versa in the fifteenth century and explored how Ramayana dance rituals were performed and evident in dance and theatre in Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar and Indonesia (Heywood 2008). These external influences and exchanges have indeed shaped Cambodian dances, but they in no way prevented the emergence of a truly Cambodian dance as explained earlier, as Cambodian dance and specifically the performances of the Royal Ballet underwent significant transformations under Queen Kossomak's supervision.

In fact, Queen Kossomak had a keen understanding of how to appeal to specific audiences, as shown in her selection of different programs for each visiting foreign dignitary. Indian President Rajendra Prasad arrived in Phnom Penh on 15 March 1959 and was entertained by the Royal Ballet with classical dance performances based on the *Ramayana*, known in Cambodia as *Reamker*, that was specifically tailored to appeal to the shared culture and heritage between Cambodia and India. *Enao Bosseba* (Legend of Eynoa) was created by Queen Kossomak and was performed specifically to welcome Indonesian President Sukarno when he visited Cambodia in 1959. According to Buppha Devi, Queen Kossomak had selected a Malay story from Java, Indonesia because it was where Sukarno was from. What this reveals is a deliberate effort to reinvent or recreate a tradition, indeed, a ritual for specific rationales. In this case, the re-invention took the form of Inter-Asia referencing, of Cambodian dancers performing choreographies that meant to conjure not just their understanding and appreciation of the culture and history of other Asian countries, but at the same time to convey Cambodia's willingness to learn, cooperate, and work together as one family of nations in Asia.

Aside from capitalising on the shared Buddhist/Hindu culture (and the Indian influence in the region, particularly *Ramayana* or *Reamker*), Sihanouk also included some folk dances common in Cambodia that have similarities with other folk dances around the region, for example: coconut dance (which could have its origins from Filipino musicians who came to Cambodia to teach music after King Norodom's visit to the Philippines in 1872), peacock dance, *kantere*, slap dance, buffalo sacrifice dance, pestle dance, and the popular dance *ram-vong*, to name a few. Take, for example, the performance of popular dance *ram-vong* for Sukarno's wife in 1962; the dance itself was deemed to have originated from the southern part of Yunnan in China and is performed as well in Laos, Thailand, and Malaysia. In the programme, *ram-vong* is described as unlike classical dance which can only be mastered and performed by professional dancers, as it is a "modern dance" that "makes few demands on those taking part, and enjoys a great vogue in Cambodian towns and villages." The inclusion of these folk and popular dances is an effort towards portraying a shared popular culture with other Asian states.

Thomas Abercrombie visited Cambodia and vividly recounts his experience watching a performance by the Khmer dancers: "Angkor's sculptures seemed to come to life as the Royal Ballet swept in from the shadows. Dressed in shimmering brocade *sampots*, sequined jackets, and tall golden helmets, the girls moved through a forest of swaying gilt fronds .... From a silver cup they tossed white rose petals on the royal party, singing: 'We are members of the great family of Asian nations. Each petal is a wish for happiness'" (Abercrombie 1964, 529). This loaded message fully captures Cambodia's regional and international outlook during the Cold War. What emerges from this is a deliberate accounting, both symbolic and constructive, of Cambodia's objective of peaceful co-existence among a family of nations. The act of tossing petals and singing or wishing for happiness mobilises the body as an instrument to construct neutrality. Of course, Cambodia's

non-alignment became evident in Sihanouk's participation at the Bandung Asian-African Conference in 1955 where he not only found his kins and siblings—fellow newly independent states in Asia and Africa—but demonstrated a strong commitment to non-alignment and peaceful co-existence. This non-aligned stance is not surprising given Cambodia's history of harassment and aggression from its neighbouring states. For instance, Cambodia's dealings with Vietnam were framed by its non-aligned stance. On the one hand, the North Vietnamese government was allowed to construct an embassy. On the other hand, Nguyen Van Hieu of South Vietnam's National Liberation Front was given accommodation at a modern villa and was given a status of a diplomatic mission (Faas 1967). As an independent nation, Cambodia stood its ground and declared solidarity with newly established states regardless of their political ideologies.

According to Ang, up until 1970, "Sihanouk did all he could do to maintain the neutrality of Cambodia and tried to maintain cordial relations with Washington, Beijing and Hanoi, although his policy of 'double-dealing' (as described by Zhou Enlai) was not lost on Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai" (2012, 242–243). Amidst this Cold War, Sihanouk was very effective in using Cambodian dance as a tool to demonstrate and, in effect, enact neutrality. In the 1950s up to the 1960s, a series of "Friendship Dances" were curated and performed by the Royal Ballet to a number of foreign dignitaries. In 1959, the United States Secretary of the Interior Fred Andrew Seaton visited Cambodia, and one of the performances was entitled Ballet of the Khmero-American Friendship. In the program, the performance was translated as follows:

> Dance, dance ballerinas.
> Here opens the Road of Friendship
> All our lives our hearts will remember.
>
> All you Americans and Khmers
> United by destiny in a heartfelt friendship
> Hand in hand, follow this road of peace.
>
> Friends, how priceless was your help.
> Thanks to you, now stronger and more prosperous
> We have regained our place in the sun.
>
> Dance, dance, young girls,
> Entwine the colours of our two nations
> And may our fruitful friendship live forever
> (Royal Corps of Ballet, Dance Pamphlet, 22 July 1959)

The programme was written in Khmer, French, and English and included an image of the dancers holding the American flag on one hand and on the other, the Cambodian flag. While the dance itself was never recorded, the description on the programme is quite revealing. It describes an emerging cordial relationship between the two countries that can only be achieved and maintained through working "hand in hand" together. The dance also expresses a token of gratitude for American support that aided Cambodia's development. Throughout the 1950s, the United States provided various economic and military aid to Cambodia. In 1959, for instance, the Khmer-American Friendship Highway, a 132-mile road that connected the capital city of Phnom Penh to the Kampong Som port was inaugurated, and by the 1960s, the United States was responsible for paying about 30 percent of the defence budget of the Royal Khmer Armed Forces (Clymer 1999; Osborne 1994). The dance then ends on an optimistic outlook of continued friendship.

In reality, however, US-Cambodia relations were highly volatile. Take, for example, the story of the Khmero-American Friendship Highway. Just two years after it was opened, some parts were

apparently in poor condition. The road, which was meant to be "a showcase of American 'know-how' was so badly bungled that it has damaged our prestige, burdened us with costly repairs and supplied the Communists with an effective source of anti-American propaganda" (*New York Times*, 24 September 1961). According to reports, Sihanouk himself tried to use the highway but was so dismayed with the potholes that he decided to use a helicopter instead. In a cable message to Washington, Ambassador William Trimble cautioned that "the deplorable condition of the highway may deal a severe blow to US prestige and good faith" (*Time*, 21 July 1961). Nevertheless, Cambodia made efforts to maintain its relations with the United States. In specific cases, Khmer dance was deployed as a political mechanism for repairing US-Cambodian ties. In 1964, after a series of protests damaged some buildings at the United States embassy, the British embassy, American Library and the British Council, the Royal Ballet gave two performances to raise funds to help pay for the repairs that needed to be done (*New York Times*, 30 March 1964).

In this task of maintaining a neutral ground, another friendship dance was also performed for dignitaries from the other side of the Iron Curtain. On 29 August 1960, Minister of Public Health of the USSR, S.V. Kourachov was visiting Cambodia during the inauguration of the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital, called as "a gift from the Soviet Union to the government and people of Cambodia" (Royal Corps of Ballet. Dance Pamphlet, 29 August 1960). The friendship dance that was performed during the opening ceremony for the hospital is translated in the programme pamphlet as follows:

> Ballet of Gratitude
> To the Minister of Soviet Union, this address
> We want to convey our sincere gratitude
> To the people of the Soviet Union, our friends
> Who have the generosity to help the Khmer People
>
> The hospital is a symbol of your help
> A beautiful 500-bed building
> With all the necessary facilities
> To heal the diseases of poor people
>
> Our two colours float to the wind
> Solidifying brotherhood in our hearts
> We will keep this friendship forever
> Sincere and fruitful between our two peoples
> (Royal Corps of Ballet. Dance Pamphlet, 29 August 1960).

The USSR gifted the hospital, which was the largest in Southeast Asia, as part of its strategy of driving "non-capitalist development" focusing on hospitals for training, and research, which was aligned with the Cambodian government's goal to modernise its hospital network. The "gift" was given under the framework of "friendship" articulated by the *Sangkum* government to drive nation-building, economic development and modernisation. Thus, as part of this hedging strategy, "Cambodian students and officials welcomed Soviet aid in fields that seemed politically neutral, such as medicine and technology, and rejected aid in fields that could be overtly ideological, such as education" (Grant 2018, 58).

A few months after, on 8 December 1960, the Royal Ballet performed another "Dance of Khmer-Chinese Friendship" for a theatre troupe from the People's Republic of China. According to Cravath (2007, 228), the "lyrics were similar in tone" to the Ballet Khmero-American Friendship. These dance performances served to reaffirm and, indeed, bolster Cambodia's efforts to establish itself as a friendly nation in Asia, especially "if those dancers were of rare quality, the likelihood of acceptance

for the political friendship which he [Sihanouk] conjointly offered was increased." Indeed, the acceptance of these friendships also translated into military aid and economic support. By 1965, Chinese aid was utilised for the establishment of a number of factories which include two textile plants, plywood mill, paper plant, glassworks, and a cement factory. The country expanded its labour market, developed its raw materials and agricultural resources, and built extensive industries in production and manufacturing of key products. This neutrality is evident in the economic development steered by Sihanouk. American, Chinese, French, and Soviet economic support has gradually transformed Cambodia's modern transport system, its industrial sector, and strengthened its military defence. Like a king ensuring the prosperity of its people, Sihanouk managed these blessings and the "aid received is channelled almost entirely into productive development" (Buchanan 1962, 6).

Khmer Rouge and the fall of *Heavenly Dancers*

At the end of the Second World War, a new era in Southeast Asian decolonisation and nation-building emerged. Newly independent and sovereign nations began to navigate the international arena with a renewed sense of political confidence and national identity. In the case of Cambodia, this renewed national and postcolonial spirit was embodied and reinforced in Cambodian dance. The elegant performances of dancers in jewelled costumes floating on stage, reminiscent of the deities on the bas-relief of Angkor Wat together with folk and popular dance performances by other Khmer dance troupes, became a focal part of entertaining foreign diplomatic visitors in Cambodia as well as the international state visits by Cambodian officials abroad. Various Asian delegations including heads of state like Zhou Enlai, Sukarno, and Lee Kuan Yew visited Phnom Penh in the 1950s and 1960s and were treated to and enamoured by the performances of Cambodian dancers. These performances were not only meant to introduce and accentuate Cambodian cultural prowess and antiquity to these Asian leaders, but also served as a crucial platform for Cambodia's cultural diplomacy with its Asian neighbours. Dance was not only a salient political instrument utilised by the state to convey its interests, self-identity, and worldview to both domestic and foreign audiences. It also was a space where Cambodian traditions intersected with Cambodia's vision of modernity to project a new image of Cambodia as a sovereign state coming out of the colonial shadow. Analysed against the backdrop of the emergent Cold War tension in Asia, these dance performances were used not only to reinforce Cambodia's foreign policy premised on non-alignment, but as a means of achieving its diplomatic interests. Through the perfect choreography and masterful movements, these dancers were constructing and advancing Cambodia's foreign policy and national interests in Cold War Asia.

By March 1970, General Lon Nol waged a coup against Sihanouk and took over the reins of the government. Cambodia's neutralist efforts, though already volatile before, had quickly dissolved. Sihanouk fled to China while the new government moved to erase all images and reminders of the monarchy from buildings and street signs. He was charged and found guilty of treason and corruption, forcing him to declare a government-in-exile. This move was recognised by a few countries in Asia—including China, North Vietnam, and North Korea. Away from his home, Sihanouk could do very little, not even to save the royal dance that was also under attack.

Reports claimed that Deputy Premier Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak requested a "religious ceremony with sacred dances calling upon the spirit of King Norodom Sumarit to bless Cambodia with victory in the war" ("Cambodia Ballet" 1970). However, Queen Kossomak declined, arguing

that the Lon Nol government had denigrated the royal family and the monarchy with its efforts to build a republic. Instead, on 20 June 1970, the royal ballet dancers held a surprise performance for Prince Norodom Randarridh, youngest son of Sihanouk. The government responded by limiting the budget for the palace and confiscating royal palace funds. The following month, the government forced Queen Kossomak and her whole entourage, including Princess Buppha Devi, out of the palace ("Cambodia Regime" 1970). With the palace closed and the royal family ousted, the fate of Khmer royal dance and indeed, Cambodian dance in general, was in limbo and with the eventual rise of the Khmer Rouge in 1975, a period of darkness loomed over the celestial dancers.

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Notes

1. The film *Heavenly Dancers* (*Apsara*) follows the activities of General Rithy, played by Lt. Nhiek Tioulong amidst the volatile political environment when Cambodia was facing threats coming from Vietnam and Thailand. The General falls in love with a dancer played by Princess Buppha Devi but, in the end, had to let her go as he continued to fulfil his obligation to defend Cambodia from its aggressors (*Desert Sun*, 23 August 1966).
2. The *Apsara* (Robam Apsara) performance in the film was created by Queen Kossomak, mother of Sihanouk, in 1962 (Heywood 2008, 74).
3. For the post-colonial writings and history of Cambodian dance under French Protectorate, see for example: Heywood (2008); Cravath (2007); Groslier (2011). Penny Edwards's (2007, 7) magnum opus, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945*, offers a post-colonial examination of the French colonial policies in the protectorate of Cambodia and asserts that "the very notion of a national culture, let alone its inner core, were products of the colonial encounter."
4. Throughout this essay, I use Cambodian dance as a broad term that encompasses the three main types or categories of dance in the country: vernacular, folk, and classical. The term *apsara* (with small *a*) is used to refer to the dancers of the Apsara choreography as well as the carvings of celestial dancers on the bas-reliefs of the temples mainly in Siem Reap, including Angkor Wat, while the term *Apsara* as in *Robam Tep Apsara* (with capital *A*) refers to the individual piece of choreography that was created by Queen Kossomak in 1964. *Apsara* is also the title of one of Sihanouk's films discussed later.

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