

Carving out a Space for Alternative Voices through  
Performing Arts in Contemporary Cambodian Tourism:  
Transformation, Transgression and Cambodia's  
first gay classical dance company

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the potential for the global phenomenon of tourism to become a platform for performing art practitioners, dancers and artists to carve out a space for alternative voices through their performances and perhaps thereby to stimulate social transformation and even encourage evolutionary social transgression in Cambodia. Drawing on the post-colonial discourses of Geertz (1980) and Vickers (1989), this paper adopts tourism as a cultural arena which contributes to the deconstruction of the landscape of a country through the exposure to the wider global gaze. This is achieved by taking the case study of Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA in its calculated promotion of social transgression in the classical arts. Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA is the Cambodia's first gay classical dance company (hereafter the Company) established in 2015, and sets a manifestation of their continuing commitment to social transformation through artistic dialogue both inside and outside of Cambodia. The increasing resonance of the LGBTQ movement across the world helped the Company to receive more global recognitions especially since the venerable TED Conference and other international art

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foundations have chosen Ok as a recipient of various grants and fellowships. In this way the Company hopes to boost the maturity and quality of the dance discourse in a postmodern era that has greater space for airing alternative voices.

**Keywords** : Cambodia, Khmer classical dance, gay, social transformation, transgression, alternative voices

## 1.Introduction

The three hours from 12:00 to 15:00 are the most intensive for the five dancers of Cambodia's first all-male, gay-identified dance company, Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA (hereinafter, the Company). At a studio located in downtown Phnom Penh, they rehearse gestural and choreographic movements. Keeping their arms curled and fingers curved exactly for long periods, combined with the heat from the sun outside and the intensity of the Company founder's technical and philosophical teaching, there is a persistent glaze of sweat on each one of their brows<sup>1)</sup>. As one of Cambodia's premiere destinations for cultural tourism, the Company prepares rigorously not only to fulfil their role as competent ambassadors of Khmer arts but also to assure domestic stakeholders that their alternative group is technically and socially fit to represent the classic techniques. This deferential attitude to composition and presentation also extends to the culture and spirituality surrounding training. As soon as he finished off one repertoire, one of the dancers, 20-year-old Kunh Pisey (pseud.) airily directs the angle of his body toward a small altar at the corner of the practice hall and briefly prays. He prostrates himself to a shrine displaying crowns and incense by bending his knees and placing both

hands and head to the floor; I was then reminded one of the significant elements of Khmer classical dance - *sampeah kru* (deference to one's teacher or guide) <sup>2)</sup>.

This ritual is particularly important because it sanctifies the master-pupil apprenticeship through prayer and encourages the students to acknowledge the spirits of both living and former teachers<sup>3)</sup>. *Sampeah kru* was common practice at the classical dance course of the Royal University of Fine Arts (Faculty of Choreographic Arts, Department of Dance, Classical Dance Course or RUFAC), as I observed on field research in 2004 and 2005<sup>4)</sup>. It is not a fleeting or casual ritual, sometimes lasting more than an hour and other times only 30 minutes<sup>5)</sup>. The duration depends on the scope of each week, but the essence remains the same: salutation to spirits and teachers, both living and deceased. During the ceremony, learners or dancers present offerings of fruit, flowers and incense to instructors and, in return, the instructors accept these offerings, bless the students for their continued growth; more generally, the process reproduces artistic and spiritual hierarchies (Shapiro-Phim 2008, p.61). Abridged versions of *sampeah kru* are even practiced by less distinguished troupes, such as consumeristic dance theaters in Siem Reap, the most popular tourist destination in the Kingdom of Cambodia. Classical dance ethics and a sense of order are internalized in practitioners' bodies through basic ceremonial mechanisms that are widely practiced in Cambodia, and only differ in terms of content. In this sense, the *sampeah kru* is not socially bounded but rather as open as a Buddhist Vihear's portal – to men, women, heterosexual and homosexual - and to any dance troupe who follow the spirit of the ceremony, whether it be RUFAC, a less-than-conventional dance company or the growing ranks of entertainment dance troupes in the mass tourism sector.

This paper explores the potential for the global phenomenon of tourism to become a platform for performing art practitioners, dancers and artists to carve out a space for alternative voices through their performances and perhaps thereby to stimulate social transformation and even encourage evolutionary social transgression in Cambodia. Drawing on the post-colonial discourses of Geertz (1980) and Vickers (1989), this paper adopts tourism as a cultural arena which contributes to the deconstruction of the landscape of a country through the exposure to the wider global gaze. This is achieved by taking the case study of Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA in its calculated promotion of social transgression in the classical arts. The executive art director and founder of the Company, Prumsodun Ok can be viewed as Cohen (2016) has argued in the context of contemporary Southeast Asia, as a “post-traditional artist”, who seeks to untether himself from postcolonial exotic preconceptions imposed by doctrines of authenticity and make themselves relevant to diverse global audiences in addition to domestic observers (pp.188-189). In Indonesia for instance, once-localized shadow puppet arts now have an international reach influenced by global flows of culture where they serve a new type of public on the internet, and appear in art galleries, international collaborations and festivals (ibid, pp.189-191). One of such international events of collaborative performance is, as Fukuoka (2019) introduces, a theatrical experimentation project called “One Table Two Chairs Meeting” held in Tokyo in 2017 and 2018, wherein Southeast Asian artists and directors gathered to create an experimental work together, aiming to construct a platform for cross-cultural artistic dialogue that could transcend the various kinds of cultural boundaries (pp.8-12). These events were carefully staged to avoid being a showcase of formulaic aesthetic representation imposed on Asian contemporary performance-makers by political regimes for nationalistic

purposes. The participants joining these events in Tokyo included, among others, Javanese cross-gender dancer Didik Nini Thowok who suffered from the Indonesian assimilation policy during the Suharto regime, and the severe restrictions placed on ethnic Chinese and their cultural expressions. Didik, as an artist of Chinese descent experienced such restrictions on his artistic creations, which might have triggered him to produce some works which reflect the problems associated with his ethnic identity as a Chinese Indonesian and could help deconstruct the stereotypes of both gender and ethnicity. Ok, the Khmer classical male/gay dancer also participated in this workshop, and is now actively trying to carve out a gay space in the art form in Cambodia. The existence of his nascent dance troupe has imposed a provocative question of gender plurism and plurality in Cambodia and more generally caused people to reflect about who may serve as legitimate stewards of Khmer classical dance. In this, the Company has avoided capitulating to the national agenda around classical arts, and instead sought to respectfully broaden its appeal while deconstructing and challenging hegemonic representations.

To this end, in development of the new performance at the Tokyo meetings, the participants gave not only physical demonstrations and rehearsals, but also prompted questions, dialogue and discussion aimed to find a common ground among the Asian performance-makers in the process. As described by Cohen (2017), that new generation of post-traditional artists in Southeast Asia are often found to be well-educated and able to address both local particularities and global issues (p.191). Indeed, Ok was chosen to be a speaker at one of the venerable TED Conferences in 2017 and in his presentation at the global arena, he eloquently talked about the historical and social implications of Khmer classical dance while discussing how the dance currently contributes to carving out a space for gender consciousness and sexual plurality in and

outside of Cambodia. Balancing the goals of respectful yet avant-garde presentation is materialized on his website.

*“Born to Khmer refugees in the United States, I rose from the poverty and violence-stricken inner city of Long Beach to become the new face of Khmer dance. I use art to heal, illuminate, and empower, reviving the spirit of my people from the enduring forces of conflict. Seen by many as a champion of Khmer culture, I work as an artist, teacher, and writer to shape a world where everyone can blossom into their fullest selves. [...] Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA is Cambodia's first gay dance company. We re-stage Khmer classical dances with a vital freshness and create original, groundbreaking works at the intersection of art and human dignity. As we infuse our tradition with a contemporary spirit, we elevate the quality of life and expression for LGBTQ people in Cambodia and beyond”<sup>6)</sup>.*

In this way, the Company has been found by the international LGBTQ community and the increasing resonance of the LGBTQ movement across the world helped the Company to receive global recognition. In addressing these issues, this paper also evaluates the uneasy transition within the Cambodian society when international tourism pushes historical stakeholders to acknowledge social transformation and transgression.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2-1: Tourism and Khmer Classical Dance in Cambodia

Cambodia joined ASEAN as the last member state on 30 April 1999, which marked the final step for the Cambodian government to come back to the regional and international community after 30-years of political turmoil. The political reappearance of Cambodia to the global society was inevitable at that time to regain trust, attract investments and lead official development assistance from donor countries for the sake of nation-rebuilding. In this process, the Cambodian government found tourism a source of economic stability, with Khmer classical dance and other cultural performing arts playing a role for both the global audience and nationals rediscovering the classic arts. In 2003, in fact UNESCO proclaimed Khmer classical dance as an intangible cultural heritage, which increased its popularity among international tourists significantly. Described as an “indestructible emblem of Cambodian-ness” (Burridge and Frumberg, 2010, p.4), the Khmer classical dance, also known as the royal ballet of Cambodia, is largely believed to draw a direct connection back to the glorious Angkorean civilization of the Khmer Empire. Intentionally in line with this view, the government proudly emphasized its historical and cultural value to the economy and to post-conflict national identity reconstruction; simultaneously, it also shows concern about the potential for dance to devolve into a mere form of entertainment or object of tourist consumption (Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, 2003).

*“Cambodian traditional culture was greatly suffered during the Pol Pot genocidal period between 1975-1979 and both tangible and intangible cultural heritage still face enormous difficulties now, one*

*of which is globalization. Influenced by rapid economic development, industrialization, modern media and tourism development accelerate westernization within Cambodia and the government found it a significant problem affecting Cambodian youth. In order for us to mitigate the social crisis, we need to re-establish the foundation of our culture. A long-term cultural conservation action plan is necessary particularly aiming to protect Khmer classical dance. Cultural preservation and knowledge transmission through education is crucial so that wisdom and artistry are passed from dance masters to a next generation. In this way, the ministry believes to improve the quality of our culture” (pp.1-2).*

The ministry's attitude toward international tourism was, that time, rather strategic. They certainly understood the risk that tourism's infiltration into the country would change the landscape of Cambodian culture and society. They also sought to take advantage of the increasing global phenomena of tourism and leverage it to explore what Cambodian culture meant to both national and international audiences. Although previous studies have suggested that Khmer classical dance is an indelible ritual and spiritual practice in Cambodian society (Cravath 1986 and Pich 2001), Tuchman-Rosta (2014) argues that, it is also unavoidable for the dance to develop niches for secular entertainment and consumption, while separately maintaining dance experiences that reproduce the spiritual or sacred aspects of the tradition. In any case, given the appeal and the commercial value of the dance, the recent phenomenon of the leisure industry in Siem Reap cannot not be ignored. In the global tourism market, the dance as well as other traditional art forms have increasingly been commodified and transformed into touristic attractions that emphasize the

recreational, rather than artistic or spiritual aspects of the traditions. Tuchman-Rosta's main claim was to acknowledge the potentiality for the dance to serve dual purposes. This paper takes this argument a step further by demonstrating that tourism does not monolithically create secular niches of dance, but can also encourage respectful artistic innovation that simultaneously fulfils spiritual and social goals.

## **2-2: Origin and Conventional Contexts of the Khmer Classical Dance**

The earliest inscription mentioning Khmer classical dance can be found in the sixth century which links it directly to the glorious Angkorean civilization of the Khmer Empire. Even in French colonial discourses, Angkor was the prism through which the civilizations of Indochina were validated, with traditions such as dance constituting a key anchor for Cambodian nationalism (Sasagawa 2005, p.419). In 1863 King Norodom signed a treaty with France to establish a protectorate in Cambodia, facilitating the French goal of *mission civilisatrice*, thereby creating a premise on which colonial intervention could be justified on the basis of saving from extinction what remained of Khmer civilization and culture. Narratives represented by Cravath (1986) and Sam (1994, 2008) have an affinity with French historiography, often describing the dance as a legitimizing symbol of the nation's connection to Angkor. It also transpired that the period of the French protectorate tended to feature Khmer classical dancers as celestial nymphs or maiden servants bringing a good harvest, prosperity and protection for the kingdom (Some 2008, p.2).

This French-era understanding of female supremacy of the dance established a fairly narrow framework of inclusion. This materialized most significantly in 2003 when UNESCO proclaimed Khmer dance an intangible heritage of humanity with an explicit mention of the exclusive role of females

in performing the four main dance roles: female, male, giant, and monkey<sup>7</sup>). UNESCO emphasized that all roles were originally performed by female practitioners. Only later in the 1960's was the monkey role played by a male dancer, a custom that continues until the present day (ibid, p.2). Predictably, female ownership of the dance tradition has been taken for granted, or at least has not been a central concern among researchers. In this category, some of the research introduced below is differentiated from more conventional work by virtue of employing critical, ethnographic research methods and/or studying a fresh context of the dance but what is rarely problematized is the unspoken bracketing of biological sex in determining who suitable informants are. In this regard, this paper discusses the conflicting narratives of contemporary gender consciousness, as well as the context in which future transgressions and the evolution of Khmer classical dance would face.

In her dissertation, Shapiro (1994) drew the dance into a context beyond the conventional discourse of the time. As her focus was on individual dancers at RUFAC, she developed an ethnography of the ritualistic and political side of the art form. Her research emphatically highlights its contribution to post-genocide identity reconstruction. This is particularly essential as it captured the fading experiences of those who had directly experienced the dramatic losses to the art form in the modern era. The valuable research deals with the timely revival of the art form after the violence of the Democratic Kampuchea period in the 1970s, in which a radical communist regime under Pol Pot decimated Cambodia's cultural assets (Shapiro-Phim 2002).

Another ethnography that captured the evolving modes of knowledge transmission was developed by Hagai (2008, 2009), based on participatory-observation at RUFAC. In this work, she reveals that the moral and hierarchical

structure accumulated through master-pupil apprenticeship which anchors trans-generational learning is one of the fundamental, yet subtly performed, components of the dance tradition at the school. The students learn choreographic styles and techniques by imitating gestural movements demonstrated by the teachers or being directly touched and guided by them, often without verbal discussions. Khmer classical dance education at RUFAC centered on disseminating the technical aspect of the dance, but also indirectly worked to instill discipline, moral ethics and wisdom, which epitomize spirituality in Cambodia. Later works by Hagai (2018, 2019a and 2019b) paid keener attentions to alternative voices represented through contemporary performing arts including Khmer classical dance and argued for the inevitability of accepting and normalizing the transgressions that are pushing the boundaries of these art forms.

### **2-3: LGBTQ Discourse in Southeast Asia and Cambodia**

Cambodia has experienced increased globalization, especially after 1999 when it became the last state to join the ambitious political framework of ASEAN. The interconnectivity among member states enhanced through the regionalism naturally stimulates exchange of cultural influences<sup>8)</sup>. Thailand, for instance, strategically capitalizes on its reputation of being LGBTQ-friendly, specifically in the entertainment and medical tourism domains, and has served as a benchmark in Southeast Asia more generally, and more specifically in Cambodia<sup>9)</sup>. That being said, because many Thai Buddhists believe that being born non-cisgendered is the result of misdeeds in past lifetimes, or of the inability to control one's desires (Ojanen et al., 2016, p.44), human rights abuses at certain levels of society create an atmosphere of marginalization and alienation from the mainstream. Discrimination and hostility toward non-

cisgender people in families, educational institutions, workplaces, religious contexts, health care settings, media and the military hinder social cohesion. It seems that as long as LGBTQ associated industries bring pink money to stimulate the Thai economy, they are welcome but otherwise moral codes should not be overly disturbed by them. Optimism remains low that recognition of sexual minorities will permeate all parts of the population; rather, socially and politically expedient double standards about gender are more likely to come into relief (ibid, pp.43-44).

As well as other countries in Southeast Asia, rapid economic development, industrialization and urbanization have strongly reshaped the socio-cultural landscape in Cambodia. At the macro level, social change, political awareness and gender consciousness have been only slowly nurtured. In the absence of a same-sex marriage law and other legislative steps to protect the human rights of LGBTQ people, some encouraging developments have materialized in recent years, particularly the establishment of the Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK) in 2009, an NGO ensuring long-term protection and support of equal rights and acceptance for the LGBTQ population (Cambodian Center for Human Rights 2010, p.6). RoCK launched, for instance, a dialogue on public policies to promote LGBTQ's rights in Cambodia in 2018, hoping this dialogue would be a steppingstone in Cambodian legislative reform to strengthen LGBTQ individuals' social inclusiveness. Influenced by this kind of gender awareness movement in civil society, at the micro level reproductive health, fertility treatment, HIV, abortion, contraception, same-sex unions, rainbow couples and gender recognition have become more familiar topics in people's daily life than in the previous decade. Sexual practices and discourses are changing as well; for instance, despite the cultural taboo of speaking about sexuality and sexual practices (Ledgerwood 1990), Hoefinger (2011)

documents how young girls in the city now more openly talk about their sexual experiences, showing their desires to be deemed sexually modern and liberal while otherwise maintaining elements of respectable Khmer wholesomeness and femininity in other domains (pp.254-256).

The incremental progress in this transition comes into relief when sexuality meets traditional arts. A 21-year-old male dancer of the Company admitted that he has never fully come out about his sexuality to his parents, although they know that he is now a part of the liberal dance establishment which advocates elevating the quality of life and expression for LGBTQ people in the Kingdom. His sister and brother are supportive of his decision to participate in dance practice with a gay dance group. In contrast, he suggests that the older generation of family members, namely his parents, uncles and aunts, who happen to be medical doctors and dentists – i.e. socially established occupations – may disagree with this; in fact, he once was advised not to be engaged in dance too seriously, but rather to take it as a part time job<sup>10</sup>). He mentioned he was a little bit worried about how his participation in the Company would play out and this perhaps is why Hoefinger (2011) argues that identities and sexualities are becoming “hybridized” (p.256). In his case, one can find hybridity in oneself: despite being involved in performing art professionally, and personally wishing to contribute to social transformation by building a new narrative of what being a sexual minority means in society, he may still wish to avoid direct challenges to his private life and sexuality.

### **3. Methodology: Ethnographic Approach**

The data and insights in this paper are based on long term ethnographic research on Khmer classical dance. With scholarship offered by a public

foundation in Japan, the original research was undertaken from May 2003 to September 2005, mainly in Phnom Penh, out of which 16-months of field research was conducted at RUFAC (May 2004 to September 2005). Methodologies adopted during that time included Khmer language acquisition for direct interviews, document collection, curriculum analysis and participatory observation as a dance student in morning trainings at RUFAC<sup>11)</sup>.

Sporadic follow-up and regular return visits were carried out during the period stretching from 2006 to 2019. Recent field research has continued the more general survey of the breadth of classical dance representations in Cambodia<sup>12)</sup>. This included troupes working with Cambodia Living Arts (NGO), New Cambodian Artists (contemporary dance company), Navutu Dreams (resort and wellness retreat), Chili Pepper (restaurant/dance theater), Apsara Terrace: Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor (hotel/dance theater), Apsara Theatre: Angkor Village (hotel/dance theater), Art Shadow Restaurant (restaurant/hotel/dance theater), Smile of Angkor (dance theater), and Angkor Dynasty (dance theater). Surveying the diverse perspectives on dance development has been the objective throughout the fieldwork, with a wide range of informants offering insights into the conflicting narratives over the boundaries of the dance.

One of the most significant field visits, which certainly marked a turning point in my study was a trip from May 6-16, 2018, which uncovered the emergence of progressive dance troupes and their motivations and messages for establishing their institutions. For this purpose, my research assistant and I visited the Company and undertook initial ethnography and participatory observation with the artistic director and all the dancers. It was my first encounter with Ok in person and the first formal interview lasted 3 hours. Face to face communication with all 5 performers helped to elaborate their passion,

pride and professional obligation in cultivating a dance arena accessible to a wide audience, but also revealed various degrees of anxiety about being exposed to the public eye as gay men. In analyzing on these experiences, academic literature about self-reflectivity and postcolonial research, and third world feminism in works from Edward Said (1978), Clifford Geertz (1973, 1980), James Clifford (1986, 1997), and Mari Oka (2000, 2006) became influential in my thinking. Although the 2 years and 6 months period of fieldwork in Cambodia from 2003 to 2005 allowed me to gain access to considerable embedded knowledge of RUFAC, as many researchers I was repeatedly forced to reconsider the scope of my work. Was my interpretation of RUFAC's dance education as a form of female empowerment a fair summary of their orientation or were they effectively reinforcing female ownership of the dance tradition and thereby developing future barriers against gender pluralism on stage and in Cambodian society as a whole?

Therefore, in terms of methodology this study can be characterized as a form of "reciprocal ethnography", as perhaps opposed to what might have been viewed as an "exploitative colonialist relationship" (Hoefinger, 2013 p.53). To this end, one of the latest research methods conducted in July 2019 was rather experimental in that Ok visited me in Japan, instead of me, as the researcher visiting Cambodia. Through this opportunity, Ok and I intentionally avoided the conventional asymmetric relationship between an informant and a researcher, and attempted to create a tangible form of reciprocity between us since he had an opportunity to spend a month in Japan, including three weeks on Mount Koya, the center of Shingon Buddhism with an external grant provided by Dance/USA. Reflecting on my position as a researcher aiming to establish a more postcolonial feminist perspective, I wanted to utilize this chance to encourage and observe him in his effort to promote his form of LGBTQ

advocacy-based dance, using legitimizing venues such as academic seminars and physical dance workshops at universities. From a methodological perspective, that week allowed me to intensively engage in various forms of interactions with Ok and other participants, which went a long way toward encouraging a trans-disciplinary sense of acceptance, recognition and mutual respect.

#### **4. Prumsodun Ok and Cambodia's First Gay Dance Company**

Born in 1987 and raised in the Khmer-American diaspora community in Long Beach, California which has the largest Khmer population outside of Cambodia, Ok's upbringing is directly connected to Cambodia's modern history, particularly the social and cultural fragmentation arising from the Khmer Rouge's war on art, religion and scholarship. Diaspora communities are inherently involved in the task of reproducing their homeland culture – including language, cuisine, and ceremony - but are also inescapably doing so in a milieu that presents new social and material challenges. Like many born in such a community, Ok's journey to explore his potential contribution started early in his childhood with exposure to diaspora activities that diverged from mainstream American culture. In his case, he first saw and imitated dance when he was 4 years old, often while wearing his sister's red dress. When he was 16 years old, he began coming with his sisters to dance class where he watched Sophiline Cheam Shapiro's teaching at a community-based school, Khmer Arts Academy. He observed for a whole year before he was able to ask to join her class<sup>13)</sup>.

Fast forward to 2015, the establishment of the Company is a manifestation of his continuing commitment to social transformation through artistic

dialogue both inside and outside of Cambodia. Although Ok's dance skills and passion were being steadily publicized to Cambodian and international audiences, the increasing resonance of the LGBTQ movement across the world helped the dance troupe to receive more global recognitions specially since the venerable TED Conference and other international art foundations have chosen Ok as a recipient of various grants and fellowships. In this way he hopes to boost the maturity and quality of the dance discourse in a postmodern era that has greater space for airing alternative voices.

Despite the strength of his position, readers might question Ok's claims to authority. How could a male dancer so readily develop legitimacy and an insider perspective in a sector dominated by female practitioners that has been institutionally unwelcoming to men? As described above, Ok skirted the restrictions placed on (gay) men by attending classical dance education outside of Cambodia, where less strict customary practices are applied. In this, Ok's upbringing in a refugee family in Long Beach provided not only the openness for his identity, but also a dose of legitimacy borne of studying at a school in the largest Cambodian diaspora community. At the Khmer Arts Academy, a new generation of Cambodian children and teenagers has the opportunity to learn, appreciate and preserve their culture without some of the institutional and moral conflicts of the motherland. According to Shapiro, she could be as flexible as she wanted in terms of admission and participation. This not only enabled, but also inspired, a male dancer to gain access to the sacred classical dance culture. And perhaps ironically, what Ok inherited from his mentor Shapiro, a well-known alumnus of RUFAC from the 1980s, are the officially-sanctioned techniques and dance philosophy of Cambodia's most authoritative institution, RUFAC. In this sense, Ok belongs to a lineage of artistry rooted in RUFAC that would, in Cambodia at least, be denied to those of his biological

sex.

Ok's identity becomes a platform for exploring the future of Khmer classical dance. The fact that Ok recently established the Company is a poignant statement about the shifting trends in dance education. This sentiment was corroborated to me by Shapiro when I asked how she reacted to Ok's request to join her lessons. She responded rather simply: she does not judge her applicants by personality, let alone survey their sexual preferences<sup>14</sup>). Indeed, Shapiro went a step further by gently revising my presumption that having gay students would present some kind of difficulty for a teacher. Rather, she explained "what makes a student difficult or easy to teach is how they respond to instruction, how hard they work and how curious they are"<sup>15</sup>). Thanks to this pedagogical neutrality, Ok could focus on the essentials: channeling his energy to learn the techniques and core values of the dance, rather than dwell on the novelty of his access. In this sense, Ok is a symbol that outsiders can serve an important and evolving role as stewards of the classical arts. In the process of developing his own identity and dance institutions, Ok pays homage to the core art form by following the footsteps of his predecessors, but also nudges boundaries by providing an alternative, original and unique direction for those, like himself, who would take on the mantle of the next generation of Khmer dance practitioners.

## **5. Alternative Voices Reflected through Today's Cambodian Performing Arts**

In the post-Khmer Rouge contemporary music scene for instance, more diverse and alternative voices can be heard - opposed to the previous era when the music scene was only reserved for a bourgeois urban elite. In this section,

praxes of other performing arts company and artist are considered. Through songs written by marginalized people and working class young adults, such as an all-girl garment factory workers' band called Messenger Band, there is a triumphant mark of pluralism (Saphan 2015, pp. 31-32). The Cambodian-American hip-hop artist Bochan Huy is another example, having undertaken the challenge of revisiting the iconic tune *I'm Sixteen*, which was originally composed by Voy Ho and sung by Ros Serey Sothea in the 1960s. Huy "covered" the pre-genocide-era music with hip-hop rhythms and new lyrics expressing the Cambodian diaspora's particular survival struggles. Her hip-hop interpretation changed the tone and the message from an innocent coming-of-age celebration to a feminist message of empowerment (ibid, p.33). Although her music video is banned by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts for the lack of sensitivity in donning the distinctive apsara costume and headset for the music video, one can also believe that her purpose in doing so was meant to be a respectful, if artistic, portrayal of the goddess as a symbol of female empowerment, which is not necessarily contrary to conventional perception of the apsara. In this sense, the conflict between traditionalists and innovators is perhaps a necessary step in social transformation. And it is also not necessarily the conservative institutions that block the path, but general public sentiment.

Alternative voices also can be heard from the case of the New Cambodian Artists (hereafter NCA), Cambodia's first all-female contemporary dance company established in 2012 by Bob Ruijzendaal, the company's former artistic director. It is now co-owned by an all-female team of four dancers and its new director, Khon Srey Neang, based in Siem Reap. The NCA has been developing a culture of contemporary dance and empowerment through artistic expression throughout the Kingdom, but their progress hit a number of snags. One of which was that they had to lobby the Cambodian Ministry of Culture

and Fine Arts for a year to gain certification as the country's first contemporary dance company in 2016<sup>16</sup>). On a field visit in May 2018, I first encountered their work in the form of a piece choreographed by a Belgian artist and trainer who visits Cambodia for 2 months every year to provide technical support. Even incomplete in rehearsal, it was emotionally powerful and a beautiful representation of women in agony. With mouth twisted and hands bound with chains, a barefoot female dancer in a black shirt and leggings writhed with pain, unable to stand still anymore, rolling over and over on the stage, showing how much burden she had to carry in her husband-dominated family setting, hierarchical workplace or patriarchal society. The silent scream in her head perhaps represented her desire to run away from gendered constraints, obligation, oppression, discrimination or abuse. The motif of the composition was initially proposed by the performers themselves, with the trainer choreographing the piece based on their awareness of gender issues. It may seem contradictory that the troupe representing expressions of Cambodia women's empowerment was actually founded by the Dutch man, but his function in this context was rather mediation than intervention, indirectly contributing to the transformation of the dancers' critical awareness and their amplified maturity into visible art forms on the stage. This indicates that performers are potentially in a position to capture and represent complex social issues, or to channel socially-sensitive emotional outbursts through performance.

## 6. Challenges and Future Directions

Throughout my fieldwork, counterarguments against the gay dance troupe have also emerged. For example, from various sources: "UNESCO stipulates

that the female successors should take care of the dance and this authoritative view should be respected”, “Cambodian society is not ready for embracing gay people yet”, “there should be less problem for gay dancers in the contemporary dance genre but would be controversial in the classical dance genre”<sup>17</sup>). Ok firstly objected to UNESCO’s strict definition, questioning why such an institution was entitled to arbitrate culture so precisely. While UNESCO is considered one of the most progressive cultural institutions, Ok believes that by reifying a very restrictive definition of historical dance, it effectively pre-empts the natural evolution of culture. The gay dance company also receives criticisms from the other side, suggesting that they are “not gay enough” or that they should emphasize their gayness rather than focusing on objective measures of success in classical dance<sup>18</sup>). This suggests that their approach is more universal than an expression of homosexual art. Given that “the mainstream of LGBTQ culture often means an exploitive form of American consumerism”, Ok tries to carefully avoid a position where they “allow themselves to be stereotyped”<sup>19</sup>). In his opinion, Khmer classical dance is indeed a mirror of heaven that reflects the societies’ highest image of beauty, order and well-being, but that this view should be considered endogenous, or co-created by society in general, not by government or elites. In this view, the reason that there have been no explicit descriptions of LGBTQ people in dance is because they are marginalized in society; Ok however believes that this can be counteracted by working to shape society’s image of ideal: “by using this art form to create a clear space for the LGBTQ community within this tradition, it is nothing less than choreographing heaven itself and in that process, choreographing a model of society”<sup>20</sup>). Reflecting on the stigma he has suffered as a refugee and a gay man, he hopes to boost the maturity of society and quality of the dance discourse to arrive at a postmodern era with greater space

for airing alternative voices more generally.

## 7. Conclusion

Over the 15 years in which I have observed the evolution of dance in Cambodia, it is becoming apparent that a boom in progressive representations of society are being channeled through the performing arts. The dance groups exhibited in this paper represent a selection of progressive shifts that are also echoed at the international level: LGBTQ rights and feminism. And, as with their international counterparts, the Cambodian local groups are struggling to gain legitimacy for their message through dance on many fronts: conservative gatekeepers, hesitant public sentiment and fixed gender expectations. It is not surprising, therefore, that the dance troupes have some international orientation relating to the way they were founded or the audience they serve. They demonstrated that the tourism domain can encourage respectful artistic innovation in order to cement their position as stewards of dance culture and mouthpieces on new social values.

This is perhaps most apparent in the case of Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA, the first gay dance company in Cambodia. The noble classical dance lineage brought by the founder, the technical excellence in dance training, respect for ethical and cultural norms of dance, and lack of obvious contradictions to Angkorean dance tradition make this dance troupe unimpeachably legitimate in their quest to transgress boundaries while stewarding classical traditions. As with the other dance troupe reviewed, critics can and should question to the international origins and influences of these groups. Establishing local authenticity and building credibility is an ongoing goal on which any observer would find steady progress. Critically questioning the external influences from

tourism is, in fact, a chance for Cambodians to recognize how plurality remains a necessary element of rebuilding a society fragmented by internal conflict, a wide diaspora, and post-colonial institutions.

## Notes

- 1) Participatory-observation at the Company's studio in Phnom Penh, May 8, 2018.
- 2) In Khmer language, *sampeah* means to greet or to salute and *kru* indicates teachers or masters of knowledge. *sampeah kru* is a greeting or way of showing respect to your masters.
- 3) Since June 16, 2018, the Company's regular performance of VAJRAMALA: Spirit of Khmer Dance takes place on Saturdays and Sundays at Java Café, Tuol Tompong, Phnom Penh. For this, the Company held a momentous *sampeah kru* for the inauguration of the new theater, in which they asked for spiritual guidance and protection from the masters of artistry in bringing life to the theater (personal digital correspondence with Ok, May 17, 2018).
- 4) With scholarship offered by a public interest incorporated foundation, the original research was completed from 2003-2005, mainly in Phnom Penh and subsequently in Siem Reap, out of which 18-month intensive field research was held at RUFAC from May 2004 to September 2005.
- 5) Thursday is deemed as the day of *kru* in Hindu tradition and if that Thursday falls on a full moon, it is considered even more auspicious and efficacious. Sometimes, however such as in the diaspora in the United States, the ritual might take place on Saturdays or whenever the group gathers (personal digital correspondence with Ok, June 13, 2018).
- 6) <https://www.prunisodun.com/copy-of-home>. Retrieved September 6, 2019.
- 7) More information is available at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/royal-ballet-of-cambodia-00060>.
- 8) The concept of formation of ASEAN community emphasized three levels of interaction; nation to nation interaction, community to community interaction and finally person to person communication. More information is available at Lallana, E. C. (2013).
- 9) Ojanen, Ratanashevorn & Boonkerd (2016) introduced a survey result indicating that people in Indonesia and Malaysia showed intolerance toward gay or lesbian neighbors, whereas openness remained in the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam (p.43).
- 10) Interview with a dancer at the Company, May 8, 2018.
- 11) More precisely at RUFAC, Semi-structured interviews with dance students, dance teachers, government employees, academics, NGO representatives were also a part of the

research. More importantly, a questionnaire survey was implemented at RUFAC in May 2004 yielding 169 responses from the dance students, with in-depth follow-up in December 2004 and May 2005, which included additional open-ended interviews with some of the students and teachers to clarify issues of inquiry involving identity construction, professional ethics, career expectations, as well as the role of gender in Khmer classical dance.

- 12) This paper is a part of my research “Khmer classical dance and tourism: Representation of authenticity in the dance and its compromises” which has been funded by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science or JSPS from 2018 for three years.
- 13) Personal digital correspondence with Ok, July 10, 2018.
- 14) Personal digital correspondence with Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, December 11, 2017.
- 15) Personal digital correspondence with Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, December 11, 2017.
- 16) Interview with NCA director Srey Neung, May 15, 2018
- 17) Interview with an anonymous informant on May 8, 2018 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
- 18) Ok’s special lecture on July 4, 2019, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan.
- 19) Ok’s special lecture on July 4, 2019, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan.
- 20) Ok’s special lecture on July 4, 2019, Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan.

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