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Princess Norodom Buppha Devi (1943–2019): A Life in Dance

Suppya Hélène Nut and Boreth Ly

*This article pays tribute to the late Princess Norodom Buppha Devi (1943–2109) who played a major role in preserving Khmer court dance after the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia (1975–1979). By looking at some of the innovative choreographies, costumes and musical choices (especially dance dramas) she created, we point out that Khmer court dance is neither purely ritualistic nor rigid; there is room for innovations. Furthermore, we argue that the Princess had participated in modernizing traditional Khmer court dance throughout her life. To this end, we look closely at her signature role in the so-called “Apsara Dance,” a role that catapulted her to fame and was captured as a celluloid apparition by the French filmmaker, Marcel Camus in his 1962 film, *L’Oiseau de Paradis* (The Bird of Paradise). We conclude by looking at the innovative elements she created for her last choreography, *Metamorphoses*. This work exemplifies how Khmer court dance can adapt to modern innovation, yet retain its traditional role as art and marker of cultural identity.*

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We are most fortunate that in 2003, *Robam Preah Reach Trop* (Khmer Court dance) was inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Heritage. However, that is not enough; we need to do more to preserve this art form. After my teachers’ generation and myself, the younger generation knows very little about this heritage. This is why I implore everybody from all walks of life to help us preserve this national treasure.

—Princess Norodom Buppha Devi

A Dancer is Born

Princess Norodom Buppha Devi (1943–2019), who passed away on 18 November 2019, was a daughter of King Norodom Sihanouk (1922–2012) and Neak Moneang Phat Kanhol (1920–1969); Samdech Reach Botrei Preah Ream Norodom Buppha Devi was a title given to her by her father. Her Royal Highness played a significant role in the history and practice of Khmer court dance. This article pays tribute to this extraordinary artist, her life in court theatre, and her dedication to its artists in Cambodia and the Khmer diaspora around the world.²

The Princess was born at Teaksin Phearom, a mansion belonging to King Sisowath Monivong, her great-grandfather. This mansion later became the home of her grandmother, Queen Sisowath Kossomak, the



FIGURE 1. Princess Buppha Devi makes offerings to the spirits of dance teachers before a performance of *Sovannahong*, a dance-drama at Chatomukh Theatre in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 2008. (Photo: Courtesy of Anders Jiras)

sole patroness of the Royal Ballet from 1953 to 1970.³ The Princess' artistic lineage harkened back to a long line of court dancers and musicians. Her mother was a leading dancer; her father was a song composer and film director.

Raised by her grandparents, King Norodom Suramarit (1896–1960) and Queen Sisowath Monivong Kossomak Nearirath Serey Vathana (1904–1975), Princess Buppha Devi was immersed in the world of music and dance from a very young age. According to Her Royal Highness, she began to learn to dance as soon as she was able to walk. She recalled imitating the gestures and body movements of older students who were dancing in the front row. Following their moves, she taught herself the four main roles: male, female, giant, and monkey. When she was a teenager, she caught her grandmother's attention. Subsequently, her aunts, who were master dancers, taught her the nuances of the more complicated roles. When Princess Buppha Devi turned eighteen in 1961, she was appointed the lead dancer for princess roles in the Royal Ballet and performed in important diplomatic events in Cambodia and abroad.

Dance as Diplomacy

Cambodia started its cultural and artistic transformation during the Sangkum period (1953–1970) under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk.⁴ Crowned in 1941 under the French Protectorate and in the midst of World War II, Prince Sihanouk witnessed the collapse of French colonialism and the rise of nationalist contesting powers as a prelude to the cold war between the Eastern and the Western blocs. After gaining independence from France in 1953, he was convinced that a third path could save Cambodia from a regrettable outcome that he already witnessed in neighboring countries. During the Cold War, Vietnam was divided into north and south from 1954 to 1975 between communist and non-communist regimes. Moreover, Laos had three different contesting political parties, The Pathet Lao (founded 1950), The Royal Lao Government (1947–1975) and The Lao Neutral Party (Lao Pen Kang, founded 1961).⁵

Prince Sihanouk believed that the neutrality advocated by Third World leaders in the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung (Indonesia), in which he actively joined, could preserve Cambodia from neighboring conflicts.⁶ He was well aware that his country was small, lacking in natural resources, and was dependent on foreign aid (Acharya and Tan 2008: 1–10). To gain international attention, Prince Sihanouk relied on two national art forms associated with refinement, heritage, and antiquity that had already entered the West's imaginaries, the ancient Hindu and Buddhist temples of Angkor and the Royal Ballet.

Colonial display and exhibition of these forms represented authentic Khmer culture in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, Prince Sihanouk considered it timely to direct these two cultural resources to serve the newly independent country and his political position. As architectural historian Michael Falser (2014) and anthropologist Hideo Sasagawa (2005) commented, Sihanouk used a wide range of media (newspapers, magazines, radio and films) to market the images of Angkor and the Royal Ballet for international audiences. In brief, these two art forms had gained great visibility for Cambodia.

Over the years, Cambodia welcomed many different heads of state from countries across the political spectrum, from the Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru, the President of Indonesia Sukarno, the President of Yugoslavia Josip Broz Tito, the President of France Charles de Gaulle, to famous figures such as Princess Margaret of Great Britain and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy of the U. S., giving glittering and glamorous images of the kingdom (Cambacérès 2013: 1814). These state sponsored occasions were opportunities for Sihanouk to charm his guests with dance performances that were carefully chosen and arranged by his mother, Queen Kossamak. During the Sangkum period, the number of dance performances was astonishingly high, at a rate of one performance per week (Cravath 2007: 163). Photographs of performances of royal dances featured regularly in the French and English versions of the deluxe photo magazine *Kambuja* to showcase the arts and culture of the kingdom to international readers.⁷

Queen Kossamak was well aware of the tastes and inclinations of the international audiences, and she started to revamp the Royal Ballet as soon as the country recovered its independence in 1953 in order to meet those international tastes. A woman of great intellect and remarkable strategist, the Queen commissioned the creation of short dance pieces—mostly extracted from long traditional dance dramas such as *Tep Monorom* (Welcome Dance), *Apsara*, *Chhun Por* (Blessing Dance), *Moni Mekhala and Ream Eysa*—that are suitable for the short attention span of a diplomatic audience.⁸ A dance program was distributed to western guests in their respective languages to explain the different ballets.

“Apsara Dance” in Historical Context

It was in this context of nation-building and past-reinvention that the so-called, Apsara Dance, a ballet focused on female roles, was imagined and conceived by Queen Kossamak. Contrary to national sentiment and fetish for authenticity, the construction of the Apsara

figure, a female deity, is rooted in the fictional literatures written by Pierre Loti (*Un Pèlerin d'Angkor* [A Pilgrimage to Angkor] 1912) and Pierre Benoit (*Le Roi lépreux* [King of the Lepers] 1927) as well as to the historical knowledge and archaeological expertise developed since the return of Angkor to Cambodian control in 1907 from Siam (Thailand).⁹ Gradually, the image of celestial deities carved in the walls of Angkor temples, called *apsara* by the French, became associated with the royal dancers and were favored by the French literati. In 1962, a French movie *L'Oiseau de Paradis* (The Bird of Paradise) made a sensation by filming a dance performed by Princess Norodom Buppha Devi. It narrated a love story between a young boy and a female dancer that took place at the emblematic site of Angkor. Marcel Camus, the director of the film, wished to have the young Princess Buppha Devi, star dancer of the Royal Ballet, for the female lead, but court etiquette did not allow this sort of public exposure. He nevertheless convinced the Queen to have her appear in a short dance sequence. In the center of a large stage, we see the Princess, attired in a dazzling diaphanous costume resembling the carved *apsara*, moving gracefully from the group of dancers and starting to dance. The sequence lasts only a few minutes but left an extraordinary impression as the Princess embodied for the first time a living *apsara* of Angkor Wat.¹⁰

The idea of further choreographing the “Apsara Dance” emerged before King Sihanouk’s visit to France in 1964. The event was important for the King, who had great respect and admiration for General Charles de Gaulle and sought to get support for his political neutrality as well as to promote tourism in Cambodia. The diplomatic relations between the United States and Cambodia had broken down in 1963. By 1965, the United States had withdrawn its embassy from the Kingdom and previous to that had stopped providing aid to Cambodia. It was at this historical moment that France became one of the main supporters of Sihanouk’s neutrality, and, as such, the diplomatic meeting with President de Gaulle was considered crucial.

According to the late Princess Buppha Devi, “The Apsara Dance consisted of seven female dancers who embodied the celestial deities. They were famous for their songs and dances which enchanted the Paradise of Indra, the god of rain.”¹¹ Thus, the “Apsara Dance” was conceived to exude sensuality, charm, and refinement through gestures, movements, melodies and song. Moreover, the choice of the two leading male voices, Sos Mach and Sinn Sisamouth, two famous interpreters of popular songs selected by the King, provided a melodious and tranquil ambiance.

According to Falser, these reinventions of national culture—particularly rooted in the “Apsara Dance”—stressed an imputed

unbroken line with Angkor and provided the possibility for Cambodians to make retrospective cultural claims while distancing the Khmer Royal Ballet from its Thai counterpart (Falser 2014: 712–715).¹² Thus the dance reassessed and retraced not only its genealogy with Angkor but also embodied the grandeur of the Angkorian civilization. It resurrected Angkor in a danced lapse of time, blurring boundaries between past and present. From the outset, the “Apsara Dance” was exclusively conceived for and performed before international guests, as were many court dances created in the Sangkum period.

The premiere of the “Apsara Dance” took place in Paris at the Opéra Garnier on 25 June 1964 in a *soirée de gala franco-khmère* before the President of France, Charles de Gaulle and the Cambodian Chief of State, King Norodom Sihanouk.¹³ Accompanied by the melodious male voice of Sinn Sisamouth, Princess Norodom Buppha Devi’s performance exuded grace, refinement, femininity, and beauty. The performance had a strong impact upon the French audience, who lauded the amazing costumes and graceful movements. Furthermore, Princess Buppha Devi’s interpretation was praised in a French magazine as, “Domine de l’élégance de ses attaches, de sa science chorégraphique et de sa présence sur scène” (Her interpretation mirrors her refined elegance, her choreographic knowledge and charisma) (“Chroniques” 1964: 159).

The success of the Paris premiere convinced Queen Kossamak and her son, Prince Sihanouk, to include the dance on programs on important diplomatic events and for special guests such as President Suharto of Indonesia (1968), Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia (1968), and Prime Minister Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia (1968). When Prince Sihanouk wanted to welcome guests in an intimate atmosphere far from the royal protocol of the Royal Palace, he chose Chamcar Mon, a private residence located in the southern district of Phnom Penh. For instance, Jacqueline Kennedy was treated to a performance of the “Apsara Dance” at Chamcar Mon during her visit to Cambodia in 1967 (“Madame Jacqueline Kennedy” 1967: 25–39).¹⁴

The success of the “Apsara Dance” in France inspired Sihanouk to produce and direct a film titled *Apsara* in 1966. In the opening shot, a stunningly beautiful face adorned with an extraordinary gilded headdress with spire-like pointed triple lotus flower; a white frangipani flower adorned her left temple and a garland of frangipani by her right temple.¹⁵ Slowly the camera disclosed the rest of her body bedecked in a sparkling costume: a flesh-colored blouse enveloping her chest, a diaphanous skirt ornamented with elaborate glittering embroideries, and lavish jewelry. It was as if suddenly an image had come to life, as if a goddess had descended from Paradise and begun an exquisite dance.

The film had its premiere in Phnom Penh in 1966 and was attended by government officials and members of the diplomatic community before its release in cinemas throughout the kingdom. Beyond the world of fantasy, the film *Apsara* exalted the courage of Cambodia's military to counter the attacks by aggressive "imperialists" (i.e., the Americans and the South Vietnamese). More important, the film immortalizes the beauty and grace of Princess Buppha Devi and the dance itself. In brief, it was the role of the white Apsara, the principal dancer in the "Apsara Dance," that propelled Her Royal Highness to fame among local Cambodians and international audiences.

Her Return from Exile

A coup d'état took place in 1970 under General Lon Nol and Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak (Sihanouk's cousin) that put an end to the monarchy under Queen Sisowath Kossamak. The Khmer Republic was established and lasted from 1970 to 1975 (Ly 2020: 1). This change of political regime interrupted the Princess' career as the principal dancer in the Royal Ballet. Due to the close diplomatic relationship between the monarchy and China, she left for Peking (Beijing) in 1973 to join her father, who found shelter there along with a few other relatives and artists. After spending a year in Beijing, the Princess left for Paris in 1976 and stayed there until the end of conflict in Cambodia in 1990. During her years of exile, the Princess saw the ravages made by the Khmer Rouge regime, namely the murdering of many of her relatives and artists in the Royal Ballet.¹⁶

The Princess returned to Cambodia in 1991 after The Paris Accord, an agreement that was signed on 23 October 1991 between nineteen countries that put an end to the Cambodian–Vietnamese war.¹⁷ In order to help resurrect the Royal Ballet, she accepted positions in the Cambodian government that allowed her to play important roles in the cultural domain. She successively held the positions of Vice Deputy of Culture and Fine Arts (1993–1996) and Minister of Culture and Fine Arts (1998–2001). The artistic situation in Cambodia during the 1990s was still very fragile. The royal dance troupe was near extinction under the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), which had been responsible for more than one million deaths in a population of eight million (Chandler 1999: 1). By 1980, only ten percent of artists of the Royal Ballet had survived. Archives as well as costumes and props had been mostly reduced to ashes (Shapiro 1994: 184; Nut 20 August 2009). It took the very few surviving artists more than a decade to resurrect memories and revive choreographies. As a result, the works accomplished by these master dancers made it possible for the Princess to have the Royal Ballet of Cambodia inscribed in the list of Oral and

Intangible Heritage of Humanity of UNESCO on 7 November 2003 (UNESCO Phnom Penh Office and Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts 2004). When the Princess was appointed a member of the Senate in 2004, she became more involved in choreographic works and created masterpieces that were performed in Cambodia and abroad.

Last Choreography: *Metamorphoses*

Metamorphoses, a dance-drama commissioned by Zaman Productions (Nantes) in 2017, was the last choreography of Princess Buppha Devi. It is worth noting that this is the first time in history that a Greek myth was adapted for Khmer court dance. This cross-cultural production was a tribute to the French artist Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), who encountered the Cambodian Royal dance troupe in 1906 during its visit to France (Ajalbert 1939: 9).¹⁸

Rodin was mesmerized and inspired by the Cambodian dancers' graceful hand gestures, flowing tunics, and movements. He tried to capture them in his drawings and watercolors. Moreover, the French artist saw the Cambodian dancers as the living symbols of Psyche, whose beauty surpassed the goddess Aphrodite. He wanted to cast images of the dancers in his monumental sculpture the Gates of Hell, but he passed away before the completion of this art project (Nut and Vidal 2018: 7–9).

The story of Psyche comes from the *Metamorphoses* of Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis (Platonicus) (2nd century CE) and details trials of Psyche and Cupid, the god of love, leading to their marriage. Psyche was mistreated by her sisters and Aphrodite because she was too beautiful. After a series of ordeals, she was saved by the god Cupid and transformed into a goddess, and lived in paradise with him.

The translation and transformation of the story of Psyche into a Khmer court dance-drama took a year. Moreover, the Princess wanted to revive the old form of dances from the reign of King Norodom to King Sisowath (1840–1927) that Rodin saw in 1906. The resurrection of the old-style of dance marked a comeback of the white make-up, costumes and props; for instance, the Princess reintroduced the long shoulder cloth (*sbay*) that is draped very low on the back of the dancer's body. Furthermore, old style gestures with more amplitude in movements were taught to dancers; this was a key element of the Princess' new choreography. However, it would be misleading to characterize the archaic attitudes and movements as a desire to recapture an old style of dance because this work is a new interpretation of the latter. For example, the halting transitional movements were erased for more softened ones; even the gestures were less accentuated than in the past to give an impression of continuous flow.



FIGURE 2. Princess Buppha Devi does a demonstration at the rehearsal of *Metamorphoses* at Chatomukh Theater in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 2 May 2018. (Photo: Boreth Ly)

In addition, it is important to note that the entire choreography was created collectively. Every part of it was discussed among the masters: Proeung Chhieng for the position and movements of dancers on stage, Voan Savay and Pen Sokhuon for dance gestures, Soth Somaly for lyric composition and the choice of melodies, Sylvain Sreng Lim for the costumes and props design, and Soth Somaly for the lyrics.¹⁹ However, in keeping with courtly traditions and hierarchy, the Princess had the final word.²⁰

The cast followed traditional types of roles of court theatre except the monkey role, which was absent in this particular story. That said, the Princess wanted to have non-human roles that rarely appeared in dance-dramas, such as the peacock, the golden deer, the *kennori* (half-bird and half-woman), the *garuda* (half-bird and half-male), and the *ngos* (a giant), to be part of the story. Each character was given a Khmer name. For instance, Psyche was renamed Vaddhana Devi as an homage to the Princess' grand-mother, Queen Sisowath Monivong Kossomak Nearirath Serey Vathana, with Vaddhana as one of her names.

In order to create a musically apt mood for each episode, melodies were chosen from traditional repertoire with a subtle balance between slow and rapid motion slots to keep foreign audiences alert (each scene lasting around ten minutes). Lyrics in Khmer narrating the

story were then composed in verse and rehearsed with singers and musicians. Another hallmark of the Princess' invention was the distribution of singers with female voices for female roles and male voices for male and nonhuman roles.

More importantly, *Metamorphoses* provided the Princess with an opportunity to showcase rarely performed dances such as the "Kennori Dance" (Bird-Woman Dance), the "Dance of *Ngos*" (performed by a male role with a baton), and the dance of golden flowers that is traditionally reserved for the coronation of a king. These dances were staged in front of projected digital slides capturing Rodin's paintings of the Cambodian dancers in motion that the artist executed in 1906.

The Princess concluded *Metamorphoses* with an innovative trio dance that she created. The three female dancers in traditional dance attire each wore a *sampot* (tube skirt) and a *sbay* (shoulder cloth) using the colors that Rodin rendered in his watercolors: ocher, rust, and blue. They slowly executed the same gestures that their counterparts had performed in front of Rodin a century ago, accompanied only by a crystalline sound of *chhing* (small cymbals) and *sampho* (two-sided drum). The audience saw the projection of Rodin's last monumental sculpture, *The Gates of Hell* serving as the backdrop illuminating the pastel colored costumes worn by these three dancers. His vision of incorporating Khmer dancers in the work was finally accomplished.

The Princess' Legacy in Khmer Court Dance: Traditions and Innovations

As mentioned earlier, Princess Norodom Buppha Devi traveled extensively accompanying her father King Sihanouk on state visits. Moreover, from an early age, she experimented in cross-cultural contacts through exchange visits with other Southeast Asian artists who later inspired her artistically. During the 1960s, she explored different dances—Burmese, Balinese, Javanese, and Japanese—but as she repeatedly said: "I am good at choreographing court dance because I know it very well. Please don't ask me to do something else."²¹

As noted, since her return to Cambodia in 1991, she held several high-ranking governmental positions in the domain of arts and culture. She invested much of her time to administration. Therefore, it was not until the mid-2000s that the Princess began to choreograph dance-dramas. She revisited dance-dramas created during Queen Kossamak's era, such as the "Apsara Dance" and the dance-dramas of *Preah Sothun* (2004), *Sovannahong* (2008), *Enao Bosseba* (Prince Enao and Princess Bosseba 2009), and *Preah Thong Neang Neak* (2010). These are all

traditional tales: the first telling of the love between the eponymous human prince and an Ogre King's daughter, the second based on the Indonesian love story of Prince Panji (Enao), and the third telling of the Indic Preah Thong (Kaundinya I) who marries a Snake Princess (Neang Neak) and founds the Cambodian kingdom. Princess Buppha Devi started to create new dance dramas in 2010 with *The Legend of Apsara Mera*, followed by *Ombres et lumières* (Shadow and Light 2011), *Memories in Motion* (2016), and her last dance-drama, *Metamorphoses* (2018).²²

The Princess' works mirrored those by her grandmother Queen Kossamak, but they also revealed the Princess' own creativity as well as her individual aesthetic choices. For instance, she followed her grandmother's legacy in choosing Ek Sidé, one of the well-known present-day pop singers in Cambodia, to be the lead singer for *The Legend of Apsara Mera* (Nut 2014). More importantly, she went further than her grandmother by giving the leading voices to the male singers, while relegating female voices, which traditionally were featured, to the choir that accompanied the dance-drama. As a result, the dominant male voices provided an intimate, precious, and languidly darker tone and color to the story. In *Enao Bosseba* (2009) and *Metamorphoses* (2018), she made another innovation by assigning male voices to male and nonhuman roles, and female voices to female roles. These intentionally strategic choices made by the Princess suggest that there is room for experimentation and innovation in traditional Khmer court dance.

As for the repertoire, the Princess not only revisited traditional stories such as *Enao Bossaba* and *Sovannahong* but also provided us with her own interpretation of traditional Khmer literature. For instance, she combined two different tales from Angkor, *The Churning of the Ocean of Milk*, a story depicted in the east gallery of the twelfth-century temple of Angkor Wat, and the *Kambu Mera* story that references the mythical ancestors of Khmer people. The result was not only a new tale but also a coherent narrative that she created, called the *Legend of Apsara Mera* (Ly 2020: 109–122).

The cast of characters had also been under innovation, with the introduction of characters of *lokhon khol*, the male mask theatre, and in *The Legend of Apsara Mera*, where a male dancer played the role of the giant. Like Hanuman, the monkey character introduced as a male dancer by Queen Kossamak, the role of the giant played by a male dancer is more vigorous and athletic, with jerky movements—a clear contrast with the highly stylized and refined movement when played by a woman. In the same order, male puppeteers derived from *sbek thom*

(shadow theatre) were also used in some episodes of *The Legend of Apsara Mera* dance-drama, especially the integration of *pol*, a mode of chanting by a male voice in *acapella*.

Last but not least, the Princess implemented alternative ways to present the “Apsara Dance,” her own signature dance that she found hackneyed due to repeated presentations for tourists. To this end, she introduced new costumes and props with the help of Sylvain Sreng Lim, a designer and embroiderer who translated her vision into reality. The new headdresses were inspired by those worn by *apsarases* rendered on the bas reliefs found the temples of Angkor. Specifically, one stunning *Naga* headdress worn by the lead dancer in the role of Apsara Mera was inspired by sculpture found at the Elephant Terrace of Angkor Thom that the Princess saw during her field research at Angkor. Likewise, the headdress she had created for the role of the nymph in *Metamorphoses* was modeled after a similar a crown found on the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat. We know six new types of headdresses were created under her leadership to represent the Apsara roles. In addition, new ways of wearing *sampots* (traditional Khmer tube skirts) were experimented by Sylvain Lim with different folds.



FIGURE 3. Princess Buppha Devi takes a curtain call at a performance of *Sovannahong* at Chatomukh Theater in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 2008. (Photo: Courtesy of Anders Jiras)

Conclusion

Princess Norodom Buppha Devi's innovations suggest that there is room for revision and innovation within the prescribed tradition of dance as ritual and courtly entertainment. With a mixture of revised and new choreographies, she brilliantly demonstrated her ability not only to preserve and honor the late Queen Kossamak's legacy of invention of new traditions like the "Apsara Dance," but also her capacity to be innovative in her own right with her last creation, *Metamorphoses*. Stylistically, the Princess was the first to reintroduce the early twentieth century way of dancing with its white make-up and costumes and props that had been abandoned since the mid-1950s. Nonetheless, she did not copy the old style but re-adapted it, providing yet another revision to the history of Cambodian court dance. In short, she followed the footsteps of her grandmother Queen Kossamak. Moreover, these dance-dramas showed the Princess's artistic vision, narrative strategy, and stylistic technique. Last, it demonstrated the reinvigoration of what was endangered traditions thirty years ago.

Sadly, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia lost its most talented choreographer and leader, Princess Buppha Devi passed away on 18 November 2019. May She be reborn at the time of arrival of Maitreya Buddha!

NOTES

1. Interview with Princess Buppha Devi, August 1, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-W7tOtPGzM>, accessed 23 March 2020. Translation from the Khmer is ours.

2. We would like to thank all the dancers and teachers for sharing their knowledge with us. An additional thank-you to Anders Jiras for granting us permission to reproduce his photographs in our text. Last, we thank Mirren Theiding, Siyuan Liu, and Kathy Foley for reading drafts of this article.

3. For an ethnography of the court ballet in the era when Queen Komassak was a prime force, see [Cravath 2007](#).

4. This term meaning "community" is a shortened form of Sangkum Reastr Niyum (Community of Common People), and was applied to Prince Sihanouk's reign from 1955 to 1970. It was named after the organization he established.

5. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States competed to expand their respective influence in Southeast Asia.

6. The conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 gathered twenty-nine Asian and African countries that proclaimed their anti-colonialism and refusal to be instruments of the superpowers. It marked the emergence of a Third World in the international arena.

7. Photo essays covering the Royal Ballet of Cambodia are found in *Kambuja* Magazine from 1966 to 1970 and Prince Sihanouk's 1966 films such as *Apsara, Le petit prince du peuple* (The Little Prince of the People), and *La forêt enchantée* (The Enchanted Forest). See http://www.cncaff.fr/internet_cnc/Internet/ARemplir/fiches/corpus_indochine/FilmsSihanouk.html, accessed 12 February 2020.

8. Moni Mekhala is the goddess of lightening and Ream Eysa, deity of thunder.

9. The Franco-Thai Treaty (1867) ceded Cambodia's Siem Reap and Battambang provinces to Thailand, but by the 1907 these areas, which include Angkor, were returned to the then French Indochina's control.

10. Youtube, *L'Oiseau de Paradis* (Bird of Paradise), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FF0LsGquCAE>, accessed 16 March 2020.

11. According to Khmer belief, Indra is the god of rain and king of all gods. Suppya Hélène Nut's Interview with Princess Norodom Buppha Devi on 17 December 2015.

12. Although Falser's analysis remains relevant, this iconic dance, however, came into being due to Marcel Camus's imagination and invention. For his film, *L'Oiseau de Paradis* (Bird of Paradise), the French director wanted dancers who not only looked like the carved *apsara* at Angkor, but also could be a breathing and living embodiments of these stone figures.

13. According to Opéra de Paris's brochure, the performance was repeated at the Théâtre des Nations a few days later.

14. After assuming the office of Chief of State in 1960, Prince Sihanouk established his private residence at Chamcar Mon on the southern outskirts of Phnom Penh, leaving his mother in the royal palace.

15. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbhoH4UZjd8&fbclid=IwAR2CTWPt3EXAjinw4s6DLAv1nTyBv5t3HZhEbC0ae_IgkvaO4FhWRfkLRyE, accessed 16 March 2020.

16. The royal members and the royal dancers were considered enemies of the Khmer Rouge regime and so persecuted.

17. The Paris Peace Agreements were signed on 23 October 1991, and marked the official end of more than a decade of the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict which began in the late 1970s.

18. Auguste Rodin saw his first performance of Cambodian court dance at the Pré-Catelan theatre in Boulogne in 1906. He was completely mesmerized by it. Subsequently, the sixty-six years old French artist embarked on a train from Paris to Marseilles to meet members of the Cambodian dance troupe at la Villa Glycines where the royal dancers stayed. There, he spent two days sketching the dancers in different poses. He improvised by buying papers from a butcher shop for his drawings. This brief encounter enabled Rodin to create nearly 150 drawings and paintings of the Cambodian dancers.

19. See the New York Public Library Digital collections (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/khmer-dance-project#/?tab=about>, accessed 15 March 2020) for more information on these important artists, specifically "Interview with Princess Norodom Buppha Devi," "Interview with

Proeung Chhieng,” “Interview with Pen Sokhuon,” “Interview with Voan Savay and Voeun Amrit,” “Interview with Soth Somaly,” and “Interview with Lim Sylvain and Sim Montha.”

20. Boreth Ly and Suppya H el ene Nut’s field note, rehearsal for *Metamorphoses* at Chatomukh Theater on 1 May 2018.

21. Personal communication with Princess Norodom Buppha Devi on 18 December 2016.

22. Royal Ballet du Cambodge: *Metamorphoses*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZ_p1TyIj0, accessed 21 July 2020.

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