

Cambodian Dance-Education

**A personal view from a classical Cambodian dancer and graduate
of the Royal University of Fine Arts**

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Dance has existed in Cambodian society for thousands of years. 'People performed dance to demonstrate spiritual respect for the events held in the royal palace, at pagodas, temples, and other religious places' (Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts & UNESCO, 2006, p. 24). Although dance existed and was practiced throughout the country, due to the internal conflicts and those with neighboring countries, there has to date been a lack of accurate teaching and documenting.

Dance in the history of Cambodia

The history of Cambodia can be traced back to the first century A.D with the establishment of a state called Funun. 'According to a sculpture, Hanuman, which was found in Takeov Province' (Krauel, 2003, p. 16), and to ancient Cambodian beliefs, we can assume that dance once served primarily a ritual purpose. At that time, 'Hinduism and Buddhism had not yet arrived in Cambodia and the Khmer practiced animism – the worshipping of natural phenomena through objects where the spirits of the ancestors were believed to communicate with the living through special ceremonies' (Chhay, 2003, P. 15). However, the function of dance in Cambodian society has changed with time and with the evolution of the society's culture. Whereas in society in earlier centuries dance served religious purposes; in our contemporary society, because of its values and aesthetics, dance has now become a means of entertainment, a subject in our education syllabus, and a professional career choice. Additionally, dance has become an important means of defining our national identity.

Dance in school

'The School of Fine Arts or L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, was established in 1919, and the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) in 1960 with the mission of reinvigorating some of Cambodia's fine arts and fostering indigenous scholarships in those arts' (Phim & Thompson, 1999, p.10). Thus, a proper academic curriculum was introduced. As the only facility where dance is officially taught, the school plays an important role in preserving, maintaining and offering traditional culture to the new generation. Moreover, the school has always served as a central place where dance can be studied. Additionally the institution has been able to promote dance and performance arts to national and international communities.

RUFA adheres strictly to traditional teaching. Most of the teachers commonly, prefer to teach their students by using the old strategies that they themselves experienced. For example, students are required to sit in a long row, and practice the same kind of dances until they master them without asking any questions or making complaints. Furthermore, the teaching and learning process is based strongly on memory. The use of text-books and dance documentation is hardly ever utilised. Besides offering dance classes, the school also provides general knowledge classes for the students. For instance, an academic curriculum including mathematics and history are conducted alongside the dance arts.

'Since 1919 any student has been allowed to come to the school and study after they have passed their entrance exams' (Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, 2003, p. 25), unlike previously, where the education of dancers was based on status and birth. Today students have to spend 9 years studying to graduate in dance and then 4 more years of study in choreographic skills at a tertiary level.

Throughout my observation of almost 15 years, I have seen that adhering to traditional ways of teaching has both positive and negative results. Some old teaching methods, which worked very well in the past, might not work as effectively today. For example, in the past students were taught unequally based on their status and talent, which meant some received lots of attention from teachers, while others, perhaps those who did not demonstrate immediate ability, did not. This teaching may possibly have worked in the past but in the democratic society of today it fails to provide an equal opportunity to all the students. As a result, in the last 10 years there are high numbers of school students dropping out and the school enrolment is decreasing.

Apart from the above example, there are other contributing factors that further exacerbate the problem, including uninteresting classes, a poor school environment, and low work opportunities. Thus, the school needs to search for some other methodologies of dance teaching that combine both past and present without walking away from traditional values; otherwise, the school cannot possibly preserve the treasure of our heritage. At the present time, the school has not been able to keep pace with contemporary methods of education and instruction. This problem leads one to ask how teaching

methods might be re-appraised and transformed to be relevant to today without losing the values of tradition in Cambodian dance practice.

Dance values

'The values of dance in Cambodia have two main aspects; the tangible and intangible' Chhieng, 2007). Tangible value refers to the beauty of the movement of the dance, which derives from nature and the creation of our Cambodian ancestors. By watching dance, people can see the close relationship between humankind and nature because all of the gestures represent nature; for example, a tree and the leaf of the tree. It shows the unique way of Cambodian culture. Intangible value is all about the spirit, meaning, purpose, and the pureness of the dance. As Cambodians we believe that dance is our soul. The slow motion, the pure smile, and the refined movement explain a lot about who we are and where we come from. Through dance, one can see the qualities of gracefulness, creativity and majesty of the Cambodian people, and gain an insight into Khmer culture.

Traditional teaching methods also have their own values. In spite of some disadvantages, traditional teaching still holds tightly to the convention of respect for everything in the dance class, either visible or invisible. For instance, students are forbidden to swear in class or to step over any of the musical instruments used as an accompaniment. In addition, everybody must show deep respect for their elders.

Dance not only serves as an offering for the gods or as a public entertainment, but also represents Khmer identity and provides a career that students can pursue; thus, RUFA has to work hard not just to retain the essential dance values but also make it more suitable for the present context.

Applying the new to the traditional

Obviously, because RUFA has a crucial place in the country in terms of cultural preservation and knowledge, it needs to guarantee a good curriculum, which combines traditional and contemporary teaching technique and methodology to be launched. The reason for using contemporary teaching methods is not to replace the old teaching way but to improve them in order to suit the current conditions. In addition, we want to encourage students to learn to dance effectively and with a positive outlook. For instance, students should learn traditional or classical material through modern teaching techniques. In today's environment, RUFA should not just be a place to preserve arts and dance, but it should also produce human resources to serve both the culture and arts profession. Thus, the school should provide many other subjects besides dancing in order to equip students to perform more professionally. A wide range of classes and subjects will better prepare students for their future profession and reinforce their strength to fight against any difficulties that they will face in the real world outside the school.

Thirdly, the school has to explain carefully and clearly to students the fundamental value of Cambodian dance. If the value of their traditional culture is understood, they will want to preserve this legacy. Finally, through effective

teaching and a relevant curriculum, the school will be able to produce qualified dancers who can take on the responsibility to be a bridge linking the past to the present without losing the original value of the past. Moreover, all dance teachers need to be trained in new ways of teaching in order to make their teaching more effective. In this way we can acknowledge that although we might have changed the original technique, we have still kept the old values of the dance, particularly respect.

To sum up, as traditions are displaced from their origins, dance inextricably changes its former 'pure' values. Nonetheless, RUFA has a vital responsibility to keep the original dance values as much as possible. Thus, in order to practice Khmer dance without losing the old values, we need to understand the value, history, and movement of the dances. Moreover, we should strive to realise the motto of 'working on the past, keeping it for the present, and developing it for the future without losing its real values, but making it better' (Chhieng, 2007).

References

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Biographical statement

Chey Chankethya pursued BA studies at the Royal University of Fine Arts graduating in 2005. She has performed nationally and internationally for the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, such as 'Millennium 2000', and Angkor Wat Exposition in 2006. Her choreographic works, both classical and contemporary, include *Dilemma* (2002), *Falling in Love* (2003), *Golden Deer* (2004), *Preah Khan Reach* (2005) and *Water and Thunder* (2006). In 2006, she was awarded a Choreography Arts Management Fellowship to support a three-month residency at the University of California (UCLA), which led to the creation of *Same and Different*. In 2009 Kethya received an ACC grant to participate in American Dance Festival. Currently, teaches classical dance at the Secondary School of Fine Arts and is the leader of Trey Visay (Compass), a dance ensemble consisting of nine young Cambodian dancers that aims to explore and create their own contemporary dance vocabulary.