

## Yale Journal of Music & Religion

---

Volume 3 | Number 2

Article 2


---

2017

# Nationalist Transformations: Music, Ritual, and the Work of Memory in Cambodia and Thailand

Jeffrey M. Dyer  
*Boston University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yjmr>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Ethnomusicology Commons](#), and the [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dyer, Jeffrey M. (2017) "Nationalist Transformations: Music, Ritual, and the Work of Memory in Cambodia and Thailand," *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*: Vol. 3: No. 2, Article 2.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X.1072>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact [elischolar@yale.edu](mailto:elischolar@yale.edu).

---

# Nationalist Transformations: Music, Ritual, and the Work of Memory in Cambodia and Thailand

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I am deeply grateful to Boston University professors Marié Abe, Michael Birenbaum Quintero, Brita Heimarck, and Miki Kaneda for their support and insightful suggestions. Also thanks to Benjamin Tausig and Jeffers Engelhardt for their helpful comments on an earlier version and to Margaret Rowley, Brian Barone, and Rachel Kurihara for being extra pairs of eyes and ears. My thanks to Song Seng for his assistance with the “Hom Rong” song translation. Thanks to Bou Lim, who first taught me Khmer poetry, and Frank Smith, who taught me additional forms. Also, thanks to Robert Bickner for suggesting the works of William Gedney and Nidhi Eoseewong.

# Nationalist Transformations

## Music, Ritual, and the Work of Memory in Cambodia and Thailand

Jeffrey Dyer

In mid-January 2003, the Khmer newspaper *Rasmei Angkor* alleged that the famous Thai actress Suvanan Kongying—known as Morning Star—said that she would not perform in Cambodia again until the temple Angkor Wat was returned to Thailand and that she would rather be reincarnated as a dog than as a Khmer. This allegation was never confirmed, but Cambodia's prime minister Hun Sen repeated it in a speech, dubbing the actress "Thief Star," and on January 29, 2003, a group of mostly college-aged Khmer gathered at Phnom Penh's Independence Monument, rode their motor bikes to the Thai embassy, and, unchecked by Phnom Penh's police, burned that building to the ground. In the days following the riot, as anthropologist Alexander Hinton recounts, Khmer people participating in online discussions said that the Thai had stolen not just Angkorean temples but also Khmer dance and music.<sup>1</sup>

Five years later, violence erupted again along a contentious stretch of the Thai–Khmer border when the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) granted Cambodia's

request that the temple Preah Vihear—called Phra Viharn in the Thai language—be designated a World Heritage Site.<sup>2</sup> UNESCO's designation reignited a longstanding border dispute regarding the land surrounding the temple, a late ninth-century complex built by the Khmer king Yasovarman. Following UNESCO's decision, from 2008 through 2011, Thai and Khmer forces skirmished along the territory in question, leading to dozens of military and civilian deaths,<sup>3</sup> and both nations continue to use the temple as "a symbol of nationalism for political purposes."<sup>4</sup>

This article links these tense international relations with musical and ritual practices common to Cambodia and Thailand to explore how music and ritual can contribute to the political polarization between nations. I focus on the Khmer *thvāy grū* and the nearly identical Thai version called the *wai kbruu*,<sup>5</sup> the ritual offerings for the teachers that are practiced in numerous contexts in both Cambodia and Thailand, to question how

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Hinton, "Khmerness and the Thai 'Other': Violence, Discourse and Symbolism of the 2003 anti-Thai Riots in Cambodia," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37/3 (2006): 445–68.

<sup>2</sup> Ubonwan Yoosuk, "The Preah Vihear Temple: Roots of Thailand-Cambodia Border Dispute," *International Journal of Asian Social Science* 3/4 (2013): 921–29.

<sup>3</sup> John Burgess, *Temple in the Clouds: Faith and Conflict at Preah Vihear* (Bangkok: River Books, 2015), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Yoosuk, "The Preah Vihear Temple," 928.

<sup>5</sup> I transliterate Khmer words using the ALA-LC Romanization Tables, updated in 2012 and available at <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/romanization/khmer>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ubonwan Yoosuk, "The Preah Vihear Temple: Roots of Thailand-Cambodia Border Dispute," *International Journal of Asian Social Science* 3/4 (2013): 921–29.

<sup>3</sup> John Burgess, *Temple in the Clouds: Faith and Conflict at Preah Vihear* (Bangkok: River Books, 2015), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Yoosuk, "The Preah Vihear Temple," 928.

<sup>5</sup> I transliterate Khmer words using the ALA-LC Romanization Tables, updated in 2012 and available at <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/romanization/khmer>. pdf. Exceptions include musical instruments, ensembles, and popular phrases such as Angkor Wat and Khmer Rouge, for which I follow popular transliterations to avoid confusion with previous literature. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Khmer words and song lyrics are my own. For the Thai *wai kbruu*, I follow Deborah Wong's transliteration in *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

nationalist sentiments become affixed to musical and ritual behaviors that, like the temples Angkor Wat and Preah Vihear/Phra Viharn, preceded modern nation-states.

Drawing on my fieldwork with Khmer and Khmer-American musicians and dancers,<sup>6</sup> I first describe the ritual's contexts in Cambodia and its diaspora, emphasizing how performing artists use the *thvāy grū* to establish a continuity with the past. Through ritualized remembrance, artists maintain the memory of their teachers, gods, and ancestors, gaining their support and guidance. I argue that these remembrances suggest a Khmer ontology in which artists are consistently in the presence of their teachers and ancestors. Writing against the assumption that "the human is ontologically singular," Dipesh Chakrabarty takes "gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human, and think[s] from the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits."<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, I argue that in Cambodia and its diaspora, musicians and dancers are coeval with their predecessors, and they use these rituals to create artistic lineages that stretch far into the past and forward into the future. These are continuous lineages, but I argue that artists are not "links in a chain," as others have maintained; artists individualize musical and ritual performance, leading to personal relationships with the past, the art, and the

---

<sup>6</sup> Since 2004 I have taken numerous fieldwork trips to Cambodia, and since 2006 I have worked with Khmer artists in Lowell, MA. I have witnessed and participated in *thvāy grū* and *sambah grū* rituals in both locations. I have conducted two brief fieldwork trips in Thailand, to Bangkok and Surin in 2005 and to Chiang Mai in 2014, but I draw on secondary sources for the bulk of my knowledge about the Thai version of this ritual.

<sup>7</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Post-colonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16.

divine. In Thailand, musicians use a nearly identical ritual to effect similar artistic lineages. While the rituals are largely the same between the two nations, as are the music ensembles and the names of the songs played during the rituals, the melodies that musicians play are different, indicating that music marks both similarity and difference.

I then trace the historical narratives that help explain the ritual overlap between these two countries and, I contend, have transformed these rituals into symbols of each nation. Today, individuals and institutions in both nations claim that the *thvāy grū/wai kebruu* reflects each country's unique national heritage and lineage. Using Paul Ricoeur's writing on "memory and forgetting," I argue that these rituals fulfill a "duty to remember" that,<sup>8</sup> in Cambodia's case, counteracts a colonial narrative of decline and the Khmer Rouge genocide. However, this ritual's remembering and its personalized lineages work against an equally essential task, what Ricoeur calls "the duty to forget,"<sup>9</sup> which he says is necessary when working toward reconciliation and rapprochement. Halting cycles of animosity and violence is thus not as simple as, for example, waiting for "cool heads [to] prevail [so that] Preah Vihear will resume the mission for which it was built,"<sup>10</sup> since nationalist associations concerning temples, ritual, and the performing arts are now deeply ingrained. I argue that the *thvāy grū*, *wai kebruu*, and their separate musical lineages now work to instill nationalist associations through their focus on memory. By prioritizing memory over for-

---

<sup>8</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting," in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (New York: Routledge, 1999), 5–11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Burgess, *Temple in the Clouds*, 11.

getting, these rituals and their music inculcate the political thought that contributes to the longstanding animosity and violence between Cambodia and Thailand.

### The *thvāy grū* in Cambodia and the *wai kbruu* in Thailand

In Cambodia, musicians name this ritual *bidhī thvāy grū*, “The Ritual of Offerings for the Teachers,” and Khmer dancers term the ritual *bidhī sambah grū*, “The Ritual to Salute and Respect the Teachers.” Following my interlocutors, I use the shortened names *thvāy grū* and *sambah grū*. Khmer artists perform versions of this ritual in numerous contexts: during initiations for music and dance students, at the beginning of music and dance lessons and rehearsals, before wedding ceremonies, before classical and other dance performances, and preceding the all-male dance-drama *lokhoṅ kbol*. The ritual begins when a group leader or *ācāry* (ritual specialist) lights incense placed in arrangements of fruit, soda, meat, and other offerings. That person then addresses three types of *grū*—one’s current living teachers, the spirits of deceased teachers, and deity patrons of the arts—and calls on those teachers, as well as Hindu and Buddhist deities, to attend the event and bless the musicians and dancers so they can study and perform well. Musicians play a specified song or number of songs, while participants sit holding a *sambah* gesture. If dancers are involved, they may then perform a blessing dance.

Most immediately, artists perform this ritual so that the teachers’ spirits and other deities will provide guidance, blessings, and support for the event that will follow. According to the lyrics of the song “Pad

Hom Rong” (Exs. 1 and 2),<sup>11</sup> which accompanies the *thvāy grū* performed at weddings and music lessons, these beings arrive to “transform the bad to prosperous blessings” (stanza 5) and achieve “health and happiness” for everyone (stanza 6). By the song’s end, three cries of victory open a new hall and provide “an achievement with no doubt” (stanza 8), which transforms an everyday location into a sacred place in which the wedding or music lesson can occur. Tim Thou, director of the Angkor Dance Troupe (ADT), which is based in Lowell, Massachusetts, says that the *sambah grū* asks “all the masters, all the ancestors of the dance” to “please come to make sure to witness, to help us, the dancers, to perform tonight to get [success].”<sup>12</sup> Only after the teachers’ blessings, Thou says, can we “play the program.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Multiple versions of the lyrics to “Pad Hom Rong” exist. Here, I translate the version used by my teacher Sok Duch. Khmer often rewrite song lyrics while retaining the song’s name and, typically, the lyrics’ overall meaning. While there is not enough space here, the multiple versions of Khmer wedding song lyrics deserve further comparative study. For this translation, I retain the formatting used when writing these lyrics in the Khmer language, which splits each line with a caesura and has four parts in each stanza. Lyrics for wedding songs such as “Pad Hom Rong” are often based on poetry forms, which have a rhyme scheme and a specific number of syllables for each part. In the Khmer-language original of these “Pad Hom Rong” lyrics, the ending syllables for each stanza’s second and third parts rhyme, and each part has five syllables. See below for a discussion of the intersection of Khmer and Thai poetic verse forms.

<sup>12</sup> Phone interview with Tim Thou (January 9, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

**Example 1:** English translation of the lyrics for “Pad Hom Rong,” The Song of Offering [at the] Hall

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. We offer this homage<br>in gratitude for the Three Jewels; <sup>14</sup>             | by lifting our hands above our heads<br>please bring us luck and success.              |
| 2. We are playing “Hom Rong”<br>In the beginning, this marvelous<br>song is played      | by the old custom.<br><br>to proclaim and wake up the devotā.                          |
| 3. Today is a day of victory,<br><br>[they] will prepare the wedding,                   | all the relatives come together with the<br>parents,<br>prepare the feast and rejoice. |
| 4. Because of this, please all <i>devotā</i><br>protect us and bring us well-being      | and all respected spirits of the village<br>from all sorrow and sadness.               |
| 5. Please all evil young spirits <sup>15</sup><br>please come and have fun together;    | from the forests near and far,<br>transform the bad to prosperous<br>blessings.        |
| 6. To everyone:<br>and the pair, the couple,  | get health and happiness<br>will marry with no troubles.                               |
| 7. [This is the] seventh verse <sup>16</sup> of<br>“Hom Rong”<br>Please, all relatives, | [it] has reached the end,<br>help us with the victory cheer.                           |
| 8. “Victory ho, victory ho”;<br>The powerful noise opens a new hall                     | we yell “Ho” three times.<br>[and] an achievement with no doubt.                       |

---

<sup>14</sup> These are the Buddhist three jewels: *brah buddh*, the Buddha; *brah dbomm*, the Dharma, or the Buddha’s teaching; and *brah sanggh*, the Sangha, or the monkhood. Later, the song invokes the Hindu *devotā* and the animist ancestors or teachers, establishing a religious syncretism that also appears in Thai rituals. Erik Davis argues against categorizing spirits this way, writing that scholars should emphasize the unity of Khmer spiritual practices, but Khmer music scholar Keo Narom does separate Khmer ritual into different religious categories. It appears that, concerning the *thvāy grū*, Khmer used what were originally separate religious practices to create a coherent, unified ritual. See Erik W. Davis, *Deathpower: Buddhism’s Ritual Imagination in Cambodia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 15. See also Keo Narom, *Music and the Khmer* (Siem Reap: Toyota Foundation, 1995), 10.

<sup>15</sup> At first, it seems odd that evil spirits would be invited to the wedding. These evil spirits are asked to come and take away all the sadness and sorrow, which they covet and enjoy. They also are asked to bless everyone present.

<sup>16</sup> This is a difficult line to translate, since the Khmer word is literally “song.” I take “seventh song” to mean the seventh time the song is played, or the seventh verse.

**Example 2:** Khmer lyrics for “Pad Hom Rong,” The Song of Offering [at the] Hall.

**១០ - បទ ហោមរោង**

- យើងខ្ញុំសូមនមស្សការ  
នឹកគុណកែវទាំងបី  
លើកហត្ថាលើសិរសី  
សូមសិរីជ័យជំនះ ។
- យើងលេងភ្លេងហោមរោង  
ភ្លេងឆ្លើមជាដើមអាជី  
តាមទំនងទំនៀមចាស់  
បើកប្រកាសដាស់ទេវតា ។
- ថ្ងៃនេះថ្ងៃជោគជ័យ  
នឹងរៀបមង្គលការ  
ញាតិប្រុសស្រីក្នុងមេបា  
ល្បែងអាហារហូបកំសាន្ត ។
- ហេតុនេះសូមទេវតា  
ការពារឲ្យបានសុខ  
នូវអ្នកតាបាចាស់ស្រុក  
ចាកក្តីទុក្ខភ័យទាំងឡាយ ។
- អញ្ជើញព្រាយកុមារ  
មូលមកយកសប្បាយ  
ព្រៃបុព្វតាទីជិតឆ្ងាយ  
ហើយប្រែក្លាយឲ្យពរជ័យ ។
- ដល់លោកអ្នកទាំងឡាយ  
ព្រមទាំងគូសាមី  
សុខសប្បាយទាំងប្រុសស្រី  
ទើបការថ្មីកុំបីហុង ។
- ហោមរោងប្រាំពីរបទ  
សូមឲ្យអស់ញាតិផង  
ចប់កំណត់ត្រឹមនេះហោង  
ជួយគិតកងហើយកដ័យ ។
- ជយោ ហៃ ជយោ  
កក្រើកបើករោងថ្មី  
យើងស្រែកហោតម្រប់បី  
ជោគសួស្តីដោយជាក់ច្បាស់ ។

This ritual does not merely provide guidance and support for one particular performance or lesson; it functions as an act of remembrance that brings ancestors to the ritual space, connecting artists with their predecessors. Keo Narom describes how, during music initiation rites, students pray that spirits of their teachers enter into them to help them study well.<sup>17</sup> Keo and Jacques Brunet write that musicians and dancers embody the spirits of their artistic predecessors,<sup>18</sup> with past teachers continuing to live in new generations of musicians. In these ways, this ritual brings musicians and their predecessors to be coeval, even conjoined. Thou says that the spirits of deceased masters “surround us, guide us, to protect us, to make sure that spirits are there and still go on to the next generation.”<sup>19</sup> He says it is imperative that students “remember that they have ancestors who start, day one, from the beginning,”<sup>20</sup> and this remembering works toward artistic continuity. Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson write that the *sambaḥ grū* creates “a sense of historical and spiritual continuity . . . [a] potent connection between yesterday, today, and tomorrow,”<sup>21</sup> and Brunet writes that the *thvāy grū* establishes “a spiritual link between the master, the pupil and the divinities concerned.”<sup>22</sup> Those authors bring to mind

---

<sup>17</sup> Keo Narom, *Cambodian Music* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2005), 27–28.

<sup>18</sup> Narom, *Cambodian Music*, 28; Jacques Brunet, “Music and Rituals in Traditional Cambodia,” in *Traditional Drama and Music of Southeast Asia*, ed. Mohd. Taib Osman (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 1974), 220–21.

<sup>19</sup> Phone interview with Tim Thou (January 9, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 49–50.

<sup>22</sup> Brunet, “Music and Rituals in Traditional Cambodia,” 220.

Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff’s observation that “rituals are promises about continuity,”<sup>23</sup> but in the *thvāy grū* and *sambaḥ grū*, continuity is not just spiritual but artistic and even kinesthetic, as musicians and dancers physically perform the same songs and dance gestures that their predecessors performed and that their successors will perform.

Still, rather than participating in a simple linear connection of past, present, and future, individual dancers and musicians create their own relationships with the teachers and these art-forms, forging a multiplicity of lineages. Thou says that individual dancers interpret the ritual in different ways, with some fully believing they are possessed by their predecessors and others simply acknowledging the memory of past teachers. Moreover, different dance masters prefer different songs and orders of songs for the *sambaḥ grū*. For musicians, individualized lineages take the form of melodic variations and personalized performance styles. The basic melodies of songs performed for the *thvāy grū* and the wedding ceremony remain largely the same over time—although there are exceptions when a song’s form or melody changes—but musicians develop individualized versions of each song’s melody, putting their own stamp on the ritual and its music.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, while I agree that the *thvāy grū* and *sambaḥ grū* create lineages, I argue that they are not simple and singular repetitions of what has come before. Through these rituals, musicians and dancers forge a personal relationship with

---

<sup>23</sup> Sally F. Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, “Introduction: Secular Ritual: Forms and Meanings,” in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara Myerhoff (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977), 17.

<sup>24</sup> I discuss these variations and issues of continuity and change in detail in Jeffrey Dyer, “Oral Pedagogy, Playful Variation, and Issues of Notation in Khmer Wedding Music,” *Ethnomusicology* 62/1 (forthcoming).



their teachers, the past, and the performance traditions; in other words, individuals create their own lineages.

The *thvāy grū* and *sambaḥ grū*'s acts of memory and the continuity they establish resemble other ritualized remembrances performed throughout Cambodia's history. During the Angkorean era,<sup>25</sup> each king began his reign by building temples honoring his parents and ancestors, which brought him legitimacy and power. That practice persisted well after the Angkorean era, as King Ang Duang, before his coronation in 1848, honored his ancestors "and restored the Buddhist religion close to the place where his ancestors were buried."<sup>26</sup> Precolonial normative poetry, or *chbap*, even more closely resembles the *thvāy grū* and *sambaḥ grū*. Writing about that poetry, historian David Chandler claims that "while honouring the past, each poet and each teacher expects to be honoured in due time by his pupils and descendants—in exactly the same way. Repetitions are proof that one's lineage has endured."<sup>27</sup> Chandler extrapolates that in precolonial Cambodia, "everyone needed people to guide them and people to guide; they needed to honour ancestors so as to be

---

<sup>25</sup> Historians typically place the Angkorean era between 802 and 1431 C.E., but as David Chandler argues, those dates should be taken more as guides than as strict limits. See David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 35–89.

<sup>26</sup> David P. Chandler, "Going through the Motions: Ritual Aspects of the Reign of King Duang of Cambodia (1848–1860)," in *Centers, Symbols, and Hierarchies: Essays on the Classical States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Lorraine Gesick (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1983), 112.

<sup>27</sup> David P. Chandler, "Normative Poems (*Chbap*) and Pre-Colonial Cambodian Society," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15/2 (1984): 272–73 (emphasis in original). Some may posit an Indian origin for this perspective, but Chandler cites Severous Pou in maintaining that this genre is an indigenous Khmer invention. See Chandler, "Normative Poems," 272.

honoured by descendants. It meant being a link in a chain."<sup>28</sup> Again, I agree that artists honor ancestors and that ancestors guide artists, but I wish to complicate the images of links and chains by emphasizing how musicians individualize melodies and how dance masters personalize the *sambaḥ grū*. This personalization is not so drastic as to disrupt artistic continuity, but as Khmer artists repeat their predecessors' art, they do so in individualized ways.

Still, on the whole, this suggests a Khmer ontology centered on the remembrance, presence, and embodiment—the coevalness, in Chakrabarty's thinking—of one's predecessors as a means of creating an individual relationship with the past and one's ancestors, which ensures their continuation into the future.<sup>29</sup> This practice fulfills what Paul Ricoeur calls a duty to remember, which he says "consists not only in having a deep concern for the past, but in transmitting the meaning of past events to the next generation."<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur writes that the duty to remember maintains traces of the past against the "general trend to destroy,"<sup>31</sup> and the Khmer *thvāy* and *sambaḥ grū*'s remembrances work against the destruction caused by Cambodia's tumultuous political history. This also recalls Moore and Myerhoff's observation that ritual "frequently interrupts or manages or accompanies various forms of disorder."<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>29</sup> Chandler seems to suggest that all Khmer people in precolonial Cambodia shared this ontology. However, the question remains as to the extent of this ontology in contemporary Cambodia: are Khmer artists and Khmer people in general constantly in the presence of their ancestors, or are they only present during this ritual and the artistic performances? These questions could prove fruitful for future research.

<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting," 9–10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>32</sup> Moore and Myerhoff, *Secular Ritual*, 17.

In all of their incarnations, the *thvāy grū* and *sambaḥ grū* maintain individual artistic lineages against history's tendencies to forget and destroy, which becomes even more essential considering that an estimated 80 to 90 percent of Khmer musicians and dancers perished between 1975 and 1979, when the Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia.<sup>33</sup> However, these highly personalized remembrances are complicated by the fact that Thai musicians perform a nearly identical ritual in many of the same contexts.

Thai versions of this ritual—rendered *pithi wai kbruu*, “The Ritual to Honor Teachers,”<sup>34</sup> in Thai—bear numerous resemblances with Cambodia's *thvāy grū* and *sambaḥ grū*: the name consists of Thai variants of the same words, they invoke the same three types of teachers, are similar in structure, have teachers and other deities provide guidance and blessings, and memorialize artistic lineages. Like its Khmer counterparts, the Thai *wai kbruu* precedes many performances, rituals, and educational activities. During the annual initiation ceremony for new music students, for example, students pay respect “to three kinds of teachers: the living, the dead, and the divine,”<sup>35</sup> just as they do in Cambodia. Another version of the *wai kbruu*, called *Homrong Yen*, precedes numerous ceremonies and

shares the name of the Khmer song “Pad Hom Rong” that features prominently in the Khmer *thvāy grū*. The *wai kbruu* brings Hindu, Buddhist, and animist deities to the ritual location to bless all who are present,<sup>36</sup> which connects artists with the divine.<sup>37</sup> Finally, according to Pamela Myers-Moro, in an analysis similar to that of Phim and Thompson's interpretation of the Khmer *sambaḥ grū*, the appearance of the teachers and gods creates an artistic continuity connecting generations.<sup>38</sup>

On the surface, the music played for the Thai and Khmer rituals also appears to be similar. For example, the music ensembles—the *piphat* ensemble for the Thai *wai kbruu*,<sup>39</sup> and the *pinn peat* ensemble for the Khmer *sambaḥ grū*—are essentially equivalent, with the same instrumental composition and similar utility at court ceremonies, dances, and theater.<sup>40</sup> Deborah Wong provides a helpful introduction to overlap between the two rituals' repertoires,<sup>41</sup> but it appears that some Khmer musicians and dancers have shortened the rituals since Wong conducted her research and that the rituals' repertoires are variable. For example, Thou says that the ADT often uses only two songs, “Pad Sathukar” and “Pad Chha Bachos,” for their *sambaḥ grū* blessings,<sup>42</sup> compared with the 14 songs Wong

---

<sup>33</sup> For estimates of the Khmer Rouge's toll on artists, see Sam-Ang Sam, “Khmer Traditional Music Today,” in *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*, ed. May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 47; and Toni Shapiro-Phim, “Finding New Futures: Dancing Home,” in *The Choreography of Resolution: Conflict, Movement, and Neuroscience*, ed. Michelle LeBaron, Carrie MacLeod, and Andrew Floyer Acland (Chicago: American Bar Association, 2013), 205.

<sup>34</sup> Deborah Wong and Rene T. A. Lysloff, “Threshold to the Sacred: The Overture in Thai and Javanese Ritual Performance,” *Ethnomusicology* 35/3 (1991): 331.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

---

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>37</sup> Wong, *Sounding the Center*, xxii.

<sup>38</sup> Pamela Myers-Moro, “Thai Music and Attitudes toward the Past,” *Journal of American Folklore* 102/404 (1989): 192.

<sup>39</sup> Wong and Lysloff, “Threshold to the Sacred,” 327–28.

<sup>40</sup> Terry E. Miller and Sam-ang Sam, “The Classical Musics of Cambodia and Thailand: A Study of Distinctions,” *Ethnomusicology*, 39/2 (1995): 232–33.

<sup>41</sup> Wong and Lysloff, “Threshold to the Sacred,” 335–38.

<sup>42</sup> Phone interview with Tim Thou (June 20, 2016). It is worth noting that, because of the lack of local

learned for the Thai “Evening Overture” and the 12 to 18 songs that Khmer musicians previously used for the blessing.<sup>43</sup> The ADT often collaborates with master dancers and musicians from Cambodia, and Thou says the group’s *sambah grūs* are flexible, following the format preferred by each master. The *thvāy grūs* that I have witnessed wedding musicians perform in Cambodia and Lowell, Massachusetts, feature only one song, “Pad Hom Rong.”<sup>44</sup>

Even more than the variability in ritual structure, the songs themselves differ significantly between Cambodia and Thailand. While song titles are very similar between the two countries, the songs’ melodies are significantly different. The version of “Pad Sathukar” used today by the ADT is similar to the version played by Khmer court musicians in Cambodia in 1971,<sup>45</sup> but it differs significantly from the song of the same name that Thai musicians play.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the Khmer wedding song “Pad Hom Rong,” which I learned from wedding musicians in 2004, has the same basic melody as the version recorded at Cambodia’s Royal Uni-

---

musicians who can play this repertoire, the ADT uses recordings of songs for their *sambah grūs*.

<sup>43</sup> Wong and Lysloff, “Threshold to the Sacred,” 337. I cannot comment on whether the Thai *wai kbruu* has been shortened.

<sup>44</sup> Concerning ensembles used for the wedding’s *thvāy grū*, the old Khmer wedding music ensemble has no Thai equivalent, although some instruments, like the *kse diev*, have Thai versions. While the new wedding music ensemble, which is similar in construction to the *mahaori* ensemble, uses instruments also found in Thailand, the Thai ensembles do not perform for weddings.

<sup>45</sup> I compared the ADT version with the version found on the compact disc Jacques Brunet, *Cambodia: Royal Music* (AUVIDIS/IICMSD/UNESCO D8011, 1989 [1971]).

<sup>46</sup> See Wong and Lysloff, “Threshold to the Sacred,” 334, for a transcription of the opening to the Thai song *Sathukan*.

versity of Fine Arts in 1970,<sup>47</sup> but it is a completely different melody than Thai songs with the same or similar name.<sup>48</sup> This suggests that, on the Khmer side, musicians have retained the basic melodies of the songs “Pad Sathukar” and “Pad Hom Rong” since at least the early 1970s, and that those melodies survived the Khmer Rouge era largely intact. Musicians personalize melodies, but that largely does not lead to these songs changing shape over time.<sup>49</sup> However, between Cambodia and Thailand, personalization leads to melodic change, which suggests that the *thvāy grū* and *wai kbruu*, despite their outward similarities, initiate separate artistic lineages, with music being a driver of difference. There are different artists, playing different melodies, using the same ritual to gesture toward different artistic lineages. Therefore, while I

---

<sup>47</sup> I compared the version of “Pad Hom Rong” that I learned from Khmer wedding musicians with the version found on *Cambodia: Traditional Music* (Ethnic Folkways Records FE 4081, 1978).

<sup>48</sup> See Wong and Lysloff, “Threshold to the Sacred,” 334, for a transcription of the Thai song “Tra Homrong.” See *Classical Music of Thailand* (King Record Company KICC 5125, 1991) for a version of the Thai song “Homrong Aiyaret” performed by the *kbruan sai* ensemble.

<sup>49</sup> I make this statement knowing full well that melodies can change over time, and elsewhere (Dyer, “Oral Pedagogy,” forthcoming) I consider Khmer musicians’ concept of musical change. One example should suffice here. “Pad Hom Rong” now has two main versions: a three-part song that musicians call the older version, and a two-part song they term the newer version. However, the version cited above, which was recorded in 1970, is the two-part version, contradicting the widespread assumption among Khmer musicians and researchers that shorter versions of songs are newer, post-Khmer Rouge inventions. This is only one song, but it implies the possibility that the “new” versions of songs actually existed earlier than what is commonly assumed, or that the “old” versions are actually newer than what is claimed. Despite the difference in form, Khmer musicians consider both versions to be the same song, and the development of a different version does not contradict their sense of musical continuity.

maintain that these rituals feature significant cross-border overlap and, as I attempt to demonstrate in the next section, can be a means for understanding these countries' historical interactions, I also propose that the different melodies and their distinct musical lineages have become examples of national difference.

### Tracing Histories

How can the same ritual using similar musical ensembles and songs with similar names come to enact artistic lineages in two separate countries? In this section, I detail how a study of the region's history helps explain the origins of the significant overlap between Khmer and Thai ritual and musical practices. But even more than that, I argue that history, and in particular the multiple ways in which these histories have been told, also helps explain the political ideologies have come to be overlaid on this ritual and its music. By necessity, the historical accounts I provide here are overviews, but my interest is in how different historical narratives, or the ways people come to interpret historical trajectories, work to nationalize and politicize music and ritual.

One historical narrative concerns a common cultural forebear. The French scholar George Cœdès was so struck by "the expansion of Indian civilization to the east" through what he supposed were maritime trading routes<sup>50</sup> that he considered the countries of Southeast Asia to be Indianized states. More recently, Chandler notes that "the process of Indianization made Cambodia an Indian-seeming place"<sup>51</sup> starting around the

first century C.E.<sup>52</sup> D. G. E. Hall acknowledges Cœdès's work and the importance of Indian religious and cultural models on Southeast Asia, but he also suggests that local actors may have actively created some of the trade routes with India.<sup>53</sup> Recent scholars also emphasize indigenous agency when working with foreign, especially Indian, elements. Following this line of reasoning, Southeast Asians "did not blindly adapt, but selectively adopted suitable foreign influences."<sup>54</sup> Concerning Thailand in particular, ethnomusicologist Terry Miller claims that "the Thai have long had a special openness to things foreign."<sup>55</sup> He cites Philip Cornwel-Smith's conclusion that "anything, given time enough to steep here, can end up very Thai,"<sup>56</sup> and a similar statement can be made about adopted cultural material becoming "very Khmer" over time.

This history of Indianization and selective appropriation certainly helps explain how artists have come to perform very similar rituals in Cambodia and Thailand, and how those rituals have come to combine aspects of Hindu, Buddhist, and animist religious thought. But it does little to explain the complex political associations that those rituals and their performing arts have accumulated; for that, another narrative is necessary. Beginning in the early ninth century, Cambodia's Angkor kingdom expanded to control much of mainland Southeast

---

<sup>50</sup> George Cœdès, *The Indianized States of South-east Asia*, ed. Walter F. Vella, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu, HI: East-West Center Press, 1968), 14.

<sup>51</sup> Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 16.

---

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> D. G. E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 12–24.

<sup>54</sup> Sonu Trivedi, "Early Influence in Southeast Asia: Revitalizing Partnership between India and Indonesia," *India Quarterly* 66/1 (2010): 51–67.

<sup>55</sup> Terry Miller, "Appropriating the Exotic: Thai Music and the Adoption of Chinese Elements," *Asian Music* 41/2 (2010): 113.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

Asia,<sup>57</sup> and its rulers used a professional class of scribes, scholars, judges, and tax collectors to manage its outlying regions, including many sections of present-day Thailand, such as Sakon Nakhon, Lopburi, Phimai, and Sukhothai.<sup>58</sup> David Wyatt downplays the extent of Khmer influence among the general population, but he acknowledges that most of the ruling class along Angkor's periphery "must have been Khmer."<sup>59</sup> It seems that this Khmer elite had widespread influence throughout much of modern-day Thailand, at least according to the available documents. The original Thai script was "first devised as a modification of Cambodian cursive script," and the first Thai-language inscription, carved in 1292, features much Khmer vocabulary.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, in the Ayutthaya period, educational and other written texts of the upper class and *munnai* officials were composed in foreign languages such as Pali and Khmer.<sup>61</sup> Concerning Thai ritual traditions, Wyatt maintains that the Khmer had significant influence on the Thai. He writes that

in ceremonies performed to ensure a good harvest, to restore health, or to celebrate rites of passage (puberty, marriage, death), non-Buddhist formulae are used and beliefs are

expressed that stem from the popular forms of Brahmanical religion known to have been practiced in Angkorean days.<sup>62</sup>

According to Nidhi Eosewong, one such ritual performed during the Ayutthaya era and accompanied by music and a specific verse rhyme form was the "*wai kbru*, or section paying respects to the teacher."<sup>63</sup> It is quite conceivable, then, that Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and subsequent Thai kingdoms adopted musical and ritual concepts, including those used for the *wai kbruu*, from the Khmer elite that ruled Angkor's outlying regions in Thailand.<sup>64</sup>

This cultural transmission was likely far from peaceful, and the following era of Thai enlargement was similarly tumultuous. Beginning in the thirteenth century, Angkor's area constricted,<sup>65</sup> and Thai armies from Ayutthaya invaded Angkor in 1431, when "hundreds of Khmer artisans and musicians were carried away to Siam,"<sup>66</sup> bringing the foundation of Khmer musical and ritual practices to the Ayutthaya court. Since then, as Thailand and Cambodia have remained largely at odds, the Thai have dominated. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Thailand expanded into present-day Cambodia, annexing its northwestern provinces of Battambang, Preah Vihear, and Siem Reap, the latter two containing the famous temples Preah Vihear/Phra Viharn and Angkor Wat. These narratives of Khmer expansion and cultural dispersal followed by Thai growth and Khmer diminution

---

<sup>57</sup> For details, see Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 35–89.

<sup>58</sup> David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 22. See also Andrew Christopher Shahriari, "Lanna Music and Dance: Image and Identity in Northern Thailand" (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 2001), 32.

<sup>59</sup> Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 23–24.

<sup>60</sup> William J. Gedney, "Siamese Verse Forms in Historical Perspective," *Selected Papers on Comparative Tai Studies*, ed. Robert J. Bickner, John Hartmann, Thomas John Hudak, and Patcharin Peyasantiwong (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1989), 503.

<sup>61</sup> Nidhi Eosewong, *Pen and Sail: Literature and History in Early Bangkok* (Chiang Mai: Silk-worm Books, 2005 [1982]), 6.

---

<sup>62</sup> Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Eosewong, *Pen and Sail*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> I am not suggesting that the ritual is performed in exactly the same way today as it was then, but the evidence suggests that its underlying beliefs and perhaps similar practices date to the fifteenth century, if not earlier.

<sup>65</sup> See Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 35–89.

<sup>66</sup> Gerald P. Dyck, *Musical Journeys in Northern Thailand*, 2nd ed. (Fall River, MA: Minuteman Press, 2010), 146.

help to further explain the two countries' overlapping ritual and artistic traditions, while also going a long way toward explaining the emotions unleashed during the 2003 riots in Phnom Penh and the 2008–11 conflict over the temple Preah Vihear/Phra Viharn. Citing this historical record, Alexander Hinton calls the Thai the Khmer Other.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the Khmer name for the province that houses Angkor Wat—Siem Reap—can translate as “The Thai Have Been Pacified,” “The Submissive Thai,” or “The Thai Plain.”

Further, using the example of Siamese verse forms, William Gedney convincingly argues that the more recent history of Thai cultural and political power has, for Thai, Khmer, and foreign scholars alike, obscured the Khmer foundation on which much of Thai culture rests. He is worth quoting at length, as he highlights historiography's political implications. Concerning Thai textbooks on Siamese verse forms, Gedney writes, “None of the textbooks, and apparently no teacher or student of Siamese language and literature, has recognized that these *kàap* forms were borrowed *in toto* from Cambodian.”<sup>68</sup> After saying that Thai scholars have labored unconvincingly to claim an Indic origin for their verse forms, Gedney continues:

---

<sup>67</sup> Alexander Hinton, “Khmerness and the Thai ‘Other’: Violence, Discourse and Symbolism of the 2003 anti-Thai Riots in Cambodia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37/3 (2006): 445–68.

<sup>68</sup> Gedney, “Siamese Verse Forms,” 512. Gedney does not go into details about the Khmer verse forms used by Thai poets. What he describes as the *kàap* form *yaanii* on page 510 is identical to the Khmer verse form *pad brohmgi*, or the “Brahma's Song” meter. What he describes as *Suraangkhabanaang* on page 511 is identical to the Khmer verse form *ka'giti*, the “Crow's Gait” meter. Gedney obviously appreciated these Khmer forms, as he writes on page 512 that the Khmer poems “have a vigor and beauty there that they seldom achieve in Siamese.”

Perhaps the main reason that this subject has been neglected is that, although in earlier times the influence was clearly from Cambodia upon Thailand, in the last century or so the influence has been entirely in the other direction. During the nineteenth century a number of Cambodian princes grew up in Bangkok, and King Norodom was so much under Thai influence that he required his children to learn the Siamese language.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, with a touch of biting sarcasm, Gedney captures the animosity now common on both sides:

Nowadays it is hard to find anyone in Thailand able to recognize the extent of the earlier Cambodian influence. How could a country which is now so much smaller and weaker, and clearly under Thai cultural domination, have been the chief source of civilization and culture for Thailand in former times? This bias is sure to hamper the kind of research into the earlier Cambodian influence that is needed.<sup>70</sup>

Gedney's point extends to linguistics—Franklin E. Huffman concluded that “Cambodian syntax has been strongly influenced by Thai”<sup>71</sup>—and also includes music. Throughout my fieldwork in Cambodia and the United States, conversations about Khmer music and its history frequently involved both Khmer musicians and nonmusicians denouncing the Thai as cultural embezzlers. Furthermore, many of my Khmer interlocutors have said that, through the late twentieth century, Khmer musicians referred to their court music as *bbleng siem*—Thai music—because of its links with Thailand. Many Khmer musicians' indignation at being perceived as the weaker neighbor and their animosity toward the Thai usurpers remain palpable today.

---

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 514.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 515.

<sup>71</sup> Franklin E. Huffman, “Thai and Cambodian—A Case of Syntactic Borrowing?” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93/4 (1973): 488–509.

Still, this second narrative, which positions Cambodia and Thailand as antagonists perpetually at odds over boundaries delineating geographical and cultural limits and distinctions, also misses the mark, because it imposes the Western concept of a linear boundary separating national and cultural territory onto an earlier Southeast Asian era, when borders did not exist as we conceive of them today. Stanley Tambiah coins the term *galactic polity* to describe how early Southeast Asian polities organized themselves politically, cosmologically, and geographically, writing that they were “‘centered’ or ‘center-oriented’ space[s] as opposed to ‘bounded’ space[s].”<sup>72</sup> Following Tambiah’s framework, these polities consisted of a central capital city surrounded by concentric rings of cities within the center’s control, with the strength of control diminishing the further one traveled from the center. I have found this framework applicable to Cambodia; for example, the royal chronicles describing King Ang Duang’s early political career term this type of polity *mondol*, or *mandala*,<sup>73</sup> a term Tambiah also employs. Further, Tambiah considered these galactic polities to be “pulsating,”<sup>74</sup> as outlying regions constantly shifted their allegiances and, perhaps even more important, centers could, over time, become peripheries. This occurred in 1431, when Angkor fell to Ayutthaya, and also in 1438, when Sukhothai was “irrevocably incorporated into the kingdom of Ayutthaya.”<sup>75</sup> For all of these polities, the control of people, their

resources, and the maintenance of central sovereignty far outweighed any concern about controlling territory, especially outlying territories. For example, historians Barbara Andaya and Leonard Andaya write that, during the early modern period, “the defense of a ‘boundary’ per se was traditionally of little importance to Southeast Asian polities.”<sup>76</sup> Robert Solomon goes further, putting this issue of a boundary in a nationalist context, when he differentiates between the Southeast Asian concept of a frontier and the Western concept of a boundary, writing that early Southeast Asian polities did not employ “a tradition of nationalism that attached anything more than bargaining value to remote territory.”<sup>77</sup> Concerning Cambodia in particular, Solomon writes that until the Lon Nol coup in 1970, the various forms of Khmer governments were very willing to

abandon all outstanding territorial claims against its neighbors in exchange for unilateral declarations expressing recognition of Cambodia within its present borders. Attainment of security was regarded as more important than the pursuit of minor claims to territory.<sup>78</sup>

What this means is that what we now think of as Khmer territorial losses may not have been considered losses to Khmer living at the time. As Chandler details, much hardship and heartache occurred when polities clashed,<sup>79</sup> but loss of land did not carry the same nationalist association that it does today. This phenomenon is also found in

---

<sup>72</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, “The Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3/3 (2013 [1973]): 509. In this quotation, Tambiah is writing specifically about Sukhothai, and he focuses on mostly Thai examples, but he clearly aims for his framework to apply to other Southeast Asian polities. I take the “galactic polity” concept as applying to the Angkor kingdom and later Khmer polities.

<sup>73</sup> Chandler, “Going through the Motions,” 108.

<sup>74</sup> Tambiah, “The Galactic Polity,” 526.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

---

<sup>76</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Early Modern Southeast Asia, 1400–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 295.

<sup>77</sup> Robert L. Solomon, “Boundary Concepts and Practices in Southeast Asia,” *World Politics* 23/1 (1970): 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>79</sup> David P. Chandler, “Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of Order in Three Cambodian Texts,” in *Moral Order and the Question of Change: Essays on Southeast Asian Thought*, ed. David K. Wyatt and Alexander Woodside (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), 53–77.

Thailand. Concerning Thai dealings with the colonial British, who very much desired to establish a linear border on the eastern end of their colony in Burma, Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul finds that the nineteenth-century Siamese government could hardly imagine why, for Britain, “the question of boundary should be so important; it should have been a matter for the local people, not those in Bangkok.”<sup>80</sup> Similarly, in 1834, the Lanna court in Chiang Mai gave away land to Britain as a gift.<sup>81</sup> These experiences were not unique, as “colonial powers [in Southeast Asia] both ignored local factors and introduced extraneous political considerations and alien concepts in the determination of colonial boundaries.”<sup>82</sup> When the French Protectorate imposed linear boundaries on Cambodia, they not only irrevocably changed the concept of what constituted the Khmer polity, but the 1907 return of the provinces Battambang, Preah Vihear, and Siem Reap, which had been controlled by Thailand since 1794, according to historian Ben Kiernan, “ironically made Cambodia *less* secure.”<sup>83</sup> With this return, two hitherto implausible ideas came to the fore: that other formerly Khmer territory, like Surin and Buriram in Thailand and the Mekong delta region in Vietnam, remained lost to Cambodia’s powerful neighbors; and that the powerful neighbors could, at any time in the future, reenter Cambodia to steal more land.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 64.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>82</sup> Solomon, “Boundary Concepts,” 7.

<sup>83</sup> Ben Kiernan, “Myth, Nationalism and Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 3/2 (2001): 191, emphasis in original.

<sup>84</sup> This actually did happen during World War II, when the Thai reannexed Cambodia’s three northwestern provinces. See Kiernan, “Myth, Nationalism

and Genocide” for more details on that era. The issue of Cambodia’s loss of territory to the Vietnamese has continued to be a rallying cry for modern Khmer politicians, from Pol Pot through the current prime minister Hun Sen and opposition leader Sam Rainsy.

Anthony Barnett describes the resulting mode of thinking as “a fear of extinction” that is now ingrained deep within the Khmer people’s psyche,<sup>85</sup> and Khmer songs such as “Surin Knung Bhnām” speak with longing about Khmer brethren now living over the mountains in Thailand.

Besides influencing the nationalist connotations of territory and land, French colonialism, through its depiction and popularization of Angkor Wat, also created a fictitious mythology surrounding Cambodia’s historic decline and its cultural heritage. The popular narrative is that French explorer Henri Mouhot discovered the temple abandoned in the jungle, a position promoted by the introduction to Mouhot’s published journal, which tells that the explorer “re-discovered the ancient Khmer civilization for the western world.”<sup>86</sup> In reality, Mouhot was far from the first European to describe Angkor, as Portuguese and Spanish depictions date to the turn of the seventeenth century.<sup>87</sup> More important, contrary to the now-popular narrative of the temple being abandoned, Khmer monks never fully left Angkor Wat, which remained an important religious center and pilgrimage site.<sup>88</sup> When Mouhot arrived, after Khmer guides took him there while traveling a well-worn road, he found the

---

and Genocide” for more details on that era. The issue of Cambodia’s loss of territory to the Vietnamese has continued to be a rallying cry for modern Khmer politicians, from Pol Pot through the current prime minister Hun Sen and opposition leader Sam Rainsy.

<sup>85</sup> Anthony Barnett, “Cambodia Will Never Disappear,” *New Left Review* 180 (1990): 101.

<sup>86</sup> Christopher Pym, “Introduction,” in *Henri Mouhot’s Diary*, abridged and edited by Christopher Pym (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), xi.

<sup>87</sup> B. P. Groslier, *Angkor and Cambodia in the Sixteenth Century: According to Portuguese and Spanish Sources*, trans. Michael Smithies (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2006), 49–59.

<sup>88</sup> Barnett, “Cambodia Will Never Disappear,” 105.



location populated with monks and functioning as a working temple.<sup>89</sup> In fact, in a letter left with his diary, Mouhot acknowledged the temple's continuous popularity, saying that he was "about to go northward to visit the famous ruins of Ongcor [sic]."<sup>90</sup> If Angkor Wat was never fully abandoned and was famous and functioning upon its claimed discovery, then what else might the Khmer have retained despite the political turmoil during what Chandler terms Cambodia's "dark ages"?<sup>91</sup> Perhaps Khmer performing arts and ritual practices such as the *thvāy grū* also never fully left Cambodia.

These questions are rarely asked, as the French successfully created a narrative of Khmer decline.<sup>92</sup> Mouhot summarized the attitude well—he wrote that magnificent Angkor Wat "presents a sad contrast to the state of barbarism in which the nation is now plunged,"<sup>93</sup> and that the Khmer "appear only to have known how to destroy, never to reconstruct"<sup>94</sup>—and French colonial administrators appointed themselves as the ones to save Cambodia from its fallen state.<sup>95</sup> French administrators solidified the country's boundaries and transformed its history and cultural forms, with historian Penny Edwards writing that "colonial rule indelibly stained the

mystery of Angkor's making and meaning, repackaging old lore into a new story of *national* glory, *national* neglect, *national* decline, and *national* renaissance."<sup>96</sup> Edwards argues that part of the nationalizing process involved melding French and indigenous worldviews into "a national religion, a national space, a national past, and a national culture."<sup>97</sup>

It was at this juncture, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that the *thvāy grū* and *wai kbruu* were transformed into national entities in both Cambodia and Thailand. Since the rise of the modern Thai nation-state in 1932, the Thai government has been highly active in managing artistic lineages through the *wai kbruu*, and musicians who become ritual officiants gain "powerful positions in the hierarchy of the civil servant system."<sup>98</sup> These officiants' musical authority is "closely tied to the construction and maintenance of the Thai state."<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, public versions of the *wai kbruu* have come to serve an important role in Thai nationalism, as they function as "public displays of Thainess"<sup>100</sup> and as "active attempt[s] to construct a Thai public culture."<sup>101</sup> In Cambodia, the king can order an extended *thvāy grū* to "create security' for the country or fulfill some national need,"<sup>102</sup> and through at least the late twentieth century, the king himself appointed officiants to oversee the Royal Palace's *sambah grūs*.<sup>103</sup> Further, the "Royal Khmer dancers were believed to have a positive effect on natural disorder,"<sup>104</sup> and the

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>90</sup> Henri Mouhot, *Henri Mouhot's Diary*, 81.

<sup>91</sup> Chandler, "Songs at the Edge of the Forest," 31.

<sup>92</sup> Historian Penny Edwards suggests that French ideas about Khmer decline may have arisen out of their fears concerning France's own population decline between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>93</sup> Mouhot *Henri Mouhot's Diary*, 82.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>95</sup> For a detailed account of France's attempt to save Khmer visual art, see Ingrid Muan, "Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration, 1918–2000" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2001).

<sup>96</sup> Edwards, *Cambodge*, 248 (emphasis in original).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>98</sup> Wong, *Sounding the Center*, 204.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 209–10.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>102</sup> Cravath, "The Ritual Origins," 197.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 198. I am not sure whether that tradition continues today.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 197.

country's national anthem, *Nogor Raj*, "The Royal City," composed by Chuon Nath, serves a similar function as the *thvāy grū*,<sup>105</sup> with its opening lines saying, "Please all deities / protect our Kingdom / make it magnificent / bring it prosperity and good fortune."<sup>106</sup> In these ways, what I have termed a Khmer ontology exemplified by the *thvāy grū*—which remembers one's predecessors, restores what is past, and maintains individual artistic lineages—has combined with European-style nationalism to transform music and ritual into possessions of the state.

### The Work of Memory and the Work of Forgetting

Given the shadow of these narratives and the history of genocide, today's nationalized *thvāy grū* performs an essential task in Cambodia, working, in Ricoeur's words, to "keep alive the memory of suffering over against the general tendency of history to celebrate the victors."<sup>107</sup> Through the production of personal and collective memories, today's *thvāy grū* can be seen as one attempt to stymie the perception of catastrophic decline that has permeated Cambodia's national narrative since the French Protectorate. New students embody deceased teachers, and past generations live through the acts of contemporary artists who go on to teach the next generation. Through what Chakrabarty might

term the ontological coevalness of artists and their ancestors, disturbances and turmoil are controlled. These are historical continuums and personal artistic lineages, enacted through ritual, that defy colonial stereotypes and a destructive genocide, as they take traces of the past, manifested in teachers and their art, and orient them toward the future. As I have argued, this is not a simple linear connection uniting past, present, and future, since artists construct personal relationships with their teachers and artistic traditions.

However, these personal and collective memories are complicated by the facts that this ritual, through the region's complex sociopolitical histories, now institutes national and artistic lineages in two countries, and that it now—like temples, boundaries, and the land itself—has been transformed into national possessions working to construct national memories. Crucially, despite all of their similarities, these rituals' emphasis on memory and their music's initiation of separate artistic lineages work to highlight and perpetuate the political and artistic divisions separating Cambodia and Thailand. These nationalist claims are deeply ingrained, and they become further embedded each time the Thai state performs a *wai kebruu* to exemplify Thai-ness, or when Cambodia's national anthem gathers ancestors and deities to protect the nation. These acts of memory use similar cultural material to further divide and differentiate Cambodia and Thailand.

It is in this way that the mode of thinking facilitated by Cambodia's *thvāy grū* and Thailand's *wai kebruu* works against Ricoeur's "duty to forget," which he says "is a duty to go beyond anger and hatred."<sup>108</sup> By prioritizing the memory of one's own personal artistic

---

<sup>105</sup> Chuon Nath's composition *Nogor Raj* should not be confused with the wedding song of the same name. Notably, Penny Edwards describes how Chuon Nath was one of the monks most involved in the nationalization of Khmer Buddhism. See Edwards, *Cambodge*, 166–209.

<sup>106</sup> Translated by Frank Smith. Although the song is not accompanied by the *thvāy grū*'s ritual actions, the lyrics mirror those of "Pad Hom Rong" and function similarly to the *thvāy grū* it accompanies.

<sup>107</sup> Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting," 10.

---

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

lineage over anyone else's and the sanctity of one's own nation over that of others, the nationalized *thvāy grū/wai kbruu* precludes a sharing of these rituals that could lead to the forgetting of past wounds and, as Ricoeur advocates, amnesty and rapprochement. Instead, these rituals seem to work *against* a "duty to forget." Thailand's public joining of historical memory and nationalism through the *wai kbruu*'s public displays of Thai-ness reduces the chance that Thailand might acknowledge any overlap this ritual shares with Cambodia. To the south, many Khmer artists consider the *thvāy grū* to be a Khmer invention and a solely Khmer possession, and their ownership of it invalidates any claim that it could possibly be a display of Thai-ness. In both cases, music and ritual emphasize one's own memory and lineage over all others. This prioritizing of memory over forgetting, actualized through music and ritual, contributes to the ongoing antagonism between Cambodia and Thailand.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Some Thai and Khmer musicians have begun to complement this ritual's work of memory with the work of forgetting. For example, Thai music scholar Anant Narkong, who is on the Faculty of Music at Bangkok's Silpakorn University, has researched Khmer music and developed professional friendships with numerous Khmer musicians, including my interlocutors Yun Khean, a professor at Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts, and Nhok Sinat, a professional wedding musician and teacher. Additionally, the Khmer arts nongovernmental organization Cambodian Living Arts is working to build and strengthen regional connections.