

Abstract

Part performance, part lecture-demonstration, and part modern ritual, *When Kumbhakar Swallowed a Dead Dog* is a postmodern interpretation of an episode of the *Reamker*, the Cambodian version of the Indian epic *Ramayana*. In this written thesis, I lay out the foundational material for my work, consisting of a summary of the epic's narratives and interpretations pertaining to its structure and symbolism, as well as an overview of three major dance theatre forms in Cambodia: shadow puppet theatre (*sbaek thom*), all-male masked dance-theatre (*lkhon khol*), and classical court dance (*robam kbach boran*). An account of the methodology employed and creative process follows, in which I include influences related to the contemporary climate change crisis, black and white cinema, and my experiences studying Cambodian dance theater forms. I conclude with a description and a short analysis of the performance, its impact on audiences, and relevance for my current choreographic practice.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

When Kumbhakar Swallowed a Dead Dog: A Diasporic Rendering of the Reamker

by

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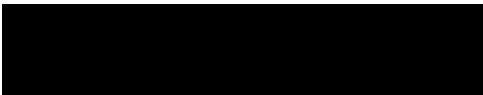
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Photographs courtesy of John Vink. All rights reserved.

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Photographs courtesy of Asian Cultural Council

Introduction

The roots of this thesis began in 2006 when I saw the Cambodian dancer Kunthea Ken perform at La Maison de la Création, a community service center in Brussels. As part of a showcase of classes the center offered that included amateurish jazz dances, hip hop, and contemporary dance, Ken presented a Cambodian folk dance. To the recorded music of a *mohôri*¹ orchestra, dressed in a dark blue sarong with the national checkered scarf (*krama*) tied across her bust, she entered, all smiles and seduction. A large flat basket under her left arm—the kind used to separate the rice from the chaff—she proceeded to throw handfuls of rice in all four directions, an action I interpreted to be an offering to the spirits or a blessing to the (invisible) crowd. The rhythm was upbeat and the tone light: this was a celebration of life, of courtship, a folk dance that belonged to a harvest festival in the countryside. Suddenly stricken with grief, I was caught unprepared.

Born of a French mother and a Cambodian father, I lived in Phnom Penh until 1975, the year the Cambodian capital fell to the Khmer Rouge.² A few months before, my mother had wisely decided to move with my brother and me to Thailand. I was nine years old and was quick to adapt to a new situation. I lost touch, and interest, in everything Cambodian. Seeing Kunthea Ken dance brought me back to the dance hall of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, where I, among dozens of other little girls, had struggled to follow the opening sequences of classical Cambodian dance training.

¹ *Mohori* orchestras accompany a play of the same name and Khmer Folk dances. See Sam, 1995 for instrumentation.

² See Kiernan 1996 for a detailed account of the Cambodian revolution and genocide.

Apparent only to someone who has seen Cambodian dance before, Ken's lines and technique were flawless. The impossible angle of her elbows when she straightened her arm, the backward curve of her fingers, the subtle arc of her smile, and proud posture—all of these elements betrayed years of arduous training. In her early forties, she was most probably part of the first generation of dancers to train after the war at the School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. Her generation was groomed by a handful of surviving masters who gave their all to recover and rebuild traditional dance from the ashes of destruction. To these masters, the dance represented a way of life, an identity, a link to the spiritual. Ken was this culture's hope and future. Yet here she was performing an unremarkable dance that did not fully take advantage of her potential as an artist; however, it evoked memories for me of a way of life that is no more.

I contacted Ken the next day to ask if I could create a work on her. She accepted; we spent the next few months rehearsing in my living room. The solo I choreographed, *Khmeropédies I*, divorced the vocabulary of classical dance from its context, costumes, and meaning. I wanted to see the pure beauty of her movements. Thematically, the piece associated apsaras—divine dancers who act as emissaries between humans and gods and figure prominently in the sculpture, dance, literature and painting of Cambodia—to courtesans, thus questioning traditional representation of women. We presented *Khmeropédies I* at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York the following year, 2007, in front of a small audience. Sitting among the guests was Fred Frumberg, the founder and director of Amrita Performing Arts, a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Phnom Penh.

After years of helping revive and preserve the broad spectrum of Cambodian traditional performing arts, Amrita Performing Arts changed its mission to support and develop contemporary work. Unusual and provocative for Cambodia at the time, the concept puzzled many artists. If “contemporary” did not mean “today,” then what did it stand for? A style? A

concept? To help the young generation of classically trained dancers find new artistic directions, Amrita Performing Arts initiated a series of collaborations between classically trained practitioners and those, like myself, with different dance training and aesthetics. My familiarity with Cambodian classical dance combined with a distinguished professional dance career³ in New York, working with reputed choreographers of American modern and postmodern dance, made me a good match for this task. More importantly, I was and am eager to (re)visit and (re)discover my origins.

The work I made with the young dancers of Amrita, *Khmeropédies II*, continued my initial impulse. I developed a hybrid form, rooted in Cambodian traditions but also intertwined with Western postmodern theatrical conventions: non-linear narratives, text-based sequences, movement deconstruction, and collage composition, which juxtaposed disparate theatrical elements to create additional layers of meaning. *Khmeropédies II* depicts the relationship between master and disciple, and the tension between tradition and modernity. In this piece, young dancers explore the fusion of genres, looking for ways to set themselves free from an inflexible heritage. The dance premiered at the New Haven's Festival of Arts and Ideas in 2010. Following this, *Khmeropédies III: Source/ Primate* premiered in 2013 at the Guggenheim's Work & Process. In the last part of the *Khmeropédies* trilogy, I consider the archetypal role of the monkey through the lens of modern primatology and ethology, hoping to expand the vocabulary of traditional dance. Finally, *Brodal Serei*—a 2016 *Dan:s* Festival (Singapore) commission—weaves together Khmer kickboxing, storytelling, and dance.

To continue in this line of investigation, I am now synthesizing two years of scholarly pursuits at Montclair State University by taking the *Reamker* as a point of departure. The ancient

³ See biographies in program (appendix A).

texts of the *Reamker*—based on the Sanskrit texts of the Indian epic *Ramayana*—take up religious and philosophical questions that extend beyond their time and place to sustain lasting relevance, even with contemporary issues. Relating to religion and morality, nature and sustenance, politics and governance, they symbolically or literally apply to modern contexts. For example, when the ten-necked demon Krong Reap (Ravana) asks his brother Kumbhakar to help him defeat the armies of Preah Ream (Rama)—whose wife he has abducted—Kumbhakar advises him not to fight back: "To act like this was out of keeping with the practice of kings, out of keeping with the way of the Law. I beg you, cast aside your lustful passion" (Jacob 160). A sound and timeless bit of advice.

It is the first time I have investigated Cambodian dance from a literary perspective, and the first time I make a dance based on any kind of extant text. It seems particularly fitting to my new status as a student to add a literary dimension to the work. This paper documents the research and creative process for *When Kumbhakar Swallowed a Dead Dog*, a dance based on an episode of the *Reamker*.

Research

Reamker (Ramakerti): A Chant to the Glory of Rama

Attributed to the poet Valmiki, the *Ramayana* was written around the third century BC, with some material added later: "it has long been known that the poem in its present form cannot be the work of a single author, or even the product of a single period of time" (Valmiki and Goldman 14-15). Its Cambodian counterpart was composed between the sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. The differences between the two versions are subtle but abundant. Over the centuries, various translations and interpretations from country to country have altered names,

details, and even outcomes. In Cambodia, all the characters have been given Khmer⁴ names: Rama has become Preah Ream, Ravana is Krong Reap, Laksmani is Preah Leak, Sita is Seda, and so on. The details of how the *Ramayana* indigenized to become the *Reamker* are vague, but scholars agree that the Cambodian version shows traces of Tamil, Javanese, and Thai influences.

Some episodes have been accommodated to reflect Theravada Buddhism philosophy and local animist beliefs (Khoury 109). In effect, although the main religion in Cambodia is Theravada Buddhism, the religious and spiritual landscape of Cambodia is populated with powerful spirits. According to Khmer scholar Dr. Ang Chouleang, the *Neak Ta*, for example, “is the most omnipresent figure of the divinities which populate the supernatural world of the Cambodian countryside...the *Neak Ta* is not just a kind of simple spirit but rather a phenomenon or energy force relating to a specific group such as a village community” (Chouleang 217). The *Neak Ta* can be protective, malevolent, or both. The episode I have decided to deconstruct is part of a ritual performed to ask for the protection and blessings of such spirits and divinities. The story involves an ogre, a river, two monkeys, a bird and a dead dog.

On their way to attack the island of Langka, Preah Ream (Rama) and his army have set up camp along the river. To cut off the enemy’s water supply, the *yak* (ogre) Kumbhakar transforms himself into a giant and meditates in the riverbed, obstructing the current. The astrologer Pipaet advises Preah Ream to send two of his most trusted generals to take care of the problem: the monkey god Hanuman—the most beloved character and main trickster figure of the *Reamker*—and his cousin Angkut, also with magical properties. Angkut transforms himself into a dead dog and Hanuman turns into a bird; the two drift on the current towards the *yak*. As they approach the meditating ogre, the bird pecks at the dog, unleashing smells of decay and rot.

⁴ The term Khmer refers both to the people and language of Cambodia.

Kumbhakar loses his concentration, falls into the water, and accidentally swallows the dog.

Nauseated, he gets up: the water flows again.

History

The *Reamker* is written in verses and is meant to be chanted. Scholars generally agree that the manuscript was written to support and transcribe the oral tradition, and not the other way around. The text has been passed along orally among reciting masters who embellish scenes with personal touches: comments, explanations, and details—often long poetic and metaphoric descriptions of nature and animals, of clothes, weapons, and other war equipment. In his book *Sbek Thom: Khmer Shadow Theater* (1995), Khmer artist and scholar Pech Tum Kravel remembers *sbaek thom* performances featuring the famous master reciter Ta Krud: “One very funny part (...) was Ta Krud's movement imitating Hanuman harassing the ogres at Langka” (15).

The original manuscript of the *Reamker*, owned by the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh and translated into English by Judith Jacob in 2006, consists of two separate groups of episodes, with the first composition much older than the second (Jacob xii). The first group, numbered 1 to 10, provides the genealogy of the main characters, and sets up the action. The second group of episodes is numbered 75 to 80 and continues the narrative, taking up shortly after where it was left. The gap between the two might have suggested a large number of missing episodes. However, after careful scholarship, the discrepancy turned out to be simply a difference in inventorying (Bizot 30), with an estimate of only four lost installments. One such episode was discovered in 1995 by Khmer scholar Khing Hoc Dy, leaving only three unaccounted for (Khing 6).

Synopsis

The first composition— episodes 1 to 10—can be summarized as follows. Petty intrigues at the Royal Court of Ayudhya send the virtuous Crown Prince Preah Ream (Rama)—an avatar of the supreme God Naray (Vishnu)—to exile. Accompanied by his wife Neang Seda (Sita) and brother Preah Leak (Laksmani), Preah Ream leaves his birth city to lead a life of asceticism in the forest. Unfortunately, during their journey, the beautiful Neang Seda catches the eye of the evil ogre Krong Reap (Ravana), King of Langka, who decides to kidnap her. Preah Ream wages war against Lanka to rescue his wife, with help from the monkey god Hanuman, the simian king Sugrib, and his army of monkeys. Upon victory, Preah Ream and Neang Seda return to the kingdom of Ayudhya.

The later composition starts with the discovery of a drawn portrait of Krong Reap under Seda's bed—a ruse devised by the ogress Atul. Taking this as a proof of her infidelity during captivity, Preah Ream, who is now the king of Ayudhya, orders his brother Preah Leak to execute Neang Seda. Unwilling to carry out the order, Preah Leak sends her into exile. The god Indra turns into a buffalo and leads Seda to a hermitage in the forest, where she gives birth to Preah Ream's two sons—Reamleak and Jupleak. Under the guidance of the sage Vajjapprit, the hermit who takes them under his protection, the two children become valorous warriors. One day, they meet the king (Ream) and challenge his authority. After many skirmishes and conflicts, both parties eventually realize their kinship and re-unite. Repentant, Ream asks Seda to come back but she refuses. To trick her into returning, Ream stages his own death and funeral. Seeing that there is no way to avoid him, she seeks refuge in the realm of Patal, the underworld.

The passage in which the demon Kumbhakar obstructs the flow of the river takes place in the first part, during the war against Langka. This particular episode ends with Kumbhakar

running away into the forest. However, Kumbhakar returns later in the epic and wages several battles. Ultimately, the great yak is killed by Preah Ream's magic arrow.

Interpretation

The episodes of the *Reamker* have high symbolic value. Their representation on stage transmits moral values and beliefs to the people. Thus, scenes are chosen to suit particular circumstances or to teach a lesson. Kumbhakar liberating the flow of the water symbolizes the passing from dry season to rainy season—or from death to rebirth. When the demon gets up, the water (the rain) flows again and the cycle of life can resume. More generally, the *Reamker* symbolizes the struggle between good and evil. At the beginning of each and every shadow theater performance, the sage Maha Eysei has to judge the issue of a combat between a white (good) monkey and a black (evil) monkey. His decision—and the lesson to be drawn—is to let them settle their differences by non-violent means: “You are only different colors of the same race, you must show solidarity. One day you will together serve our worthy savior” (Phim and Thompson 22-23).

In his introduction to *Ramaker, L'Amour Symbolique de Ram et Seta* (1989), French specialist in Southeast Buddhism François Bizot writes: “It is only after transcribing and translating the narrative that I discovered the philosophical dimension of the *Reamker*: its structure appeared clearly to depict the pathway of the Buddhist devotee towards immortality” (13). According to Bizot, this structure consists of roughly five sections:

- I. Introduction of the different characters and their genealogy.
- II. Marriage of Preah Ream and Neang Seda. Preah Ream's banishment from the kingdom of Ayudhya into the forest. There, joined by his brother Preah Leak and

his wife Neang Seda, he leads a life of asceticism. Neang Seda is abducted by the ogre Reap.

- III. Alliance with Sugrib, the simian king. The voyage to Lanka and the combats against Krong Reap. Death of Krong Reap and his lineage.
- IV. The return to Ayudhya and the subsequent banishment of Neang Seda.
- V. Birth of the twin brothers Reamleak and Jupleak. Simulacra of Preah Ream's funeral. Return of Neang Seda. (47)

The genealogy and introduction of the first composition symbolizes the birth of the disciple into the world. Marriage symbolizes the pilgrim's desire to follow Buddhist values. Neang Seda is the metaphor of a metaphor; she represents the jewel, the crystal globe that stands for the Buddhist concept of enlightenment (Bizot 45). The road to Lanka is the voyage towards Nirvana (heaven), which demands renunciation of all temptations and desires. Life without Seda is the joyless and desire-free life until the final deliverance—death. The birth of the twins symbolizes the afterlife and the ascension to Nirvana. The Buddhist disciple has to escape the cycle of life and death to reach Nirvana, thus “The spirit (Ream) can only be united to the crystal globe (Seda) and know happiness, longevity, and safeguarding after accomplishing the funeral rites” (Bizot 61).

The demon Kumbhakar blocks the river that leads to Krong Reap's kingdom, the island of Langka. The way to Langka is also the way to complete the cycle of reincarnation for eternity (Bizot 42). According to Bizot, Langka represents the womb of the queen-mother, mother of Gautama Buddha, the historical Buddha—also an avatar of the God Vishnu. The monkey-god Hanuman is the son of the Wind: he symbolizes breath (life). The fact that he transforms into a cadaver alludes to the cycles of reincarnation. Monks in the Cambodian hinterland have been

spotted meditating over corpses in advanced stages of decomposition. Decomposition is a crucial passage in Buddhism, between death and re-birth. Interestingly, in Theravada Buddhism, water is also associated with urine and with the feminine. Urine (feminine) and feces (masculine) accompany all birthing processes; they are a reminder of our (filthy) human condition (Bizot 58-59), as is the decomposing dog.

When Kumbhakar Swallowed a Dead Dog

The episode of Kumbhakar and the dead dog is the religious climax of a ceremony celebrated each year at Wat Svay Andet, a monastery situated in Kandal province, ten kilometers from Phnom Penh across the Mekong River. During three days, on the occasion of the Cambodian New Year in April, villagers gather to celebrate the end of the harvest and the beginning of the raining season. The ritual revolves around performances of *lkhon khol*, the male masked dance theatre; its purpose is fulfilled the last day during one pivotal moment in the performance: the release of the current by the demon Kumbhakar, which I described above.

The doctoral dissertation of French ethnomusicologist Dr. Stephanie Khoury is the most detailed description and analysis of the *lkhon khol* performances at Wat Svay Andet I have found to date. Khoury's observations are based on research conducted between 2005 and 2008 in the village of Ta Sgar, where the monastery is situated, and in participating neighboring villages and monasteries. The performances at Wat Svay Andet are a magico-religious event, at once ritual, social gathering, and spectacle. The artists are villagers, amateurs who train on their own during their spare time. Without much rehearsal, they get together the day of the performance. Khoury describes audience members constantly interfering and disrupting the performances. Some spectators are induced into trance, possessed by the local spirits, divinities, or ancestors who have all been called into attendance. Some of these spirits can become very unhappy, causing their human hosts to step onto the stage to correct actors or voice their dissatisfaction. Spectators

comment aloud on the action, and children continuously run on and off stage, getting in the way of the performers.

In her book *Dance in Cambodia*, dance ethnologist and anthropologist Toni Shapiro-Phim writes:

The *khol* version of the *Reamker* differs significantly from the classical texts taught in schools, and from the one recited in *sbaek thom* performance, and can be attributed, at least in part, to the art's specific magico-therapeutic function. The epic tale has undoubtedly evolved thematically and structurally in the rural ritual context, where strict adherence to tradition is constantly tempered by improvisation responding to changing social conditions and needs. (57)

Indeed, the episode of Kumbhakar performed at Wat Svay Andet is altogether absent from Judith Jacob's translation of the original manuscript, yet it is well known in Cambodia. In a region reputed for its rice fields, it makes sense that folks would adapt the story to suit spiritual, magical, and practical purposes. Getting the appropriate amount of water is especially crucial in the countryside, where people rely on the cultivation of rice for their livelihood.

François Bizot's abbreviated transcript of the recitation by *lkhon khol* Master Ta Cak shows a slightly different version of the story. Kumbhakar withdraws to the seashore—the water element is still a strong theme—to conduct a magical ritual. He holds the spear of Brahma. This spear, once rid of the rust that covers it, renders Lanka indestructible. Hanuman transforms into a dead dog and falls on Kumbhakar's head. In the brief fight that ensues, Kumbhakar is stabbed to death by the tail of Hanuman (93). This version is all the more surprising given the fact that Ta Cak has learned his narrative from a manuscript located at Wat Svay Andet before the war.

The version at Wat Svay Andet is closer to the narrative written in the early 20th century by the then minister of the Royal Palace Samdech Thiounn, except for its ending: Kumbhakar

gets up and runs away into the forest. There is no mention of him swallowing the dog—he reacts only to the smell of the dead dog. Minister Thiounn's narrative follows the sequences as painted on the Silver Pagoda murals at the Royal Palace (Ly 21).

Many countries in Asia share the *Ramayana*. It would be fascinating to conduct a comparative study of Thai, Indonesian or Lao iterations to see if this episode is also part of their oral or written traditions and, if so, in what context and for what purpose it is used. In the meantime, the different versions of *Reamker* I consulted support Toni Shapiro Phim's observation that they fulfill specific magico-spiritual needs and are adapted to suit the circumstances and contexts of those needs (57). I realized then that I could adapt the episode of Kumbhakar to reflect my own needs and circumstances.

Theater Dance in Cambodia

The performances at Wat Svay Andet are in the *lkhon khol* tradition. It is best to understand *lkhon khol* in the context of two other forms of performance, *robam khack boran* and *sbaek thom*, as all three forms are linked and share many features. One such major common feature is the *Reamker*, which provides the underlying themes and stories. The other major common characteristic is the *pinpeat* orchestra. This orchestra is predominantly percussive and consists of several types of xylophones (*roneat thom*, *roneat deak*, and *roneat ek*), a kind of oboe (*sralay*), two sorts of drums (*sampho* and *skor thom*) and two sorts of circular instruments with gongs (*kong thom*, and *kong touch*). Unsurprisingly, all these instruments have a sacred dimension. As such, it is forbidden to step over them. According to a popular legend, the origin of the *pinpeat* comes from the sound that the chariot of the Hindu god Indra makes: the wheels became the *kong*, the axle became the *sampho*, and so on (Khoury 1). Used in ceremonial contexts, at the

royal court and in the countryside, the *pinpeat* music is at once traditional, religious, and classical (Khoury 54).

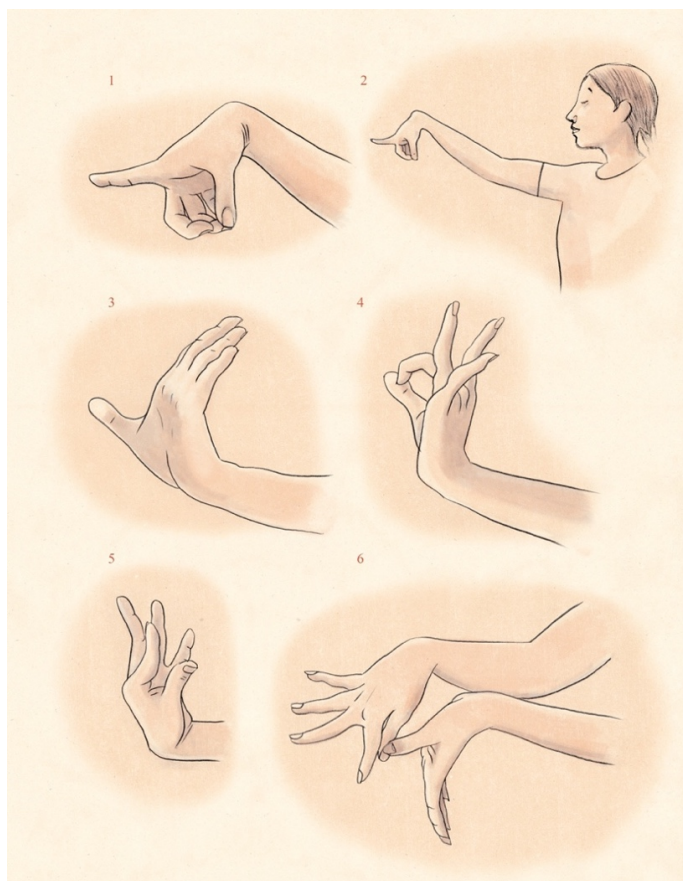
Seated next to the musicians, one or two narrators direct the action on stage with their lyrics, sometimes giving instructions directly to the actors. They choose sequences and episodes relevant to the form used, the occasion and time allotted. In all three forms, choreography starts with the arrangement of the scenes with their chanting sequences: the combination of song and narrative determines what the dancers dance. Dance alternates with chanted sequences. While performances are often set, there is always room for modifications and improvements. These changes can be given during or in between performances. Additionally, each troupe has its own way to stage and recite these stories.

Robam Kbach Boran

The most famous Cambodian dance tradition is the all-female court dance *robam kbach boran*. It is not the one I have used, but it is nearly synonymous in non-Cambodians' minds with our dance theater, and it does bear many resemblances with the male forms that inspired my dance. Because of its direct connection with the royal palace, the French contributed significantly to its aura and prestige during its protectorate period (1863-1953). This prestige reached its peak in the (French) public imagination in 1906 when King Sisowath of Cambodia visited France with his royal troupe. The sculptor Auguste Rodin became so enthralled that he followed the troupe from Paris to Marseille, where they performed at the Exposition Coloniale de Marseille. The sketches he made of the dancers immortalized the visit. Cambodian dance became in the French psyche, and through Rodin's oeuvre, a symbol of refinement and culture—and, as recent scholarship contends, a way of legitimizing French control over Cambodia. By saving the Khmer culture, the French became the legitimate inheritors of the ancient Khmer civilization (Deyasi 123).

Stylistically, in terms of classical dance training, the characters of the *Reamker* can be divided into four categories: demons, monkeys, humans, and celestial beings. The last two categories are portrayed as either “male” or “female.” Until Queen Kossamak introduced male dancers in the royal troupe in the early 1960s, mostly in the Giant and Monkey roles, all categories were exclusively danced by women (Nut 427).

Fig 2. The basic hand gestures in Cambodian classical dance



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Legend:

1. Tendril; 2. To show
3. Leaf;
4. Fruit; 5. Flower in full bloom;
6. Picking a flower

In Cambodian classical dance, hands curve back, legs are bent, the back is arched with minimal head and torso movement, and the toes curl. The four basic hand gestures represent the cycle of nature and life. A tree grows; its leaves transform into a flower bud, which blooms; the flower gives way to fruit; the fruit drops, and from the seed of the fruit, a tree grows again. The combination of hand gestures, body shape, and change from one gesture to another is codified: “these gestures are integrated into full body positions and movements having standardized forms and meaning” (Cravath 324).

Other gestures are more mimetic, allowing the dancer to mirror the narrative with her movements. In her essay “*Lokhon Luang*, The Cambodian Court Theatre: Toward A Decline of Women's Supremacy?” Suppya H el ene Nut argues that the female physiology influenced classical dance:

Women focused strictly on grace and refined movements of dancing and acting, even in combat scenes. The giant character, albeit one of the most physical roles, followed the same pattern of grace. Dance gestures were adapted to the female physical body, which is more supple than a male’s. Articulations of hands, arms, and legs were pushed to their extremes, rendering gestures almost non-reproducible by male dancers despite the same dance language. (423)

Characters within a given category are recognizable by the features and colors of their costumes, jewelry, headdresses, and masks. In the monkeys’ cast of characters, for example, Hanuman is a white monkey. Subsequently, he wears a white mask and his costume is white, with gold ornaments. The simian king Sugrib always wears red and gold; Bali is a green monkey and wears green. The costumes are in heavy brocades embroidered with gold thread and jewels, bead-by-bead, and sequin-by-sequin. The back of the sleeves and bustier are sown directly onto

the dancer's body stitch by stitch to ensure a perfect fit. Expensive to produce (it takes many people and sometimes more than a month to make one costume), they are also challenging to store and repair.

Fig. 1.a and 1.b Sewing costumes onto the body



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Lkhon Khol

Danced by men only, *lkhon khol* share the themes, music, costumes, masks, gestures, and poses of the illustrious *robam kbach boran*. But the all-male form has evolved into something much more energetic and acrobatic. *Lkhon khol* is the popular, male version of the female court dance, performed in the countryside by and for the regular folk. If the all-female version favors episodes centering on court intrigues and love stories between gods and humans, the narratives in *lkhon khol* tend to focus on battle episodes, often insisting on the comedic aspect of the characters. In fact, according to linguist Saveros Pou, one possible translation for *lkhon khol* is “theater of monkeys” (Pou and Mikaelian 30-33).

In the early 19th century, under the rule of King Ang Duong (1796 – 1860), *lkhon khol* was performed at the royal court of the king. But ultimately, the all-female version of the dance was deemed more refined and prestigious. After the reign of King Ang Duong, the male *lkhon* dancers left the court and went back to their villages, establishing small troupes to perform on special religious occasions. Most of these became amateur over time, except for two troupes that remained important bastions for the form. The first troupe was in Battambang province, under the patronage of its governor; this troupe, the country’s largest, had a broad repertoire. The second troupe, under the king’s patronage, was at the Buddhist monastery of Wat Svay Andet (Phim & Thompson 54-55). Both troupes maintained ties to the royal palace: until April 1975, performers joined the yearly national festival, Tang Tok, to celebrate the king's birthday (Nut 422). Before 1975, there were eight active village troupes of *lkhon khol* in Cambodia. Today the form is taught at the Secondary School of Fine Arts and the Royal University of Fine Arts. Dancers who graduate from these schools are professionals who work for the Department of the Ministry of Culture or become teachers. The only remaining non-professional troupe of *lkhon khol* in Cambodia is the one at Wat Svay Andet.

I saw my first and only performance of *lkhon khol* in Singapore during the annual *Da:ns* festival held at Esplanade –Theatres on the Bay. The festival had commissioned a full evening-length piece, *Brodal Serei* (2016), which we were rehearsing in their black box theater. In addition to our rehearsals, the Amrita dancers, graduates of the Secondary School of Fine Arts, were performing twice a day, every day, the episode “Battle at Night.” The event was happening on a small raised stage, in the middle of the lobby of the ultra-modern theater and shopping complex. I was not prepared to be this enchanted.

Fig.3 *Lkhon Khol*: Hanuman fighting against a demon



As its title indicates, the scene depicts monkeys and ogres battling in the dark. Unable to see, the characters mistakenly grope and stab each other, most often in the private parts. Each hit sends dancers swerving across the stage with eyes crossed, knees knocked together, backs hunched, and hands covering groins before the dancers collapse to the ground only to get up again. It was pure comedy, somewhere in between Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers. I laughed. It had never occurred to me before that classical dance could be so farcical.

Shadow Theater

There are two primary forms of puppet theater in Cambodia, *sbaek touch* and *sbaek thom*. The first type of shadow theater, *sbaek touch*, is a form of popular theater that uses small and articulated puppets—the word *touch* means small, in opposition to *thom* (large). *Sbaek touch* is used to tell a wide range of stories, many of them inspired from folk tales. It is used primarily as a form of entertainment. For the purpose of this essay, I only discuss the second form, *sbaek thom*, because of its association to the *Reamker*, which renders it sacred.

Sbaek thom practitioners believe that the art of shadow puppetry is at the origin of all performing arts in Cambodia, although exact history and origin of the form remains unknown (Phim & Thompson 15-16). It is performed only on special occasions: the Cambodian New Year, birthday ceremonies, or funerals of the royal family or important dignitaries. In the countryside, where farmers depend on nature to grow food and make a living, it is also performed in periods of drought, to ask for rain and to combat natural calamities (Krauel 4). For these reasons, it occurred to me that puppetry might be important to my own work.

The puppets in *sbaek thom* are large panels of drawings made of leather. Mounted on sticks with no moving parts, they are held against a large white screen ten meters wide by five meters high and lit in the back by a bonfire. Some of these panels can weigh up to eight

kilograms and measure up to two meters high. The dancers who hold the puppets perform on both sides of the screen. But the real stars of the show are the two narrators; everything on stage comes to a halt when they perform.

Both stand in front of the screen. Both have the ability to narrate or to lecture on the *Ramayana* in a way that deeply entertains the spectators. Both truly act as they narrate. They show anger, sadness, grief, desperation, lightheartedness, and sarcasm. They create a medium which engrosses the spectators, entertains them, and engages them in the story from the beginning to the end. (Krauel 11)

One of the major stories narrated in *sbaek thom* is known as “The Battle of Indrajit.” Within this sequence of events, the most famous episode is the stratagem employed by Krong Reap’s niece, Punyakay, to demoralize the adversary. Taking the appearance of a dead Seda, she floats on the water past Preah Ream (Phim & Thompson 23). When the ruse is discovered, Hanuman tortures, rapes and abandons Punyakay. This episode demonstrates that good heroes can perform terrible deeds. Similarly, evil characters are shown to be vulnerable, such as when Krong Reap laments the death of his son Indrajit. “The performances of *sbaek thom* teach that good and evil co-exist in an interminable dialectic (...); it demonstrates the good within evil and the evil within good” (Phim & Thompson 32).

Sbaek thom is in danger of disappearing. Performances require two narrators, musicians, ten to twelve manipulators, as well as many leather panels. One sequence of *Reamker* can use up to 160 panels. These are relatively expensive to produce and require a knowledge and craftsmanship that is becoming rare. Between performances, the panels need to be stored safely away from rodents and humidity—many of the old panels were lost this way during the war. Today, only three troupes remain, in Siem Reap, Battambang and Phnom Penh. The Siem Reap troupe is the most important bastion for the form, followed by the Ministry of Culture’s

Department of Performing Arts in Phnom Penh and the troupe in Battambang. Also in Phnom Penh, the association Sovanna Phum runs a weekly show that combines music, dance, and *sbaek thom* in its small theatre. Mann Kosal, the director and master puppeteer of the theater, regrets that his performances attract fewer and fewer tourists (Noun).

Fig.4 Preah Ream Ka Thnal - Preah Ream Building the Road. Wat Bo Shadow Puppet Troupe supported by Cambodian Living Arts 2010



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Methodology

Once I knew the episode I wanted to illustrate, I contacted Sovitou Noun to come to Brussels to work with me. Sovitou is an Amrita Performing Arts dancer who trained at the Secondary School of Fine Arts and specialized in the role of Hanuman, the white monkey. He has been in all of my projects but one. For budgetary reasons, the new piece had to be a solo. But, if I wanted to keep

the story fun, suitable for adults and children alike and in the tradition of popular theater, I needed more characters.

Sovitou occasionally works with Mann Kosal's Sovanna Phum Arts Association to supplement his income. He performs in both the *lkhon khol* and *sbaek thom* genres.

Remembering that one form has its origin in the other, I wondered if we could blend them again. Since we did not have authentic leather panels, we could design our puppets. Luckily, my husband, Pascal Lemaitre, is a best-selling illustrator and author of children's books. While waiting for Sovitou to prepare for his visit and finalize his Visa applications, I started to work, looking for offshoots, dimensions to incorporate in my work. Some people term this process brain-storming. I prefer to call it "free association."

Free Associations

In psychoanalysis, free association is a process that lets the mind make connections without censorship. The concept was developed by the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud to let ideas emerge freely when interpreting or analyzing dreams. Freud was inspired by the poet and philosopher Schiller, who applied this method to generate ideas. Freud quotes Schiller in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "Where there is a creative mind, Reason—so it seems to me—relaxes its watch upon the gates, and the ideas rush in pell-mell" (qt. in Freud 16). Or, as Arthur Rimbaud wrote to fellow poet Paul Demeny: "Le poète se fait voyant par un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens" (the poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic, and rational [not "reasoned"] derangement of all the senses) (Rimbaud 377). Free association permits me random thoughts and affinities. This process allows me to dream up related material and new ideas to feed my work. The following associations greatly informed my thesis performance.

Water and Climate Change

The main element in the Wat Svay Andet ritual is water. In many spiritual traditions, water symbolizes birth, renewal, and the passage of time. The flow of water slowly carves its bed through rocks, sand, and mud, a metaphor for time and memory. Some memories bring tears—more water. Another association comes to mind: in French the expression “water under the bridge” refers to events no longer important or forgotten—to history. Performing the *Reamker*, even a contemporized version, is to join the collective memory of a people, to perpetuate a culture and history.

Water in relation to agriculture brings forth themes of irrigation and the cultivation of nature. In the past, Cambodia's annual wet season floods were mainly beneficial. They provided much-needed inundation of the soil after months of dry heat. Now though, with global warming, floods, landslides, and droughts have increased in frequency and damage. Cambodia, located in a climate-change hotspot in Southeast Asia, is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters. Even before this, widespread poverty, malnutrition, lack of resources and access to health and education services, poor sanitation, and poor water quality in rural areas posed a challenge. Moreover, the continued use of fossil fuel exacerbates the effects of extreme weather and natural disasters.

Extreme poverty and vulnerability to natural disasters is a deadly combination. In Cambodia, 80 percent of the population lives along the Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers in the low-lying floodplain regions. While these regions are ideal for rice production, they are also highly susceptible to inundations during the rainy seasons. In rural settings, areas with treated water and improved sanitation facilities are rare. People usually defecate in the open air; they rely on uncovered wells or containers to store water coming from a variety of sources, treated and untreated. Untreated water from open sources is susceptible to contaminations by *E. coli*,

present in human and animal feces, by rodent urine (Leptospirosis), bacteria in soil (Meloidosis), and parasites carried by snails (Schistosomiasis). Consumption of contaminated water in flood conditions is common. Typhoid fever, arsenicosis, and viral hepatitis are diseases related to the consumption of contaminated water and are present in Cambodia (Shaheed et al.).

Droughts, on the other hand, sever the capacity to grow food and limit already scarce resources for people who rely on agriculture for their livelihood. A lesser-known fact is that drought has also been associated with an increased risk of water-borne diseases. Reduced water supplies force people to travel greater distances to access water and to use unsafe water. Malnutrition, more severe in drought periods, is a risk factor for the transmission of infectious diseases. During these crises, the capacity of the people and the government to respond to catastrophe is minimal. There is no infrastructure in the country that permits the state to react and intervene efficiently. The inability to boil or treat water during floods, lack of money for medicine, lack of medical centers, and technology leave the population extremely vulnerable (Davis et al.).

Shadow and Early Cinema

Shadow puppet theater is generally experienced as magical because of its play between light and darkness, which is a reminder of ancestral fears and can serve as an allegory for the afterlife. It is easy to imagine the impact of a shadow performance being held in the open, with the warm glow of the fire supplying the light under a ceiling of stars and surrounded by nothing but dark space. Or to imagine our ancestors, gathered around the fire, looking at the play of light and shadow on the walls of a cave. By its very nature, this form of theater is well suited to represent the dualities of good and evil, life and death. Exploring the dualities led me to more pairing of opposites: male-female; past-present; back and front (of the screen); young-old; tradition-contemporary; dance-non-dance; individual-collective. The story of Kumbhakar and the

release of the water mixes images of death with farcical, hyperbolic humor. There is an amusing juxtaposition between the discipline of dance and hard to control bodily functions.

In Plato's allegory of the cave, prisoners are facing a wall and can only see the shadows cast by objects or people behind them. The story alludes to our capacity for imagination and interpretation: what is reality, and how do we interpret it? Are the shadows real? Can we truly know what they represent? Shadows are deceitful. The distance to the source of light changes the size of objects. Identifiable only by outline, an object can be mistaken for another. The art of shadows truly becomes the art of magic, make-believe, and transformation.

Shadow plays are an early incarnation of cinematography. In Thailand, the *Nang Yai*'s popularity—the Thai equivalent of *Sbaek thom*—declined significantly with the advent of cinema (Krebs). The black and white images of early silent films invoke a bygone area or, in the case of documentary films, they are a stamp of authenticity. I read Fatimah Tobing Rony's *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, which casts a critical eye on ethnographic cinema and the Western appetite for exotic, colonialist images. I researched some of the films discussed in the book: Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926); Jean Rouch's *Moi, Un Noir* (1957) and Margaret Mead's beautiful albeit problematic film *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1951). Mead's film is interesting in that her voice describes and interprets everything the camera films; it even replaces the voices and sounds of the participants. I made a mental note not to do the same.

I looked at the classic animation films by German director Lotte Reiniger. Reiniger used paper cut silhouettes and stop motion animation to illustrate classic tales such as Charles Perrault's *Cinderella* or *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, based on *The Arabian Nights*. The way she combines her silhouettes with music and narration made her a pioneer in the genre. Her

films predate Walt Disney, whose first film was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). One of Reiniger's sources of inspiration is the Indonesian *Wayang* shadow puppets.

Collaborative Process: Phase One

Following the methods of the old masters, my first move was to write the story of Kumbhakar. The story needs contextualization for viewers who are not familiar with the themes, plot, and characters of the *Reamker*. I mimic the style and pattern of Judith Jacob's translation of *Reamker*, borrowing its extensive use of superlatives: Ream the magnificent, Kumbhakar the victorious, the fair Seda, and so on.

Collaboration with Pascal Lemaitre

In the meantime, my husband, Pascal,⁵ was working. For this project, he explored several trails: the tradition of silhouette and paper cuts in illustration and graphic design, notably the work of Milton Glaser for the Push Pin Studios and of the American commercial artist John Alcorn; the cut-outs of Henri Matisse; the Brazilian printed booklets also known as Cordel literature—among them the prints of José Guadalupe Posada. An admirer of outsider art—art made by untrained artists—he also looked at his favorite artists, the American Bill Traylor and the German John Elsas.

Ultimately, Pascal was looking for a mode of representation that reflected his drawing style while still referring in some ways to the Cambodian tradition. His challenge was to synthesize characters of the Cambodian mythology in simple shapes that could be seen and understood from afar. Not wanting to imitate, he wanted to get away from the decorative and ornate aspect of traditional Khmer puppets.

⁵ See biographies in program (appendix A).

He helped me make important changes in the scenario, which rendered the story more dynamic. His unfamiliarity with the subject highlighted the elements that could use more explanations or needed to be repeated, such as the protagonists' names. He suggested bringing more focus on the avatars of dog and bird, which is the part he found most surprising.

We transformed the scenario into a storyboard. Visualizing it in individual and sequential scenes allowed us to determine we needed a minimum of five puppets. We decided on their size based on *sbaek touch* puppets I have at home. I wanted Sovitou Noun⁶ to be able to move; the puppets had to be light and comfortable to manipulate. We asked a professional company to give us an estimate price for five plywood figures. Too expensive. We decided to cut them out of cardboard ourselves. Pascal set out to work and designed each character in solid black shapes. We soon find that some parts were still too detailed and difficult to carve out of the stiff cardboard. Pascal had limited time to devote to this project. He simplified the shapes again, bringing the figures down to straight lines and angles. When Sovitou arrived in Brussels from Cambodia, we had finished only one puppet.

Collaboration with Sovitou Noun

Sovitou came to Brussels for an initial workshop phase of four weeks. Relying on his practical expertise in performing *sbaek thom* at Sovanna Phum, I had been waiting for him to shop for the appropriate material—a screen, a lamp. My ignorance was total; I did not know whether we needed a frame for the screen, how to build it, or what to buy. Within a week and a half, he singlehandedly finished cutting the four remaining puppets and hung a screen across the rehearsal space with ropes and rubber bands, securing the bottom part with sandbags and a bamboo stick. Looking for the appropriate light took us on tour to nearly every store in Brussels:

⁶ See biographies in program (appendix A).

we needed a single but powerful beam of light, the kind used in projectors. Sovitou placed the lamp on a stool two meters away from the screen. We sealed all the windows, including the one in the ceiling, and were plunged into complete darkness. We were good to go.

During the remaining two and a half weeks, we worked on the sequence itself. The explicit narrative framework, with specific characters, a timeline, and a storyline that have to be respected for the tale to make sense, was a significant constraint and called for an entirely different *modus operandi*. I am lucky that Sovitou had seen the Wat Svay Andet troupe and had even performed with them. Scene by scene, between his propositions and mine, we sketched through the entire sequence. For the time being, I had decided to be the narrator. With no *pinpeat* orchestra, we worked in silence. Very soon, I realized that we needed to let go and have more fun with the material. To help us get in a playful mood, I put on John Williams' score for *Star Wars*. The music brought a rhythm, an atmosphere; it gave us a time frame for each scene. And it generated more ideas.

Along the way, we added props. A football represents the world, a flashlight is a magic weapon, branches suspend a meditating Kumbhakar over the water. The branches become microphone, then a forest; the football gets tucked in Sovitou's shirt, thus transforming his slender silhouette into an ogre-like figure; the flashlight is now a mirror. Sovitou himself alternates between roles: he is Seda, Preah Ream, an ogre, a monkey, a bird, and a puppeteer.

Playing with the notion of “the good within evil and the evil within good” (Phim & Thompson 32), Preah Ream’s movement vocabulary is inspired by Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940). The mighty warrior Kumbhakar meditates; he looks like a baby in his mother’s womb—meanwhile, he is blocking the river and causing havoc in the enemy’s camp.

At the end of the fourth week, Sovitou has to leave. He will come back in the winter for a second and final work session. I have been awarded a Jerome Robbins Dance Division Research

Fellowship and plan to present the new dance, *When Kumbhakar Swallowed a Dead Dog*, at their annual symposium. In the meantime, we decide to remake the puppets the traditional way, in cowhide. The cardboard figures are too fragile, some have already lost their limbs. Sovitou proposes to do this with Mann Kosal at *Sovanna Phum*. Pascal Lemaitre needs to revise his designs. Additional research has revealed that Hanuman, for example, is always represented with his mouth closed and holds a dagger; Angkut has a long tail that he coils into a throne to sit on⁷ (Ly 70 - 71). As for me, I plan to add a section where Noun dances in front of the screen.

Collaborative Process: Phase Two

Two weeks before the scheduled rehearsals, Sovitou gets into a motorbike accident and breaks his leg. All I have of him is the film of our last rehearsal. However, the film is not devoid of qualities. It is (almost) black and white. There is the chance that with some work, it can stand alone. I revise and edit the text to insert intertitles. Typography and rhythm of sentences are inspired by the films of Lotte Reiniger and Margaret Mead. I reframe images, cut, and edit scenes. I replace the music from *Star Wars* with traditional Cambodian music—some *pinpeat*, but also a flute solo played by artist Yeum Sang and a song by the Brao people, a Northern tribe. The result is not optimal. Many themes I wanted to explore are still missing.

Collaboration with Vincent Dunoyer

Vincent Dunoyer⁸ and I have known each other for twenty years. We worked together in 2018 when he directed my piece *Bits & Pieces*, a solo presented at *Danspace Project*. A former member of De Keersmaecker and Vandekeybus' companies, he has been creating work for over a decade. I am a big admirer of his choreographic work. His approach to dance is meticulous,

⁷ See Appendix B

⁸ See biographies in Program (Appendix A)

rigorous, and minimalist. Most importantly, his work is intelligent and sensitive, showing great depth and integrity. He is passionate about literature, film, and perfume.

I show him the film, and he comes back to me with questions. Mainly, he does not understand what I did and why. Vincent's first proposition is to put me in the piece. I protest, I am out of shape and do not want this piece to be about me again—*Bits & Pieces* is an autobiographical solo that depicts my relationship to dance. But, he has already found a solution to my problem. The performance can be a lecture-demonstration. My presence, he argues, establishes many of the dualities I have outlined. Sovitou is absent, a shadow from the past, while I am on stage, here and now. Sovitou dances; I talk. Sovitou is in the film; I am in front of the screen. The list continues: black and white – color; female – male; tradition – contemporary dance. Vincent is right, of course. I ask him to collaborate with me.

I go back to my desk to write. What I say needs to be informative yet direct and straightforward enough to keep people engaged. During three weeks, I send pages after pages to Vincent, who edits and makes suggestions. I mix personal memories with background history and elements from my research, adding my personal epic to the *Reamker*.

I look for ways to support what I say visually. It makes sense to use the props in the film. I can replicate some of the actions in the film with the same objects while talking. Vincent and I spend the remaining three weeks in the rehearsal studio. We recycle ideas from *Bits & Pieces*: part of what I say can be pre-recorded, part of it read; the rest has to be spoken directly to the audience. We recycle the opening scene of *Bits & Pieces* as well, using it to explain the origin of my research. The concept of “origin” becomes a thread: the origin of the piece, *sbaek thom* as the origin of all performing arts in Cambodia, the origin of drawing, the origin of dance, my origins.

Each day changes are made to the text, sometimes just a word. We weave together text, movement, and images until they blend into a cohesive whole. At this point, I am letting Vincent Dunoyer direct me. I need to step into the shoes of the performer.

Fig. 5 A rehearsal in Brussels.



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Performance

Standing, sitting, walking in front of the screen, I present and perform the story of Kumbhakar. I have woven into the performance the process of its making, the research carried out, and my own history. By doing so, I have altered its meaning, making the ritual my own. I have associated it with shadow theater, which is performed in the face of calamities. I have alluded to death by recalling events of the past: war, Noun's accident, my father's death. The performance is as much about me as it is about my cultural origins.

Fig 6: Studio performance at Baryshnikov Arts Centre



My presence is manifest throughout the piece. I introduce the film, I reproduce some of the moments of the film. I am part of the film. I sit close to the screen, facing it: I am meant to be seen at all times. When Sovitou in the projection comes to dance in front of the screen, I am visually on the same plane. I sonically interact with the film: I blow balloons to replicate the sound of putrid gas coming out of the dead dog; I play the flute to put Kumbhakar to sleep. I replicate some movements from the film—a crying gesture, a dance pose.

A mix of Western contemporary dance with Cambodian tradition, the performance is hybrid. I use the language of Cambodian dance, but my references and associations are Western. Despite the lack of authenticity, the two languages permeate each other, yet somewhat retain their integrity, making clear that two cultures and genres are echoing each other.

To the purists who lament over the loss and misuse of tradition, or who frown upon the fusion of styles, I argue that traditions remain relevant as long as they continue to provoke, to evolve, to question, or simply to be used. Whether it is fantasized, changed, or strictly upheld, the result is the same. From a literary perspective, the poetic discourse of the *Reamker* illustrates how the narrative transcends its literal meaning, and how art and beauty can convey truths that live across cultures and the passing of time. The mythologist Joseph Campbell contends that “the function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and the world” (Campbell 107). A universal motif found in mythologies and religions is the transformation of the hero from the status of an outsider or regular person to the status of one who has fully come to the realization of his or herself. In this case, the *Reamker* helps me accept my status as an outsider.

The Cambodian rapper Prach Ly is from Long Beach, home to one of the largest Cambodian communities in the United States.⁹ His album, *Dalama... “the end’n is just the*

⁹ Other large communities can be found in Lowell, Massachusetts, Stockton, California, and Paris (France).

beginnin,” speaks about his native homeland; its history; his experience as an immigrant.

Although he left Cambodia as a very young child and grew up mostly in the United States, Ly considers himself a “Cambodian in America,” and not a Cambodian American (Ollier 103). In her essay “Rapping (in) the homeland,” Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier writes of Ly’s lyrics:

But unfortunately, just like the African American rappers before them, the younger Cambodian rappers’ quest for and reclamation of their origin are based on second-hand memories, nostalgia they cannot even claim as their own, and are fraught with inaccuracies, contradictions, and misrepresentations of history. (111)

I relate strongly to this statement. Despite all the research, time, and effort I pour into my work, I can never understand and truly be part of Cambodia. I cannot claim to be “a Cambodian in America.” Perhaps my strength is that I know and accept that my foray into Cambodian culture is always fraught with inaccuracies and misrepresentations, that the best way to appropriate it is to re-imagine it.

When Kumbhakar Swallowed a Dead Dog was presented on two separate occasions. The first performance at Baryshnikov Arts Center on January 22, 2020, was curated by the Asian Cultural Council (ACC), part of their Cultural Conversations series. In the Q&A session that followed, moderated by ACC’s Senior Program Officer Cecily Cook, a young theater scholar from Indonesia mentioned how rare it was for contemporary artists to include the *Ramayana*’s characters and story into contemporary works. He found it provocative and beautiful and asked why I called it Dance when the performance included puppets and theater. He answered his own question by remarking how my experience of working with postmodern choreographer and film maker Yvonne Rainer might have informed and extended my definition of dance. In a private email, Rainer wrote: “I found the projected material a bit long-winded, but I want to tell you how iridescent you are in the piece. No matter what you do—addressing the audience, performing

small gestures, donning masks, dealing with objects—you captivate us spectators and hold our attention with your luminous presence.”

During the second performance at the New York Public Library’s symposium, Rajika Puri, the acclaimed exponent of Bharata Natyam and Odissi—two forms of Indian classical dance—remarked that she had not realized Kumbhakar was considered pious in India. This is remarkable considering how familiar she must be with the *Kumbhakarna*. These reactions show that the *Ramayana* can continue to spark reflection and connect audiences across Asia. I hope that Western audiences also get a better understanding of its timeless dimension and poetic power.

Implications for the Future

The NGO Amrita Performing Arts no longer exists. After many years at the helm of the organization, its founder and director Fred Frumberg moved back to the US, leaving the organization in the hands of local administrators. Despite their best efforts, fundraising in Cambodia, without outside help and with little interest on the part of the local elite, proved to be the one problem they would not overcome. Amrita Performing Arts closed its doors in January 2019.

Despite this setback, I plan to continue the dialogue I started with some of the dancers. The method I employed for this thesis, using shadow puppets and filming the performance, allows me to work with dancers without having to worry about travel and accommodation costs for them on tour. Noun mentioned that the episode in which the monkey king Bali and buffalo king Dubhi fight in a cave is popular in mountainous regions. It would be interesting to learn what form of theater illustrates this episode, where it is performed, whether it is also part of a

ritual. Could this episode be tied to my actual performance, or would it require an entirely new framework? Could it address other aspects of the problematic relationship between humans and nature? Regardless of the answers, the *Reamker* certainly provides ample material for future artistic investigations.

The *Reamker* opens to a world of beliefs and customs. Studying and learning more about the unique syncretism of Theravada Buddhism and magical-animism would be a valuable foundation to help me understand what governs and guides the lives of people¹⁰, as these beliefs underlay all cultural production in Cambodia. Folk tales, for example, offer much in terms of popular wisdom. One way to examine them is through the lens of religion and local customs. Another exciting link to consider here involves the archetype of the trickster Judge Rabbit, with its uncanny resemblance to the African American trickster Br'er Rabbit. These tales are traditionally the subject of *sbaek touch*, the popular shadow theater that uses the smaller leather figures. In this form, the choice of music and dance is much less codified and could offer an interesting medium of expression.

Up until today, I have exclusively taken my culture of origin as a source of inspiration to create dances that reflect changing contexts and individual histories. I have portrayed my own history, but also the reality and history of others—dance masters, young dancers, boxers. These explorations have in common the larger question of how we construct our identities—what makes us who we are, what guides our aesthetic choices, what influences we are subjected to—questions that can be applied to anybody and everybody, regardless of gender, race, class, and cultural background. In contemplation before the Mediterranean Sea, the Algerian columnist for *Le Quotidien d'Oran* Kamel Daoud reflects:

¹⁰ The majority of people in Cambodia are farmers or fishermen; agriculture remains the traditional mainstay of the Cambodian economy.

We realize (looking at) colonial buildings that the French parenthesis is not something “from elsewhere,” but which is “mine too,” in the order of my history and heritage.

Buildings, architectures, public squares, remaining churches, erased synagogues, and names of streets and vines. They are not “French,” but also “mine,” part of my story.

Colonization and decolonization are acts, mine, that I have suffered or insured and that I also assume. French colonization is a story that is part of Algerian history, and what is born of it is mine. (23)

Post-colonial art is an art of resilience, born of violence and suffering, inherently hybrid. It is an art that integrates and accepts multiple influences, perspectives, and cultures. An art that never privileges one tradition over another. An art that reflects the voices and experiences of individuals and does not represent homogenous populations. This realization is essential to this thesis, both in its performative and written forms. More importantly, these questions and their proposed answers constitute in themselves a methodology in dance making, from research, through the transformative personal experience of inner-life, to its final performative iteration. For dance students of mixed backgrounds who are interested in doing work that straddles multiple cultures, in their image, the methodology articulated and analyzed in this paper illustrates one possible way of accommodating this tension.

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APPENDIX A. Program

When Kumbhakar Swallowed a Dead Dog

Choreography: Emmanuele Phuon with Sovitou Noun

Performance: Emmanuele Phuon & Sovitou Noun

Puppet Design: Pascal Lemaitre

Direction and dramaturgy: Vincent Dunoyer

Music: Yeum Sang: Sorin Khnang Phnom
 Kavet Men and Brao Woman: 3-Day Ceremony
 Pinpeat Orchestra: Trak Tok

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Biographies

Emmanuèle Phuon is French-Cambodian and lives between Brussels, Belgium, and New York. Phuon studied dance at the Conservatoire National de Danse d' Avignon (France), and Alvin Ailey American Dance Center. In New York, she has performed with the *Elisa Monte Dance Company* from 1989 to 1994, Baryshnikov's *White Oak Dance Project* from 1995 to 2002, and had the privilege to work with acclaimed directors Martha Clarke, Joachim Schloemer, and choreographer Meg Stuart among others. Ms. Phuon joined Yvonne Rainer's informal company, the "*Raindears*," in 2010. She has helped re-stage *Trio A*, *The Mind is a*

Muscle and Chair/Pillow for "Yvonne Rainer's Performative Exhibition" at Shunju-za Theater in Kyoto and most recently the Inside-Out Museum in Beijing.

Ms. Phuon's work has been presented at the Baryshnikov Arts Centre, the New Haven's Festival of Arts and Ideas (2010), the Spoleto Dance Festival in Charleston (2011), the Guggenheim Works and Process (2013), Singapore Da:ns festival (2016), Danspace Project (2018) and has toured Hong Kong, Amsterdam, New Delhi.

Sovitou Noun began his training in 1999 in *Lakhaon Khaol*, the traditional Cambodian male masked dance, and graduated in 2014 from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. Mr. Noun has performed extensively in both classical and contemporary dance, collaborating with choreographers Peter Chin (Canada), Eko Supriyanto (Indonesia), and Emmanuele Phuon (USA), among others. Mr. Noun's choreographic work has been featured in various festivals in Cambodia, including Amrita Performing Arts Contemporary Dance Platform, Street Dance Festival, and the University of Fine Arts. He currently teaches full-time at the Secondary School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. Mr. Noun specializes in the traditional Khmer martial art Bokator. He was awarded gold medals three years in a row by the Ministry of Youth and Sports Kung Fu Gold, representing Cambodia from 2012 to 2014.

Vincent Dunoyer began his professional career in 1989 as a dancer for Wim Vandekeybus, then joined Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's company Rosas from 1990 to 1996. In 1997/98, he performed and toured internationally *Three solos for Vincent*, choreographed for him by The Wooster Group, Steve Paxton, and De Keersmaeker. Since 1998, he has worked as a freelance dancer (for Rosas, Raimund Hoghe...) and as a choreographer. Creations include *Etude #31* (1999), a collaboration with photographer Mirjam Devriendt, *Vanity* (1999) for which he received the Mouson Award from the Mousonturm Arts Center in Frankfurt, *The Princess Project* (2001), *Solos for Others* (2003), *Cadavre Exquis* (2005), created with 33 young dancers from the school PARTS in Brussels, *Sister* (2007), a duo with Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and *Encore* (2009), a reconstruction of his repertoire as a dancer. During summer 2012, he was invited by visual artist Berlinde de Bruyckere to create *Loan*, performed daily in Istanbul gallery Arter, during the three months of her exhibition *The Wound*. He also collaborates since 2013 with Mette Edvardsen for her « living library » project *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*.

DVD DVD, combining texts, images and dance reconstructions, was created for the 2015 edition of Brussels' festival *Danseur*.

Pascal Lemaître is a freelance author and illustrator based in Belgium. His editorial work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Le 1*, *Lacroix*, *Astrapi*, *J'aime Lire*, *Pom d'Api*, and *Dorémi*, among many other publications. Pascal's

illustrations for children and adult books can be found in the catalogs of American, Belgian, and French editors such as L'École des Loisirs/Pastel, L'Aube, Simon & Schuster, Scholastic, and Penguin Books.

Lemaitre has had the enormous privilege of working with authors Toni and Slade Morrison, Stéphane Hessel, Edgar Morin, Boris Cyrulnik, Jean-Claude Ameisen, Pierre Rahbi, and Rascal. In 2015, the museum Tomi Ungerer in Strasbourg curated an exhibit titled "Tomi Ungerer invites Pascal Lemaitre," featuring Pascal's children's books illustrations. Among them, *The Book of Mean People* by Toni and Slade Morrison prompted legendary illustrator and author Bill Steig to exclaim: "These drawings are wonderful, and you can quote me!"

APPENDIX B. Final Version of the Characters Design with their Sources

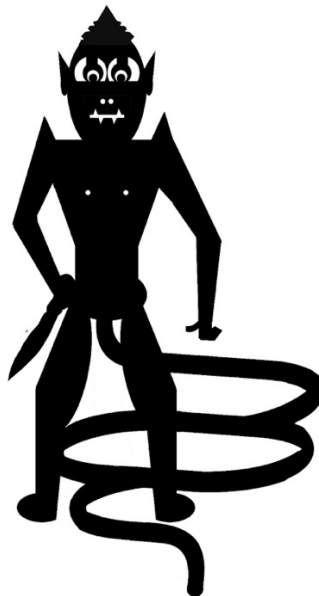
Kumbhakar is depicted as a green skinned yak with round ears wearing a kbang headdress (small crown). He carries a long spear.



Hanuman is a white monkey. He holds a dagger, wears a kbang headdress (short crown or no crown), depicted with mouth open



Angkut is a green monkey with a “goose tail mokot” (he is the son of a queen) , mostly depicted with his mouth closed. He holds a dagger. Angkut coils his tail into a throne which lets him sit slightly higher than Reap.

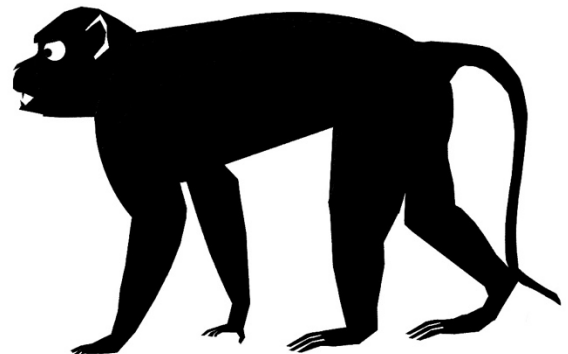
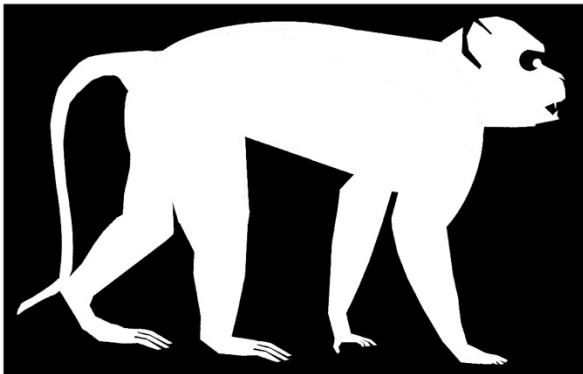


Reap is King of the Yaks. Depicted with green skin and is said to have ten heads. Generally painted with 4, 6, 8, or 10 arms.



Black monkey & White monkey

The battle of the black and white monkey is usually played without explanations as a prelude. It is part of the blessing ceremony as it symbolizes the battle between good and evil.



Dead Dog & Bird



Sources: Chan, Chet. *Reamker: Painted by Chet Chan*. Reyum Publications. 2002.