

International Partnership Programme for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage
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Case Study Report: Cambodia

Living Human Treasure of Classical Dance

Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts

1. Introduction

Classical dance plays a critical role as a cultural artifact of Khmer civilisation. The depictions of celestial dance on the bas-reliefs of the temple architecture show the various forms of Khmer arts. Therefore, Khmer classical dance is one of the major manifestations of the Khmer civilisation. Classical dance and other art forms have faced many difficulties throughout the political history of Cambodia. If we examine the history of classical dance, what has been an important change through the times is its function and virtue. In ancient times, sacred dance was performed for ritual ceremonies to help the country when it faced difficulties, as well as to worship the king. The performances originally belonged to court rituals conducted in the palace to which ordinary people had no access. In terms of virtue, the dancers' costumes and make-up symbolised purity and peacefulness while the smiling facial expressions of the dancers conveyed emotions of compassion, love, and forgiveness. Classical dance tradition continued only because it fulfilled a social need, not because it reflected Brahmanic cult practice. When disasters struck the country - war, drought, or famine-the purpose of the sacred dance was to ask for the blessings of the gods; peace, happiness and prosperity for the people.

Classical dance is one of the aspects of cultural heritage which Cambodia considers a national treasure. This dance form contains the immutable lexicon of 4,500 basic dance movements which form the basis of a repertoire. This art form has been transmitted from one generation to another by memory without interruption for more than one hundred years. It has today acquired international prestige due to its antiquity and extreme refinement.

During the regime of the Khmer Rouge in 1975-1978, classical dance was thought of as an aristocratic institution and therefore something to be eliminated. In the face of the purges by the Khmer Rouge, classical dance faced near extinction in Cambodia. An estimated 80% of artists died from starvation, disease, forced labour or execution. Classical dance was totally abandoned by society. All texts pertaining to the choreography of dances were burnt or destroyed, and the only surviving relics of the art form were the masters themselves.

After the tragedy of lost art during the Khmer Rouge regime, artists and teachers of classical dance put all their efforts into restoring and preserving classical dance. During the period of extreme poverty in the 1980s, society began to rebuild itself in earnest. A number of artists and dance masters gathered to create organisations and academic departments for the preservation of a wide range of art forms. The work of reviving classical dance, however, had to face a number of challenges such as building capacity – both institutional and human – finding funding and support, and recovering dance materials. This was only possible by the reuniting and the collaboration of the surviving artists. Without the willingness and support from the government at that time, classical dance would never have recovered from the dark years of the Khmer Rouge. Today, it is remarkable to note that 90% of classical dance forms and pieces have been restored. As the

potential for revival derived from the strength of human resources, it was necessary in the post-Khmer Rouge period to encourage and capacitate these living testimonials to an art form – the dancers themselves (*who numbered fewer than one dozen*) so that they could revive or resuscitate the lost art of Cambodian classical dance.

The revival of classical dance has been a complex and difficult task. On one hand, it has depended on the strength of human capacity and public awareness about the cultural value of dance. On the other hand, the physical resources, most importantly the stage or theatre, are one element which has been essential for the success of the revival work. It should not be forgotten that such an oral tradition exists and is actively practiced. This dance has been transmitted by memory from one generation to another.

Classical dance in modern times was promoted and seen not only during the visits of international officials, but also by the common people of all ages in cities and remote areas. At the present time, classical dance can be seen in public, at hotels, restaurants, as well as on special occasions and at the national and international festivals. Classical dance nowadays has spread in popularity throughout the country especially in tourist areas, and it is no longer seen only as a sacred ritual but as a form of entertainment.

Hence, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts was concerned that the morality, virtue as well as the sacred values of classical dance were losing their meaning as a result of the new western influences and the growth of tourism. On November 7, 2003, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia was proclaimed as one of the “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” by UNESCO. The Japanese government assented on July 1, 2005 to support the UNESCO project to ensure the preservation of this intangible cultural heritage with financial assistance from the *Japan funds in trust* and UNESCO. The urgent concern of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts focused on the dance masters as living human resources whom they believed indispensable to the protection as well as safeguarding of Khmer intangible heritage. Therefore, they began to seek out these human resources within the country for the purpose of preserving and developing the cultural heritage. Moreover, the creation of a network of old artists was undertaken to transmit the intangible culture heritage to the next generation as well as to reinforce the cooperation between the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts with other national and international organisations. An example of this can be seen in the agreement on the *Living Human Treasure Project*.

2. Objectives of the Project

From the above remarks on the history of Khmer dance, the project is designed with the following objectives:

- 1) To restore and revive the remnants of classical dance knowledge;
- 2) To research and compile the existing classical dance documents;
- 3) To provide financial support to the old dance masters and old artists who dedicate their effort and commitment to transmit their dance knowledge to the next generation;
- 4) To strengthen the research and training capabilities of the Faculty of Choreographic Arts and the Department of Performing Arts;
- 5) To build up public awareness, especially among the young generations, to participate in and to appreciate the value of the classical dance form.

3. Methodology of the Project Implementation

- 1) The old dance masters and dance teachers worked together and shared the dance knowledge which they recalled and reached mutual understanding and agreement.
- 2) Training course was conducted by the principle dance masters for the young dancers.
- 3) Lectures were given by the art scholars and old dance masters between ages 65-80 for public awareness.
- 4) The main old dance masters served as a main source of information in compiling the inventory of classical dance.

The Department of Performing Arts and the Faculty of Choreographic Arts organised the training course for the dancers in the province. The project also provided the training course for the dance troupe in the provinces and private dance companies.

Due to the shortage of documents, the project largely depended on interviews with the old dance masters and on the limited existing documents to be compiled for the inventory. The project activities took place at the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, Phnom Penh. The project was also carried out in cooperation with dance masters and the representatives of Culture Center of the Ministry of Fine Arts in the provinces.

4. Outcomes of the Project

The outcomes of the project were considered remarkable. As a result, there were a number of important outputs including the training course and the inventory making which took place at the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. Other project outputs included:

- 1) Training Cambodian researchers;
- 2) Publishing the outcomes of classical dance research for public awareness; raising efforts concerning the value of classical dance form;
- 3) Production of two classical dance inventories in Khmer and English;
- 4) Strengthening and transmission of the dance skills to the next generation;
- 5) Fabrication of musical instruments;
- 6) Innovation of lost dance forms;
- 7) Performances of classical dance to raise public awareness concerning intangible cultural heritage preservation.

5. Conclusion

The notable feature of the above project was the successful cooperation between the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and UNESCO, Phnom Penh. As a result of the project, there were classical dance inventories made and a group of artists learned and explored with the dance masters about the unity of the classical dance technique. The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts is delighted to continue the project to ensure the preservation of the classical dance, an important ICH.