

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: SOUNDING THE SPIRIT OF CAMBODIA:
THE LIVING TRADITION OF KHMER MUSIC
AND DANCE-DRAMA IN A WASHINGTON, DC
COMMUNITY

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Since the Khmer Rouge takeover of Cambodia in 1975, the desire to preserve, reconstruct, and document Khmer performing arts has motivated many important projects that aim to strengthen these traditions worldwide. These projects typically focus on dance and promote the notion that authenticity is linked with ethnicity and the geographical designation, Cambodia. This presentation stands in stark contrast to the reality of the devoted activities of living artists who keep these traditions alive across the globe. Additionally, Khmer music usually exists as an audible yet forgotten soundtrack to these projects. When it is recognized, listings of instruments, descriptions of musical structure, names of ensemble types, and pages of notation (that many Khmer

musicians themselves cannot read) frequently overshadow its human dimensions. Major chasms divide current scholarship from musical practice.

To help bridge these gaps, this dissertation takes readers on a visit to a community that lives and breathes Khmer music and dance-drama today in the Washington, DC area. It explores the experience of more than forty individuals who participate in the activities of Cambodian American Heritage in Virginia and the Cambodian Buddhist Society in Maryland. Ethnographic “sound-spheres”—constructed from interviews, conversations, and observations—join their stories. A bifocal lens—including the experience of the author as a music student and that of her teacher, master musician, Ngek Chum—organizes the “sound-spheres.” They are arranged according to “four concentric worlds of musical meaning” (musical experience, local community, the United States, and the world) that illuminate the dual reality of historical, geographical, political, economic, social, and cultural change and the enduring timeless, placeless essences of the tradition.

This collective story illustrates the fundamental role that music (especially *pin peat*) plays in linking contemporary residents of the Washington, DC area to the spirit of an ancient, distant Cambodia. It demonstrates how Khmer music: 1) unifies sound, movement, story, and social interaction, 2) embodies cultural ideals that resonate across Buddhism, transmission processes, and performance, 3) retains lessons about the continuity of life and exceptional conduct, and 4) balances personal with group needs.

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by

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Introduction:

Experiencing the Sound of Cambodia

“What Does It Mean...?”

In the summer and fall of 2001, the New England Foundation for the Arts presented, *Dance, the Spirit of Cambodia*, a tour of the United States by traditional Khmer performing artists from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh.¹ Forty-one artists toured twelve cities across the United States in “a public celebration of more than a decade of documentation, preservation, and cultural exchange fostered between the Royal University of Fine Arts, U.S. presenters, funders, and Cambodian-American communities.” (<http://www.asiasource.org/cambodia/tour.htm>)

Dance, the Spirit of Cambodia is just one example of the many important projects that have been and continue to be carried out in Cambodia and worldwide that work toward strengthening the continuation of Khmer performing arts. The overarching impetus for this work and the scholarship that supports it is the preservation of traditions that were nearly destroyed since Pol Pot took control of Cambodia in 1975. This work has focused especially on “reconstruction” and documentation, and on the visually entrancing element of dance. Often, it also promotes the idea that authentic continuations of Khmer performance arts can only take place in Cambodia. (Cravath 1985; Sam 1987; Sam 1988; Sam 1992; Sam 1994; Shapiro 1994)

¹ The New England Foundation for the Arts was the executive producer. The tour was co-produced with the Asia Society (contextual and interpretive materials) and Lisa Booth Management, Inc. (programs, promotions, and finance).

Through this dissertation, *Sounding the Spirit of Cambodia: The Living Tradition of Khmer Music and Dance-drama in a Washington, DC Community*, I complement this work by paying tribute to contemporary Khmer performing arts projects that, in true faith to their traditions, are in constant motion. I take readers on a visit to a community of artists who live and breathe Khmer music and dance-drama today, in the United States—well beyond the confines of Cambodia’s borders. This visit focuses on experience: the experience of musicians, dancers, and the community members who invest immeasurable quantities of energy into the production of Khmer music and dance-drama. Upon conclusion of this visit, I hope that readers will appreciate Khmer performing arts not only as grand traditions of a Cambodia that was, but also as thriving legacies embodying valuable knowledge that transcends time, place, and even ethnic boundaries.

The Study of Musical Experience and the Study of Cambodian Music

This approach was inspired by scholarship in ethnomusicology, anthropology, music education, and performance studies that places the value of a performance, not in a narrowly defined form, but rather, in the act of performing itself. For decades, ethnomusicologists have been asserting that musical meaning is bound to the processes of music making. Musical functions and learning processes, as well as related social interactions and interpersonal communications are not incidental, but central, to the authenticity of any musical tradition. Analogous conclusions reappear in reports from the fields of anthropology, music education, and performance studies. Of particular note is the collection of essays which comprises *The Anthropology of Experience*. (Turner

and Bruner 1986) The diverse papers bespeak, from a broad range of unique perspectives, the importance of accessing and examining culture as “lived experience” (Bruner 1986: 5), as the intersection between events and human consciousness. The pattern that emerges there and across numerous studies in anthropology and related fields suggests that placing experience at the heart of investigations, analyses, and representations of music will yield the most accurate insights into its meanings.

The following survey introduces several common approaches to exploring the significance of music in life from the mid-1960s through the late 1990s. A focus on music within its cultural context distinguishes these studies from more traditional musicologically oriented research. They examine music as part of a larger, cultural whole, emphasizing the connections between music and human behavior; communication through music; structural patterns (or homologies) across socio-cultural realms; music as interaction between humans, humans and nature, and humans and the supernatural; or a combination of these.

For instance, in 1964, in *Anthropology of Music* Merriam called for the study of music *in* culture. The volume presents a multidimensional argument for looking at “music as human behavior” (1964: viii), including theoretical, methodological, sensory, and educational perspectives. The rationale behind this argument centers on the idea that music may not be separated from people. Based on the idea that music “reflects the organization of society” (1964: 13), Merriam identifies three major components of ethnomusicological study: the technical aspects of music, human behavior, and linking ethnomusicology to the humanities and other social sciences. According to Merriam, in

exploring these facets of music, the ethnomusicologist should continually ask: What is music? and, What relationship does music have to the rest of culture?

Frisbie's 1967 *Kinaalda: A Study of the Navaho Girl's Puberty Ceremony* explores these questions. In order to "view the Kinaalda in its cultural context: to see how it expressed the over-all value system of the Navaho" (1967: 4), Frisbie examines the relationship between human behavior and the technical aspects of musical performance. For instance, she explains that Kinaalda "ushers the girl into society, invokes positive blessing on her, insures her health, prosperity, and well-being, and protects her from potential misfortune." (1967: 9) She illustrates how the ceremony is based upon mythology, and she discusses the correspondences between the ceremony and Navaho religion. It is not until chapter three of the study, until the socio-cultural context of the ceremony has been introduced, that technical aspects of music are presented. Even throughout this process, Frisbie consistently provides contextual information such as a general overview of Navaho music and parameters of performance. Through this approach, Frisbie demonstrates how, through Kinaalda, the Navaho girl becomes a symbol of reproduction and cosmology.

Blacking expands these views of music as behavior, as reflective of social organization, and as embedded within the context of performance by proposing that "the world of music is a world of human experience." (1969: 59) He bases his proposition upon his observation of the interdependence among music, individual experience, human relationships, and musical structures in both Venda and European music. Tracing these connections, Blacking illustrates that cultural and social contexts form the foundation of music's ability to communicate. This line of argument led to his

conclusion that, “The ultimate task of the ethnomusicologist is to discover the relationships between life and music.” (1969: 59)

In *Sound and Sentiment* (1982), Feld explores the relationship between Kaluli music and life from two perspectives: the structural and the hermeneutic. Through this process, he demonstrates how socially situated sound expression conveys implicit cultural understandings about unity of nature, thought, and action. He accomplishes this by focusing specifically on patterns that recur in weeping, performance, and myth, illustrating how one myth in particular contains the key elements (birds, food, and loss) of this pattern. Through a study that combines ethnographic, theoretical, and personal constructs, Feld concludes that, “ ‘becoming a bird’ is the core Kaluli aesthetic metaphor.” (1982: 217)

Rice’s *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music* (1994) illustrates from multiple perspectives how understanding music is “a reflexive process that begins with the self’s encounter with musical symbols in the world.” (1994: 4) This study of Bulgarian instrumental and vocal traditions is a personal one, featuring the author’s own encounters with two important musicians, Kostadin and Todora Varimezov. Rice narrates the Varimezov’s stories from various postures, including learning processes, social parameters of music-making, cognitive understandings, and socio-political change. The author’s own learning experiences are of particular relevance to his conclusion that, “The truth that music embodies and symbolically represents is not a propositional, logical truth, verifiable by the niceties of epistemological reflection and explanation, but an existential, ontological truth that sensation, memory, and imagination coalesce into a memorable experience.” (1994: 305)

Small echoes this standpoint in his theory of “musicking.” According to Small, music is an activity. It therefore should not be examined as if it were a noun (“music”), but rather, as if it were a verb (“to music”). Thus, he proposes the concept of “musicking” as a tool for gaining a deeper understanding of music as all human activity. His book, *Musicking: The Meaning of Performance and Listening* (1998) demonstrates how meaning and beauty reside, not in isolated musical works, but instead, in the processes of performance. He accomplishes this by guiding readers through various dimensions (location, exclusivity, musical score, and so on) of a symphonic concert, showing how musical performance leads people through the enactment of relationships, the vehicle that enables humans to link their internal worlds with the world that surrounds them. Small indicates that the ultimate purpose of this exploration is to live well in the world. (1998: 143) As such, a performance’s quality must be evaluated not only by the technical skill it involves, but also by “the loving care and attention to detail that the performers can bring to it.” (1998: 215)

As illustrated throughout this dissertation, these perspectives on music resonate deeply with the reflections of the master artists of the Cambodian community of the Washington, DC area and their accomplished students. Despite this fact, however, existing studies of Khmer music and dance-drama either completely overlook the issue of experience, address it as a peripheral topic, or present it only in relation to dance.

For instance, the Royal University of Fine Arts' report on *pin peat*² and *mohori*³ music describes each of these ensembles by listing the instruments included in them, discussing their acoustic properties, and tracing the origin of the ensemble names. The report represents, via Western notation, the basic rhythms employed in the repertoires. It also introduces the relationship of these rhythms to musical compositions. (1974)

In contrast, Cravath's impressively comprehensive 1985 dissertation (University of Hawaii) of the classical dance of Cambodia contextualizes the technical aspects of the dance through a presentation of historical background; spiritual, social, and political functions; and thematic continuity. The study combines archival material, data gathered from fieldwork in Cambodia in 1975, and interviews with refugee dancers living in the United States. It traces the connections among ritual dances of the pre-Angkor period, Angkorean sculptural evidence, historical changes in the dance from 1860 to the contemporary era, the mythological origins of the dance, dance training, costumes, music, choreography, and traditional ritual function. Cravath guides readers through various dimensions of the dance, illustrating how "Cambodian dance has always been a representation of the two natural forces or principles—the Feminine and the Masculine—in confrontation, and that, ritually, dance was a means of contacting spirits who could influence the outcome of their interaction in any given situation." (1985: 47)

² A type of ensemble that is used to accompany dance-drama, court dance, shadow theater, and religious and other ceremonies. Readers will become familiar with the sounds, structures, functions, and performance practices related to *pin peat* through the process of reading this dissertation. It will soon become clear that Khmer dance-drama is intricately linked to the *pin peat* musical tradition.

³ I do not describe this musical genre in-depth in this dissertation but include some elaboration in Chapter 7.

Additionally, since “music is nearly inseparable from dance” (1985: 309), Cravath includes a twenty-five page introduction to *pin peat* music within his six hundred twelve page volume. He notes that, “The literature on Khmer music is extremely limited and, regarding its history, largely conjectural.” (1985: 387) He suggests some preliminary work on Khmer, Lao, and Thai music by European, Khmer, and Thai scholars between 1906 and 1978 as possible points of departure for musical analysis. But he also notes that, “The best sources of such a study...are what remains in the orally transmitted tradition among contemporary Cambodian musicians or recordings made in this century.” (1985: 392) While pointing out that “music—unless it is a mere demonstration—is always considered to be an offering to the deities or spirits” (1985: 389), Cravath’s musical overview proceeds with a description of the history of the *pin peat* ensemble and portrayals of each instrument of the ensemble. Physical features of the instruments and technical procedures for playing them characterize these portraits. Finally, the section includes an annotated list of twenty-nine major *pin peat* melodies as well as an insightful introduction to the relationships among entrance and exit music, dramatic structure, and ritual function of Khmer classical dance.

Sam’s 1988 dissertation on *pin peat* music (Wesleyan University) was a substantial contribution to the scarce literature on Khmer music related by Cravath above. Concurring with Cravath, the author lists three major problems with relying on hitherto published sources on Khmer music. He notes, “First, previous writings are full of errors, bias, preconceived ideas, and ethnocentricity. Second, writers often follow in their predecessors’ footsteps, so perpetuate the pattern. Third, writings appear shallow and too general.” (1988: 5) In response to this situation, Sam indicates that, “The most

valuable data are drawn from interviews with Khmer and Asian musicians, dancers, scholars, now living in Paris, Bangkok, and in Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Washington, and California.” (1988: 6) His own study therefore combines data gathered from readings, recordings, video, film, interviews with artists and scholars, and insights gained as a performer of the tradition. His manuscript concludes with a listing of names and short biographies of fifteen informants who were crucial to constructing the document.

Sam’s dissertation surveys 1) the history, origin, and development of *pin peat*; 2) the relationship between Khmer and Thai music; 3) components of the *pin peat* ensemble; 4) tuning, scale, mode, melodic elaboration, *metabole*, tempo and rhythm; 5) poetry and song relationships; 6) history, function, and features of *pin peat* performance within the context of court dance, masked play, and shadow play; and, 7) the impact of contemporary political conditions on Khmer music. In the third section listed above, Sam introduces three basic categories of *pin peat*: ensembles connected to villages, the court, and the University of Fine Arts. He describes the physical features and playing techniques associated with each instrument in the ensemble, groups the instruments according to their role in the ensemble, and provides transcriptions in Western notation to illustrate the relationships between these groups. He complements his later discussion of melodic elaboration with transcriptions that illustrate six variations on a vocal theme. The overview of *pin peat* vis-à-vis court dance indicates that “*pin peat* is the skeleton and support system” (1988: 240) for court dance, announcing, accompanying, and bridging emotions, scene changes, character types, and dramatic action. Page 242 offers

a brief description of how two types of drums, *sampho*⁴ and *skor thom*,⁵ “provide detailed dynamics and nuances for the dance.” (1988: 242) In the epilogue about the consequences of political circumstances on music, Sam discusses some of his major concerns for the tradition in both Cambodia and in refugee communities. In Cambodia, these include a dearth of professional artists, ideological limits on creativity, and the destruction of documents. Abroad, the corps of skilled artists is also distressed; instruments are not easily procured; ensembles, learning processes, and repertoire have been modified; and “incentives and enthusiasm are overwhelmed by acculturation.” (1988: 284) Three appendices contain: a list of one hundred Khmer songs according to poetic meter, an annotated list with transcriptions of music performed within the context of dance performance, and the text in Khmer and English of repertoire performed for productions of the *Reamker* epic (the Khmer version of the Ramayana).

Like Sam, Giuriati published his dissertation in 1988 (University of Maryland, Baltimore County). Focusing on Khmer music in the Washington, DC area, Giuriati’s approach is consistent with Cravath’s and Sam’s observation that the most precious data available prevails within the experience of living Khmer musicians. Consequently, the study is the product of fieldwork conducted in the same community that is featured in the present study. Giuriati clearly recognizes the people he studied with through

⁴ A small barrel drum.

⁵ Large barrel drums.

summaries of the experience of master musician, Ngek Chum,⁶ and of members of the Khmer Classical Dance Troupe, all of whom resettled in Maryland during the early 1980s.

After providing readers with this background in the initial sixty-one pages of the text, the author proceeds with discussing the settings for performances, musical genres and ensembles, the repertory, local tuning and modal systems, and techniques for improvisation. Additionally, the volume's appendix contains transcriptions in Western notation of twenty-one *pin peat* songs, seventeen pieces that can be performed either as *pin peat* or *mohori* tunes, twenty-seven *mohori* melodies, and fourteen *phleng kar*⁷ compositions.

Finally, Shapiro employs yet another technique for representing Khmer classical dance. Her 1994 dissertation (Cornell University) presents a moving account of the relationship between war and dance in Cambodia. In a way, she reverses Giuriati's direction above to emphasize experience. That is, after supplying background information about the mythological origins, history, and aesthetics of Khmer classical

⁶ Proper names will appear as is customary in English: given name followed by the family name (GF). While it is customary in Cambodia to present the family name followed by the given name (FG)--and many members of this community still generally identify themselves according to that custom, including Ngek Chum who calls himself Chum Ngek—I have decided to use GF in this volume. I have elected to do so for consistency's sake, despite the fact that some community members use FG while others use GF. I have opted for GF, because many of the people in this community who use this ordering—especially younger people-- *never* refer to themselves according to FG. On the other hand, many who prefer FG, often employ GF as well. Furthermore, this dissertation focuses on the American context, so GF seemed to be the more appropriate choice.

⁷ Literally, “wedding music.” I do not discuss this genre in any depth; however, its significance to the Khmer community will become evident throughout the course of this volume.

dance, she proceeds, beginning in Chapter Four, to narrate seven thematic stories. These chronicles—about dance during the Khmer Rouge, dance in the postwar era, and dance after a 1990 tour of the United States, and so on— are conveyed through the author’s own voice. However, she clearly identifies the original teller of those anecdotes, even skillfully weaving direct quotes from conversations and interviews directly into the text at times. The overall result is an encounter with the core aesthetic qualities of Khmer classical dance: its power to bridge human and spiritual worlds, its power to heal, and its power to endure.

Experiencing Cambodian Music

To further illuminate the connections between Khmer music and experience, this study, *Sounding the Spirit of Cambodia*, unites, reorganizes, and expands upon four characteristics of Khmer music and dance-drama reported in the studies presented above. These elements include 1) the links between Khmer dance and experience, 2) the relationships between Khmer music and dance-drama, 3) the elements of the *pin peat* ensemble, repertoire, and performance practice, and 4) the experience of contemporary Khmer artists. To accomplish these goals, I have focused on one overarching question: “[I]f we want to discover where musical meaning resides, we have to ask, not What does this musical work mean?...rather, What does it mean when this performance takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants?” (Small 1990: 3)

My inquiry began one Sunday afternoon in 1996 when I visited the Cambodian American Heritage, Inc. in Arlington, Virginia. At Cambodian American Heritage, I was impressed with the gathering of teachers and students who were earnestly engaged

in the transmission of Khmer music and dance-drama. In particular, I was struck by the mellifluous sounds of the xylophone that simultaneously floated about the room and created an esprit de corps as it met periodically with the complex pulsation of the hand drum. I was even more astounded when I realized that this symphonic feast was the work of just two artists: master musician, Ngek Chum, on *roneat aik*⁸ and his son, Sovann, on *sampho*. I wanted to know more about how they produced those remarkable sonic effects. I thought that I would like to do so by learning to play the *roneat aik*.

As I describe in greater detail in Chapter Six, accomplishing this was no easy task. Cambodian American Heritage accepted me as a student that year, and I tinkered with the xylophone under Ngek Chum's guidance. But I did not feel that I was *his* student. Later, in the summer, I requested private lessons, but he refused me. (I tell this story as well in Chapter Six).

But by the end of 1997, my relationship with Ngek Chum began to change. He eventually consented to teaching me in October, and early the following year, I think I softened his heart by appearing at his house with a *roneat aik* of my own. By then, I had also already found my way into his music class at the Cambodian Buddhist temple in Silver Spring, Maryland. Consequently, I was taking lessons at his home on Saturdays, following him to both the temple and Virginia on Sundays, and learning Khmer language in whatever time there was to spare. Of course, I was also studying ethnomusicology during the week, so I was sharpening my fieldwork skills and acquiring theoretical knowledge that helped me to navigate the music and the community with relative success. To gain a better understanding of the cultural, social,

⁸ A treble xylophone.

historical, and political context surrounding my endeavor, I also studied materials about Khmer and Southeast Asian culture, history, literature, mythology, art, architecture, philosophy, and religion. This research also entailed reading about the experience of Khmer and Southeast Asians in the United States.

That year, Chum's wife, Vorn, presented me with a silk *kben*⁹ and hired her tailor to make an elegant lace blouse for me to wear in the April New Year's celebration.¹⁰ At that point, I realized that Chum's acceptance of me as his student was complete.

As I continued to study, my relationship with Ngek Chum, his family, and his community improved gradually and even seemed to stabilize for a few years. One "perk" of this alliance was joining Chum and his family on a trip to Cambodia in 2001. But before that excursion, Chum alerted me to yet another shift in our relationship. One afternoon, after an informal recording session, he told me, "I need you to play *roneat*.¹¹ You play *roneat*, and I will play *kong*¹² or *sralai*."¹³ I knew what he meant. He wanted

⁹ A traditional Khmer garment fashioned by twisting a length of fabric between the legs to create pantaloons and fastening it at the waist.

¹⁰ The Khmer New Year is usually celebrated on the second weekend of April: "In the Buddhist Era lunar calendar of Theravada Southeast Asia, the end of the hot, dry season and the onset of the monsoon rains marks the beginning of the new year." (Swearer 1995: 36)

¹¹ General term for xylophones of different pitches and produced from different materials. When used independently of a qualifier (such as *roneat aik* or *roneat thung*) in this volume, it refers to the *roneat aik*, the leading instrument of the *pin peat* ensemble.

¹² A general term for circles of tuned gongs. When used independently of a qualifier (such as *kong thom* or *kong toech*) in this volume, it refers to the *kong thom*.

¹³ A kind of oboe.

me to play *more seriously*, so that I could take the lead in public performances. (See Chapter Four for more about *roneat aik*). I heard the message but resisted the responsibility of thoroughly digesting it. However, the words penetrated my consciousness when I received the translation of an interview conducted with Chum a few weeks earlier. In the interview, he identified *me* as his one potential successor! (See Chapter Eight for more about this).

As of this writing, I am still studying *pin peat* at a snail's pace. I am no music master, and can only fantasize about achieving that status. Chum's choice, in fact, is more of a reflection of his circumstance in the United States than it is a reflection of my musical ability. This is the reason that this commentary appears in Chapter Eight (Compromising with the United States). Nonetheless, I recount this history as one means toward orienting readers to the personal and emotional realities that interact with and shape the words and images presented throughout this text. I hope that the format of my presentation (described in greater detail in the subsection entitled, "'Sounding' Cambodian Music") will also keep these facts alive.

Sounding the Spirit of Cambodia presents my current understanding of the connections between music and experience among the participants of the Cambodian American Heritage, Inc. based in Arlington, Virginia and the Cambodian Buddhist Society, Inc. based in Silver Spring, Maryland. While the subject of my study—the experience of over forty individuals—is broad, the lens through which I investigate it is naturally limited by the fact that this is an independently conducted study. That is, I can only be in one particular place at any moment and can only utilize whatever tools are available to me at the time.

Understanding my limits, I, like Rice (1994), have opted to explore the relationships among music, society, history, and politics by focusing on a particular individual (Rice selects two people) with exceptional musical skills: Ngek Chum.¹⁴ This study therefore reflects Chum's beliefs and understanding of Khmer music (at least that portion of Khmer music that he has exposed me to) through my own encounters with and renderings of it.

Although Ngek Chum was never the subject of a study in this way, there are precedents for working with him. He was a key informant for both Sam's (1988) and Giuriati's (1988) dissertations described above. He has also been a crucial ensemble member (playing up to three leading instruments on each) on major commercial recordings of Khmer music.¹⁵ Before the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia, Chum was a leading musician of *pin peat* ensembles in his native Battambang province. He commands all of the instruments that comprise this ensemble and is an expert in the genres and instruments of *mohori* and *phleng kar* as well. From the Università di Roma La Sapienza, Giuriati writes, "His name was still remembered by musicians and cultural authorities in Phnom Penh when I went there for the first time in 1987." (Quoted from a letter to the National Endowment for the Arts, January 20, 1999)

¹⁴ As noted above, Rice's own study of a Bulgarian bagpipe tradition under Kostadin Varimezov and discussions about singing with Todora Varimezov formed the basis of his study that claimed "personal experience as the starting point for the interpretation of meaning." (1994: 10)

¹⁵ *Cambodia: Music of Exile*. AIMP/VDE-Gallo/Apsara Productions, 1992; *The Court Dance of Cambodia*. Produced by Sam-Ang Sam, 1994; *Echoes from the Palace*. Music of the World, Ltd., 1996; *Mohori*. Music of the World, Ltd., 1997.

Of course, neither Chum nor his music lives in a vacuum. Rather, both are engaged in a dialectic exchange with the dynamics of his community, the United States, and the world. *Sounding the Spirit of Cambodia* describes Khmer music by portraying some of these relationships as they intersect with the artistic and cultural activities of the Cambodian American Heritage and the Cambodian Buddhist Society introduced above. The participants of these activities themselves refer to these organizations as “Virginia” and the “Vatt,” respectively.¹⁶ As described in the first few chapters of this volume, “Virginia” and the “Vatt” are the products of cooperation among highly-dedicated tradition bearers, devoted students, well-educated administrators, international relief organizations, American cultural institutions, and the United States government. Consequently, they are now the sites where the largest concentration of first and second generation Khmer performing artists nationwide gather to exchange and perform artistic and cultural knowledge. More specifically, “Virginia” and the “Vatt” are comprised of hundreds of music, dance, and language students; master dancers and musicians; community leaders; and their extended families. Further, the members of this community include, not only those who reside in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, but also a vast network of musicians, dancers, students, families, audiences, educational institutions, and funding agencies that are located throughout the United States, Cambodia, the Cambodian diaspora, and the world. The members of this community possess diverse backgrounds: They have come from different social and

¹⁶ While all members of this community may not refer to these organizations with these words, the people that I work most closely with—especially those who work in both settings—do. Therefore, these are the terms that I will use throughout the volume. I explain below the benefits and pitfalls of documenting the activities of this community through the lens of my own experience.

economic classes, are equipped with a broad spectrum of educational experiences, and embrace a mixture of values and beliefs. They also have individual stories to tell about their journeys to the United States: They have immigrated under a variety of circumstances and have responded uniquely to relocation. Neither organization is mutually exclusive. For example, Ngek Chum teaches at and performs for both. Many other individuals also participate in both.

Hein's 1995 study of the Indochinese refugee experience in the United States offers a framework for understanding how the collective experience of the participants of "Virginia" and the "Vatt" facilitates meaningful social and cultural exchange within the community. To begin with, Hein indicates that "migrants adapt as members of groups with collective strategies and goals rather than isolated individuals facing the host society alone." (1995: 112) He also identifies mutual assistance associations (MAAs)—which serve social, cultural, political, or economic functions—as the primary venue through which Indochinese refugees take part in the adaptation process. Further, Hein points to a shift in focus of these organizations from social services in 1980 to cultural functions in 1985. In other words, with increased economic security the trend has been to focus more on "the larger goal of sustaining an ethnic community." (1995: 95) "Virginia" and the "Vatt" serve this function of creating and maintaining community through activities centering on Khmer music and dance-drama. Both organizations therefore play a significant role in the community's process of adjusting to life in the United States, including the negotiation of family, social, and cultural values. They also serve as forums where participants can address feelings of loss and

anxiety. But why do two seemingly identical associations exist in the Washington, DC area?

Hein also notes that the notions of family, kin group, values, and norms are critical to gaining an understanding of the Indochinese refugee experience. He cites four interrelated propensities as the sources of this fact. First of all, family and kin groups serve as the primary network through which refugees address challenges presented by the new environment. Secondly, a majority of these uncertainties involve the family. Thirdly, ethnic communities develop around residency patterns shaped by reunion with family members. Finally, many of these communities and households embrace multiple generations as well as many individuals who enter the system as fictive kin. (1995: 112-133)

Indeed, the dynamics of family and kin group reside at the core of both the distinctions and the cross-fertilization between “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” In Chapter Seven, Gary Marco reflects upon his experience at “Virginia,” noting that, “Families, certain key families, are the ones who seem to keep it together...And I don’t mean just the family. I mean the extended family!... others participate. They make a substantive contribution. But it’s really being orchestrated by certain families...” This fact originates in the histories of “Virginia” and the “Vatt.”

In brief, “Virginia” has its roots in the mid-1970s, while the “Vatt” was formed by members of the Khmer Classical Dance Troupe who arrived in the early 1980s.¹⁷ Considered in conjunction with research by Hein (1995) and Mortland (1994), these seem to be significant facts with respect to each group’s collective sense of refugee

¹⁷ Chapters 2 and 3 offer more details about these histories.

identity. That is, both authors point to a sharp distinction between the demographics and culture of Cambodian-American communities before and after 1979. For instance, Hein notes that Indochinese refugees who arrived prior to 1979 “had a great deal of human capital because they were from their homeland’s middle or upper class.” (1995: 134) He also points to a drastic jump in the number of refugee arrivals during the period. While 1,300 Cambodians were admitted to the United States in 1978, the number had increased to 6,000 in 1979. As many as 16,000 Cambodian refugees arrived in 1980; 27,100 in 1981; and 120,100 in 1982. (1995: 47) Similarly, Mortland illustrates this radical growth in population with respect to the history of Cambodian Buddhist temples in the United States. She indicates that before 1979, only three Khmer temples were in existence. Since that time, however, “more than fifty Khmer temples have been established in communities throughout the country.” (1994: 77)

Imprints of the histories of “Virginia” and the “Vatt” as well as the value placed upon family and fictive kin relationships reappear throughout this volume. For instance, in Chapter One, we learn that Ngek Chum’s first music teacher was his grandfather. In Chapter Two, we discover that Devi Yim’s father inspired her study of dance. In Chapter Three, Sichantha Ouk contemplates how his daughter’s study of dance heals his homesickness. In Chapter Four, Sophy Hoeung expresses how her singing keeps her father alive in her memory. In Chapter Five, we learn how the bonds between teachers and students become obscured with filial attachment. In Chapter Six, Kantya Nou describes her path to dancing as an inheritance that dates back across many generations. In Chapter Seven, many *mohori* group members cite family relationships as keys to their participation in music. In Chapter Eight, Devi Yim considers the benefits that life

in the United States can offer her children. And in Chapter Nine, Ngek Chum spends his time in Cambodia, not on a musical treasure hunt, but on paying respects to his and his wife's ancestors. Many more examples of powerful kinship ties abound throughout the pages of the manuscript.

While the disjunctions and overlays between “Virginia” and the “Vatt” contribute significantly to the environment in which Ngek Chum, his colleagues, his students, his family, and his friends converse with Khmer music and dance-drama, they are not the focus of this study. Rather, the locus is the musical experience of the individuals who participate in the activities of “Virginia” and the “Vatt” as I have observed it as a student of Ngek Chum. Since Chum, like many others in his community, is a part of both the “Virginia” and the “Vatt” families, they appear as siblings within this volume. They may agree, or they may quarrel, but in the end, it is essential to explore both to gain a coherent understanding of the meaning of the “sound of Cambodia” among its participants.¹⁸ Allow me to describe my strategy for obtaining ethnographic and interview data that corresponds more than less accurately with observable experience.

As indicated earlier, I initiated this study in 1996. From that time through the year 2000, my research comprised primarily of participant observation. I attended Sunday classes at “Virginia” the first year, frequented performances, and engaged in

¹⁸ I would also like to add that “sibling harmonies” and “sibling rivalries” occur not only between institutions but also within them. Therefore, the question of conflict and compromise should not be stimulated by the observance of plural institutions, but rather, by the observance of social interaction among individuals be they members of a single, two, or multiple organizations. For more about “sibling harmonies” and “sibling rivalries” both within and across “Virginia” and the “Vatt,” please see the third section of this introduction entitled, “What Does It Mean...in This Place...?”

informal conversation with Ngek Chum and others in the community. After each meeting, I reviewed the day's events and conversations in my head while driving home. Once home, I spent between one and three hours recording these in notebooks. In 1997, I visited the "Vatt" (see Chapter Three) and joined the music and language classes there in September. I began private lessons with Chum in October. I recorded my private lessons on audiotape, so many of my conversations with Chum are preserved on tape as well. However, after each of my field visits (to the "Vatt," "Virginia," or Chum's home) I recorded the day's events and conversations in my notebook when I returned home. After a year or so of learning Khmer, I discovered that I gained the ability to understand many conversations and exchanges conducted in Khmer. I also conducted some formal, but short, interviews in English during this time for isolated class projects. I recorded those interviews either on tape, in notebooks, or both. Beginning in 1999, I organized some workshops and performances with a small number of artists and students. I recorded the proceedings of these workshops, presentations, and rehearsals on audio and videotape, with photographs, and in notebooks as well. I also conducted some one to two hour formal interviews in English prior to these events, which I recorded on tape. Additionally, I took general notes during these sessions (in case of technical failure). I transcribed the interviews verbatim from the tapes over the course of many days.

Participant observation and informal verbal exchange characterized these initial four-and-a-half years of research. That was part of my strategy for encountering "natural" discussion and behavior, so that I could formulate a basic understanding of the personal, social, and artistic dynamics of this community before collecting any "official" statements from anyone. I wanted to develop a healthy rapport with the

people in this community and allow them become familiar with me as well before proceeding to any official business.

In the summer of 2001, Alisa DiCaprio, a recent graduate in Southeast Asia studies from Johns Hopkins University and a music student at the “Vatt” (see Chapter Six for more about her), spearheaded the Artistic Development and Achievement Project (ADAPT). The project was a product of a conversation we had one day at the “Vatt” about the precious, yet under-recognized, human resources that existed there. After this conversation, Alisa assembled a team of community researchers and translators (including Alisa, Vathany Say, Pete So, Narin Jameson, Sotheavy Poum, John Meas, Sovath Chum, and myself) to collect oral histories from eleven master artists and community leaders who were an essential part of the “Vatt’s” artistic program. The purpose of the project is to document and make publicly accessible the histories and experiences of the master dance and music teachers at the “Vatt.” Interviews were conducted in Khmer and varied in length from one to five hours. Each interview was translated and transcribed into English. Edited portions of some of those translated transcriptions appear throughout this document. I selected these according to the major topics explored in this study (such as migration history, community history, music and dance performance, philosophy of music and dance, and transmission processes).

After five years of participant observation in this community, I took an inventory of conversations, interviews, and field notes that I had collected. I cross-referenced them with the topics I planned to write about and my understanding of the “key players” that had to be included in a manuscript exploring musical experience in

this community. With regard to the latter, I had determined that Ngek Chum, Chum's family, all of the master dance teachers, all of the indispensable community leaders, and all of the active musicians and adult music students that I had studied with should be invited to include their voices in this document. Some younger people, especially highly accomplished students, should also be included. At that point, I assessed who was under-represented my field notes and requested interviews with them. I began the process of interviewing twenty-four individuals in January 2002 and completed the process in October of the same year. I conducted all except two of the interviews in English. For the two in Khmer, I worked with translators who helped to facilitate a three-way conversation among the interviewee, the translator, and myself in both English and Khmer. I recorded all of the interviews on tape or digital mini-disk and transcribed them word-for-word over the course of the year. From these transcriptions, I selected excerpts that informed the central themes of this study.

This document is comprised of a patchwork of direct quotations compiled from the interviews, conversations, and field notes described above. While the "authenticity" of these words is verified by the approval process describe below, I was required to modify them in many ways as a result of the constraints of writing a dissertation. I have therefore standardized and interpreted the commentaries to a considerable extent. My overall concerns throughout this process were fluidity of passages and space limitations. Consequently, I confronted the editorial process as follows.

Among all of the “voices” that appear throughout the text, thirteen originated from interviews in Khmer which were translated into English.¹⁹ Consequently, speech style and vocabulary remain relatively consistent with the original spoken Khmer texts. Only topics of discussion (see above) and space limitations influenced the editorial process. Because of grammatical differences between Khmer and English and the use of (what many English speakers might regard as) redundancies in the interviews, I rearranged many sentences and deleted a number of words from the narratives.

The remaining interviews were conducted in English and can be separated into three categories. These include 1) six native speakers of English, 2) fifteen speakers of English as a second language who are fluent in English, and 3) twelve speakers of English as a second language who are proficient in the language but may have limited vocabularies or difficulties with English grammar. For the first and second groups, I employed the same editorial process described in the preceding paragraph. For the third group, I tidied some grammatical errors and replaced many words with synonyms. I made these decisions based upon the knowledge that these are intelligent individuals who speak Khmer fluently. I assumed that, were the interviews conducted in Khmer, the Khmer words would correspond roughly to my own renditions in English.

Finally, throughout the text, I designate many quotes as originating in “conversations.” These words, in fact, represent my own paraphrasing of conversations, conducted in either Khmer or English, that I either listened to or participated in.

¹⁹ At least half of these individuals are fluent in English, but it was determined that ADAPT interviews would be conducted in Khmer. The remainder of the individuals are also competent in English but less comfortable using it. Therefore, Khmer was selected as the interview language.

Therefore, the words that appear most likely do not correspond to the original utterances; however, the process described below serves to legitimize these “fictional” expressions.

Once I had completed the process of gathering, sorting, and editing my data, I inserted the excerpts into the manuscript draft. I then distributed the relevant sections to “owners” of the “voices” in the excerpts. Subsequently, interviewees responded by either approving of the excerpts, requesting that I make editorial changes, or editing them themselves. Once they were satisfied with the proposed text, they confirmed their approval by signing consent forms. When I completed the draft, I read it in its entirety to Ngek Chum who asked me to modify some inaccuracies and to clarify some points. On one hand, he did not agree with all of the conclusions and comments presented within the text. To these, he responded with, “Everyone has different opinions. They will be happy to be part of your book.” Yet, Chum’s overall assessment of the contents was, “If anyone ever reads this, they will learn a lot about my music.”

In the remainder of this introduction, I describe my approach to presenting the data I collected over the course of seven years. Immediately below, I begin with a discussion of the techniques I employ under the rubric of “sounding.” The three sections that follow delineate how I interpreted my findings with respect to literature that relates specifically to Cambodian and Cambodian-American culture. These sources—derived from the fields of anthropology, history, literature, folklore, art history, philosophy, religion, political science, and refugee studies—have allowed me to construe what I saw and heard in the field within a culturally relevant framework.

“Sounding” Cambodian Music

Throughout this dissertation, I invoke the term, “sounding,” (Robertson 1996: 2) as a means toward emphasizing the importance of experience and human interaction in Khmer performing arts. On one level, the concept of “sounding” functions as a metaphor for my own journey into the world of Khmer music. On another level, it refers to my technique of bringing readers into the world of Khmer performance in the Washington, DC area. Specifically, I try to convey the essence of this world through a presentation of ethnographic “sound-spheres.” These “sound-spheres” consist of excerpts from interviews and conversations with Ngek Chum and participants of the activities of “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” They also include accounts of my own observations of performance in this community as well as echoes of my own voice whenever I am a very real presence in the scene. Essentially, the “sound-spheres” represent my attempt to “describe others as people and give them a voice in our discourse.” (Stoller 1989: 140) They offer one means of representing Khmer performing arts “in their fullness, in the plenitude of their action-meaning.” (Turner 1982: 91)

With regard to the advantages of performance itself, Small indicates that,

When we take part in a musical performance, any musical performance, when we music, we engage in a process of exploring the nature of the pattern which connects, we are affirming the validity of its nature as we perceive it to be, and we are celebrating our relation to it. Through the relationships that are established in the course of the performance we are empowered not only to *learn about* the pattern and our relation to it but actually to *experience* it in all its complexities, in a way that words never allow us to do, for as long as the performance lasts. (1998: 141-142)

Small’s distinction between *learn about* and *experience* highlights my primary motivation for depicting the world of Khmer music and dance drama in Washington,

DC via “sound-spheres.” That is, through this technique, I create a “performance” in writing through which readers can apperceive the complexities of music in this community in much the same manner that I had experienced them. I employ this approach, both performative and literary, so that readers’ excursion through this manuscript will be as consistent as possible with my own fieldwork encounters. Clifford comments upon the advantages of this approach:

the “literariness” of anthropology—and especially of ethnography—appears much more than a matter of good writing or distinctive style. Literary processes—metaphor, figuration, narrative—affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered, from the first jotted “observations,” to the completed book, to the ways these configurations “make sense” in determined acts of reading. (1986a: 4)

In other words, evoking experience through literary techniques opens the sensory channels needed to comprehend the subtleties of complex cultural phenomena. Like Clifford, Tyler suggests that post-modern ethnography can accomplish this task, because it “...does not move toward abstraction, away from life, but back to experience.” (1986: 135) It produces this effect through a process that resembles ritual. First, readers transgress everyday existence. Second, they proceed on an expedition across extraordinary realms. Third, they then dwell in these provinces, heedless of actuality. And finally, they return to their normal lives, transformed by their travels. (1986: 126) In short, post-modern ethnography “is not a record of experience at all. It is a means of experience.” (1986: 138)

These benefits of performative writing, however, are accompanied by some hazards. To begin with, the very subjectivity that enables comprehension through literary devices also fosters suspicion about the validity of the information it conveys.

(Clifford 1986a) Further, writing demands coherence and the illusion of permanence. It therefore requires clarity and simplification. Consequently, writers must immobilize the cultures they write about to some degree. They must decide how to encapsulate the passage of time. (Fabian 1983: 20) As a result, they must choose what to cut and what to include. (Clifford 1986a: 10; Crapanzano 1986: 52) Such decisions can lead to gross generalizations, create overly idealistic presentations of cultures or cultural phenomena, or nurture stereotypes of “charming natives.”

These pitfalls of performative writing are the products of what Clifford identifies as the power inequalities embedded within ethnographic texts. In “Partial Truths,” Clifford challenges anthropology’s pretense of “transparency of representation and immediacy of experience.” (1986a: 2) In contrast, he (along with other contributors to his edited volume, *Writing Culture*) advocates writing that illuminates the fact that “culture...[is]...composed of seriously contested codes and representations.” (1986a: 2) He contends that cultural accounts should bare their fabricated nature and admit to the fact that “Ethnographic truths are inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete.” (1986a: 7) He discusses two interrelated approaches to accomplishing this goal that are relevant to the present study. Each offers a means toward shifting the focus of writing from cultural product to cultural process.

First, Clifford reflects upon the publication of “new histories.” (1986a: 11) The focus of these is not on tracing definitive trajectories of knowledge, but rather on scholarly inquiry as naturally complicated by local and institutional circumstances. Within this context, both rupture and coherence offer valuable insights. Provisional understandings become legitimate peers of conclusive facts. (1986a: 11)

Second, Clifford discusses a variety of reflexive writing experiments that have involved “staging dialogues” (1986a: 14) in order to designate conversation among informants and between informants and ethnographer. They challenge traditional relationships between the researcher and the researched by locating cultural encounters in particular times, places, and individuals. One consequence of these presentations is an emphasis on movement and sound rather than stasis and sight. This mode of inscribing motion into text has been variously referred to as “heteroglossia” (Bakhtin 1981: 263), “dialogism” (Bakhtin 1981: 426), “polyphony” (Bakhtin 1981: 430), “interplay of voices” (Clifford 1986a: 12), “polyvocality” (Clifford 1986a: 15), and “cooperative story making.” (Tyler 1986: 126) “Heteroglossia,” “dialogism,” and “polyphony,” derive from the field of literary theory. They refer to the “orchestration” within a novel of varied speech types and constantly shifting meanings that result from interchange between context and verbal interactions. (Bakhtin 1981) Similarly, “interplay of voices,” “polyvocality,” and “cooperative story making” serve as ethnographic tools for decentralizing the power relationships among utterances by ethnographer and informants. The outcome is an emphasis on discussion over decree. (Clifford 1986a) All of these variations on a theme infringe upon the comfort zone of traditional ethnography by displacing the ocular with the audible word. As such, they imply infinite possibilities for arrangement and individual interpretation. (Bakhtin 1981: 431) They query the domination monophonic declarations and seismically alter the perceived stability of representation. (Clifford 1986a)

Because the “new history” and “cooperative story making” strategies introduced here correspond so closely with my own experience as an ethnographer within the

Khmer performing arts community of the Washington, DC area, I view them as ideal instruments for imparting that experience to others. Specifically, both these techniques and my field observations reveal that 1) The practitioners of this tradition are both cognizant of and quite capable of articulating the meanings of music in their lives. 2) The interpretations of these meanings are multiform, mutable, and incomplete. And, 3) the “polyphonic” writing style, inspired by music, is organically suited to elucidating the meaning of musical experience.

As noted earlier, experience and human interaction are keys to understanding the value of Khmer performing arts among its practitioners. My experiment with “sounding” in this text aims to convey this fact. To accomplish this, I embrace the tools of performative writing throughout this manuscript. While remaining aware of and employing some strategies to minimize their negative effects, I attempt to share the benefits of performative writing with readers by 1) depicting musical experience in this community, 2) simulating musical experience in this community, and 3) staging “polyphonic” discussions about these experiences.

With these goals in mind, then, this study differs considerably from the research on Khmer music by the Royal University of Fine Arts (1974), Cravath (1985), Sam (1988), and Giuriati (1988) reviewed above. Those investigations serve as valuable sources for gaining an understanding of Khmer music in terms of 1) the physical and acoustic properties of musical genres, ensembles, and instruments; 2) visual representations of rhythms and major compositions via Western notation; 3) annotated lists of important pieces in Khmer musical repertoires; 4) historical background; and, 5) musicological analyses of tunings, modes, and principles for melodic embellishment.

Such portrayals, however, produce static, linear, and one-dimensional depictions of an art form that relies heavily upon layerings of sounds, movements, images, feelings, and ideas for quality performances. Ultimately, the configurations of these layers depend upon the people who create them and the manner in which they are configured. It is for this reason that this volume focuses on the unity of art and personal encounter.

For example, instead of introducing readers to Khmer instruments through listings of their names and explications of their physical features, I present commentaries about the same instruments by musicians and students who discuss them in various contexts. A master musician reflects upon the instruments' roles in performance and the processes of constructing them (see Chapters Four and Five). He remembers learning about the superiority of the *sampho* and considers how that status mirrors beliefs about society, class, and gender in traditional Cambodia (see Chapter Five). Together, teacher, dancer, and student participate in lessons on the *skor thom*, illuminating how these drums alternately synchronize with instrumental and dance progressions (see Chapter Four).

Similarly, in order to simulate musical experience, I try to recreate some aspects of my own process of learning Khmer music. As part of this procedure, I introduce people, places, and things in this community in much the same manner that I was introduced and acclimated to them. For example, I present emic terminologies as they reveal themselves naturally, in context. When new (emic) words appear, I join them with etically accessible words and then continue to use the emic terms as they reappear throughout the volume. (Pelto and Pelto 1993: 54-66) To reinforce these lessons, I have included this information in an easy-to-reference glossary.

The subsequent sections describe how I positioned the “sound-spheres,” the reasons behind those arrangements, and the pertinence of employing an experiential approach in introducing this particular community and art form. Here, I will mention that together they form a “cooperative story” (Tyler 1986: 126) portraying a diverse range of interpretations of the meaning of Khmer performing arts. More than forty “voices clamor for expression” (Clifford 1986a: 15) on a stage of just a few hundred pages. As the dialogues ensue, the “contested codes and representations” (Clifford 1986a: 2) become ever more apparent. As this fact becomes more salient, so does the necessity of identifying the relationship between speakers and the cultural phenomena about which they speak. This is one of the reasons that, as new personalities are introduced into the story, I incorporate—as much as possible—biographical information about each individual. To bolster readers’ ability to acquaint himself or herself with each person appearing in the text, I include in the appendices an annotated listing of the community voices. This listing also includes the names of and biographical notes about some people who are only mentioned in the volume but who are clearly important players in this community.

With respect to “cooperative story making,” Tyler indicates that

...cooperative story making...in one of its ideal forms, would...[be]...a polyphonic text, none of whose participants would have the final word in the form of a framing story or encompassing synthesis—a discourse on the discourse. It might be just the dialogue itself, or possibly a series of juxtaposed paratactic tellings of shared circumstance...(1986: 126)

It is in the spirit of Tyler’s recommendation that *seemingly* lengthy commentaries by members of this community interlace to form the foundation of this

dissertation. I emphasize the word, *seemingly*, because, when one considers the process of constructing these narratives as well as the functions they fulfill, one realizes that they are, in fact, really quite concise.

If we are to encourage the “collaborative production of ethnographic knowledge” (Clifford 1988: 50), it is only appropriate to visually reflect this standpoint in our writing. Thus, in order to exemplify the mutual validity of information communicated by academics and that conveyed by informants, each “sound-sphere” and the individual it is associated with is introduced according to the same methods that are customary for presenting ideas and quotations from works of scholarship. That is, the flow of the overall volume—rather than one’s identity as intellectual or informant—determines when and how the owner of each voice is announced. Speakers may be introduced prior to their narratives, just as I designated Tyler’s statement above (e.g. “Tyler indicates that...”). Or they may be identified in brackets at the end of the quotation, like the citation of Clifford’s work in this discussion. To signal the entrance of each new voice as it contributes to this “cooperative story,” I insert a break in the text.

As I make every effort to preserve the voices of the people featured in this dissertation, the truth remains that—even when my own presence is not explicit—their experience will have been ultimately filtered through my own experience. I employ four techniques in particular to emphasize this fact. First, since I have learned the most about Khmer performing arts and this community by tagging along with Ngek Chum, his experience dominates this volume. Second, I make evident the fact that the story is constructed from my provisional understanding of Khmer music and dance-drama in the

Washington, DC area, providing information about who helped me to gain this awareness and when they provided me with the insights. Specifically, I join each “sound-sphere” with parenthetical notes indicating the name of the speaker, the day of the communication, and the nature of the exchange. Within a few pages of the first chapter, readers will observe the many discrepancies that exist between the chronologies of the narratives and the time sequences of actual communications. This presentation is intentional. It highlights the divergences as one way of reflecting the truth that “Life in the field is itself fragmentary.” (Tyler 1986: 131)

In order to assist readers in navigating the overlay of community voices, my external interpretations of these commentaries, and scholarship that is woven into the text, from Chapter One through Chapter Nine, I utilize two different font styles. That is, all of the direct quotations, either by community members (including myself where relevant) or authors cited throughout the dissertation, will appear in italics. In contrast, all commentary scripted by me as an outside commentator will appear in standard font.

Before proceeding, I would like to note two additional characteristics of the “sound-spheres” that comprise the document. Previously, I have indicated that the “sound-spheres” are all representations of performance in this community. As readers continue, they will notice that the scenes described in this volume do not necessarily coincide with typical associations with the word, performance. In most situations, performance conjures images of rehearsed artists offering a staged presentation of a pre-determined repertoire to an attentive audience of men, women, and children at a designated time and place. Certainly, these configurations of performance are a very real and very important part of Khmer music and dance-drama, but they are not the only

essential elements of these performing arts. Rather, every public performance is the result of a series of learning processes, interpersonal interactions, and multi-sensory observations and actions. The Khmer music and dance-drama community of the Washington, DC area discusses all of these components of performance in the coming chapters. Their reflections reveal the fact that often, these experiences can be as meaningful as or more meaningful than a formalized stage presentation. (Blacking 1969; Herndon and McLeod 1990; McNiell 1995; Pemberton 1987; Rice 1994; Schechner and Appel 1990; Schechner 1993; Small 1998; Stokes 1997; Trimillos 1983)

Similarly, just as every performance of Khmer music and dance-drama integrates music, dance, and theater; so too, do the following “sound-spheres” depict their fundamental interrelationships. (*Becoming Human through Music* 1985; Blacking 1969; Feld 1982; Schechner 1993; Schechner and Appel 1990; Trimillos 1983) In the spirit of this understanding of Khmer performing arts, all subsequent references to the discrete notions of music, dance, dance-drama, and theater will encompass and imply the characteristics of the others.

The following sections elaborate upon my method of presenting the “sound-spheres” in a way that evokes musical experience in this community. A combination of the field data itself and literature (from the fields of anthropology, history, literature, folklore, art history, philosophy, religion, political science, and refugee studies) that deals specifically with Cambodian and Cambodian-American culture directed my interpretations. Each section introduces one of three interrelated aesthetic undercurrents that cohere the layers of sounds, movements, images, feelings, and ideas mentioned above. These threads—encompassing implicit artistic and cultural understandings of

cosmological, social, and personal worlds—include the philosophical underpinnings of *pin peat* (which inspired the structure of the dissertation), relationships in Khmer music and dance-drama, and cultural patterns which order and are informed by musical performance.

“What Does It Mean...at This Time...?”

The element of story is another implicit ingredient in this web of integrated arts in Khmer music and dance-drama. In Khmer, dance-drama is known as *roeurng*, which translates literally as “story.” Cravath indicates that while “Khmer Classical Dance is not based on a static or limited repertoire...most of the dramatic episodes performed originate from about forty stories.” (1985: 296) The episodes relay popular Khmer legends, myths, Buddhist allegories, and the *Reamker*. The significance of conveying these stories via performance cannot be underestimated, as most of them thrived across countless generations primarily because of performance. The *Reamker*, for example, was clearly written with the intention of being communicated via music and dance-drama. The text is divided into scenes. It also includes numerous changes in meter and instructions for music and dance performance. (Jacob 1986: ix)

Why stories? And why have they endured the test of time?

Stories, or narratives, possess the power of taking non-linear, abstract, and emotional experience and turning it into something concrete that can be arranged into a logical progression of observable events. Stories provide the tools for making marked reference to the intangible relationships of people to people and people to nature while keeping them moving.

Audiences can follow the actions of Ream,²⁰ who personifies enlightenment, omniscience, strength, and stability (Jacob 1986), for example, at a particular time and place in the production while also remaining aware of the fact that Ream perseveres in other manifestations. They understand that Ream lives not only in the personality they are witnessing, but also in various other forms at multiple times and places. They realize, either consciously or instinctively,²¹ that Ream is the earthly incarnation of Vishnu, the absolute Brahmin and guardian of the universe. (Roveda 1997: 16) As a manifestation of Vishnu, Ream is also regarded as the nation's king. In particular, he is perceived as Suryavarman II, the great architect of Angkor Vatt,²² and as Jayavarman VII, who reconstructed the temple, the royal city of Angkor Thom, and expanded the Khmer empire "to the borders of Pagan in Burma, Vientiane in Laos, and to part of the Malay peninsula." (Roveda 1997: 11) Under Jayavarman VII, Buddhism became the state religion (Roveda 1997: 18), so the qualities of the Buddha became fused with the identity of Ream as well. In fact, Jacob indicates that by popular interpretation, Ream is considered to be "the Buddha himself." (1986: ix) In addition to these mythical and historical associations, audiences may associate Ream with individuals and experiences

²⁰ The Khmer name for Rama, the protagonist of the Ramayana.

²¹ As all audiences associate story characters with people and situations connected to their own experience.

²² An impressive twelfth century temple located in Siem Riep, Cambodia. It is a monument that represents the last great Khmer empire of Angkor and is associated with a kind of superhuman power that blends sacred cosmology with political authority. Consequently, today Angkor Vatt serves as the quintessential symbol of all that is great in Khmer culture.

that are a part of their current circumstances. And they may even assume that Ream will continue to exist in some way, shape, or form in the future.



Figure 1-Joanna Pecore at Angkor Vatt in July 2001
(Photo credit Lok Than)

This recognition of the simultaneous nature of physical and mythical time (Becker 1981; Conquergood 1992; Cravath 1992; Cravath 1986; Feld 1990; Herndon and McLeod 1990; Khanna 1979; Robertson 1996; Sam 1992; Schechner 1993; Schechner and Appel 1990) and the power of stories to express the subtleties of this phenomenon resides at the core of Khmer music and dance-drama, formulating its essence. It also explains the structure of this dissertation.

This dissertation is designed to communicate two concurrent chronicles of the Khmer music and dance-drama activities in the Washington, DC area. One story is linear, and the other defies the constraints of time and place. The “sound-spheres” that comprise the linear tale tell a more or less chronological story—a history—of the Khmer artistic community in the Washington, DC area; while the same “sound-

spheres,” read according to an alternative arrangement, tell a story of experience and meaning in Khmer performing arts. The former account begins on the first page of the first chapter and concludes on the last page of the last chapter. It tells a story of shifting surface manifestations and fluctuating interpretations of Khmer performing arts from the 1950s to the present. The latter narrative begins at the center of the dissertation (Chapters Four, Five and Six) and expands outward in both directions to the extremes of the book (Chapter One and Chapter Nine). It recounts a story of firmly established, pivotal artistic qualities of Khmer performing arts that endure in the face of the challenges of changing times and circumstances. Their centrality to performance practice remains constant, even within the transient conditions of community, United States, and global history. Let me illustrate the juxtaposition of these stories with some diagrams.

Figure 2 depicts four concentric worlds of musical meaning. At the core resides musical performance itself: the acts of acquiring, performing, and transmitting Khmer music and dance-drama. The specifics of this nucleus are described in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. The figure shows that this core is surrounded by the historical dynamics of the local community, the United States, and the world. Examples of the social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions of these dynamics and their impact on Khmer music and dance-drama are addressed in Chapters Three, Seven, Two, Eight, One, and Nine.

Figure 3 illustrates how this dissertation presents the concentric worlds of musical meaning in a more linear and relatively chronological format. Chapter One follows Ngek Chum and some of his friends through their artistic histories in Cambodia,

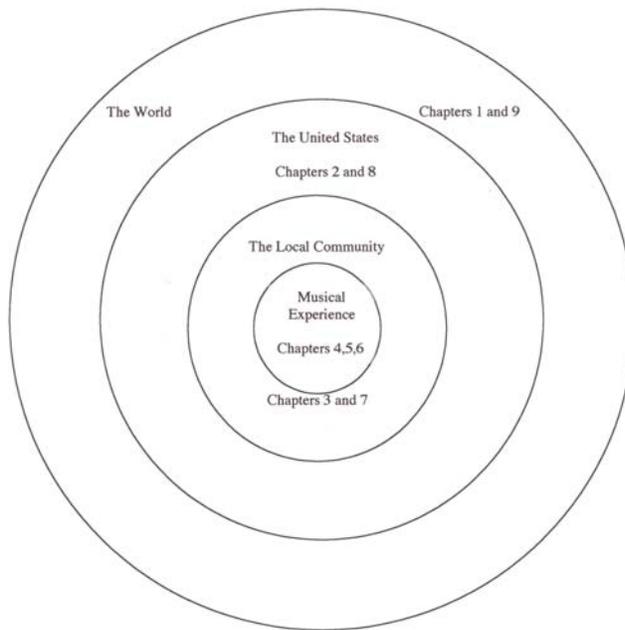


Figure 2-Concentric Worlds of Musical Meaning

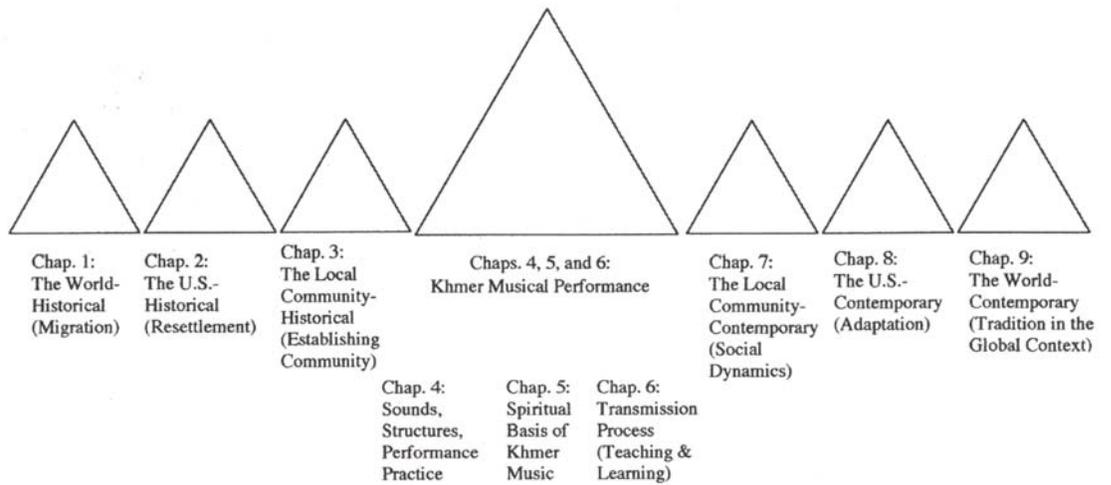


Figure 3-Linear Configuration of Concentric Worlds of Musical Meaning

their subsequent experiences during wartime, their lives in refugee camps, and their journeys to the United States. Chapter Two describes some of the excitement and some of the frustrations that the artists experienced when they came to the United States. Chapter Three depicts the process of constructing Khmer communities in the United States and the role that music and dance-drama has played in that process. Chapters Four, Five, and Six explore the timeless elements of performing and retaining the knowledge inherent in Khmer music and dance-drama with respect to the specific experiences of the artists living in the Washington, DC area. They also demonstrate the critical role that sound plays in activating those elements and knowledge. Chapter Seven reveals some of the inner dynamics of creating community by participating in performance activities. Chapter Eight introduces the many challenges of maintaining the traditions while meeting the demands of daily survival in the United States. Finally, Chapter Nine poses questions about the direction of those traditions vis-à-vis global perspectives on culture, heritage, preservation, and home.

Stories—both chronological and timeless—have always been and continue to be important instruments for transmitting Khmer cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. Vathana Say²³ stated this fact so clearly at a workshop in October 1999: “When we learn dancing, we also learn the stories. It’s more like for knowledge. It’s not just dance.”

What is some of this knowledge that has persevered across great distances?

²³ Vathana Say is an accomplished dancer affiliated with the “Vatt” She will introduce herself in Chapter 3.

“What Does It Mean...in This Place...?”

*My sons...there is old age and death.
There is birth and growth.
There is no end to it all.*

--Words of Kaikesi, a wife of the King of Aiyudhya, Ream's father
in Jacob1986: 32

*You have forsaken greed, desire, error, fear.
Your words are indeed the truth, reliable, unsullied.
You walk the way of the Dharma,²⁴ the way of absolute truth,
In coming to your older brother, making obeisance before him
Inviting him to return.*

--Words of Kukhan, a forest overlord, to Ream's brother, Bhirut, a son of Kaikesi
in Jacob1986: 39

The words from the *Reamker* above express interrelated values that have persisted in Khmer culture from pre-Angkorean times, have traveled across Asia, and have voyaged across the world. In particular, they reveal the view that human experience persists continuously across the ages and that knowing who you are within the context of that experience and behaving in accordance with that understanding is of the utmost importance.

Throughout the course of history, the sacred nature of ongoing human existence has been recognized in Khmer culture in various manifestations. It has been expressed through the worship of fertility spirits, human ancestors, Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu, Buddha, Khmer kings, and mythological role models. (Catlin 1987; Chandler 1983; Cravath 1985; Cravath 1992; Cravath 1986; Jessup and Zephir 1997; Mabbett

²⁴ The Buddha's teaching.

and Chandler 1995; Roveda 1997; Sam 1992; Swearer 1995; Smith-Hefner 1999; Zephir 1998) Significantly, Khmer music and dance-drama has always played a multi-layered role in this worship. First, it has served as an offering to designated spirits. Second, it has functioned as a container of knowledge about the specific procedures for paying respect to those souls. And third, it has operated as a crucial means for establishing contact with those figures. In other words, Khmer performing arts have always been recognized for their ability to tap into the powers of a sacred macro-cosmos in order to maximize the fortune and comfort of those living on earth. (Brunet 1974; Catlin 1987; Cravath 1985; Cravath 1986; Cravath 1992; Mabbett and Chandler 1995; Phim and Thompson 1999; Sam 1987; Sam 1992; Sam 1988; Shapiro 1995)

What is the philosophy underlying this assumption?

According to classical Khmer, Southeast Asian, and South Asian worldviews, “everything has a ‘magical position’ and a ‘magical moment’ in the structure and movement of the universe.” (Swearer 1995: 74) Consequently, through mimesis, or imitation, of supernatural worlds, humans can link the earthly to the divine and gain access to cosmic power. By creating harmonious relationships between earthly and divine worlds, humans can influence the movements of the universe as well as their future positions within the context of that universe. It was in keeping with these understandings that ancient Khmer kings designed their cities as miniature representations of the heavens and associated their rule with *neak* (mythical cobras

identified with water)²⁵, Vishnu (guardian of the universe), Shiva (god of fertility),²⁶ Buddha (The Enlightened One), and celestial dancers (who emerged from the primordial ocean). (Chandler 1983; Cravath 1985; Cravath 1986; Jessup and Zephir 1997; Khanna 1979; Mabbett and Chandler 1995; Roveda 1997; Sam 1992; Sam 1988; Swearer 1995; Zephir 1998)

As an embodiment of sacred sound and movement energized through human action, Khmer music and dance-drama serves as an ideal vehicle for maintaining and nurturing the relationships that keep the heavens and the earth in equilibrium. This fact can be observed through the intricate network of communications that is set into motion during the practice of *sampeah krou*, a ritual that is performed by music and dance students in honor of their teacher spirits before all major performances as well as on Thursdays (“teacher day”).²⁷ Master dancer, Devi Yim, makes the first reference to this ritual in Chapter Two, highlighting its fundamental relationship to performance. Later, in Chapter Three, I describe in greater detail a *sampeah krou* ceremony that was held prior to a 1997 Khmer New Year’s celebration. This description illuminates the essential role that music plays in communicating with ancestors and bridging the physical divides of space and time. It also mentions offerings of incense sticks and candles which carry with them symbolic allusions to reverence for Shiva and the deity’s associations with fertility and the ongoing cycle of life. Specifically, the

²⁵ These beings are known as *naga* in Indian mythology.

²⁶ Roveda indicates that “The Khmers regarded Shiva as a benevolent deity, another creator.” (1997: 15) His complementary role as destroyer in Indian mythology was not emphasized in Cambodia.

²⁷ See Chapter 5 for more about this.

incense sticks and candles are presented as representations of Shiva's *linga*,²⁸ bearing with them prayers for prosperity. (Roveda 1997; Sam 1987: 18 in Sam 1999: 5) Later, in Chapter Five, this symbolism reappears in the form of *baysey* during Ngek Chum's inauguration to the status of *krou* (teacher). Like incense sticks and candles, these miniature, hand-made, tree-like towers signify the *linga* of Shiva.²⁹ (Sam 1987: 18)

Correlation and interaction among the personalities of kings, deities, ancestors, mythical heroes, and humans cannot be divorced from cultural parameters for exceptional thought and action. In fact, the surest means to acquiring cosmic benevolence is following socially-sanctioned guidelines for idealized behavior.

In the *sampeah krou* ceremony, this avenue to success becomes evident through the fact that every action, every offering, and every sound presented in the ceremony are carefully selected and mindfully coordinated. Dance offerings, for example, should only be of the highest quality. This assumption explains the surprise expressed by Devi Yim's colleagues before she danced the role of *Moni Mekhala*³⁰ for her first time during a *sampeah krou* ritual (see Chapter Two).

²⁸ A phallic symbol that was often represented in ancient Cambodia by large sculptures. They typically merged associations of kingship with Shiva. (Swearer 1995: 212)

²⁹ *Baysey* are constructed from rolled-up banana leaves attached to a section of a banana tree. The shortest *baysey* have three tiers of banana leaves, while taller *baysey* may include five, seven, or nine tiers. A hard-boiled egg and candle are placed on the peak of each *baysey*, which may also be decorated with flowers. Ngek Chum indicates that they are "a symbol of success and we present it as a prayer for prosperity." (ADAPT Interview, 7/1/01)

³⁰ Goddess of the Sea.

The *sampeah krou* ceremony offers but one convenient example of some of the ways that Khmer music and dance-drama functions as sacred offering, repository of wisdom, and communication medium. This dissertation demonstrates on a much broader scale how this tradition continues to fulfill these purposes among the artists of the Washington, DC area. Chapters Four, Five, and Six in particular show how Khmer music and dance-drama retains—in terms of both the content and processes of learning and performing—important lessons about the continuity of life and guidelines for exceptional conduct. Chapter Five explicates the underpinnings of these lessons by tracing connections that join sound, spirit, cosmology, creation, preservation, and intergenerational continuity. Chapter Four describes how these relationships manifest themselves in performance practice. And Chapter Six illustrates how effective transmission is the result of following a “middle path” between imitation of and reliance on teachers and the ability to steer the course of one’s own learning process.

While I emphasize many parallels between Khmer music and dance-drama and quintessential morality, I do not mean to imply that all of the behaviors associated with Khmer performing arts in the Washington, DC area are perfect or “unsullied” by “greed, desire, error, fear.” On the contrary, the purpose of value systems such those presented here is to teach and promote *ideals*. Therefore, readers should not be surprised to find instances in the forgoing vignettes that reveal some of the ways that relocation to an unfamiliar land has tilted the balances of traditional power relationships among the community members who possess diverse social, economic, political, and educational backgrounds. Rather, the “sound-spheres” presented herein show that complex dialogues among six sources of power have stimulated and

produced changing meanings and interpretations of Khmer music and dance-drama within the local community, the United States, and the world. These sources of power include

- Credentials of tradition-bearers.
- Hierarchies established for the purpose of administering cultural programs.
- Personal interactions determined by ordering social networks according to perceptions about wealth, education, or political standing.
- Level of experience with traditional arts and transmission processes.
- Teacher expectations and requirements of potential students before accepting them wholeheartedly.
- Degree to which individuals interact with teachers according to American versus Khmer cultural rules.

On one hand, all of these elements have converged to bolster the tradition of Khmer music and dance-drama in the Washington, DC area. On the other hand, they have also provoked their poverty. The “sound-spheres” show, for example, how the combination of these forces has strengthened the arts by leading to 1) the establishment of performing arts troupes in refugee camps (see Chapter One), 2) the relocation of those troupes to the United States in coherent units (see Chapter One), and 3) the creation of institutional infrastructures for maintaining and further developing the performing arts (see Chapters Two and Three). Conversely, dialogues

among these same factors have led to a host of difficulties such as the inability to identify a healthy number of students who are adequately dedicated to carrying the traditions on into the future and the inequitable distribution of resources that are so critical to ensuring the continuity of these traditions. While conversations about these and similar dilemmas resonate throughout this volume, Chapters Two, Six, and Eight most directly address these issues. Questions about the best approaches to bridging this paradox guide readers through Chapter Nine, returning them to thoughts about individual roles in determining the meanings of music.

“What Does It Mean...With These Participants?”

*You can persevere with this journey,
Following me along the way...
I shall take you away from here, beyond this place of ignorance
Which causes failure and confusion in the world.
I shall take you, my beloved,
To dwell in a country where there are no involvements.*

--Words of Ream, to Seta, his wife
in Jacob1986: 21

Above, the hero, Ream, invites his wife, Seta, to join him on his pilgrimage into the jungle. He agrees to take this excursion after being exiled from the kingdom of Aiyudhya by his father, the king. Although the monarch originally intended to bequeath his dominion to Ream, the king's jealous wife, Kaikesi, reminded him of a promise he had made to her earlier: to bestow his kingdom to Bhirut, Kaikesi's son. Unable to break his promise, the sovereign agreed to send Ream on a forest hermitage for fourteen years. Ream departs with favor, leaving behind his claim to the throne.

(Jacob 1986; Roveda 1997)

While Ream's words to Seta suggest that in the woods they would find a life without frustration, defeat, or entanglements, the fact remains that the *Reamker* is an epic. As such, it is filled with adventures and tests of endurance, honesty, and commitment. In order to reach their destination, a land of "no involvements," Ream and Seta are first required to encounter, first-hand, a series of joys and pains along the way. In other words, they must follow the paths that teach them—through a process of physical, emotional, and intellectual engagement—how to live in the world that they imagine.

Ream's and Seta's steps in attaining wisdom by proceeding along individual paths is one that resonates throughout Khmer culture and performing arts. It recurs, for example, in Buddhism, throughout the transactions of teaching and learning Khmer traditional arts, and in the practice of Khmer musical performance. A look at each of these areas reveals a set of common features that emphasizes individual roles: 1) a personal search for knowledge; 2) learning through the integration of physical, emotional, and intellectual capacities; 3) retaining knowledge through embodiment; 4) placing the value of processes over the worth of goals; 5) traveling with the aid of role models but experiencing routes for oneself; 6) following these role models with only the purest intentions; and, 7) exploring all avenues available to the individual. The consistency of these characteristic across these interrelated realms of Khmer performance also suggests that the idea of pursuing individual "paths" is a key to uncovering the meaning of Khmer music and dance-drama in the Washington, DC area.

In the discussion of the element of story above, I point to the adoption of Buddhism in Cambodia. From the twelfth century onward, Theravada Buddhist philosophy—in combination with some ingredients of indigenous belief systems—pervaded Khmer religion and culture. (Swearer 1995) Even today, associations with Buddhism distinguish Khmer culture. For example, Smith-Hefner indicates that, “The overwhelming majority of Khmer are Theravada Buddhists.” (1999: 13) She clarifies this affiliation and reveals its interdependence with culture and identity by noting, “Of course, to identify oneself as Buddhist says less about participation in temple rituals or belief in specific dogmas than about a sense of community and solidarity.” (1999: 32)

In Chapter Three, I begin to track the associations among participating in Khmer performing arts, identity, community, and Buddhist philosophy. The affinities can all be traced to a basic principle of Buddhist thought: that humans gain understandings about their existence through their personal journeys. The significance of this proposition to Buddhist practice becomes evident when one considers the fact that the stories of the Buddha’s life are all parables about attaining enlightenment through travel.³¹ Perhaps not coincidentally, they expound upon much of the wisdom described above that is embedded in Khmer performing arts. For example, they show that life is an ongoing process of becoming and that personal behaviors can influence the future well being of individuals and their social networks. (Davids 1989) In daily Buddhist practice, merit can be acquired through actions that demonstrate control over

³¹ The most compelling of these stories are depicted in murals on temple walls (See Chapter 3). Many of the stories are also dramatized through Khmer music and dance.

greed and anger and the ability to practice compassion and charity. (Swearer 1995; Smith-Hefner 1999) While Buddhist teachings can be instrumental in leading individuals along their paths, ultimately each person remains responsible for achieving his or her own liberty through personal observation and experience. (Rahula 1959) According to Swearer, “The [Theravada] tradition affirms that the Buddhist path is a many-sided affair and that different types of people are at different stages along the path.” (1995: 6) In fact, the Buddha has underscored the significance of this passage by noting that “the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over, and not for getting hold of.” (Buddhist teaching in Rahula 1959: 11)

Chapter Six illustrates how these same standards guide the transmission process of Khmer music and dance-drama. To begin with, study of the art forms depends upon access to the path of learning. This entry starts with acceptance by teachers, which in and of itself, is a profound exercise in the art of navigation. Normally possessing limited or no communication with their potential teachers, students must determine how to best establish a nurturing relationship with them. As part of this process, students must demonstrate their complete commitment to the teachers and the art. Dance master, Masady Mani, proclaims “When you study, you obey the teachers. And when you obey the teachers, they love you in return... You build trust.” This undertaking demands of students much more than imitation of teachers. Rather, artistic mastery depends upon a combination of deference to teachers and the student’s self-initiative and ingenuity in developing and coordinating the skills necessary for retaining knowledge through their intellectual, physical, and

spiritual capacities. Ngek Chum indicates that, “My ability today is based upon the fact that I grew up with music. Since I was very young, I...was surrounded by many musicians...I didn’t do anything else...I only thought about music.” He highlights the fact that once knowledge is gained, it must be regenerated through embodiment: “Music is not something you learn in your mind once and then you’re a master. No. You have to keep it in your body.” Patience, effort, and adventurous study are all critical steps along the road to mastery. Ngek Chum encourages students to explore all of their possibilities instead of limiting their performances to particular standards. He advises, “I believe that when you’re learning, you need to see as many performances as possible...Whether it’s good or bad, it doesn’t matter. You can learn from it.”

Finally, this ideal of navigating one’s way through knowledge also appears on multiple levels in the art of musical performance. In Chapter Four, Ngek Chum and his son, Sovann, describe two the aesthetic paradigms for Khmer musical sound. Both of these emphasize the exploration of diverse sounds. First, Ngek Chum shares his teacher’s³² metaphor of music as *koyteav*, a Khmer soup containing a profusion of flavors. According to Ngek Chum “When you have a lot of different instruments, that’s good music, that’s real music.” Second, he and his son present their descriptions of the art of *phloev* (literally, “way,” “road,” or “path”), or techniques for individualizing basic melodic themes through variation and improvisation. According to these artists, Khmer music is most effective when all instrumentalists of an ensemble simultaneously perform their individual *phloev* in accordance with common melodies, counter-melodies, and percussive dialogues. When this ideal is met, each

³² Master Chou Nit.

variation expresses the unique voices of contrasting instruments and showcases the skill and creativity of individual musicians. Concurrently, instrumentalists accentuate their uniqueness while maintaining a semblance of harmony with the entire ensemble. In short, they travel a middle course between individuality and group responsibility. Further, the ability to perform *phloev* itself derives from a musician's investigation of several paths. That is, it is the result of observation of and hands-on study with numerous teachers. Ngek Chum attributes his musical resiliency to this process, noting that, "Because I had so many teachers, I could play any music well" (see Chapter Five) and "To learn music well, you need to experience it. You need to hear, see, and feel it as much as possible" (see Chapter Six).

As illustrated in the examples presented here, the concept of distinct and spirited paths recurs both broadly and deeply across the integrated traditions of Khmer music and dance-drama. With this insight in mind, let us now harness it as a tool for accessing knowledge and meaning in these arts. Let us now join Ngek Chum, his family, and his community as they recount their stories about their roads to artistry and their journeys across the world by means of Khmer performing arts.

Chapter 1: Pathways across the World

Here begins a chronological story of Khmer music and dance-drama in a Washington, DC community. What were the *local/global encounters* (Clifford 1992: 101) that first led the artists to mastering their traditions and later to transporting them across the world? As noted earlier, each artist and member of this community has a unique tale to recount in response to this question.

In this chapter, we explore the experience of master musician, Ngek Chum. His personal narrative serves as a point of entry into this community's reflections about the many ways that war, flight, camp life, and resettlement (Ledgerwood, Ebihara, and Mortland 1994: 19) have intersected with its members' identities and their arts. Ngek Chum's memories offer readers a focal point, or a *specification of discourse* (Clifford 1986:13), in which to ground their understandings of the diverse stories presented throughout this dissertation.

This chapter also represents the outermost of the four concentric worlds of musical meaning (The World, or the global context) proposed previously. It therefore conveys the layer of musical meaning in Khmer music and dance-drama that is least closely integrated into an artist's physical, intellectual, and spiritual being. As such, it functions as a source of the many externally observable shifts in Khmer performance practice that are identified in terms of comparing here with Cambodia and the old days with now throughout this volume. However, the limited extent to which this world effects the essence of Khmer performing arts also points to the existence of tenacious core traditions that endure even under circumstances that forebode total destruction.

Ngek Chum's Musical Beginnings

By following Ngek Chum through his recollections of becoming a musician, readers become acquainted with these shifts and boundaries. They witness the integration of personal, cultural, social, and artistic experience, gaining a useful frame of reference for appreciating the varied strengths and weaknesses of the individuals who appear in this volume and their efforts toward harmonizing Khmer music and dance-drama with life in the United States. For example, Ngek Chum initially links his origins to a very specific geographical location. However, soon thereafter, it becomes clear that his biography is distinguished by a series of modifications to markers of his identity. His name; official date of birth; “parents;” educational aspirations, opportunities, and achievements; social status; sense of economic security; and his social, cultural, and linguistic environment³³ have all been drastically altered throughout the course of his lifetime. Undoubtedly, the fluid sense of selfhood that results from these kinds of circumstances has simultaneously empowered and presented significant challenges to the process of regenerating Khmer performing arts in the Washington, DC area.

³³ Ngek Chum's recollections of some of these shifts appear later in the dissertation as well as through the voices of some of his family members and friends who have had comparable experiences.

I come from Battambang Province, Sangker City-district, Anlong Vil Village, Anlong Vil Neighborhood. I was born in 1953 on the first of June. Well, really, that is my made-up birthday. In reality, I was born in March. Before I entered the United States, my friend completed the form for me. He noted that June first was my birthday, because, when he asked my mom³⁴ when I was born, she couldn't tell him. So he decided on the first as the day and the sixth as the month of my birthday, because "first" and "sixth" sound alike and are easy to memorize in Khmer.³⁵

My grandfather³⁶ was a musician. He used to play pin peat and other kinds of Khmer music needed for special occasions such as funerals, or music for individual entertainment. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

I tell people that I started to play music when I was ten, but I think I played before that. One man in Lowell, Massachusetts remembers me. He saw me playing the roneat aik when I was four or five years old. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/28/99)
When I was a kid, I really liked to play. When the musicians were playing, I picked up chopsticks and played on the table with them. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 3/17/01)

I really got to like music when I went places with my grandfather. At first I went with him for the food. The food at home was good, but at the events where he performed, the food was better. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/28/99)

³⁴ Her name is Pech Um.

³⁵ In Khmer, "first" is pronounced "ti muoy" and "sixth" is pronounced "ti bram muoy."

³⁶ His name is Hieng Um.

But my grandfather didn't want me to become a musician. Instead, he wanted me to go to school. Normally in Cambodia, once someone started with music, he then would love to focus his career in it, and so did I.

My grandfather who was the music teacher is the father of my mom, not of my father.³⁷ My mom wanted to play music, but my grandfather did not let her. Now, my mom always tells me how amazed she is that I teach my daughter³⁸ to play. I remember when grandfather was not at home, my mom secretly played kong.³⁹ She could really play well for someone who did not have the freedom to learn. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

My mom had sixteen kids, but only eight lived. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/28/99) I have two brothers. I am the first boy in our family. Let me count. How many sisters do I have? One, two... um... all together five sisters. So in all, we were eight in the family. But none of my brothers and sisters learned to play music, only me. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

I lived with my grandparents, not with my brothers and sisters or my parents. In Cambodia, at that time, they believed a lot of things. When I was two months old, I was sick. I couldn't drink my mom's milk, so she took me to an aachar.⁴⁰ He read my failure to drink her milk as an indication that I was more powerful than my mom was.

³⁷ His name is Chum Pinn.

³⁸ Her name is Sovath Chum. She introduces herself in Chapter 3.

³⁹ Circle of tuned gongs.

⁴⁰ An *aachar* is a specialist who officiates over rituals and may or may not possess divining skills. In this case, Ngek Chum's mother took him to an *aachar* who was also a *krou teay*, or astrologer, with expertise in foretelling the future.

He therefore told her not to live with me. If she did, she, my dad, or I might die. So I went to live with my grandparents. After that, I called my grandparents “Mom” and “Dad.” I didn’t know. I thought they were my parents.

I prayed with my grandmother⁴¹ every night. One night she said, “Listen.” But I was tired, so I said, “Tell me tomorrow.” I was about eleven years old. But she told me. She said she wasn’t my mom and told me who my mom was. I got really upset. I cried and cried. I didn’t believe it. I loved my grandmother. She was so gentle. She always told me calmly about right and wrong.

Then I tried to call my mom “Mom.” My grandmother said to do that. Before that, I called her “Bong.”⁴² It wasn’t easy for me to say “Mom” when I saw her. I ran away every time. My mom saw what I was doing and asked my grandmother about it. I don’t know what my grandmother told her, because later, when I called her “Mom,” she was surprised. Then I called her “Mom” after that, but we never talked about it. But I still think about it. I still don’t understand. Why did my mom let me go? Why did my grandmother tell me the truth? (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/28/99)

My father was businessman, sort of craftsman who could build houses, carts, and school tables. He was a vegetable farmer, too. He even played music a little and made a few music instruments for me. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview)

⁴¹ Her name is Yin Um.

⁴² *Bong* is a term of address for older siblings. In this case, Chum is calling his mother “older sister.”

My mom was a housewife. I think she really loved my dad. Even though they had a lot of kids, they were rich. She cooked special food for my dad, although she had helpers who cooked for the kids. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/28/99)

Before I was eighteen, I did both: regular school and music. I learned music after school, usually from seven in the evening to ten-o'clock at night.

But then, I became a full-time musician. I worked for the province of Battambang which had a stadium, newly built, in the capital city (also called Battambang) for music performances. The province also owned a set of instruments and sponsored some short-term music training in preparation for important performances. Musicians received a salary in exchange for the title, "soldier." We were "provincial music soldiers" who were responsible for performing at official functions.

In addition to that job, I went to play music in other provinces for weeks at a time, so I missed a lot of school. Once, when I returned to Battambang, my classmate told me that my name was removed from the class list. I was scared to go to class after that, so I decided to skip school to be a musician. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

My dad's brother had a special position in the army. His boss said he would send me to university, but Grandfather didn't want it. After caring for me all of my life, he didn't want me to go away from him.

But no one asked me about it. I found out later from my dad. I spoke with my grandfather, and he became angry. He said that I didn't need to go to university,

because I was already earning a good living as a musician. He said I had the best teachers and was the best player. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/28/99)

“Everyone Knows What War Means”

If the *regional/national/global nexus* (Clifford 1992: 100) of artistic experience has not yet become apparent in this history, it certainly emerges with the appropriation of political power in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge in 1975. Between 1975 and 1979, the Maoist-inspired radical group collectivized socioeconomic operations, destroyed the family unit, and outlawed religion in the name of a model egalitarian social system. The rebels systematically executed all potential “enemies” of the new public order, particularly city-dwellers, intellectuals, capitalists, and former government officials. (Chandler 1983; Hinton 1998; Welaratna 1993)

For people like Ngek Chum who miraculously survived those horrific years, by the period’s end, any previous conceptions of personal, cultural, social, or artistic continuity had been completely shattered. Ngek Chum symbolically recalls the process of encountering this tension with respect to his instruments. He left so many of his at the temple, hoping he would soon return to play them. Yet, he carried with him the most portable of his instruments, including one that was bound to the memory of his grandfather and one that freed him from a few brushes with death.

On the other hand, amidst the abominable torture and losses of the Pol Pot years, Ngek Chum also initiated some stable relationships during this time. Above all, he met his wife, who became his lifelong companion, traveled with him through refugee camps, accompanied him to the United States, and gave birth to their two

children along the way. Her voice appears along with her husband's below to emphasize the recurring pattern of fractures that continue to effect Khmer families, communities, and arts worldwide.

Everyone knows what war means. The government frontline troops were defeated. It was a clear sign of danger. The Khmer Rouge soldiers were everywhere. They lived with us. It was not easy to differentiate between who was Khmer Rouge who was not, because they wore the same clothing as we did.

When Pol Pot took power in April 1975, he tricked all of the Battambang residents into thinking that they would be leaving their houses for a short time. Everyone left their property locked in their houses. I left all my music instruments in the temple, because they are not easy to transport. But I was able to pack some small items like a flute, a chhing,⁴³ and two, small sralai in my clothing. The chhing were my grandfather's heritage. He treasured them and asked me to bring them with me wherever I went. I also packed mallets for kong, roneat, and skor thom.

I will tell you a bit about the Pol Pot years, but first I want you to hear about one unusual and lucky thing happened when we were living under the Khmer Rouge. Toward the end of 1978, the Khmer Rouge organized a wedding for the citizens. At that time, they allowed me to select a young woman whom I loved. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

⁴³ Bronze hand cymbals.

My name is now Vorn Chum. I am originally from Takeo, a province that is located to the south of Phnom Penh. All of the people in our village were poor. But we didn't live as poorly as everyone else did, because everyone in my family always worked. My mom made everything for us. She had her own weaving loom. She made her own silk. (Vorn Chum, Conversation 7/16/01)

But when the Khmer Rouge took over the country, I was living in Battambang. I was seventeen years old when I went to live there with my uncle and his family. I went there to "take care" of the family, to do chores and things. In Cambodia, young women often go to live in a relative's house for a kind of education, to learn how to care for a home and a family. I worked really hard at my uncle's house, but I also enjoyed living there. (Vorn Chum, Conversation 1/23/99) I became close with three of my older cousins. We were like brothers and sister. I really miss them. They all live in Cambodia now.

My uncle used to drop my cousin, Heng, and me off at school every day. He took us there on his motorbike. Then he'd continue on to his teaching job. I never got to finish high school, because that's when the Khmer Rouge came. (Vorn Chum, Conversation 7/17/01)

Before the Khmer Rouge, I worked in the health clinic of a sugar factory. I was studying how to become a nurse, a midwife. I was all ready to continue with my education, but I couldn't. My relatives had the money and everything ready for me. I was just about to begin my study. But when Pol Pot came, it was all over. I was in tenth grade. Everyone planned out my career, my parents, my uncle, everyone...they had the money all ready for my education. But the Khmer Rouge messed that up. And I

had a relative who was a chief monk in Takeo. His temple had a medical center where people could deliver their babies. I was planning to go to work there. Everybody planned it for me.

So now, I don't know anything! See?! Ohhhhh! Here, now, I'm too old to study. My English is so bad, and I just study a little bit...everything changed.

My name was different then, too. I was "Ta." I changed my name when we lived in the commune. The other girls I stayed with wanted to change their names, and they just called me Sovorn. I didn't pick it. And then when my husband met me, he knew me as Vorn. And then all of his family knew me as Vorn. And I told him, "I'm not Vorn." But they always call me Vorn. So I can't change it back. (Vorn Chum, Interview 1/21/02)

My husband and I met in the Khmer Rouge commune. He was working in a hospital, and I was working in an orphanage. We didn't really talk to each other, but we knew each other. Then one day, the commune leaders made an announcement. They asked the men if there was a woman they wanted to marry. If so, they could propose to her and marry her. He picked me. I didn't believe it at first. In fact, my girlfriends didn't believe it either. One of my friends really didn't believe it, because she thought that he liked her. But it was true: he did pick me. And I loved him. We loved each other. So we got married. (Vorn Chum, Conversation 1/23/99)

When I think about it, I wonder, "How was it that we could get married?" We never talked. When he asked me, I didn't know what to say. I didn't say yes, I didn't say no. I just went to marry him. I think I already loved him. I think he was inside my heart already. (Vorn Chum Interview 1/21/02)

To tell the truth, I didn't know he was a musician until the Pol Pot years ended. But it seems that his music saved his life a few times. He can tell you about that. (Vorn Chum, Conversation 7/18/01)

At first, life in the commune was fun. Whatever we produced, we could consume. Later on, though, we had to produce for the collective. I joined a team of ten youths who were sent to Porsat Province to cut small trees. Initially, everyone had to cut thirty trees-a-day. The next day we had to reach fifty, and the next day, the goal was raised to one hundred trees-per-day per person! If someone cut less than a hundred trees, he would not get rice to eat. But because I was young, had lived in the village, and observed some farming, I was successful. I went deep into the jungle where there were a lot of trees, so I could cut a hundred trees as fast as I could.

I reached the goal consistently and became a good citizen in the eyes of the Khmer Rouge. So then, they transferred me and used me as a cook. I did not need to go cutting trees anymore. All I needed to do was to cook two big pots of rice-a-day. Meat was easy to find, since we were in the forest.

At that point, though, things started to get really scary. I was so afraid, because I saw them killing people everyday. I did whatever they asked me to do.

One of the Khmer Rouge leaders was a musician. One day, as he played his instrument, I could not stop myself from sitting with him. He looked at me and asked, "Are you a musician?" I was so afraid. I did not really want to tell him the truth, but I gave in. He asked me, "Do you have an instrument with you? Why don't you bring it here and play together with me? I really hesitated to, but I told him that I had a flute

with me. He asked me to join him. Day after day we played together until we knew each other well.

One day, it was a bad day. One of my friends, who used to complain a lot, was sick. One Khmer Rouge officer hated him so much that he refused to feed him when he was sick. My friend was so mad that he could not control himself any more.

As a rule, everyone was supposed to go back to work after lunch—everyone except for the Khmer Rouge, that is. On the contrary, the Khmer Rouge army would have a nap.

One day after lunch, I heard many gunshots. I was told that my friend tried to shoot one of the Khmer Rouge soldiers who constantly insulted him for not going to work when he was sick. Unfortunately, my friend had poor aim and failed to kill this soldier. Instead of hitting the soldier, he hit only the string of hammock where the soldier was resting. All the soldiers woke up and chased after my friend. My friend hid in a bamboo forest and decided to kill himself rather than be tortured by the Khmer Rouge.

*Since they couldn't catch my friend, when the soldiers returned, they caught me instead! They said they could not trust me and accused me of plotting against them. They said I would be the next one to damage their revolution, so they tied me up and brought me to be executed. Luckily though, the Khmer Rouge leader, with whom I played music, protected me. He saved my life. He named me "Ta Khloy."*⁴⁴

On another day, I was poisoned from eating wild fruits. I was so weak so that the Khmer Rouge allowed me to stay in the kitchen and assist them in finding

⁴⁴ "Old man flute."

firewood. I was so skinny that anyone who had not seen me for many days could hardly recognize me.

Again, auspiciously, the same Khmer Rouge leader who played music with me rode his bicycle to my place. I saw him but was not brave enough to call him. He rode his bike past me, then turned back and shouted: “Is that Ta Khloy?” I raised my head, looked at him, and nodded. He was thunderstruck and said, “How could you be so skinny and bad looking?” He gave me a bunch of rambutan fruit to eat and promised to send his subordinator to come and pick me up in the afternoon after work. He said that I should bring my flute with me.

That was my lucky night. I had good soup and lots of rice to eat. I played flute for him until I could not continue. Every evening after that, he brought me to his place and gave me food until I was healthy again. He asked me whether I wanted to come back and work for him. I immediately agreed.

He put me in a hospital to work as a medical staff. I was not trained. I just worked. That was the nature of the Khmer Rouge system. Training was not necessary. Once you are there, you work on it. There were three sections at the hospital: a section that dealt with fever, a section that was in charge of diarrhea curing, and the last one...I forgot what it was for.

I was put in the second section. Because I did not have any medical background and had to deal with many patients, I got sick again very easily. I was in the hospital myself for two days. When I recovered, I was reassigned to distribute corn, rice, and other provisions. I often gave people I met some extra corn, since I

have a good heart. So I became a good guy in the eyes of many young female workers. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

Risky Business

Early in 1979, Vietnam toppled the Pol Pot government. Survivors of the Khmer Rouge were emancipated from the grips of the genocidal regime. They embraced renewed hope for the future.

As welcome as this situation was for the population, it also presented a new set of trials. Returning to life as it was prior to the Khmer Rouge was not an option. Food was scarce, and famine was widespread.

At first Ngek Chum reclaimed his career as a musician, but eventually he turned to a new and dangerous occupation—trading goods along the Thai border—to survive and support his family. In time, he decided to relocate and moved to the Thai refugee camps with his wife and other family members. He attributes his evasion of some perilous scrapes during this period to magic and good fortune.

When Pol Pot lost the war, I was in the mass of people fleeing with no direction. I had the cart and two cows that I was using as part of my new assignment. I had transportation duty. I drove my cart across the jungle, because I was afraid to ride on the road in the middle of turmoil and fighting.

I restarted my career as a musician. Some other musicians and I performed in exchange for a thao of rice.⁴⁵ So I had lots of rice, more than enough.

⁴⁵ One *thao* = 15 kilograms.

My wife was pregnant, and I gave up playing music. I became a trader across the Thai-Cambodian border. I walked from Anlong Vil to Thailand without even having a small breakfast. After I traded two to three times, I made enough profit so that I could buy a bike. I rode across the border every day with a full load of merchandise. When business got tough, I decided to stay in Thailand to work as a middleman. I bought from Thailand and sold to traders right on the Cambodian border. That way I made a higher profit. Honestly, buying merchandise in Thailand was a very risky job. People often got shot and robbed by Thai soldiers and other thieves.

One day I heard from a trader that my wife was sick, so I went back home. She had a fever, and I had no medicine. When I got home, I boiled some water and forced her to drink. Neighbors heard me raise my voice, forcing my wife to drink, and wondered what was happening. Believe it or not, hot water helped. Her fever went down.

So I returned to my business. When I came home again, my wife said that she wanted to go with me to the border. I told her that it was too far for her to walk with her big belly, but she insisted on going.

After we walked just a few miles, she could not walk any more. Her feet had many broken blisters, so I rented a horse cart for her.

When we were in the middle of the road in a deep jungle, Khmer Rouge guerillas came and tried to block us. We heard artillery shells and bullets. My wife was so scared that she forgot her pain and could run much faster than I did.

After we passed the guerilla occupied area, she realized again that she could not walk any more, and I had to carry her. When we crossed the border, we built a wall-less hut in Chumrum Thmey, a Thai refugee camp.

I returned to our village to persuade my mother to come with me to the camp. We donated our home in Cambodia to our uncle. I sold my cows, using the money to expand my trade in Thailand. I was back and forth, trading between my country and Thailand.

On one of my business trips, some other travelers and I were almost caught in the crossfire of a guerilla fight. Fortunately, among us, there was a monk who knew magic. He could sense the best route to take to avoid the battle. Because of him, I was able to reach the Thai border safely.

I was so hungry when I got there. I met my cousin unexpectedly. He was selling rice, each bowl for 10 baht.⁴⁶ He told me to take a break and offered me a bowl of rice.

When I was about to eat, he asked me whether I knew that my wife had delivered a baby boy.⁴⁷ I was so happy, I could not eat. I jumped out of my chair and ran home to see my son. It was such a feeling that I never had: Becoming a father of a son!

I continued trading, going into Thai villages to buy vegetables and groceries. Even though there were many bandits, both Cambodian and Thai, I continued with my work, because I had to make my living.

⁴⁶ Thai currency.

⁴⁷ His name is Sovann Chum. He introduces himself in Chapter 2.

One day I accidentally traded with thieves. I heard that I could make a good profit by selling sugar. The sugar was available at a house in a Thai village. I did not know that those Thai people were the robbers.

When I reached the house, two Thai children who used to trade with me saw me. They were aware of my danger and ran to a house nearby where an old lady was living. They asked the lady what to do to save my life. They heard that the robbers killed their customers after they received their money. The old lady said, “You have to shout loudly the following words in Thai: ‘Hey, hurry up and be careful. The police are coming.’” The children followed the lady’s advice, shouting loudly so that the robbers could hear. The robbers immediately pushed me out of their house and ran away. The two children saved my life. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

Keeping the Heritage

Because of limited health services and safety, Ngek Chum and his family moved from *Chumrum Thmey* to another refugee camp, *Khao I Dang*, where he worked with many performers, including a group that would become his vehicle for resettling in the Washington, DC area. These artists and their organizer, Raci Say, continue their work in preserving and transmitting their arts to this day at the “Vatt” in Silver Spring, Maryland. This circumstance is the result of a fortunate series of international interactions among individuals with diverse strengths that reflect the six sources of power proposed in the introduction to this dissertation. In particular, it involved cooperation among 1) a number of tradition bearers with superior artistic credentials and a dedication to teaching; 2) aspiring students who devoted themselves

to excellence; 3) committed administrators with cross-cultural skills, advanced formal education, and knowledge of international affairs; 4) caring friends working in international relief organizations; 5) concerned American cultural institutions; and 6) advocates with the ability to influence the United States government.

In addition to Ngek Chum's retrospections, the following "sound-spheres" include the voices of Raci Say and Swiss filmmaker, Jean-Daniel Bloesch. First, Raci delineates a history of one group of artists' arrival in *Khao I Dang* camp. Then, Jean-Daniel describes his meetings with these artists and Ngek Chum. Raci and Jean-Daniel both point to the significant role that bearing traditional knowledge played in the political process of admitting the artists to the United States. Raci also recalls that Ngek Chum's musical ability was the driving force behind his resettlement in the Washington, DC area and a necessary contribution to the success of the artists' tour of the United States.

Later, my wife had a breast infection that was so bad that we had to move to Khao I Dang camp where there were good doctors. The night before we moved, our son cried non-stop, like crazy. We had to hold him in our arms. According to our belief, the baby's crying foreshadowed danger.

The omen became true. That night the Khmer Rouge counterattacked the Thai soldiers by invading Chumrum Thmey. We moved immediately to Khao I Dang camp where we began out new life.



Figure 4-Vorn and Ngek Chum in *Khao I Dang* Refugee Camp
(Photographer unknown)

In Khao I Dang I met friends with whom I organized a new music group. We all had different backgrounds, skills, and origins.

One day, I learned about an orphanage that had some music and dance clubs. Because I wanted to keep my music heritage, I decided to join that organization to teach the children music. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

My name is Raci Say. I am now the Vice President of the Cultural Committee at the “Vatt.” I became involved in Khmer music and dance when I was in the refugee camps. I became a coordinator for a dance troupe in Khao I Dang camp. Back then my name was Sek Meau Raci. (Raci Say, Conversation 2/21/99)

Before I went to Khao I Dang I was at the Ban Samet camp, but everyone called it the Double-O Seven. An aunt of mine—her name was Borin—was the one

with the idea of starting a dance group. I think her family is also very close to the royal family. At that time, I was just some interpreter. I helped to translate for a team of volunteer German doctors who came to help the refugees.

The dancers felt like they had special skills to offer, so they went to speak with my aunt. I think Mrs. Khatna Peou, Lok⁴⁸ Rejana Nou, Ny Sin, Kantya Nou, and Heng Viphas⁴⁹ were there. So my aunt agreed to help them.

There were some singers, too, but Mrs. Khatna Peou taught them a lot. She was like a gold mine. We were so lucky to have her, because she was a dancer for three reigns of kings. She was herself a dancer. And then when she got to a certain age, she became a singer, so she knew all the songs and the music. And then after that she became a costume maker and a dresser.

The teachers sat together at nighttime with no light, and they wrote down the songs. Everybody remembered different things, so they put it all together.

Then I think in the end of 1979, sometime in December, U.N.H.C.R.⁵⁰ started admitting refugees to Khao I Dang in Thailand. The Khmer Rouge attempted to disturb Double-O Seven many times. My mom felt insecure and said we shouldn't stay there. Sure enough, I think it was two weeks after I left, they attacked the camp very badly. That was when the dance troupe fled to join us in Khao I Dang. That's when we started to work intensively with them.

⁴⁸ A Khmer honorific term for an adult male, roughly equivalent to "Mr."

⁴⁹ Ny Sin, Kantya Nou, and Heng Viphas will all appear in later chapters.

⁵⁰ United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

The more closely I worked with them, the more I liked them. Their dedication, especially Lok Rejana, was very creative. He's just like Sochietah⁵¹ now. Not just a dancer, but he was a teacher and a costume maker. He was incredible. He could make costumes out of almost anything! (Raci Say, ADAPT Interview 6/17/01)

In Khao I Dang, I also worked closely with Ngek Chum. He was one the few good musicians to have survived. He is the one who knew how to play so many instruments. He joined with other musicians to revive the threatened music. He worked with them night and day to help them increase their ability. (Raci Say, Quoted from a letter to the National Endowment for the Arts, February 21, 1999)

We were very popular. So whenever we had a performance, it was like the whole crowd! Including foreigners. People worked hard during the day, and then we performed. Everybody would come to watch.

We made a photo album just in case someone wanted to help us. We wanted to go somewhere as a group. So we gave the album to certain people that we felt would make a difference. We heard that there would be some refugee admissions to the United States. It was just some rumor, but we heard that it was a possibility. So every time we handed out the album, we mentioned that the group would like to go to the United States.

⁵¹ Sochietah Ung is a dancer and costume maker who will appear in the next chapter.

I think it was Jean-Daniel Bloesch, who later conducted the film Dance of Tears.⁵² He is in Switzerland now. He was volunteering for the International Committee of the Red Cross at that time. He happened to watch one of our performances. (Raci Say, ADAPT Interview 6/17/01)

I am a filmmaker with a particular interest in music. That is why, even when on mission for the International Committee of the Red Cross, I used to travel with portable recording equipment.

One morning, I heard at a distance a crystal-clear breath of music. I rushed to the place the delightful sounds were coming from and discovered an incredible scene. At that time, there were 140,000 refugees in Khao I Dang living in thousands of bamboo shelters surrounded by mud. And in the middle of this nightmare, there was a huge blue plastic foil on the ground, on which an orchestra and several dancers were rehearsing. Hundreds of refugees of all ages were silently standing around that “stage. It appeared to be a scene from the Reamker. Most dancers were very young. The musicians of the pin peat obviously had diverse origins and skills. Among them, the lead instrument, roneat aik, was clearly emerging. Ngek Chum played it. (Jean-Daniel Bloesch in a letter to the National Endowment for the Arts, May 1, 1999)

⁵² Bloesch produced the film together with Richard Kennedy at the National Council for Traditional Arts. (Bloesch and Kennedy 1984) The film won a Golden Gate Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival in 1985. (Bloesch in a letter to the National Endowment for the Arts, May 1, 1999)

When Jean-Daniel asked what he could do for us, we told him that we would like to be resettled in the United States. We asked him to pass that along if he had the chance. And we gave him the album. He took it to some people at the State Department. I think at that time they already had the refugees' admission approved.

Jean-Daniel knew a lot of people at the National Endowment for the Arts.⁵³ He told them about what he saw in the camps, and they were interested. Eventually they got a grant to take us on a tour of the United States.

We wanted Ngek Chum to come with us, because he was one of the great ones. But he was stuck there a little longer. He was not in my album. I know! My heart was broken because I wanted him to come. And we didn't know what to do. But he performed for another dance group in Section One of the camp, and we didn't want to intrude on them.

But then we got his information and everything. And when we came here, we went to the State Department and gave them his case number. And that got him here. That's why he came so much later. We were about to do the tour, and so we had the opportunity to push in the State Department. We said, we need this guy, or we cannot go on tour! And sure enough, they brought him here. (Raci Say, ADAPT Interview 6/17/01)

⁵³ Bloesch indicates that *some U.S. citizens, the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, the Cambodia Crisis Committee (Mrs. Rosalyn Carter and Ms. Debbie Harding) and the National Council for the Traditional Arts (Joe Wilson and Richard Kennedy)* helped the troupe to resettle in the United States as "cultural refugees" in 1980. He received numerous grants to produce the film, *Dance of Tears*, including one from the National Endowment for the Arts. Dan Sheehy was instrumental in making that possible. (In his letter to the NEA, 5/1/99)

My next destination before the United States was Galang, Indonesia. During that time, I filled out a lot of papers.

In Cambodia, my family name was Pinn. It was my father's family name and had been in the family for a long time. My father's first name was Chum. So, when I filled out forms in the refugee camps, I wrote my family name as Chum. I did it, because I wanted to remember my father. (Ngek Chum, Conversation with Ngek Chum 1/14/01)

Galang was a big camp where Cambodian refugees organized many different art clubs including music, dance, and masked play. I knew a few of the musicians there, and I became a music teacher for their group.

At eight-o'clock in the morning on the morning after I arrived, I made a kheum⁵⁴ for a music group that was scheduled to perform just a few hours later. Because we did not have guitar string, we used bicycle brake cord for the instrument's strings. Everyone was busy, a few went to find the bike brake cord, and the others tightened the strings. It was terrific. We were able to make a kheum for that afternoon performance. Besides the kheum, we had a drum and a tro.⁵⁵

I stayed in Galang for a year until we had our second baby, our daughter. I was waiting for such a long time, because I switched sponsors. Two different associations were helping me with my paperwork to get me into the United States. One association wanted me to accept a New York sponsor, but I turned that one down. I

⁵⁴ A hammered-dulcimer.

⁵⁵ A bowed lute.

wanted to be sponsored by the Washington, DC association. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

The interaction of nearly two decades of local and global circumstance—based first in Cambodia and then in the refugee camps of Thailand and Indonesia—molded Ngek Chum’s development as a master musician, survivor of war, and immigrant to the Washington, DC area. The preceding overview of such dynamics has offered an initial glimpse into the ways that Khmer performance exists in dialogue with personal stories. By locating Khmer music within context of the historical experience of Ngek Chum, some patterns of movement and stability within Khmer music and dance-drama began to emerge.

For instance, Ngek Chum’s pre-war recollections set the stage for observing the critical shifts that occur in his personal, professional, economic, social, and cultural identity throughout his lifetime. They also helped us to recognize the long-term influence of family on his personal and artistic development. For example, we made acquaintance with Chum’s father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, wife, and daughter who will continue to appear throughout this volume. We also learned of one significant circumstance of his youth: living with his grandparents as a result of an astrologer’s advice. The pages of this text illustrate how, as a result of this situation, Chum’s grandparents provided the foundation of his moral and musical education. Later, Chum’s life as a professional musician revealed the interplay of artistic and social duty. Because of his responsibilities as *a provincial music soldier* in Battambang and musician elsewhere in Cambodia, Chum decided not to complete

high school. His “fear” of returning to school after being removed from the class list may be attributed to his sensitivity to “face”⁵⁶ and respect for a teacher’s authority. A similar loyalty to his grandfather ended in a missed opportunity to attend university. These choices reflect a cultural understanding of the importance of reciprocity between teachers and students as well as parents and children. In the context of pre-war Cambodia, Chum’s judgments reflected his integrity. However, as we shall see in the next chapter, global political events transformed this uprightness into detriment in Chum’s new life in the United States.

Ngek Chum’s personal experience also provided a brief glance into the conditions of life under the Khmer Rouge and some crucial ways that musical talent facilitated survival within that environment. Chum’s skill ministered his escape from two life and death situations and exposed some of the boundaries of music making during the period.⁵⁷ Further, the credit Chum assigns to providence for the outcome of these predicaments points to the ways that many artists in the Khmer community of the Washington, DC area understand their art to thrive as revered offering, repository of wisdom, and tool for communication between human and supernatural worlds.

With the overtaking of Cambodia by the Vietnamese, survivors like Ngek Chum gained new opportunities to restore their lives amidst irreparable destruction. In time, Chum and his family confronted this process by relocating to Thai refugee camps. To obtain better services, he and his family moved from *Chumrum Thmey* to *Khao I Dang*. The complications of one site brought him to another where he

⁵⁶ See next chapter for more on this.

⁵⁷ Ra Khlay discusses this situation in further detail in Chapter 4.

contributed his musical talents to dance troupes and schools throughout the camp. In this new home, Chum joined with others who embraced the spirit of Khmer music and dance-drama by dedicating immeasurable quantities of energy into teaching and performing activities there. Among those colleagues was a group of artists who, like Chum, had fled from another camp to *Khao I Dang*. Their work together there ushered in a relationship that engendered a vital segment of the Khmer performing arts activities that flourish in the Washington, DC area today.

Chapter 2: Encountering the United States

What did Ngeek Chum find when he arrived in the Washington, DC area? What were some of the benefits and difficulties that he and others in his community experienced in the United States?

In this chapter, readers will hear more than three times the number of voices than they encountered in Chapter One. While the intention of the initial chapter was to offer a relatively detailed biography of Ngeek Chum who guides us through the “sounds of Cambodia” across his community; in contrast, this and subsequent chapters plunge readers more deeply into this master musician’s social world. They reflect more accurately the diverse range of meanings—including both constant and variable interpretations—that continue to inform and shape contemporary performances of Khmer music and dance-drama.

Specifically, this chapter presents memories of the circumstances surrounding the resettlement of some of the artists, their families, and community members who relocated to the Washington, DC region over the past decades. In particular, it highlights some of the interactions among the six sources of power proposed in the introductory section of this volume. It demonstrates how shifts in the traditional balance of authority vis-à-vis Khmer arts both strengthened and set the stage for some of the struggles that confront Khmer music and dance-drama today.

Chapter One offered a glimpse into this dynamic. For example, it revealed that arts and social service organizations in the United States already had an interest in supporting Khmer performing arts by the time the “third wave” of refugees arrived

from Southeast Asia in the early 1980s.⁵⁸ Indeed, these organizations were instrumental in relocating the refugee musicians and dancers. They also offered some resources that helped to sustain short-term performing and teaching activities in the United States.

Additionally, this chapter introduces the trajectory of fluctuating perceptions about the relationships between geography and authenticity in Khmer performing arts. By now, it has become obvious that the forces of history have destroyed the illusion that engagement in “pure” Khmer music and dance-drama must somehow occur within the borders of the nation, Cambodia. Rather, it has become more than clear that global conditions effectively scattered Khmer art and culture throughout the world, nullifying any judgements that equate geography with aesthetic supremacy.

In fact, by the 1980s, the United States had become a new site for the development of Khmer music and dance traditions. For example, by the late 1970s, the forerunner to “Virginia”⁵⁹ had been formed, and by 1984, the film, *Dance of Tears*, chronicled the experience of the artists who arrived from *Khao I Dang* camp in the early 1980s. These (and many other projects implemented across the United States and the world) were the products of conversations that took place among master tradition bearers, cultural administrators, community supporters, and dedicated apprentices. The

⁵⁸ Various authors indicate that refugees came to the United States in “three waves” during and after the wars in Southeast Asia. The “first wave” occurred in 1975, the “second wave” in 1978, and the “third wave” in 1980. (See Camino and Krulfeld 1994; Caplan, Whitmore, and Choy 1989; Hein 1995; Ledgerwood, Ebihara, and Mortland 1994)

⁵⁹ To be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

commentaries below shed light upon the transactions that fashioned some of these endeavors between the late 1970s through the early 1990s.

“The Dance Was Inevitable”

As indicated above, in recent decades, the Washington, DC area has been a hospitable destination for displaced artists from Cambodia. The “sound-spheres” that follow point to the role that Khmer performing arts activities based in the region have played in effecting social and personal transformation. They also reveal that the artists’ skills have been in high demand both within and beyond the ethnic Cambodian community. Various sources of support have endorsed that demand. With such assistance, the community has made significant progress toward reviving its artistic and cultural heritage, and in the process of doing so, it has also discovered and nourished many sources of previously untapped talent within its midst. Hindsight reveals that, over time, the combination of coincidental situations and family ties brought together a number of individuals who eventually became the founders, leaders, and lifeblood of the Cambodian artistic and cultural institutions that continue to thrive in the Washington, DC area today.

Below, Moly Sam remembers the days before the “Virginia” school was founded. Sochietah Ung reflects upon the events that led to his current role as a leading teacher and master costume-maker at both “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” Heng Vipas relays his thoughts about continuing to teach and perform dance in the United States. Finally, Puthyrith Sek conveys the excitement that surrounded the arrival in the United States of the dance troupe from *Khao I Dang* refugee camp.

For the details about establishing the school, ask Mr. Tes.⁶⁰ But for my part, I came here in 1977. At that time, the community here was small and very close. We made great efforts to get together on a regular basis. But at that time, there was nothing around which to center our gatherings...but then we had the New Year. I was involved in the first year of it. At that time, the Cambodian Association was somewhat established but trying to get on its feet. Meetings were irregular and infrequent. It was mostly social. There were no cultural presentations.

At that time, I danced for the Cambodian New Year. I performed solo. One other dancer performed a solo as well. It really created a sensation.

Then, I met someone who was an apprentice of my same dance master in Phnom Penh. The following year I met yet another person who had studied under that master. And the third year, I met a friend, Phuong Phan, who had studied Indian dance in Delhi. In the late 1960s he went to India, and later he came to the United States. Together we did a comparative program.

Mrs. Tes⁶¹ and I became partners in the early 1980s. Eventually, we all started an organization. We developed by-laws and so on. At first, the organization was solely supported by the community. Students came once or twice a week to practice for the New Year's performance. The first year there were about a dozen students. Everyone

⁶⁰ Saroeum Tes is the president of "Virginia" (Cambodian American Heritage, Inc.). In Chapter Three, he and his wife, Sam-Ouen Tes (the head teacher at "Virginia") will talk about their school.

⁶¹ Sam-Ouen Tes is the head dance instructor at Cambodian American Heritage. She will be introduced in the next chapter.

went to Mr. Son's⁶² house to practice. He gave us his basement. We stayed there for hours and there was food for everyone. At that time, Mrs. Tes was already teaching classes here together with Phuong Phan. The "Virginia" program continued to grow during the 1980s. (Moly Sam, Interview 8/11/97)

I used to dance in Cambodia, but folk dance only. The classical dance seemed slow, boring. So I was really not into that. In school, if you danced, you got a special break. So that's why I did it. I did what the teacher asked, but I wasn't really into it. Not inside my heart.

Then we suffered the war. I lost most of my family. I escaped to Thailand and came over here in 1979. There was a dance troupe here with the master teachers, Phuong Phan, Moly Sam, and Sam-Ouen Tes. They did the opera story and found out that my grandfather was an opera singer, so they asked me "Can you make the costumes for us? Do you remember what they look like?"

...and that's when I started doing the costumes, and crowns too. People really like my crowns. Now, I make them for dancers all over the United States.

Back home, the crowns were made of pure gold, silver, diamond, ruby, and sapphire. But here, they were cutting paper and spray painting it gold. I felt so bad for them, so I started to research the costumes. I looked at the old dance pictures. So, I learned from that. (Sochietah Ung, Self-introduction at a workshop 10/29/99)

⁶² Mr. Snguon Son was a friend of the artists who continued to support their activities until he passed away only recently.

Princess Bopha Devi, a famous star in Cambodia, came here in 1985. She needed a crown for Apsara,⁶³ so they asked me to make one for her. So the Thai Embassy, they knew she was coming to perform, so they asked someone to make a crown for her. And the French Embassy, too. They had a crown made for her when she went to France on the same tour. So when she came to the United States, she had three crowns to choose from, and she liked mine the most. She said it was the most Cambodian of the three. So she used mine for the performance. She encouraged me. She said, "You have fate. You were born to do this job."

Anyway, let's go back to the time I first made the costumes for the opera story. Well, at that time, a dancer got sick before the Cambodian New Year. The group needed a replacement, and they asked me to do it. So that's when I joined the group. I learned the dance especially from watching Mrs. Tes. I could pick up the steps that way. Back then I said, "Just a one-time deal." But I haven't stopped since.

⁶³ *Apsara* is the title of a dance piece that features the *apsara*, Mera, and her attendant celestial dancers (also known as *apsara*). These nymphs are thought to have the power to link the human and supernatural worlds. *Apsara* are associated with earth, creation, and kingdom on many levels. For example, they were among the creatures of the earth that were borne from the mythological "Churning of the Ocean" that united the monarch with the waters. (Cravath 1985: 62) In addition, early Khmer kings traced their origins to the union of the hermit, Kambu Svayambhuva, with the *apsara*, Mera. (Cravath 1985: 33) These powers of the *apsara* are represented through images, carved on the walls of the temples of Angkor, that evoke fluidity and movement. (Cravath 1985: 89-90) These *apsara* and images of other dancers were used as models for the reconstruction of Khmer court dance in later centuries. Because of these interrelationships, *apsara* are considered to be *the embodiment of wisdom*. (Cravath 1985: 89) They simultaneously symbolize the energies of the earth and the feminine, *the balance of the feminine with the masculine*, and *the profound transcendence of all life's dualities*. (Cravath 1985: 89) Consequently, *apsara* are a favorite symbol of life and rebirth in contemporary Cambodia and Khmer communities.

I also wanted to stay in the group, because some of the people were really surprised by me. They questioned, “Who is this Chinese guy?”⁶⁴ How is it that he can dance?” But I learned the classical dance pretty well, because I had seen it in Phnom Penh. I used to go there with my grandmother. (Socheitath Ung, Interview 7/15/99)

I started dancing when Lol Nol came to power. I was twelve or thirteen years old. I stopped going to school, because the country was at war. I went to study at the Royal Palace with Pou⁶⁵ Rejena.⁶⁶ He was my mom’s little brother, and he was a big teacher at the Palace.

Actually, before I started dancing, I had no interest in the arts. But Pou Rejena wanted me to try. I tried different things: the monkey role, the male role⁶⁷...I liked the

⁶⁴ In this context, people are singling Sochietah out, because he is a Cambodian of Chinese descent. It is common for Cambodians to distinguish between “Khmer” Cambodians and “Chinese” Cambodians, regardless of the number of generations a “Chinese” may have lived in Cambodia. This distinction implies that Cambodians of Chinese descent are less “authentic” than “Khmer” Cambodians are. Further, Sochietah experiences double criticism because he is male. An unspoken controversy always surrounds a male dancer who performs roles other than monkeys or other comical characters. (See Chapter 8 for more commentary on Sochietah’s identity vis-à-vis Khmer performing arts).

⁶⁵ *Pou* is the Khmer equivalent of “uncle.”

⁶⁶ He is referring to Nou Rejena who was introduced in Chapter 1.

⁶⁷ There are four major character types, or roles, in Khmer dance-drama: *neang* (females), *neayrong* (males), *yeak* (demons), and *sva* (monkeys). Each of these character types possesses distinct movement styles. For example, females take small, graceful, symmetrical steps. Males take larger, more uneven, steps. Demons take bold steps, exaggerating the transitions between bent and straightened positions. (Sam 1987) Finally, monkeys violate *all of the rules of decorum and pride in favor of the expression of agility and mischievousness*. (Sam 1987: 49)

monkey role the most. That's what I specialized in. The monkey makes your body strong, builds your speed, and makes people like you more. That's why I went into it.

Once I realized that I liked it, I started to get better and learn faster. When you don't want to do it, you will never look right. But when you put your mind to it, you can make it happen.

Then, Pol Pot took over the country. We were forced to leave the city. The Khmer Rouge soldiers told us that we only needed to evacuate the city for three days.

At that time, it was hectic. People didn't know who was who. No one asked any questions until we arrived in the countryside, when they started assigning jobs. They asked about our professions and stuff like that. You couldn't tell them that you had a formal education. If you told them that, they would kill you.

I told them I was an artist, but I didn't say anything about going to school. If I did, they would have killed me. If you just said you were an artist, they didn't kill you. It has nothing to do with politics.

So I lived under Pol Pot the whole time, until the Vietnamese invaded in '79. That's when I went to Thailand. I didn't know how long I could survive in Cambodia, so I left with some of the other artists who had survived. We started a dance troupe in Chumrum Thmey. Later, we moved to Khao I Dang and continued to teach and perform there.

I came to the United States in October 1980. Actually, at first, I didn't want to be a dancer when I got here. I came here to work. I was still single, and I didn't have a family yet. I wanted to work, start a family, and have children who could go back to Cambodia to help the country. Even now, that's my goal. I want Cambodia to be

modernized like other countries. I'm getting old. The light is dawning on me. But I do what I can to give my children the potential to help the country to move forward.

But when we got here, people wanted us to perform. So, I went on tour with the troupe. Back then, I danced for free, because we were already receiving financial support. There was more time to practice and to perform in different places. I didn't want money. I wanted people in the United States to know this Cambodian art. I wanted them to see that this is our dance and that we still have our country and land left. (Heng Vipas, Interview 8/5/02)⁶⁸

I was born in 1960 in the city of Phnom Penh. My father was an officer in the army and my mother was a teacher. When I was young, I never lived in one place, because my father had to go on mission.

When the fighting got closer to the city where we were living, we moved. We moved to Phnom Penh in 1971. I was in school during that time, and I had nothing to do with classical dance. I saw it on television. I think my mom had a relative who was a folk dancer.

When the Khmer Rouge took the country in 1975, things were destroyed. They starved us to death. We had to go out and find food. We lived in hell for five years.

When we saw that Vietnam was invading Cambodia, we left the country. First, we went to the Double O-Seven camp, and I started to dance when I moved to Khao I Dang.

⁶⁸ Translation assistance by Sovath Chum.

Then, I got to the United States because of luck. When I came here, involvement with the dance was inevitable. Our group performed around here at Wolf Trap, Kennedy Center, National Geographic, Smithsonian, and the White House. And we performed in different parts of the country, too, like California and Florida.

The tour wasn't all year 'round. We got assistance like welfare. I went to school to learn English for six months and to vocational school for mechanics the other six months.

So people had jobs, and everybody had to tell their workplace that they were going on tour for a few weeks. At the time, leaving my workplace for a few weeks was not a big deal. But I didn't get paid during those two weeks. Instead, the tour paid us fifty dollars a day, free hotel, things like that. In all, it was two years... close...close to two years. (Puthyrith Sek, ADAPT Interview 6/17/01)

Old Traditions in a New Land

Better to close your mouth than to open it; better to be quiet than to speak.
--Khmer proverb, in Fisher-Nguyen 1994: 103

After “close to two years,” however, the challenges of survival and adjustment to life in the United States became ever more demanding. Job expectations had the greatest effect on the future of the artists and their art. It was not so easy for most of the artists to continue taking long-term leaves from work or to support their families by juggling their artistic work with their regular jobs.

For a minority of the refugees, English language skills eased the transition into the American mainstream. But as Raci Say notes, *We were refugees. We were so poor. When we came, we came with empty hands. And most of our members did not speak English. Only three people in that whole group spoke English: my husband, Vanna Ou,⁶⁹ and I.* (ADAPT Interview 6/17/01)

In addition to the kind of limitations described above, a number of refugee artists accepted many decisions made for their arts of their behalf, even though they recognized that such judgments would prove detrimental in the future. Their consent was “granted” as a by-product of the intermingling of cultural rules, conflicting agendas, and reasoning that remains consistent with Khmer behavioral codes that are dictated by assessing one’s relationship to others based on a combination of age, sex, kinship, birth order, occupation, wealth, political standing, and education. (Chandler 1983; Fischer-Nguyen 1994; Hinton 1998; Smith-Hefner 1999; Wolters 1982) For instance, traditional wisdom warns against circumventing the chain-of-command and counsels caution with the use of one’s words. Further, it communicates that the strong and fortunate in society are responsible for the welfare of the less affluent (implying that one day, the “haves” will demonstrate benevolence toward the “have-nots”). (Fischer-Nguyen 1994: 99-102) Those who possess official credentials from educational institutions based on French models are considered to be among the strong.

⁶⁹ *Vanna Ou assisted with the dance troupe in the refugee camps and later became the troupe’s president when it relocated to the United States.* (Raci Say, ADAPT Interview 6/17/01)

Below, Vorn Chum reflects upon some of the barriers that faced the majority of refugees as they relocated to the United States. Ngek Chum's memories follow hers. They reveal his approach to negotiating the complicated status inequalities of his social worlds in America, his keen sensitivity to preserving "face"⁷⁰ (Hinton 1998: 99-101), and the consequences that his decisions have effected with respect to his rare store of Khmer musical knowledge. We also make our first acquaintance with their son, Sovann.



Figure 5-The Chum Family in 1983
(Photo credit Van Pok)

⁷⁰ Hinton indicates that Cambodians concerned with "face" thoroughly contemplate the potential social outcomes of their actions and feel compelled to fulfill expectations to the degree that is commensurate with one's abilities. (1998: 101) The divide between Ngek Chum's superior musicianship and incomplete English language skills has placed his musical knowledge in severe jeopardy.

When we came here, we felt sad. We didn't know how to speak English, didn't know what's where, I didn't know where to go! A year later, we felt better. See? Outside I was happy, but inside, I was sad. At first, we had help, like sponsors, people like that. But after that, we had to do it on our own. We didn't know how to speak English. We didn't know how to say when our kid was sick, you know? I just used gestures. Like if my kid had a stomachache, I held my stomach. It was hard. (Vorn Chum, Interview 1/21/02)

When I left Galang, I brought my roneat aik to the United States with me. It was the last one I made and the only one I brought with me. Vanna bought it, and then I regretted selling it. I no longer had a roneat to play. I could not speak English well and did not know where to get bamboo to make a new one. So then, I was able to play on that roneat when I performed for the group that Vanna oversaw. But if I wanted to play with another group, I was stuck, because I didn't have my own instrument. I did not even have courage to borrow the roneat from Vanna. So I was mad at myself for making the decision to sell it for sixty dollars. I didn't sell it for money. It was a misunderstanding. Vanna said that she could take good care of it and that she wanted to keep it as a souvenir.

I offered to buy it back, but she said that once she bought it, it was hers. I always hoped that one day I could buy it back. I would keep trying. Even if I could not buy it back, I would insist on seeing it. To me, it was my last remembrance; I produced it with my own hands, and it was such a good roneat, not only in terms of appearance, but also in terms of sound.

Later, I was in a panic. I did not have a roneat to play. I asked Sara⁷¹ to get an instrument from Thailand. We were lucky to get one. It was a ninety-year-old roneat. So then, I had an instrument to play.

Although I received refugee assistance and language training from the American government for eighteen months, I accomplished very little in my studies. I could not concentrate on English, because I had so many responsibilities as a musician.

After the period of social support was over, I got a job in a factory that produced metal shutters. Later, I worked for a wood table company, but that was shut down soon after I started working there. Next, I worked in a plastic company. I worked there for quite a long time.

In between, I also played music. But little by little, the other musicians decided to move to other states. Some found better jobs. So I was the only one left. I stopped playing for the dancers for a while.

Instead, I went to play wedding music in Virginia, Maryland, New York, and Philadelphia. There were no other wedding music ensembles around at that time, so I kept a very irregular schedule. Sometimes, I was asked to perform on Mondays and Fridays. I missed a lot of work, so my employer was not happy with me. Life was so hectic. I could please neither my music clients nor my company.

⁷¹ Mr. Sara Say, Raci Say's husband. She mentions him above.

Many people wanted me to teach them, but I refused. They asked Mr. Sieng⁷² of our association about it, and then he asked me about it. I told him that I could not speak English well and therefore could not explain things well to my students. If I could not speak, how I could I make them understand me? I thought it was better to decline in the beginning than to agree to something that could not be realized in the end.

But Giovanni⁷³ did not give up. He tried this and that. He talked to this person and that, until I had to accept him as my student. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

I taught him for free. I never charged him. When I first came here, I was on welfare. I didn't want to take Giovanni's money, because I had money. Giovanni helped me a lot. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 6/22/02)

At that time, my wife and I used public transportation. It was not convenient to wait, especially in the rain. Buses were not available on Sunday.

Giovanni had a very old car that he bought probably for five hundred dollars. He was so nice to drive us wherever we wanted to shop, even on the weekend.

His car was not only old, but it was also very small and noisy. However it was the car that brought us to where we wanted to go. Giovanni was the only person who

⁷² Working together with Vanna Ou mentioned above, Mr. Lapresse Sieng served as the president of the dance troupe from the *Khao I Dang* refugee camp after they arrived in the United States.

⁷³ Giovanni Giuriati received a Fullbright scholarship to study Khmer music under Ngek Chum in 1983, continued working closely with Chum until 1987, and completed his doctorate in ethnomusicology at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in 1988.

knew where to bring us to play music. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

We played all over the place. One time, I couldn't believe it. I went to a museum in New York to perform. And in the museum they were playing a recording of Khmer music. I was shocked: It was me playing! I didn't know how they got a recording of me. So, I asked someone there about the music, and they said the tape was for sale in the shop. I never made that recording. Where did they get it?

It was around that time that I discovered that my son had musical talent.

(Ngek Chum, Conversation 3/25/00)

Well, there's not really a day or a year when I started to play music. I just did it when I was three years old. When I would run around and make noise, my dad would give me the mallets to keep me quiet. I played music instead... Actually, when I was in my mom's stomach, I was kicking around when I heard the music. I guess I was playing then.



Figure 6-Sovann Chum at his Carnegie Hall Gig in 1984
(Photo credit Giovanni Giuriati)

*I did my first performance at the age of four. I went to New York with my dad. I played skor thom there. Everyone was amazed. A lot of people came there just to see the little kid play. It was a real big show. I think it was at Carnegie Hall.*⁷⁴(Sovann Chum, Interview 8/25/99)

Ngek Chum remembers that performance.

Yeah, when I was teaching someone to play the drum part during rehearsal, Sovann just stood there quietly behind us and watched. The guy didn't learn the part quickly, so I kept showing him. Eventually, we took a short break and walked away from the drum. Just then, Sovann took the mallets and played the part perfectly.

(Conversation, 9/13/99)

Expanded Interchange

Although the infrastructure and resources available to the Khmer artists to maintain their traditions were greatly reduced during the 1980s, they still continued with their activities. Musicians like Ngek Chum continued to perform and teach, and organizations like the “Virginia” school sustained their operations.

⁷⁴ *It took place in March in the small hall of the Carnegie and was part of an “ethnic” music series organized by a local association. (Giovanni Giuriati, e-mail correspondence, 2/25/00)*

During the 1990s, however, many resources were allocated to more globally focused exchange programs that involved collaboration between artists living in the United States and artists who maintained their residencies in Cambodia. These programs set the stage for new directions in the development of Khmer performing arts and in the dynamics of exchange of traditional knowledge.

The Cambodian Artists' Project, based at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, was one such initiative. It was inaugurated in 1991 by *a coalition of Cambodian American artists and scholars dedicated to the conservation and perpetuation of Cambodian performing arts through teaching, research, video, recording, cultural exchange, and public programs.* (Roche 1996: 36) The project was nourished with seed funding from The Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts' Folk Arts program, and the New England Foundation for the Arts. Over the years, it developed into a loose-knit network of organizations and supporters. Participating institutions included the Cambodian Network Council, the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, the Ministry of Culture of Cambodia, Cornell University, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Asian Cultural Council, the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, the Albert Kundstadter Family Foundation, and the National Initiative to Preserve American Dance. (Roche 1996: 36)

A major strategy of the project was to offer opportunities for artists in Cambodia and the diaspora *to pool knowledge and resources in order to piece together their heritage.* (Jowitt 1996: 72) A multi-year plan enabled repeated exchange opportunities, artist residencies in multiple sites across the United States, video documentation of dance repertoire, artist interviews, and opportunities for

dancers, teachers, and university administrators to assess preservation methods and dance facilities in the United States. The project also included a plan for distributing archival materials, and for establishing an archive and for training archivists in Cambodia. (Roche 1996: 36)

Public perceptions of authentic Khmer arts began to shift at this time, placing more legitimacy on the work of artists who resided in Cambodia. As noted earlier, the historical processes and personal journeys introduced in this book demonstrate the futility of equating geography with cultural continuity; the only consistencies between past and present and Cambodia and the diaspora in Khmer performing arts are resilience, adaptability, and the respectful transmission of knowledge from masters to novices.

The following accounts reveal some of the effects of this broader approach to resuscitating Khmer performing arts. Sochietah Ung is one dancer who benefited immensely from these programs.

And I got lucky, because we had the masters from Cambodia come to visit us in the United States. I got to train and live with them. I learned from Chea Samy, Soth Sam-On, Chea Khann, Ros Kong, and Chhieng Proeung. Chea Samy taught me the female role. She was here for four months. I tried to learn as much as I could from her at that time. Chea Khann taught me the female and male roles. She is good at music, too. Lok Yeay⁷⁵ Kong, she's the best monkey. And she taught me the ugly guy role,⁷⁶

⁷⁵ A Khmer honorific term for an elderly woman.

⁷⁶ He is referring to a character type known as *nguoh*, or ogre.

too. And Lok Krou⁷⁷ Chhieng also taught the monkey role. Then there was Neak Krou⁷⁸ Leas. She taught me the male roles, the Giant. She is the best for teaching the Giant role. (Sochietah Ung, Interview 7/15/99)

I felt bad when people doubted me, since I'm a man and I'm half Chinese. They said, "You dance very well, but a Chinese guy? What the hell are you doing?" But my teachers told me not to feel bad. I should just try harder. They said, "You do really well. Never let people judge you or say you are not good enough." (Sochietah Ung, Self-introduction at a workshop 10/29/99)

Now I spend all of my free time dancing, making costumes, and teaching. I have to teach. My teachers gave me so much. I'm supposed to give it to the students. (Sochietah Ung, Interview 7/15/99)

The Cambodian Artists' Project brought Cambodia's most accomplished artists to the United States. The group included not only the old masters introduced above, but also some outstanding young artists who first encountered Khmer performing arts after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. Masady Mani and Devi Yim—the troupe's star dancer—are two of these artists.

⁷⁷ A Khmer honorific term for male teachers, roughly equivalent to "Mr. Teacher."

⁷⁸ A Khmer honorific term for female teachers, roughly equivalent to "Ms. Teacher."

I don't know why I started to dance. No one in my family danced. After Pol Pot, they opened a dance school, Sala Rejena.⁷⁹ My house was right behind it, so every day, I watched them practice. I thought, "Oh, that's kinda cute." So in 1981—I started kind of old—I took the test, and I passed. When you take the test, they look at your face, your whole body. They want to know if you are not too short, not too tall, not too big, about the right size. They look at everything.

I first traveled abroad in 1982, my second year. I went to Vietnam. I was not professional, but they took some of the students on the trip. They said they selected us, because we were the best dancers. It was Lok Krou Malis (he was director at that time) and Neak Krou Chea Samy, they chose. They chose only five or six people out of more than two hundred students. They required good dancers, so we tried hard.

After a couple years, I learned more and more. I got into it and didn't want to stop. I studied the male role.

I graduated in 1987. So, from 1987 to 1990, I continued to perform, but I was also a teaching assistant. I taught the first class of the generation following my own generation at the University of Fine Arts. I taught the youngest kids. We helped the established teachers, because they were old. After I passed the exams, they wanted me to learn how to teach.

The dance school offered classes in academic subjects, but it was not like in the regular schools. Therefore, I studied at a normal school, too. So in the end, I

⁷⁹ She is referring to the School of Fine Arts that was opened in 1980 at the site of the former University of Fine Arts. In 1989, the School was reestablished as the University of Fine Arts. (Shapiro 1994: 192)

received two diplomas: one in the arts and one from the regular school. (Masady Mani, ADAPT Interview 7/15/01)

I started to dance when I was about twelve years old. My dad was working at the University of Fine Arts. He liked the classical dance.

Actually, he took me to the Palace before 1975 when I was still a baby. He told me that the teachers liked me. They wanted me to stay there to learn the classical dance, but he didn't leave me there at that time.

After 1980 he brought it up again. He kept asking me to try it. But I didn't want to. I wasn't really interested. I hadn't seen much dancing. But he kept pushing, so eventually I decided to try it.

I was so embarrassed when he took me to take the test. I don't know why, but one teacher placed me in the front. I thought, "My God! What am I going to do?" When the music started, I didn't know what to do. I had no idea. So I pulled another person in front of me and said, "You go ahead." So I tried to imitate her. Most people practice before the test, but my dad took me there without any preparation. I kept wondering, "Why did he do this to me?" I didn't pass the test.

But the teachers said, "She looks pretty, just like an original Cambodian. I think she has patience. If we guide her, she will do well, so we should take her." I never knew they were saying that until later when my dad told me.

So the first day of class, I was really confused. They placed me in the female role, but they didn't tell me that. They just said, "Okay, sit here." And they put me in front again! So even though I was supposed to be studying the female role, those who

were studying the male role were standing opposite me. So when I turned, I saw them, and that's who I imitated! The teacher came right over to me and said, "Don't look at that side. Pay attention to this side." Later she explained it all to me, "Female role on this side. Male role on that side."

It was really difficult for me. I was already kind of old to start dancing. My body was not that flexible. So I tried to quit one day. I didn't go to class. A teacher told my dad, and he came home right away. I knew my dad was coming. I heard him turn the key. He came inside and said, "I just want to talk to you. Tell me why you're not at practice." I told him it was too hard and the teacher was too strict. Then he said, "Okay, you can stay home today, but tomorrow, you're going." That night, I was like, "God, please, I don't want to see the morning come!" When the morning did come, I was scared. My dad waited for me and took me to school. That's when I thought, "Okay, I'll do it for my dad."

So I tried, but it was really hard. The other dancers were quick learners. They had been studying longer. And when I made a mistake, the whole group had to go back to the beginning and start again. Then my teacher, Chea Samy, told my dad that I should practice with her outside of class at her house. Another teacher of mine lived next door to her, and we didn't want her to see me. We thought she would get mad. So I sneaked to learn privately from Lok Yeay Chea Samy. I went to class in the morning, from seven to eleven. After lunch, I went to my teacher's house. And then for one hour, I came back to school. In the evening, I went back to my teacher's house. Back then, my dad had only one bicycle. He'd drop me off and pick me up. He worked really

hard. And Lok Yeay was working hard for me also. So, that's when I decided that I had to learn it.

The other students and teachers didn't know that I was learning from her. She taught me Moni Mekhala, too. And one day, when I went to the class, we had sampeah krou. Lok Yeay told me to bring chicken, banana, or some kind of fruit. And she told me to pray, to do chha banhchoh,⁸⁰ and to then perform Moni Mekhala. Everyone was staring at me, even the teachers. They were wondering what my teacher talking about. At that time, I didn't get nervous or anything. I performed no problem. Everyone was surprised. They were thinking, How did she learn that?

After that, my teacher wanted to try me out on a small audience, so she put me on a big stage. They liked it, so when the next big performance came up, she put me in. And next, she put me in Apsara, but she put me in the back, not in the middle. But the photographers liked me. They came to the back to take my picture. After that, they always picked me, not the other dancers. But she still didn't put me in the middle.

Later we were asked to perform in Russia. They had to pick the best dancers for the trip. The Minister of Culture selected me and asked me, "What is your name? When did you learn that? Who is your father?" you know, all those kind of things. After that, he spoke with my teacher. He told her that he wanted me to be in the middle. But then they put me in the back again. It was okay.

But you know, in dancing, the audience doesn't care. Whether you're in the back or the front, if you're doing well, they're going to like you. They still choose you

⁸⁰ A series of requisite dance postures that constitute the vocabulary of Khmer classical dance.

as their favorite. So the Russian audience picked me up, hugged me, kissed me, those kind of things. (Devi Yim, Interview 1/27/02)

Programs like the Cambodian Artists' project necessitated adaptation to tradition even before collaboration among the artists began. Masady Mani explains.

Before I came here, they had me study folk dance. We'd never practiced folk dance, never. Only kbach.⁸¹ My teacher would never let me study folk dance. He said it would mess up my classical dance style.

But when we came here, they required us to do it, because only thirty-two people, including musicians, came. They required a lot of dance. So we had to know both of them, not only classical. When you already know classic, you learn folk dance very fast – it's not that hard. (Masady Mani, ADAPT Interview 7/15/01)

Ultimately, programs like the Cambodian Artists' Project set in motion unintentional dynamics of transmission. With each exchange, a small number of artists who visited from Cambodia decided to stay in the United States. Even artists who visited for the recent *Dance, the Spirit of Cambodia* opted not to board the planes that should have returned them to Cambodia at the completion of their tour. (Kaufman 2001) In the early 1990s, Masady Mani was among the artists who remained in the United States.

⁸¹ Dance posture or pose.

I stayed in the United States, because here you have freedom. Here we can change our minds or have our opinions. But I miss the feeling of being an artist in Cambodia. (Masady Mani, ADAPT Interview 7/15/01)

Seeing that most of her dance partners decided to stay in the United States, Devi Yim made a last-minute judgment to resettle here as well.

When I came here, I didn't think I wanted to stay. I didn't have family here. Some of my friends decided to stay here before I did. A couple of them stayed in Minnesota. Masady stayed in Massachusetts. We hadn't finished performing yet. I was the last one to stay.

When Masady left—because we were dance partners—people thought that I was going to stay, too. That upset me. Bodyguards were watching me. I started to think, “If I live here, I can study more. I can learn something else.” I kept thinking about whether or not I should stay. Before making up my mind, I thought, “Because my friends stayed here, when I go back, our group will be incomplete...what can I do? It won't be the way it used to be.” So then I thought more about staying.

But I thought that if I run away during the tour, the tour might fall apart. I didn't want my country to look bad, so I finished the tour. By that time, I still hadn't decided. But my friends were calling from Minnesota. They wanted to talk to everyone. My teacher handed me the phone. I asked them, “How are you doing?” And they said they were fine.

And then some other people, you know, they're involved in politics. They asked me, "Do you want to stay here?" I said, "Not really. But if I do, will somebody help me? I don't have family here." One of my sponsors said, "My father, is a lawyer. He can help you." Then, one day, at three in the morning, I went to her brother's and he took me out of state. I was crying the whole way. I was missing my group! I was missing my parents! At the time, I didn't know if I decided wrong or right. I thought, "What am I going to do here? I don't have anybody...I miss my dancing." So I cried until I fell asleep in the car.

Later, I came to Washington, DC. A lot of people were looking for me. One day, my lawyer said he had about sixty or ninety calls for me. I don't know who it was.

Lany⁸² made fun of me the other day. She showed me an old film from Germany that included an interview with me. They asked me, "Are you going to leave Cambodia?" I said, "No, No! I'm not moving anywhere. I like Cambodia. I'm going to stay."

When you're young, you're sure of yourself. I thought I would stay in Cambodia. I liked it and didn't want to go anywhere. But you don't know the future. You don't know what situations you'll be in, what's going to happen next.

When Lany said that, I just laughed. What can I do? Because...the situation made me do that! Nobody really knows how I felt. I've tried to tell them, but they don't understand. It doesn't matter how much you tell them... so now I just remain quiet.

(Devi Yim, Interview 1/27/02)

⁸² Lany Lang will be introduced in Chapter 6.

This chapter has offered some of the history of the Khmer community in the Washington, DC area prior to the establishment of “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” It has also introduced the stories of some artists who arrived in the region after the organizations were founded but before those particular individuals became involved in them. All of these narratives serve to supplement Ngek Chum’s story that appeared in Chapter One and provided insight into some of the ways that Khmer music and dance-drama develops in tandem with personal stories. Together, this history and stories draw attention to the continued interaction between local and global circumstance vis-à-vis the Khmer performing arts. They present this interchange from multiple perspectives including 1) the adoption of these arts in the United States; 2) the advantages this welcome offered to the artists, their families, and their friends; 3) the adjustments made by the artists to accommodate this reception; 4) the change in predilection towards these arts between the late 1970s and the early 1990s; and, 5) the ongoing nature of international exchange.

Early in the chapter, we learned from Moly Sam of the important role that Khmer dance played in creating a community network based upon shared culture and history. This function, of course, is complexly intertwined with the personal stories of the community members who supported these activities. It aligns with the analysis offered by Hein in the introduction of this volume: that expatriates acclimate as members of groups (1995: 112) and that one of the major goals of these groups is the maintenance of an ethnic community. (1995: 95) Celebrating the Khmer New Year with classical dance—two native symbols of renewal—offered the community one significant means of confronting feelings of loss and anxiety at a time when Cambodia

was sequestered from the rest of the world. Engaging Khmer arts in this way parallels the manner in which Ngek Chum and Raci Say describe (in Chapter One) the value of these arts in Thai refugee camps. These applications of Khmer performing arts reflect an awareness (either conscious or otherwise) that these traditions endure as ritually potent vehicles for healing.

Immediately following that introduction, Sochietah Ung, Heng Vipas, and Puthyrith Sek described their involvement in the Khmer performing arts as a response to a combination of community needs and a mainstream interest in Cambodia and Khmer culture in the years following U.S. political involvement in Southeast Asia. For example, Sochietah Ung concluded that his role in the arts is *fate*. Heng Vipas expressed a strong desire to substantiate his homeland's vitality through performance. And Puthyrith Sek indicated that a tour of the country and local engagements at Wolf Trap, the Kennedy Center, the White House, and elsewhere were part of the *luck* and destiny of his resettlement in the United States. These commentaries bespeak a strong sense of belief in the powers of Khmer music and dance-drama that can only be corroborated through personal observation and experience.

Puthyrith Sek, Ngek Chum, and his wife offered some commentary on the challenges of relocation. In particular, Sek's and Chum's accounts delineated the process by which artists in this community quickly became overwhelmed with juggling the demands of daily survival and requests for their artistic services. Because many arrived in the country with non-transferable job and inadequate English language skills, they were compelled to accept low income, manually intensive work that required long hours to make ends meet. These circumstances further complicated

Khmer social networks that had already become intermingled with American and Western standards. As noted earlier, proper Khmer behavior depends upon complex comparisons between an individual's age, sex, kinship, birth order, occupation, wealth, political standing, and education and these same characteristics of the person he or she is interacting with.

Rules for artistic relationships magnified the confusion of these guidelines. For instance, as will be illustrated in Chapter Six, mere ethnicity as a Khmer does not guarantee understanding of proper etiquette toward a master artist or potential teacher. Rather, only experience can yield this knowledge. This fact was highlighted in this chapter by the fact that someone who is not Khmer, Giovanni Giuriati, was the one individual who was knowledgeable enough about traditional Khmer arts (and determined enough) to gain acceptance as Ngek Chum's student. This fact was echoed in Sochietah Ung's story. While many criticized him for pursuing Khmer dance as a male of Chinese descent, his teachers and Princess Bopha Devi encouraged him to disregard such judgements. Similarly, reflections by Heng Vipas, Devi Yim, and Masady Mani disclosed how personal qualities such as dedication, patience, hard work, and physical beauty override the assumed disadvantages of embarking on one's artistic studies at a relatively older age. Although these artists initiated training when they were already twelve or thirteen years old, all of them succeeded in attaining exemplary professionalism. They accomplished this, in large part, because of their relationships with their teachers. Conversely, Ngek Chum's protests that he could not teach students in the United States, because he could not speak English well, was not addressed in a way that evidences comprehension of or appreciation for traditional

Khmer teacher-student relationships. Had that custom been understood, valued, and respected, more practical solutions (such as hiring a translator or sincere and humble persistence) would have been exercised.

In sum, this conglomerate of heterogenous and constantly shifting social and cultural rules fixed traditional artists in an interesting predicament: Their services were urgently needed and desired; yet, the manner in which requests were made or accommodations neglected compromised the integrity of their arts. Ultimately, however, cultural and artistic values that espouse a balance of individual and group needs caused artists to comply with every request possible, but within a precarious infrastructure of overextended time, money, and energy resources. One result of this situation was the departure of the majority of musicians to other locales where they found more lucrative work or more supportive social systems. Another was the initiation of many of the artistic difficulties identified by Sam in the introduction of this manuscript: a paltry number of skilled musicians; limited access to instruments; alteration of ensembles, transmission, and repertoire; and discouragement from pursuing the arts seriously. (1988: 284) Giuriati made some comparable observations, including modification of repertoire, prioritizing ethnic representation in public productions, and performing with inadequate numbers of musicians and instruments. (1988: 286-302)

Finally, the chapter has shown how, as time passed from the influx of refugee artists in the early 1980s to the early 1990s, public perceptions about artistic authenticity leaned increasingly toward the homeland. While the talents of the artists who generated such excitement in the United States shortly after the war had not at all

diminished, their allure was decreased by national and global multicultural desires for a consistency between culture and geography. Despite such inclinations, however, personal, social, economic, and political circumstances encouraged artists of the highest caliber like Devi Yim and Masady Mani to resettle in the Washington, DC area in the latter period. Their decisions point to the fact that artists in Cambodia, like their U.S.-based colleagues, also struggle to maintain their arts within the context of daily survival. This suggests that, Khmer performing arts should not be compared in terms of a Cambodia-diaspora dichotomy, but rather, interpreted as holistic, artistic and cultural processes nestled within concentric worlds of musical meaning. This alternative lens supplies a means for gaining greater appreciation for and more accurate understandings of the work of local artists like Devi Yim, Masady Mani, the numerous artists who relocated here in earlier years, and those who have followed in their footsteps. Because their endeavors in the United States uphold the basic functions of Khmer music and dance-drama (serving as sacred offering, container of knowledge, and medium for communication) and demonstrate sincere and committed intentions, they are regenerating authentic traditions among their constituents at “Virginia” and the “Vatt.”

Chapter 3: Local Bridges to the Past

The preceding chapters have pointed to a number of ruptures in the lives of the members of the community featured in this study. In particular, the loss of loved ones, homeland, cultural treasures, opportunities, dreams, and social identity rank high among these injuries. The narratives have also suggested that both formal and informal social organizations in the United States have served as effective arenas for confronting some of the questions and difficulties associated with these fissures. Moreover, the commentaries have revealed that, in conjunction with these social institutions, the rich and tenacious Khmer performing arts have proven to be a potent vehicle for advancing these dialogues.

In this chapter we look more closely at the history of “Virginia” and the “Vatt,” the Washington, DC area’s two major nodes for Khmer cultural and artistic education. Every weekend “Virginia” and the “Vatt” bustle with teachers, students, and community members—ranging in age from four through seventy—who dedicate their Sundays to Khmer music and dance-drama. The “sound-spheres” that follow reveal how these organizations serve as important agencies for *constructing trajectories rather than boundaries across space*. (Stokes 1997: 4) They also disclose a number of themes that underpin the connections between Khmer performing arts and identity. They show how the Khmer performing arts serve as a mechanism for transmitting Khmer cultural values from one generation to the next, constructing “Khmer” environments, and presenting Khmer culture to non-Khmer Americans. Cultural values encompass Khmer ideals of social interaction and communication.

They are tied to a Theravada Buddhist worldview that combines the concept of karma with merit-making,⁸³ reciprocity, and exchange.⁸⁴ (Hinton 1998; Smith-Hefner 1999; Swearer 1995)

The Sigala sutra, a Buddhist teaching that there are six directions associated with one's social network, is especially relevant to the activities of "Virginia" and the "Vatt." The stories presented in the preceding chapters also impart how essential this philosophy is to Khmer social interaction. According to this teaching, east represents parent-child relations; south refers to the bond between teachers and students; west serves as a metaphor for wife and husband interaction; north represents associations among friends, relatives and neighbors; nadir symbolizes an employer's bond with workers; and finally, zenith refers to a layperson's connections with religious men. Good Buddhists worship these people by simply performing their duties towards them. In particular, children are expected to attend to the needs of their parents and to *maintain the honor of the family and continue the family tradition.* (Rahula 1959: 78) Conversely, parents should encourage their children to become involved in *good and profitable activities* (Rahula 1959: 78) and provide a worthwhile education for them. Similarly, students must respect and obey their teachers. In turn, teachers are expected

⁸³ Karma refers to the general belief that good deeds will yield good fortune and bad deeds, bad luck. This cause and effect relationship is linked to the belief in reincarnation and therefore binds together the circumstances of discrete generations. (Smith-Hefner 1999) In practical terms among the members of the Khmer community in this study, this association manifests itself in the notion of *nisaiy*, or the idea that one's destiny, fate, and aptitude are an integral part of an individual's existence.

⁸⁴ Cambodian Buddhist practice must be understood as syncretic. Many rituals and beliefs blend Brahman, Saivite, Hindu, animist, and Buddhist ideologies. (Smith-Hefner 1999: 44)

to teach students well and act in the interest of their students' security upon completion of their studies. Married couples should recognize the sanctity of their union, and therefore treat each other with respect, devotion, and fidelity. Friends, relatives, and neighbors should join together to support each other's welfare. (Rahula 1959: 78-79)

“It’s Really More Like a Family”

The reciprocal relationships between the individuals featured in the Sigala sutra figure prominently within the activities of “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” The ideals of parent-child, teacher-student, wife-husband, and friend-relative-neighbor interaction are practiced, modeled, and taught across various levels of these activities. This fact becomes evident as Saroeum Tes, the president of “Virginia,” and his wife, Sam-Oeun Tes, the head dance teacher there, summarize the history and purposes of the school.

Back in 1976, I was teaching about four or five students in a basement. In 1978, we founded the Cambodian Dance Troupe, which rehearsed in the basement of a church in Alexandria. Our group had grown to include fifteen or twenty students. In 1980, we became Cambodian American Heritage and practiced at a beauty salon. The following year, we practiced in a community center on Lee Highway. We have been practicing at Fairlington Community Center since 1994. (Sam-Ouen Tes, Interview 9/30/98)

Slowly but surely, our organization expanded. It gained greater recognition from the community, not just the Cambodian community, but the mainstream American community, too. They were interested in our art and culture, so we shared it with them. So, this organization isn't just about preserving the arts. It's also about contributing to the United States. There is an article in our by-laws that states that anyone can be admitted to the school. Not just people of Cambodian origin.

The focus has been on music and dance. In the past few years we have included some language classes. Our aim is introduce Khmer art and culture. Students learn proper etiquette. They practice behaving appropriately, in a Khmer way. We Khmer are Buddhists. We have to follow that tradition. (Saroem Tes, Interview 9/30/98)

The students learn how to walk, sit, and fold their legs properly. We teach them to follow cultural rules, to respect their elders, including their teachers. In Cambodia, a teacher is a second parent. When we bring our kids to their teachers, we let the teachers take over. A lot of parents thank us for taking care of their children and teaching them how to behave. When our students meet us at social gatherings they greet us and talk to us. They treat us with respect. (Sam-Ouen Tes, Interview 9/30/98)

Our students pursue learning to a higher degree. They have always been successful, in business, in education, and in marriage. (Saroem Tes, Interview 9/30/98)

We have a lot of responsibility. We watch what the kids are doing, make sure they have enough food, and make sure they have rides to practices and performances. There's so much we do. It's really more like a family.

I used to cook every week. Some people told me that I shouldn't bring the food. Let the kids bring their own food. But what if they don't? If they're hungry, they can't dance. We make them dance. That's work, so we make sure they eat. And it's better if they do things together, eat and share... Now I have more help from the parents. We have a lot of volunteers and supporters. I really thank them. (Sam-Oeun Tes, Interview 9/30/98)

“I Think I was Meant to Dance, It's Part of Me...”

Bonavy Chhim, Vathana Say, and Sovath Chum are three highly accomplished young artists who are associated with “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” Each of them reflects upon the paths that have led them to participating in Khmer music and dance-drama. Their memories reveal the definitive role that family connections and a sense of destiny have played in their encounters with these traditions. Each points to the influence of relationships that transcend their personal, local, and temporally bound identities.

I started my training with Cambodian American Heritage about sixteen and a half years ago. My aunt is the main instructor. She suggested it. It's not like I really had a choice. She didn't force me, but there was no question. If I were in Cambodia,

my grandmother would have sent me to the court to dance. I would just be carrying on a tradition. (Bonavy Chhim, Interview 8/7/97) I love to dance, but it's only a part-time job. I perform a lot. I would like to turn it into a career. (Bonavy Chhim, Self-introduction at a workshop rehearsal 9/19/99)

A lot of people decide to stop dancing when they get older, but not me. I never thought of it. I always find time to dance, whether it's on Sundays or another time. I think I was meant to dance, it's part of me... (Bonavy Chhim, Interview 8/7/97)

When I was nine years old, my mom asked me if I wanted to be a student, and I said, "Oh, I'd love to." I feel so lucky to have this dance, even though I am far away from Cambodia... I was born and raised in Silver Spring, Maryland.

My parents don't push me. I want to grasp as much as I can. Ever since I was little, I have been able to do it. It's not like I'm trying and trying. I catch on so quickly, and that makes me want to learn more. It makes me feel like someone is "with me." I think it is my great uncle.⁸⁵

That's why I've always been heavily involved in the coordination of the dance classes and performances at the "Vatt." I feel a responsibility to make it happen. When I saw that the program needed help, I helped out. I really want to have good performances. (Vathana Say, Conversation 3/18/99)

The late Mrs. Peou Khatna was the head dance teacher at the temple before she passed away in 2000. She was a great instructor. I used to be really close with her

⁸⁵ She is referring to Nou Rejena who was introduced in Chapter 1.

and loved her with all my heart. Now, Mrs. Masady Mani has taken on the role of head dance teacher. (Vathana Say, Conversation 6/9/01)

At age sixteen, I also began to study music under Mr. Ngek Chum. I am learning the roneat thung.⁸⁶ I have known him all my life. I have no idea what took me so long to start, but I'm glad I did. (Vathana Say, Self-introduction at a workshop 10/29/99)

I started to learn the dance at the temple when I was around thirteen years old. My brother did it in "Virginia." He went there with my dad to play music, and they asked him to dance. And then they started the dance troupe at the "Vatt." My friend, Vathana, convinced me to try. My brother was dancing, so I decided to try it. (Sovath Chum, Interview 1/8/02) But I think that maybe I was dancing all along. When I was a little kid, I hung around with my dad and the musicians. I was dancing the whole time. (Sovath Chum, Interview 8/25/99)

After learning to dance for a couple of months, my brother started playing kong thom.⁸⁷ He played that for a while. Then, he started playing sampho instead. I don't know, but my brother's a big influence on my life. When I see him do something, I'm like, "I want to try it, too." So, since my brother stopped playing the kong, I decided to try it. Now I like it. I think it's fun.

⁸⁶ A low-pitched, bamboo xylophone.

⁸⁷ Circle of low-pitched gongs.

And you know, seeing my dad, I didn't want to let him down. My dad's such a great musician, I don't want people to say that he knows so much and his kids don't know anything. (Sovath Chum, Interview 1/8/02)



Figure 7-Sovath Chum Dances while Ngek Chum Plays *Roneat Aik* and Sovann Chum Listens in 1984
(Photo credit Giovanni Giuriati)

Actually, I think I became interested in music when I was twelve years old. I played a flute called khloy for about a month or so. The sound was so beautiful that I just wanted to learn. So I asked my dad to teach it to me, but I didn't really get into that. (Sovath Chum, Interview 8/25/99)

“Going There, My Daughters Really Help Me Out a Lot”

How has participation in Khmer performing arts helped community members to address and tend the wounds caused by irreparable damage and irretrievable losses? How does this function interface with the motif of reciprocal relationships and ideal social interaction that resonates throughout the activities of “Virginia” and the “Vatt?”

Below, Nearry Ouk and her father, Sichantha Ouk, offer an example of the workings of this dynamic. Their reflections demonstrate how engaging in Khmer music and dance-drama can alleviate feelings related to actual losses of the past, fears of potential future losses, and *anxiety that the Khmer as a people will cease to exist*. (Ledgerwood, Ebihara, and Mortland 1994: 1-3)

I have been dancing since I was six years old...for about ten years. I can't remember how I got started. I guess I was kind of excited about it. It was fun. (Nearry Ouk, Interview 7/8/98)

I asked her to do it. At first, I was homesick. I wanted to find a way to make me feeling...without my homesick. And at the same time, my two other daughters came from Cambodia. I thought that “Virginia” was a good place to take them. At first, I thought only the older girls could do it. I just brought Nearry to look. She doesn't know how to speak Khmer, so I thought it would be hard. But then, all of a sudden, she brought a tape cassette home. She recorded the children's dance song, Bopha Lokey. So from that time, I took her there to study. (Sichantha Ouk, Interview 7/8/98)

It was hard, not knowing Khmer. Sometimes I didn't understand. Sometimes I pretended to understand. (Nearry Ouk, Interview 7/8/98)

Going there, my daughters really help me out a lot. My heart, my mind still...still...sick...if she didn't want to go, that would hurt me. One day, she had a performance. I drove almost four hundred miles to drop her and go back, because my house is more than thirty miles away.

I think it's sad that so many Cambodians in this country—like some friends I visited in Georgia—go about their daily lives doing nothing that's connected to Cambodia. I showed them the video from the New Year's performance, and they were amazed. They couldn't believe that a group like this existed in the United States. If people keep living like that, we will have nothing left of our culture. (Sichantha Ouk, Interview 7/8/98)

“I'll Go Back. I Still Have That in My Mind.”

Sipo Dan has been involved in the activities of “Virginia” since its early years. His reflections illuminate the integral role that family plays in his artistic experience. On one level, his local family of the present nurtures his engagement with music. On another level, he attributes his affinity for music to the family life of his childhood in Cambodia. The meaning he derives from attending “Virginia” is grounded at the intersection of these family experiences. It is tied especially to memories of times and places of the past that he joins with dreams for the future. Through his current

activities in “Virginia,” Sipo prepares to return to his home in Cambodia and to fulfill some of his unclaimed opportunities of past.

I have been going to the practices in “Virginia” since the '80s or '70s. I came to the United States for my second time in '75 to pursue my job as a radio announcer for Voice of America. Before that, I came to the United States to study at Long Beach State. I think, '63. When I finished college, I went back to Cambodia and taught school, mathematics.

At first I joined the folk dances here. I didn't sing. I just performed the role of “Chief Tribesman.” Then I got sick. I had a heart problem. After having surgery, I switched to music.

I picked singing because that just comes more naturally to me. That's because of my family. I have a big family, seven: five brothers and two sisters. I am the youngest. All of my brothers can play some kind of music or sing. And my sisters and my mom all know how to recite Buddhist chanting. At night, I listened to them. My brothers played music and my sisters chanted. All of my life, I listened to them. And when I came to learn to sing from Master Ngek Chum...like every song that I learn from him, I know them in my mind. I already listened to them when I was young. So, I learn them very easily.

I'm just like a kid, you know, looking for something to play. So every Sunday, I get ready... physically. I keep myself busy, and I'm happy.

Before I came to the United States, I never had the chance to sing or dance. I really wanted to. In the back of my mind, I wanted to sing and perform. But there was

no occasion for me to do it. I had to go to school. And I played a lot of sports: volleyball, soccer, you know, everything. I didn't have time to practice or pick up an instrument. During the Japanese invasion, in the 1940s, I was a bread-maker, too. I picked up the cows, fruit, whatever, and brought it home, so we could have something to eat. I was three or four years old then.

But now I'm very fortunate. My family helps me a lot. They make an effort to let me be a singer.

I think I will go, when I retire from here. I will go back home. And maybe I'll have a lot of time to be involved in singing. I'll go back home and gather people—maybe older, my generation—from my village, go to the school or to the temple, to play. I can do whatever I like... probably sing...with them. I think I'm going to have a happy life. If I cannot go to stay for a long time, I'll go back and forth.

But I still have to wait, I think, maybe ten years. So I'll hang around here, you know, every Sunday.

I really want to go back and see where I was young, mostly, my mountain, my little mountain in Cambodia. When I was young I tended the cows, brought them to my little mountain. I was really in the woods there. I took care of the beehives and picked bamboo shoots and wild berries. I'll go back. I still have that in my mind. (Sipo Dan, Interview 2/1/02)

“When They Come to the Temple, They Should Feel Like Cambodians”

The Cambodian Buddhist temple in Silver Spring, Maryland is the home to the music and dance-drama activities of the “Vatt.” The temple itself is one that is considered to be central for Cambodians who live throughout the United States and Canada. Designed to look like a *vatt*⁸⁸ in Cambodia, it is well known to Cambodian communities throughout the world. (Kalab 1994: 58) In July 1997, I went to the “Vatt” to find out about their activities. I spoke with a monk who said that there would be a service at seven-o’clock that evening. He invited me to join the event. Below, I describe my first impressions of the “Vatt.”

I arrived at the temple at six forty-five. There was only one other car in the parking lot. A few cars were parked along the driveway near the monks’ residence. As other cars arrived, they parked close behind.

I wandered around the temple grounds, and I met some women. They opened the door to the large temple, and we stepped inside.

The room was expansive but cozy. It was made to feel warm with the subtle mauve hue of the plush carpeting. One of the women walked humbly, almost crouching, so that she could sit on the floor facing the altar. I followed her. There was a shimmering, larger-than-life, golden Buddha statue gazing down at us. The woman bowed three times as if to greet him. I lowered my head, keeping my eyes on the stunning altar. The Buddha was flanked with countless vases of colorful flowers. On our right hand side was a low but long platform covered with fine woven mats and

⁸⁸ Buddhist temple or monastery complex.

trimmed with red fabric. Eight cushions were placed on top of the platform, creating eight seats.



Figure 8-The Cambodian Buddhist Temple in Silver Spring, Maryland
(Photo credit Robin S. Kent)

A petite man with dark skin walked into the temple. This was Sovann Tun, president of the “Vatt’s” board of director’s at the time. He was dressed formally in a tan blazer and a saffron yellow tie. He indicated that the ceremony would begin shortly. He turned to the three of us saying, “Please join us. The procession will begin outside.” We walked outside toward a small driveway that separates the large temple from the monks’ quarters. We waited there. Some people entered the house.

After some time, the door to the monks’ quarters opened. Dozens of elderly women dressed in white emerged from the house. One of the women handed me some flowers, incense sticks, and candles.⁸⁹ I tagged along on the end of the line and circled the temple three times with the group. One of the women explained to me that this

⁸⁹ Like the baysey described in the Introduction, *Candles and incense sticks represent the linga of Shiva and prosperity.* (Sam 1987: 18 in Sam 1999: 5)

ceremony was being held in recognition of the first day of the rainy season. People came to the temple to make offerings to the monks who would retreat into the monastery for the rainy season.

After the ceremony we entered the small house where the monks resided. To my surprise, there was a full-scale sanctuary inside. Six monks were seated on the platform to the right of the altar. The ceremony continued. We sat on the floor, first facing the Buddha. A master of ceremonies chanted while the lay people responded. Then we turned to face the monks and repeat the process.

Later, someone brought out a chair, resembling a throne, and placed it in the center of the sanctuary. It was painted red, decorated with gold, and adorned with silk pillows. One of the monks took a seat there and delivered a sermon. Towards the end of the sermon, a collection bowl was passed around.

Voha Chuon, one of the founders of the “Vatt,” offers some of the history behind establishing this majestic temple.

There were five members of the board of directors who worked with Venerable Bel Long to make it happen: John Meas, Ken Kroch, Phan Chhim, my father (Bonara Heng Chuon) and me. It was 1976. At that time, there was no Cambodian temple in the United States. Venerable Viradharawar Bel Long came to Washington, DC specifically to build it. He wanted to start a temple, because there were lots of Cambodians in the area who wanted one.

We began fundraising for the temple in 1977 after the charter was approved. At first, the temple was located in Oxon Hill, Maryland. Venerable Bel Long resided there. But he was already eighty years old, so we held a discussion about replacing him. Venerable Bel Long suggested Venerable Oung Mean, who was in London studying for his master's degree. After Venerable Oung Mean arrived, he requested a larger place, so the temple was moved to New Carrollton. (Voha Chuon, ADAPT Interview 8/2/01)

Sovann Tun elaborates upon the history of the “Vatt.” He describes the chronology and process of the *vatt*'s construction and the appearance of the cultural and artistic programs on that timeline.

Our society was incorporated in 1978. And that is why we changed our name to the Cambodian Buddhist Society, Inc.

I was not involved in the beginning part of it. I was not here in Washington, DC. In 1980, I started going to the temple in New Carrollton. I was a Buddhist, and I wanted to learn more about Buddhism. I was young, and I went to the temple, but I didn't know much about Buddhism. And then I became a member of the board of directors in 1981.

We felt that the temple in New Carrollton was too small, so we looked for a bigger property.

We started to build the fence in 1986. It is the Cambodian way – they build a fence first. We built the small building in 1987, and then we started to build the shrine⁹⁰ in September 1991. We finished it in October 1992.

Even before the large building was built, people were writing about it in books. We wanted to build a true Cambodian temple, so we researched different temples in Cambodia as models. The shrine was copied from one just outside of Phnom Penh in Kaw Kee Krow. We showed the picture to our architects. It is all American made.

The architect was American, Italian-American.

A Cambodian immigrant, Kruoch Sina, did the paintings inside the temple. He just arrived from Cambodia, and he didn't have a job yet. He painted everything in about two-month's time, if you can imagine that!

We had Cambodian language classes at the temple in New Carrollton. When we arrived here in 1987, we didn't have classes yet. We started language classes in 1988 or so. And then we started dance and music classes. Venerable Oung Mean wanted to do it as a way of preserving the culture. (Sovann Tun, ADAPT Interview 6/16/01)

⁹⁰ He is referring to the large *vihear*, or sanctuary, that constitutes the reputation of this *vatt*.

Raci Say took on much of the responsibility for putting the “Vatt’s” cultural program together. She describes the history of and motivation for her involvement, highlighting the goal of fostering an ability to speak to the distinct qualities of Khmer culture. This ambition reveals the “Vatt’s” role in *the construction, maintenance and negotiation of [ethnic] boundaries* (Stokes 1997: 6) for this community. Within this context, these processes depended upon the preservation and transmission of Khmer performing arts and language. Promoters of these objectives favored the temple as the ideal venue for bolstering tradition and resisting potential future losses.

We have the program because, if people are going to go out and say that they’re Buddhist, say that they’re Cambodian, they have to be able to explain what they mean. (Raci Say, Conversation 5/24/98)

We started in the early 1990s. Lok Ta⁹¹ Oung Mean wanted me to come and help. He said he always wanted it to happen, but nobody took responsibility for it. I agreed to do it, because I admired his efforts to build the temple.

And his explanation was wise. He said that I had been working successfully with the dance group. We arrived as a troupe and resettled in Wheaton, Maryland. Our apartments were all near to each other’s. We helped each other with everything, like going to the hospital and babysitting each other’s children. It was such a struggling time. We were such a family.

Venerable Oung Mean said that our troupe really made the American public aware of the Cambodian culture. He said he was really proud, and now that we have

⁹¹ A Khmer honorific term for elderly males.

the temple, we should have something cultural to show the American people. He said that at least we have to show our children that we have something that is different, that we carry from Cambodia. It should be preserved at the temple. He also explained that in Cambodia during the war, all the documentation, all the culture, and everything remained at the temple, intact. He wanted to do the same thing here. Outside the temple people have different lives, but when they come to the temple, they should feel like Cambodians. So when he put it that way, I thought it sounded like a good idea, and I thought I would try it.

And I was very surprised, because he was a monk. Usually, monks are only interested in prayer and chanting. But he wanted to preserve our culture and heritage, because at that time, Cambodia was still in the communist period. We were very uncertain. We were not sure about the future of our culture. He said that we should preserve as much as we could here, pick the pieces up, just in case the culture was destroyed in Cambodia. (Raci Say, ADAPT Interview 6/17/01)

As the key force behind initiating the “Vatt’s” music curriculum in the mid-1990s, Sovanthary Chhim played a critical role in strengthening the cultural program there. She demonstrated a unique desire and competency to recognize, respond to, and take action on Ngek Chum’s request for help in passing on his musical knowledge. As noted in Chapter Two, Ngek Chum “consented” to the unstable existence of his art as a result of his own approach to negotiating the hierarchies of his social obligations. Consequently, after more than a decade of residing in Maryland, he still had no viable channel through which to comprehensively lead instruction in all of the instruments of

the *pin peat* ensemble. Yet, his gentle persistence eventually bore fruit when it met with the sensitivity and generosity of Sovanthary Chhim. Her will to assist is wedded to her view that Khmer music and dance-drama puts Cambodians *in touch with an essential part of themselves*. (Stokes 1997: 13)

I always helped out at the temple when it was time for traditional religious ceremonies, but I wasn't really committed until after Venerable Oung Mean passed away on March 16, 1993. I just didn't want the educational art program, founded by our beloved Venerable Oung Mean, to disappear.

Keeping the cultural program alive is really teamwork. No one person can take the credit. I did it together with Raci. I did whatever needed to be done. If the teachers or students needed rides, then I gave them rides or helped to coordinate rides for them.

When Dr. Tun⁹² became vice president of the temple, I was able to get more support from the board of directors to purchase the musical instruments. We wanted to have music class, and we didn't have any instruments. Ngek proposed it to me. He said he always wanted to teach there. The board had been approached before... he said that he did mention it before, and some board member promised him, and he was hoping...but so far, no instruments. So when he talked to me, he didn't expect any results. And I didn't expect anything, either. But I just said, "Why don't we try and see what happens? If we really need it, if you really want it, and it's a good idea, we

⁹² Sovann Tun who was introduced earlier in the chapter.

should push for that.” So I kept bringing the subject up when the new board of directors came in. So I asked at the right time.

And I advanced some of my own money, because the board authorized three thousand-something, but the actual price exceeded that a bit. But I thought, “Well, if it’s not enough, I’ll still go ahead and do it, because we went through the process of getting the board’s approval.” Later we did some fundraising and covered the difference with donations.

It just goes to show, just because you ask one time and it’s not done, you can keep asking, and it will be done...because different people come along in your life.

When we think of music and dance, it’s the center of our culture. It’s a part of ourselves as Cambodians. Without that, we’re not anything...it’s our heritage. It’s, I don’t know how to explain this, but that’s how we feel. This art, the classical dance is what makes us different from others, you know, Americans, or Vietnamese, or Chinese. They all have their own cultures. Cambodians, besides the language, what else do we have to differentiate ourselves?

It’s part of our culture. When I was growing up, that was part of our education. Boys studied drawing, sculpting, building, and stuff like that. And girls learned dancing, cooking, and sewing. And then, every Friday before school ended, we had like a talent show.

When I saw Cambodian American Heritage doing it, I said, “Oh, we still have something left!” I helped them before we had it at the temple. I was involved...always

made donations, contributions...you know, because Dy⁹³ is my friend. I helped her when she started that. I went to listen and sit with them. On Sundays, I went to the practices, brought food to them, whatever... That's how I know Sochietah.⁹⁴ I know Ngek from that, too. (Interview 2/8/02)

Narin Jameson's memories of dance and music during her childhood inspired her volunteerism at the "Vatt." She hopes that the students she works with will develop their own memories that will translate into a respect for Khmer tradition.

I always loved Cambodian dance. My mother took me to the Royal Palace. She knew the head of the royal dance troupe very well, so she entrusted me to her. I studied there for around two years. I was about six to eight years old. But I was not made to be a dancer. It was too hard, so I left.

But I loved it and the Cambodian classical music. My father was a musician. He played many instruments, including violin. My brother was also a musician...and my sister sings beautifully. Everybody is a musician except me. I studied piano, but not for too long.

When I was in high school I went back to classical dancing again. The last three years of high school, like 1962 to 1965, a group of us went to study in the Royal Palace. We learned the basics. I danced the male role and performed for a fundraising

⁹³ A kind of nick-name for Sam-Ouen Tes, Cambodian American Heritage's head dance teacher.

⁹⁴ Sochietah Ung, a dancer and costume-maker who was introduced in Chapter 2.

event at our high school, Lycee Sisovath. My best friend performed the female role.

There were four of us who were great friends. So we made two pairs when we danced.

That's why—when I came back to the Washington, DC area in 1994—I saw the dance at the temple, I loved it. I just stayed there and watched. Then I thought, “Why do I just sit here? Why don't I help out?” So I asked Raci how I could help, and she gave me something to do. So I've helped since then.

I save my Sundays for this dance troupe. Before I was only coordinating with the parents on food. Now I help to coordinate the costumes and assist with some teaching. I try to do whatever I can, press their backs, help the students sit up properly...Now I introduce the dance troupe to the international community, like the French embassy, the Asian Women's Club, and the World Bank, where I'm working.

I'm not only helping out at the temple. I help out at my son's church, too. And during Christmas time, I wrap shoeboxes at the church downtown.

I want to keep Cambodian culture and tradition alive while I'm living abroad. I want to teach Cambodian students to remember their background, to know their heritage, so later when they grow older they will have the sense of devotion to Cambodia and a desire to go back and help their own country. I do not want them to forget America. I want them to be grateful to America. But I want them to keep their traditions, their culture. While talking to them, I always mention those things. If they hear it now, I'm sure they will remember it sooner or later. That's what I do with my own children. I tell them now. And I'm sure, later on they will think about it. (Narin Jameson, Interview 1/12/02)

Ringling in the Year of the Ox

In practice, Cambodian Buddhists adhere to the guidelines of the Sigala sutra for social relations not only among the living, but also between the living and the deceased. Although rebirth is not the Buddhist ideal, Buddhism explains that it is a fact of the human condition. When a physical body dies, its energies do not die. They take on new form and another life. (Rahula 1959: 33)

In music and dance-drama, the lesson of paying respect to one's teacher and ancestors is taught through a ritual known as *sampeah krou*. Devi Yim introduced this idea in the last chapter. *Sampeah krou* is performed in "Virginia" and at the "Vatt" before every New Year's performance.

Below, I describe my first encounter with *sampeah krou*. The account conveys the processes of gleaned knowledge through highly patterned, partially repetitive action and kindling communication channels via symbolic and multi-sensory motion. Creative use of limited resources that are indicative of the particular time and place of the ceremony contributes to the efficacy of the ritual, demonstrating sincerity of intent to the ancestors.

Within a few months of my first music lesson at "Virginia," I was asked to perform a simple song on the stage for the New Year's performance. Although the performance was scheduled to begin at seven-fifteen in the evening, the students were told to arrive at nine-thirty in the morning.

During the course of an hour, the reasons for a seemingly absurd arrival time revealed themselves. Everyone was expected to be at the Francis Hammond Jr. High School nine hours before show time.

There were people everywhere not long after ten a.m. They were working on stage, back stage, and in and around the auditorium.

One of the younger dancers sprung from her seat in the auditorium next to her mother and greeted me. Her eyes were turned down slightly and her head tipped shyly towards the left. "I'm supposed to show you where to put your things," she explained.

She showed me to the "women's dressing room," which was really a junior high school band room in disguise. Brightly colored red, purple, and green silk fabrics and ivory satin blouses glittering with sequins were draped over blue plastic chairs and open suitcases. Cosmetic cases, complete with mirrors and an assortment of eye-shadows, were propped open randomly throughout the room: one on top of the upright piano, another on a heavy black metal music stand stenciled with "FHJRH" in white spray paint. Mothers were helping their daughters tie their kben and fastening them with shining gold-colored belts.

In the hallway, a group of both male and female dancers, of junior high school age and older, were already in costume and began rehearsing. The hollow clatter of their coconut shells clicking together in patterns of three-seven-three-eight, echoed down the corridor as the dancers stepped in pairs to form a circle.

I wanted to practice my part in the program, so set up the roneat in the corridor. As I practiced, I felt a sudden commotion. A series of perhaps five different loud voices overlapped each other. They were speaking in Khmer. The conversation

traveled the length of the hallway in a collective swoosh. It moved too quickly for me to complete the phrase I was playing, turn around, and look. When I turned, I found that it was Lok Krou⁹⁵ who had come in, accompanied by some other musicians.

Everyone had been busy, but they were really awaiting the arrival of Lok Krou. All activities ceased, and everyone took their incense sticks and candles to the stage.

The altar was set up on the far left, front of the stage. The musical instruments were resting on a straw mat behind it, essentially in the left wing of the stage. The musicians were seated behind their instruments. The ensemble included roneat aik, roneat thung, sralai, sampho, skor thom, chhing, kong thom, tro, kheum, and a few vocalists.

Today's altar was more elaborate and better attended to than any I had seen prepared by the group so far. A raised wooden platform, draped with colorful Cambodian silk fabric, was placed lengthwise along the edge of the straw mat. It served as the resting-place of the ornately decorated golden crowns, brightly painted masks, other props, and vases of freshly-cut flowers which marked the focal point of the altar. Improvisation is a must when showing one's generosity to the ancestors;

⁹⁵ It is not necessary to add teachers' names when addressing them or when it is obvious which teacher someone is talking about. Since Ngek Chum is my primary teacher, I regularly refer to him as simply "*Lok Krou*." Therefore, when I obviously talk about Ngek Chum from my own perspective and when it would not become confusing, I will refer to him as "*Lok Krou*" for the remainder of this book.

although there was a shortage of stands to support all of the crowns placed on the altar, Sprite bottles (complete with two-liters of beverage) sufficed as a proxy.



Figure 9-*Sampeah Krou* Offerings
(Photo credit Joanna Pecore)

Although it already looked cluttered, the dance teachers and other community members continued to place more items on and before the altar. They arranged plates of colorful, fresh fruit; roasted duck's and boar's heads garnished with cilantro and spring flowers; whole fresh fish; plates of steamed jasmine rice; large, whole, green papayas; bottles of soft drinks; and bite-sized homemade muffins on the straw mat which served to define the altar space on stage.

Great care was taken to arrange the plates in the most attractive and perhaps even hierarchical order in front of the altar. The meat and the fish were placed closest to the platform. Plates of fruits and other offerings were lined up in rows in front of them further away from the center of the altar. They were placed strategically so that the colors of the fruit and other items enhanced the altar's appearance. A final touch was the placement of candles and sticks of incense in various plates.

All of the students lined up in columns in front of the altar, the dancers in the five columns nearest the front of the stage and the music students in the last column toward the back of the stage. We were all on our knees and bowed the instant we heard the ringing of the kong thom, the trills of the roneat aik, and the high pitch of the sralai all underscored by the slow, steady rhythm of the sampho.⁹⁶

The dance teachers positioned themselves in a row, backs to the altar and faced the students. The leading musicians emerged from behind their instruments and joined this row of teachers. The remaining musicians continued playing the music without interruption.

I didn't know what to do, but the students in the other columns were picking up their incense sticks and candles. Those in the front of the line offered their candles and incense sticks to the teacher at the front of the row. Once the offering was complete students took their place at the back of the column. One-by-one, each student offered these gifts to their teachers, moving to the back of the line when they finished.

I was in the line with the other music students. We followed suit. I offered my candles and incense to the musicians. They wished me luck with my performance. I returned to the back of the line.

All the while, the high-pitched percussive melodies twisted and turned, grounded in the perpetual beat of the sampho.

The other music students and I waited patiently, heads bowed, as the seemingly endless columns of dancers snaked around. Miraculously, all of the students had offered their gifts to the teachers.

⁹⁶ This was the beginning of the *sampeah krou* ceremony.

But the music didn't stop. On the contrary, the complex integration of the parts seemed to suggest that a resolution was perhaps hours away. The instrumentalists were joined by the high-pitched vocals. While enunciating a single syllable, their voices fluctuated over a series of pitches to round out the musical phrases. We held our bowed position, trying to watch what was happening from the corners of our eyes. The dance teachers were busy lighting the incense sticks and candles they had just received. They placed them, one-by-one, in the plates of fruit and other offerings that awaited acceptance by the ancestors.

As the volume and intensity of the music increased, the incense filled the air. It became virtually irrelevant that we were sitting on a stage in a Virginia junior high school; what was of central importance was the dialogue that had just been initiated with the ancestors.

After the teachers lit the candles on the plates of food, the students, one-by-one, slid toward the altar on their knees and picked up a plate. With knees bent, and posture still low-to-the-ground each student returned to their place in line, resting their plate of food with burning candle in front of them. We lowered our heads in a continuous bow until everyone had a plate. Then, the pattern of moving toward the altar, one-by-one, repeated. This time, each student brought their offering of food—a formal presentation of gifts to the ancestors. This procedure continued until all students completed their ritual offering, supported by the glissandi of the roneat and the intermittent “ching” of the hand cymbals.

Then, the pattern was repeated again. This time, each teacher took a small gold bowl. The contents were impossible to see, but there were two small pastel

colored, full-petaled flowers peeking out of each. The stems were extremely short, cut close to the actual blossom so that it would fit inside the teeny bowl. I faced a dance teacher who took her flowers, petals down, and stirred something inside the bowl, as if to purify, or make something inside fragrant. I wondered if there wasn't some liquid, a special water perhaps, inside the bowl.



Figure 10-Sam-Ouen Tes and Sovanny Chun Bless Students by Tying Strings around their Wrists
(Photo credit Joanna Pecore)

Again, the students, one-by-one crawled respectfully toward the teachers. This time they held out their wrists. I waited my turn in line to receive a string from one of the teachers. I noticed they were putting flowers behind an ear of each of the female students. When I held out my wrist for one of the dance teachers (by this time, the music teachers had returned to the ensemble), she tied a string around my wrist, said a prayer in Khmer, and placed a flower behind my ear. When I went to the back of the line, I looked over at the other lines. Instead of going to the back of the row and waiting for the phase of the ritual to end, the students were lining up in front of each

of the teachers. The idea was to get as many strings as possible for maximum insurance. I followed suit, collecting a string from each of the teachers—I could certainly use a boost from the ancestors.

The ritual did eventually end. I looked at my watch. More than one hour had passed. Now, six and a half hours before show time, we were ready for lunch and a dress rehearsal.

This overview of the history of “Virginia” and the “Vatt” and some of my initial experiences there offered an introduction to the most basic purposes of the Khmer performing arts activities at these institutions: transmitting Khmer culture, shaping Khmer community, and exhibiting Khmer civilization to non-Khmer Americans. The commentaries from a broad range of participants in these organizations have shown how these aims are fulfilled in ways that traverse cosmological, social, and individual worlds. In particular, they illustrated how collaboration at “Virginia” and the “Vatt” 1) instructs about the continuity of life and one’s personal and social responsibilities within that sequence, 2) serves to heal suffering and revive distant memories, and 3) forges and represents ethnic community.

Lessons about ongoing life and the primacy of family in sustaining that phenomenon were the most prominent throughout the chapter. The narratives by Bonavy Chhim, Vathana Say, and Sovath Chum accentuated these messages. For instance, Bonavy indicated that *there was no question* about her involvement in the dance, since it was a family tradition for generations. Vathana pointed to a spiritual connection with her great uncle, dancer Rejena Nou. And Sovath linked her

engagement in the arts to her father, brother, and friend. Symbols of these understandings as they intersect with Buddhism reappeared in my own description of a ceremony at the “Vatt” to usher in the monsoon season. During this ritual, the religious assembly encircled the temple edifice multiple times while clasping offerings of flowers, candles, and incense sticks. The value ascribed to these teachings became especially evident in the strong desires to preserve any elements of Khmer culture that remained within the community so that they could endure into the future. For instance, while discussing their advocacy for cultural programs at the “Vatt,” Raci Say, Sovanthary Chhim, and Narin Jameson cited preservation as the stimulus for their volunteer work. First, Raci Say supported the Venerable Oung Mean’s hope to conserve Khmer culture at the temple. Later, Sovanthary Chhim lent her assistance when she became concerned that the art program might *disappear*. And finally, Narin Jameson joined so that she could help *to keep Cambodian culture and tradition alive while I’m living abroad*. Finally, the *sampeah krou* ritual described at the conclusion of the chapter magnified cultural wisdom about the cyclical nature of human life. This knowledge was modelled on multiple levels including the continuous sounds of the *pin peat* ensemble that drove the progression of the ceremony and the series of steps involved in transferring offerings to the ancestors and receiving blessings in return.

It has also been demonstrated that cultivating knowledge about individual roles within one’s social network vis-à-vis intergenerational perpetuity is a major mission of both “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” This fact was proposed and depicted in terms of a fundamental Buddhist teaching that highlights the significance of reciprocal behaviors within family, educational, professional, social, civil, and religious relationships. For

example, Sarouem Tes noted that at “Virginia,” students *practice behaving appropriately, in a Khmer way*. Sam-Ouen Tes added that, *We teach them to follow cultural rules, to respect their elders, including their teachers*. And Sovanthary Chhim emphasized that at the “Vatt,” *Keeping the cultural program alive is really teamwork*. She even advised that dreams should not be abandoned, *because different people come along in your life*. During the closing *sampeah krou* ritual, we witnessed the transmission and performance of a variety of behaviors considered essential for artistic and social success with respect to each individual’s position within the music and dance community. All of these practices as well as the remarks identified above point to the key role that dedicated individuals acting together play in sustaining Khmer music and dance-drama.

Additionally, the vignettes presented in this chapter revealed some of the ways that Khmer performing arts helped individuals to confront grief associated with extreme loss. They illustrated the process by which musical performance, broadly defined, escorts people through relationships that provide the means for joining their private with public worlds. (Small 1998) For instance, Sichantha Ouk withstood *almost four hundred miles* of driving in a single day to support his daughter’s studies, which, in turn, remedied his homesickness. Similarly, Sipo Dan expressed confidence in his plans for *a happy life* when he returns to Cambodia in his retirement and gathers with friends and family in his village to play music. Finally, Sovathary Chhim explained that she was comforted when seeing the activities at “Virginia” for the first time. Witnessing them, she resolved, *Oh, we still have something left!*

Furthermore, the “sound-spheres” have displayed the significant role that the Khmer performing arts have played in the construction of a sense of cultural identity for the participants of “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” This purpose was particularly pronounced within the context of establishing a cultural program at the “Vatt.” First, Raci Say explained that, *if people are going to go out and say that they’re Buddhist, say that they’re Cambodian, they have to be able to explain what they mean.* Her words echoed the Venerable Oung Mean’s concern that, *we have to show our children that we have something that is different, that we carry from Cambodia.* In like fashion, Sovanthary Chhim reported that, *This art, the classical dance is what makes us different from others, you know, Americans, or Vietnamese, or Chinese.*

Finally, we observed that Khmer music and dance-drama serves not only to bind the Khmer community, but also to build bridges between the Khmer community and the American mainstream. With respect to this purpose, Saroem Tes declared that “Virginia” *isn’t just about preserving the arts. It’s also about contributing to the United States.* Likewise, Venerable Oung Mean told Raci Say that, *we should have something cultural to show the American people.*

In sum, this introduction to “Virginia” and the “Vatt” has explored how time-honored beliefs about the continuity of life, social responsibility, and memories of a distant Cambodia are manifested in sentiments toward participating in Khmer music and dance-drama. The following chapter takes us one step further into the world of playing *pin peat* music to demonstrate how these values are embedded within and advanced through musical sound, structure, and performance practice.

Chapter 4: The Sounds of Building Local Bridges

On the surface, the transmission of cultural values from one generation to the next, the construction of ethnic environments, and the presentation of the culture of one's motherland to outsiders via the performing arts appear to be non-artistic aspects of music and dance-drama. This perception is consistent *with the highly pervasive fiction of an earlier musicology...[which] considered [music to be] a domain of a special, almost extra-social, autonomous experience.* (Stokes 1997: 1) Nonetheless, numerous researchers have delineated the correspondences among social, cultural, political, and aesthetic patterns in a diversity of the world's musics (Becker 1988; Becker 1993; Becker 1998; Blacking 1969; Feld 1984; Feld 1990; Feld 1991; Kaeppler 1978; Kaeppler 1985; Kaeppler 1996; Pemberton 1987; Roseman 1984; Roseman 1998; Seeger 1979; Trimillos 1983; Turino 1993; Walser 1993; Waterman 1990), demonstrating the relationships between *cultural logics* (Roseman 1984: 411) and musical structures. While some of these studies might *overargue the significance of music* (Stokes 1997: 1) by emphasizing instances of structural conformity and deviations across realms, once the models have been exposed, they become extremely difficult to ignore, lending credence to their importance. This approach to musical analysis is particularly convincing when combined with the examination of music in practice. (Becker 1993; Blacking 1969; Brinner 1995; Conquergood 1992; McNeill 1995; Rice 1994; Rice 1995; Robertson 1996; Roseman 1989; Schechner 1993; Schechner and Appel 1990; Slobin 1993; Small 1990; Stokes 1997; Trimillos 1983; Turino 1993; Walser 1993; Waterman 1990)

In fact, pairing these perspectives to illuminate the meaning of Khmer music and dance-drama suggests that the tradition's potency extends far beyond the realm of isolated personal and social interpretations. This position becomes especially salient when one considers that historically, the Khmer have embraced the beliefs that ideal action on earth can yield sacred benevolence and that art, religion, and government are naturally interrelated. (Brandon 1967; Brunet 1974; Catlin 1987; Chandler 1983; Cravath 1992; Cravath 1986; Cravath 1985; Mabbett and Chandler 1995; Roveda 1997; Sam 1992; Sam 1987; Sam 1999; Sam 1988; Shapiro 1994; Swearer 1995; Wolters 1982) Employing this approach seems even more appropriate when one recognizes that, *Discussing Khmer classical music in English from technical and theoretical viewpoints requires a kind of translation that can easily distort what Khmer musicians understand.* (Sam, Roongruang, and Nguyen 1998: 174)

This chapter harnesses the propositions and considerations presented here and joins them with the voices of expert Khmer artists⁹⁷ from the Washington, DC area and a concluding ethnography performance to illustrate how cultural values and models of human communication are embedded within the Khmer performing arts on many levels. It reveals that constructive attention to relationships and the ability to adapt are the hallmarks of quality performance and that embodying these standards is a prerequisite to mastery. Finally it demonstrates how these ideals coincide with a more general Khmer worldview that values a delicate

⁹⁷ The one exception of “voices” that fit this description is my own voice, which appears near the end of the chapter. It is clear, however, that I am a student in this context.

balance of autonomy, social responsibility, and adaptation in order to fulfill one's community duty in the face of changing contexts. (Fisher-Nguyen 1994; Hinton 1998; Smith-Hefner 1999; Smith-Hefner 1995; Welaratna 1993)



Figure 11-Ngek Chum Prepares a Bowl of *Koyteav* in 2002
(Photo credit Joanna Pecore)

“Music is Like Soup”

The *pin peat* musical tradition guides the activities at “Virginia” and the “Vatt” that center around the modern Khmer dance-drama repertoire comprised of *robam* (“pure-dance” with ritual origins) and *roeurng* (literally, “stories”). (Cravath 1985)

Ngek Chum mastered all of the *pin peat* instruments while he was still a teenager. His vivid description illuminates multiple aspects of the tradition, including the ensemble components, compositional organization, his instrument classification system, and the circumstances that lead to exemplary performance.

Music is like soup, you know, koyteav. We have a lot of stuff in that soup: bean-paste, hot peppers, basil leaves, bean-sprouts. We need all of that stuff to make the soup taste good. It's the same with music. When you have a lot of different instruments, that's good music, that's real music.

First of all, you need the roneat aik and the kong thom. Those are like the noodles and the broth. Without noodles and broth, there's no soup. You can play the music with the roneat aik and the kong thom only. That's the basic. But of course, it's not really good. Like the other things we put in the soup, we need kong toech,⁹⁸ roneat thung, and sralai. Those sounds make the music really nice. The roneat aik and the kong thom are the two leading voices that glue the ensemble together. They don't play the same thing. They play different parts that complement each other to create the whole. And they stay on track. They don't wander too far from the basic tune like the other instruments do. The kong toech, for example, follows the roneat aik, but it also veers away according to its phloev.⁹⁹ Sometimes, when the player is really good you can't even tell that the kong toech and the roneat aik are the same, but they are. And the roneat thung follows the kong thom. But like the kong toech, it should drift off.

This might surprise you if you've heard some of the more modern recordings of Khmer music. On so many of those, the kong toech and the roneat thung follow the roneat aik and the kong thom exactly. But that's not really good playing. When players know the phloev for their instruments, they won't sound identical to the instruments they're following.

⁹⁸ Circle of high-pitched gongs.

⁹⁹ This idea is discussed more below.

So then, there's the sralai, which roams between the noodles and the broth. It follows the kong thom for the most part, but at times it also follows the roneat aik.

So those are the two main groups: the group that the roneat aik leads and the group that the kong thom leads. But there's one more group that includes the chhing, sampho, and skor thom. These instruments relate differently to the ensemble than the other two groups.

First, every instrument listens to the chhing. The chhing keeps the beat. If the chhing gets lost, everyone gets lost. Like the rest of the instruments, the skor thom and the sampho listen to the chhing, but they follow each other. Well, they don't exactly follow each other. As I said, this group is different. Instead of following each other, it's more like they talk to each other. Do you know hao-chhlary?¹⁰⁰ Sampho-hao, skor-chhlary.

My teacher, Krou Nit, told me about this. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 6/21/01)

Ngek Chum's down-to-earth description of good music sheds light upon two of the most distinctive qualities of Khmer music: the *polyphonic stratification* (Mantle Hood in Royal University of Fine Arts, Cambodia 1974:188) of timbres and *phloev*, an approach to abstracting melodies through improvisation. What are these *minute and shifting subtleties of rhythm and texture which make or break the event?* (Stokes 1994: 5)

In describing the music of Southeast Asia Mantle Hood coined term, *polyphonic stratification*. The term points to the interplay of multiple voices (polyphony) or

¹⁰⁰ "Call-respond."

instruments that each perform unique versions of the same melody (stratification).
(Royal University of Fine Arts, Cambodia 1974:188)

The voices correspond to all of the *stuff* in the soup that Ngek Chum describes. The instruments that are the ingredients of the soup—*roneat aik*, *kong thom*, *sralai*, *kong toech*, *roneat thung*, *sampho*, *skor thom*, and *chhing*—are constructed of various materials—hard wood, bamboo, brass, copper, bronze, calf skin, and ox-hide. They are designed in diverse shapes and sizes, and they are struck with different materials: the bare hands and mallets of different shapes and hardness. Blended together, the instruments resonate in a savory feast of timbres.

Listening to a comparable combination of instruments in Tibetan music, Charles Keil describes the effects of this kind of sound-layering, *I realized that...all those pairings of instruments share one goal: to maximize overtones, harmonics, and “beats,” the throbbing of pitches rubbing against each other. I think that’s one goal of music, to maximize timbres, textures, overtones, and harmonics. It puts you into a spiritual or supernatural, above the Himalayas, in a spatial head.* (1994:168)

In Khmer music, this throbbing of pitches, textures, and overtones constructs the atmosphere needed to connect musicians with dancers and performers with their human and supernatural audiences. Musicians keep these connections alive and fresh by individualizing the music with *phloev*.

Below, Sovann Chum reflects upon the experience of creating *phloev*. He reveals the distinctions between mere emulation (scrupulous mimicry of a model) and selective imitation (reproducing only particular aspects of an example and executing it according to one’s own inspirations). (Brinner 1995: 138-139) His words echo the

emphasis on independence noted in his father's commentary above. At the same time, however, he upholds his artistic connection to the *realm of musical consensus* (Brinner 1995: 133) by establishing his father's playing as the locus of his creative work. Further, Sovann identifies substantial observation, repetition, comparative analysis, and attention to other performers in the ensemble as the dominant foundations of his interpretive abilities.

Because my uncle¹⁰¹ was already playing the drums, my dad asked me to play the kong. So I decided to play that. I think I like kong the best, because you can make it sound interesting, hit different notes, make the piece sound better. I feel that I can achieve that a lot better than other people.

I know how to do it, because I watch other people play. I just compare what they're playing to how I play.

Basically, I play what my dad teaches me. It already has some tricks in it, because my dad never teaches any of the music straight. But I come up with my own tricks, too. I can be a little creative myself.

I don't know exactly what it is that I'm doing. I guess...that's why I like it so much. I can change the music into something else. That's how my dad did it; that's why he has so many of his own tricks. I don't know. I just listen, and I can play it by myself. I don't know how...

...I'm telling you, if you play it more and more in your head, you begin to think, "Oh, I could add this little thing real quick to it." Instead of playing it straight through,

¹⁰¹ Ra Khlay will appear later in this chapter.

you can add a little curve to it or just add a little slip-sliding and continue on. That's how I am with the drum. When I hear a note flipping around on another instrument, I just change what I'm playing to match that instrument.

People who don't know how to do this just play the same thing again and again. But the music's better when the instruments are always changing. It takes a long time to learn how. I just started playing three-four years ago, but I've been listening all my life. You hear it and hear it, and it just sticks to you. (Sovann Chum, Interview 1/26/02)

The accounts above point to the centrality of *phloev*—literally “way” or “road”—to the *pin peat* musical tradition on at least two levels. They present this concept in one obvious sphere, one that is referred to with the term, *phloev*. It designates the path that a musician takes to travel between pivotal melodic points in the music: the beginning and ending pitches of a song's phrases. Additionally, the commentaries describe a comparable kind of independent deviation from common pathways in terms of the simultaneous sounding of multiple ensemble instruments with diverse *sensuous textures*. (Waterman 1990: 220) Ngek Chum has confirmed that it is correct to interpret the layering of consistent song renditions via assorted instrumental sonorities as *phloev*. Consequently, it becomes apparent that good *pin peat* music is dependent upon the dual execution of *phloev*. This includes 1) the sequential implementation fulfilled by performing a piece from its start to finish, and 2) the “vertical” realization through the concurrent performance of a single composition by multiple voices. This combination is destined to produce *the expected and desired connections and transformations* (Stokes 1994: 5) within the context of a social event.

It is with the above insights in mind that I would now like to return to the proposition that I made in the introduction of this volume—that the concept of *phloev* is a key to uncovering the meaning of the Khmer performing arts on many levels. The “sound-spheres” presented in previous chapters have started to reveal how common features that characterize *phloev* recur across Khmer art and culture. These qualities include a personal search for knowledge; the integration of learning through mind, body, and spirit; retaining knowledge through embodiment; emphasis on process over objectives; following role models with pure intentions; and exploring all possible paths. They are the means toward accessing more generalized Khmer lessons about ongoing existence and public obligation. Because of the compelling redundancy of these patterns, I ask readers to bear them in mind as I continue to demonstrate how *acoustic organizations are always, at a prior level, socially organized* (Feld 1991: 81) vis-à-vis the Khmer performing arts.

The next “sound-sphere” features Ngek Chum who introduces how *phloev* relate to interpersonal relationships, regional style, and one’s future well being as an artist. When teachers share their *phloev* with students, they are offering a piece of themselves. Sincere teachers will not expect students to imitate them exactly forever. Instead, students are encouraged to develop their own style and the ability to adapt to unexpected situations.

When I learned different phloev from different teachers, my teachers never said, “That teacher is wrong” or, “Don’t listen to him. My way is better.” No, they told me, “Learn. The more you study, the more you’ll understand.”

The phloev in Battambang, Phnom Penh, and Siem Riep are all different. But I understand how they play in those different places, so I can play in their styles, too. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01) It's funny the way I learned about the different styles.

I will tell you about each of my teachers later. But right now, I want to tell you what happened with one of my teachers, Krou Chhuorm.

Well, it seemed that Lok Krou Chhuorm would always show up when my other teachers weren't around. One time, I was left at home alone. My grandfather went away for a couple of weeks and Lok Krou Chhuorm showed up at my house. But he wasn't alone! He came with ten other musicians! He picked his friends up on his way, from all over the country. They brought a lot of instruments: a whole pin peat!

As soon as I realized that I didn't have any food for them, I apologized. But Lok Krou Chhuorm said, "That's okay. Don't worry." And he told two of the musicians to make some food for us. They were from Battambang, so they knew the area.

Well, the other musicians all sat down to play music for me in their different styles. They wanted me to watch and listen. One of the teachers said, "I want you to learn from me. I spent a lot of money to come here. Pay attention to what I'm playing. Pay attention to everybody." I said I would, and I apologized. I had no money for these teachers who just showed up at my house. I told them again, "My grandfather went away." But all of the teachers said that that was okay. I didn't have to worry. They wanted to be there.

Then, some of them came over to me. They touched my arms and my back. They were feeling my bones. I didn't know what they were doing. I didn't even think about it,

not until this year or so. Now I think that they wanted to see if I was healthy, if I could play.

The two musicians from Battambang picked some vegetables from my yard and found some leftovers in the house. I couldn't believe it. They cooked a delicious meal!

Later I told my teacher, Krou Nit, about what happened. He didn't believe it. He said Krou Chhuorm had never done anything like that before. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 6/6/98)

Fateful Lessons

It seems that Ngek Chum's fantastic experience with the teachers from throughout Cambodia was a fateful one. The knowledge became invaluable when he moved to the United States in 1982. Although there were a number of musicians among the refugees who came to the United States, they were scattered throughout the country. As a result, it was difficult to put together ensembles of musicians who could play together. Fortunately, however, Ngek Chum had learned the different musical styles and the similarities and differences between them. Because of this, he was able to identify common threads that he could use to link the knowledge of musicians who settled in the same localities. With this knowledge, Ngek Chum created musical arrangements that allowed each musician to utilize his playing strengths while making slight adaptations so that his skills would fuse logically with the abilities of the other players. The ensembles became unified.

It was not only fortunate that Ngek Chum learned the different regional styles, but also that he mastered so many instruments, especially the *roneat aik*. He explains.

In Cambodia, it is not common to find musicians who play so many instruments. If somebody plays roneat, he only plays roneat. He might be able to play a bit of kong, but normally, he would not be able to perform on all of the instruments.

One of my teachers could play almost all of the instruments, but he was unusual. Krou Nit, for example, could not play sralai and kong toech. And Krou Van played only kong thom, roneat and kong toech.

I just had a lot of opportunity to learn all of the instruments. I started with chhing when I was very young, because I did not have much to do. Besides, chhing is the easiest instrument to start with.

Later on, I chose kong, because my grandfather said that kong is one of the leaders of the band. However, when I realized that roneat aik is the most important instrument in the ensemble, I wanted to learn that. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

“You Can Say that the Roneat Aik is the Leader”

I told you that when you have a lot of instruments, that's good music. But, you know, in the United States, I have to play in small groups a lot, and without kong thom. I mean, we have roneat aik, but no kong thom. When we don't have enough money to hire many musicians, we have to eat noodles without broth! People who put the programs together, well, they're not musicians. I tell them that we need kong thom, but they just say, “That's okay. We don't need it.” That's too bad, because when we do it that way, people in the United States can't hear the real Khmer music. We do need the

kong thom, but the people who organize the performances don't understand that. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 6/21/01) But, we do okay, because I play roneat aik.

Pin peat is greatly dependent on the roneat aik player. If the roneat aik is performed well, then the whole band will perform well. You can say that the roneat aik is the leader.

Because the roneat aik is so special, my grandfather decided that I should have many teachers for that instrument. Having many teachers and studying on my own allowed me to master many different techniques and to excel at performing.

A roneat aik is a wooden xylophone. The keyboard has twenty-one phlai¹⁰² in all. Each phlai is a different length, so when you put them together, you have a whole keyboard of phlai that produce different sounds.

When I was staying in Khao I Dang refugee camp in Thailand, I had to make my own roneat. Although I was not a carpenter, as I have mentioned before, my father was. I used to watch him make things. Because of that, I knew what to do to make roneat.

In Khao I Dang, houses were made of bamboo. I knew that I could construct roneat from the bottom part of the bamboo. So then, I collected the bottom parts of bamboo, which the construction workers threw away. After some time, I was able to earn my living by both teaching music and selling instruments.

The tricky part in making a good roneat from bamboo is extracting the sap from the bamboo. To get this done, I dug a big hole, put lots of water in it, and placed my bamboo sheets into it. I left the bamboo sheets in water and mud for a reasonable time, so that their sap was completely absorbed by water. The smell of the mud keeps the

¹⁰² The Khmer term for the bars or keys of a xylophone.

insects away. Once the phlai are taken out of the water and the mud, they have to be dried naturally in the shade. But, since I had so many rush orders, I had to get them smoked to speed up the drying process.

To make holes in the phlai for the strings (to hang the keyboard over the wooden sound box), I used a nail instead of a hand drill. To make the sound box for the roneat, I collected the wood sheets that people threw away.

Later, I taught people how to make roneat, so they could earn some additional income. I had such a small family. But some families were large and needed more money. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

“I Like to Preserve My Tradition”

Ngek Chum was not the only one with a musical education that became a great resource for Khmer performing artists in the United States. Chum’s brother-in-law, Ra Khlay, was a singer of popular music in Cambodia. When he came to the United States, he switched to the traditional repertoire, picking up drumming skills along the way.¹⁰³ Below, Ra describes his path to musical mastery as well as his transition to traditional musicianship. His narrative amplifies some of the experiences expressed in earlier “sound-spheres” about the power of informal transmission—picking up knowledge through extensive exposure (Trimillos 1983: 3-6)—in Khmer music. It also illustrates

¹⁰³ Now, his and Ngek Chum’s talents can be heard on commercial recordings of Khmer music: *Cambodia: Music of Exile*. AIMP/VDE-Gallo/Apsara Productions, 1992; *The Court Dance of Cambodia*. Produced by Sam-Ang Sam, 1994; *Echoes from the Palace*. Music of the World, Ltd., 1996; *Mohori*. Music of the World, Ltd., 1997.

how embodying knowledge through this process enhances a musician's ability to transfer his or her knowledge across distinct musical styles. Ra's motivation for accomplishing this shift restates the emphasis on a constructive balance between individuality and social cooperation in Khmer music.

I come from the countryside of Battambang. I first became interested in music when I was three-four years old. Before I even went to school, I listened every night to my father. He played the old, traditional wedding music. It's a little bit different than what we play now. They used a three-stringed fiddle. Once in a while, I hear that music on tape. It sounds so neat. Well, I heard my father every night. He played for my mother. It was kind of romantic. [laughs] That's what I got from that!

And then, when I went to school, I became interested in western music. I sang Cambodian popular music. Yeah, and when I had a show at school or something, I was a star, too. I just learned from the radio, you know, like, Sin Sisamouth, the most popular singer in Cambodia.

I started to play drums here. I learned from my brother-in-law, Ngek Chum. Well the thing is, here, because we're short of musicians, you have to pick up something to be of value to the band. It's worth it to the band, you know. The more instruments you play, and if you can play at the same time as you sing, one person can take two jobs!

So, I play and sing at the same time. Actually, to do that, you have to put yourself into it. Most people can't do it. It's very rare, but...I tried really hard! But, you know, after you get it...it takes time to practice....I started in 1983 when I got here. That's when I started to convert from popular to wedding and classical music.

Even though I didn't convert myself until I got here, I remembered all of the songs that I heard when I was young. Maybe they were in my mind already, from my father. I had the basics in my blood already.

Yeah, when I came here, Ngek tried to convince me that I could convert. I wanted to. At that time I didn't have a job. I went to vocational school. And I said, "Okay, I'm gonna try. I have time." After I learned about three songs, I caught on.

Actually, when I started to learn this kind of music, I got into it. Plus, when I came to the United States, I wanted to keep my culture, art, and tradition. I like to preserve that. So now I don't really care that much about popular. Maybe if I were in Cambodia now, it would be different, because over there, they do more popular stuff. Maybe over there you can get more money from popular. So why not? But here, no, I have a job. So, I like to preserve my tradition.

My brother-in-law, Ngek Chum, converted me. He's my teacher, of all of the classical music that I know. All of the mohori, and most of the wedding music is from him, too.

He's about two-three years older than me. Actually, we played music together for the communists, on the front lines. We played music for the people when they worked at nighttime or something. During the harvest season, they usually worked day and night, from like seven o'clock until like eleven. We were supposed to be in that work group, too, but the leaders asked, "Who knows how to play? Who knows how to sing?" Ngek played flute, another guy played fiddle, some others played takhe,¹⁰⁴ I played harmonica, and I sang too.

¹⁰⁴ A three-stringed zither.

It is true that the Khmer Rouge killed a lot of musicians. Actually, if you were really popular, yes, they would kill you. But if you were like, really poor, born in a poor family like me... I had to camouflage myself like, "I didn't finish high school. I don't even know how to write my own name." My skin is dark, too, just like a real Cambodian. It's not like a Chinese or high class or something. That's why...as long as you played their music...they had their own music...but of course, we picked it up fast, because we're musicians! They didn't know that. They had their music on the radio that we listened to. So as long as you sang their music, they didn't mind.

So that's how we met. We were friends until the communists left. And then the Vietnamese took over. And then everybody went to their own villages. But my village was really far. And at that time, there was no communication, no transportation, you know. So I lived with him for a while in his village. We were very, very good friends.

And then I met his sister. And at that time, there were a lot of young men like me, a lot living like a group, because we just left from the communists. And then, um, a lot of applicants, you know, wanted to marry Ngek's sister. But, you know, I was the closest one to her...I won. I won the contest. (Ra Khlay, Interview 3/2/02)

“My Father Lives through Me in My Voice”

Like Ra Khlay, Sophy Hoeung transferred her knowledge of Cambodian popular singing to the classical repertoire. She developed her basic vocal skills informally and during performances when she was young and living in Cambodia. Since resettling in the United States, Sophy has become a favorite singer of popular music throughout Khmer communities in North America. Now, she is also in high-demand as a singer of

traditional music. Sophy's story highlights the role that *nisaiy* has played in her personal musical journey. Further, she attributes the appeal of her voice, not to technical precision, but rather, to her use of emotion—an assessment that implies the exceptional incorporation of *phloev* into her performances.

Looking back on my musical life today, I can only say “thanks” to my father, who was a traditional musician who loved his music. He played mohori instruments such as flute, takhe, tro sao,¹⁰⁵ drums, and other instruments. That's why I learn music quickly. I had that surrounding me. But I never thought that I would be a singer when I grew up, never. My father always pushed me to perform, but I didn't like it. However, he knew that it was my destiny. So, right now I feel some regret...because, if he were alive...I mean...he would see that I'm doing it.

I started to sing when I was sixteen or seventeen. We lived on a farm, but my father really wanted me to perform, so he brought me to town. He and his friend had a rock and roll band. They tried me out and thought I sang well, so they kept me. I didn't have much style, but I could sing.

After sixteen, I got married. My husband's family liked music, but they didn't like to see me sing. They didn't think it was proper...that's common in Cambodia. So, when I went out to perform, I sort of had to sneak out to do it. That didn't feel so great, so I was shy about singing. But in my heart, I liked music!

¹⁰⁵ A medium-pitched two-stringed fiddle.

My husband and I lived through the Khmer Rouge, but not without great losses. I endured the deaths of three sisters, one brother, and four of my own children. I lost my parents as well. We were separated, and I never saw them alive again.

Now, reminiscing on my childhood gives me the strength and happiness to perform like my father taught me. It brings me great joy to know that my father lives through me in my voice.

We came to the United States in 1981. A few months after we got here, my sponsor brought us to a party. When we saw the band, my husband said, “You wanna try?” Since that time, I always sang when we went to parties. People enjoyed it, so I started to sing, one song, two songs, over here, over there, over here, over there...until I had a band!

The classical dance groups? I never knew them. I mean, we saw their performances, but I never...I never thought about learning how to sing that. Uh-uh. It's only lately, maybe the last five years.

I've known Madame Tes Sareoum for a long time, but I never thought I would be singing for the classical dancers. But one day, we met at a cousin's, and she asked me to sing. I didn't think she was serious, so I just said, “Yeah, yeah.” But she kept asking, so finally I asked her, “Are you for real?” She said, “Yeah!” That's how it started.

It is more difficult to learn the classical music than the songs for the live band. For the classical, your voice has to go back and forth, back and forth. There's a lot of...“uuyyyyy”...fewer words and so forth. It took me a whole week to learn my first classical piece. My goodness! My head hurt and everything! It took a lot of effort. For example, I'd study on my way to and from work: in the car, I popped the cassette in; on

the way home, do it again. In contrast, I could learn a live band song in just one day. But now, I've figured out how the classical songs work, so I can learn them in one day as well.

Personally, I don't think I have a good voice. But I think that people like my singing, because I know how to use emotion. (Sophy Hoeung, Interview 2/23/02)

“When Something Goes Wrong, They’ll Blame the Xylophone”

Pin peat music guides dancers through their performance, “telling” the narrative in aural form. Throughout the course of a piece, musicians and dancers take turns (independently and together in different combinations) unfolding stories, so musicians must also anticipate and follow dancers’ movements. While the following “sound-spheres” describe how performance of the *roneat aik*, *sampho*, singing, dancing, *skor thom*, and stories relate to one another; the closing ethnography of performance illustrates how these relationships are realized within the context of a formal stage presentation.

The xylophone is the leader. When you play it, you need to take care of everybody: the musicians who follow you and the dancers. You need to watch and listen to everything. When something goes wrong, they’ll blame the xylophone. They won’t say “Kong is wrong,” or “Sralai is wrong.” (Ngek Chum, Conversation 9/8/01)

Playing with the dancers is a good way to learn. A lot of people can play the songs by themselves, but they can’t play with the dancers. By themselves, they play a

little bit fast, a little bit slow...but with the dancers, it's not fast or slow...it's a good way to learn.

That's also the point of the music. Every song tells what's happening in the story.¹⁰⁶ Like Cheut Reay means running or flying. And Rev concludes the dance. We always play Rev just before the dancers exit the stage. Like in Chou Chhay, we play Smoeu when they come onto the stage. And then we chrieng,¹⁰⁷ and then we phleng.¹⁰⁸ After phleng, we play Rev. And after Rev, we play Lea. Lea is "leave." It's the end of the dance. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 3/18/01)

Today, I want to teach you how to play Pya Doeun with the dancers. I will teach you the whole thing. When you're not playing with the robam, you can play that pi¹⁰⁹ two times. But sometimes we shorten or lengthen it for the dancers. We adjust that bey,¹¹⁰ too. We keep repeating it if necessary, and we cut the that when they finish the dance. If there are more dancers, it takes longer.

¹⁰⁶ During his reign (1841-1859), King Ang Duong revived Khmer culture. As part of this renaissance, he worked with artists to reconstruct Khmer court dance. This restoration included the creation of a fixed set of musical pieces that correspond to formalized dance gestures and the actions or emotions they convey. (Cravath 1985: 148-154; Sam 1987: 3)

¹⁰⁷ "To sing."

¹⁰⁸ "Music."

¹⁰⁹ *That* is a Khmer analytical musical concept that helps musicians to segment musical works into different parts. In some pieces, *that* are comparable to verses in Western music. *Pi* is the Khmer word for the number two. So, *that pi* is essentially the "second verse" or the "second section."

¹¹⁰ *Bey* is the Khmer word for the number three. So, *that bey* is essentially the "third verse" or the "third section."

You have to be really careful in the beginning. Some dancers start early, and some dancers start late. They don't know the music exactly, or they're concentrating on the dance, so I just watch them and decide if I need to make it shorter or longer. They're usually on beat, but sometimes early, sometimes late.

If you don't fix the music to fit their dance, the dancers will tell you that you play the music wrong. Even if you play it different each time to fit them, they just know that it started on time and ended on time. They don't know how you changed it. Even if you play exactly the same every time, even if you play it straight through the way I taught you, if it doesn't fit the dance, the dancers will say you play the music wrong.

I change the music to fit the dance and most of the dance teachers say, "Mr. Chum plays really well. He's never wrong."

I didn't really learn this from any of my teachers. I figured it out with my friends when I was young. Sometimes the dancers and I played together for fun. When we did that, we noticed that the time kept changing every time we did it. It didn't always fit exactly. So I adjusted the music fit the dance. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 9/8/01)

“When the Performers are Good, the Dancers and the *Sampho* Move Together”

The sampho is a very important instrument. As you'll see later, the skor thom is significant for stories, but for classical dance... the sampho player watches the dancers, and when they're ready to change their kbach, the sampho changes the pattern.

Actually, it's not like the sampho player always follows the dancers. Nor do the dancers always follow the sampho. No, they're together. Some dancers say that the

sampho follows them, but that's not really right. When the performers are good, the dancers and the sampho move together. Dancers listen to the sampho, too.

But of course, if a dancer is a little off the beat, the sampho adjusts the music for her. Dancers are supposed to know how to move between kbach depending on what they hear. Like if the sampho plays something like tip-ting, tip-ting, ting-ting-ting-ting-ting-ting, thoung, thoung, kting-ting, thoung, kting-ting,¹¹¹ the dancers count: one, two, three, four, five. They continue their movement for a certain number of beats. And while they're doing that, the sampho player counts, too. If they do this, they can move together.

At the same time, the sampho keeps the beat for the musicians, too. But since the sampho changes the pattern with each kbach, it could confuse the musicians, so that's why we have chhing. The chhing is important, because it keeps a steady beat. All of the instruments stay with the chhing. And the sampho listens for the chhing, too. If everybody does that, they won't get lost. Other people don't think so, but when I think about it this way, I believe that the chhing is key. When the chhing player is lost, everybody gets lost.

¹¹¹ Each of the various techniques for striking the *sampho* is associated with a vocal mnemonic (Trimillos 1983: 4) that teachers use to transmit the patterns to students. Each technique is distinguished by its duration, quality (muffled, resonant, etc.), drumhead upon which it is executed, section of the drumhead that is struck, intensity of the attack, and the shape or part of the hand that the drummer employs to hit the membrane. (Royal University of Fine Arts, Cambodia 1974:198-199) Students efficiently memorize the subtleties of these variables by learning to strike the drum and to sound the vocal mnemonics simultaneously.

Playing the sampho is pretty difficult. The drummer has to keep the beat. He has to move together with the dancers, and he has to stay with the melodic flow of the music.

There are three basic patterns for sampho: muoy choan, pi choan, and bey choan.¹¹² A good sampho player is supposed to know what pattern to play as soon as he hears the music. He shouldn't have to be told. But these days, we sometimes tell the sampho player what choan we need.

Okay, like muoy choan goes like this: Ting-ting, kthoung, ting- thoung, ting-chak. Ting-ting, kthoung, ting- thoung. Rest, and repeat. Ting-ting, kthoung, ting-thoung, ting-chak. Ting-ting, kthoung, ting- thoung. And pi choan: Ting-ting, chak, touk, ting-thoung, ting-thoung, touk, ting-thoung. See? And bey choan begins like this: t-ri-tip chak, t-ri-tip chak, tip chak-chak-touk, touk-thoung. Take a half of a rest here and continue: Touk-thoung, touk-touk, ting-thoung-thoung-kthoung, ting-chak-ting, chak-touk-ting, thung- ting-chak-touk. Ting-thoung-thoung, ktouk-kting-kthoung, ktouk-kting-kthoung.

When a song calls for a particular pattern, the drummer can play that pattern over and over again, but beyond these patterns are changvak, or rhythms, that are just like songs in themselves. There are different changvak for different songs like Sathukar, Trak, Bathom, Kaman...the twelve songs of Homrong¹¹³...and there's also changvak

¹¹² “level one,” “level two,” and “level three”

¹¹³ Homrong and its component songs will be introduced in Chapter 5.

Smoeu,¹¹⁴ Lea, Sinuon, Lo, and Saen Lav...people forgot that one, I think.... Tayai and so on. They're all different. Tayai and Sinuon are almost the same.

It's just like when the roneat plays one rendition of Sathukar while the kong, sralai and so on play another version of the same piece. They're all playing the same song at the same time from beginning to end, but each instrument has its own way. The sampho is like that, too, for the changvak. It has its own way.

Changvak Smoeu is like this: touk, kting, [thoung-thoung-thoung-thoung]¹¹⁵ ting-thoung...something like that. And Lea: touk-touk-thoung [thoung-thoung-thoung]. It's different for each song. And changvak Kaman, the other instruments start to play and then the sampho comes in: Kontear, touk, ting [thoung]. See? It's different. All of the changvak are different. And changvak Cheut Chheung: thoung-ting-thoung, thoung-ting-thoung...it's the same as changvak Bathom. And there's no Cheut Reay for sampho. We're really supposed to play Cheut Reay with skor thom only. And changvak Khlom and changvak Krao Nai are different too. Khlom is like this: Ting-thoung, thoung, ting. And changvak Krao Nai: [thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung] ting-chak-ting [thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung] ting-chak, ting-chak-ting [thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung] ting-chak-ting...they're different. People confuse Khlom with Krao Nai...and changvak Chamnan.

So the sampho has three jobs: keeping the beat, merging with the dancers' kbach, and playing the song.

¹¹⁴ Smoeu appears later in this chapter in the section about skor thom.

¹¹⁵ Vocal mnemonics in parenthesis represent skor thom patterns that occur in relation to the sampho patterns.

Also, just like the other instruments, the sampho has phloev. Drummers play the basic patterns, but they add their own techniques to them. Like ting-ting, kthoung, ting-kthoung is a basic pattern, but someone might play ting-ting, kthoung, ting-thoung-ting, thoung or something like that instead ...because when you play only the basic, it's not good. So I play the basic, and then add some.

And there are some standard variations on these basic patterns. For example, there are at least two or three basic ways to play muoy choan. And pi choan can be played a few different ways. And we can change bey choan, too. The variation on bey choan is called Saay. When I add, I use my ideas, my teachers' ideas, and other people's ideas. I mix them together.

So every drummer plays differently. That's why dancers and musicians need to rehearse together before performing—dancers have to get used to the musicians' style. There might be a misunderstanding. Like you know Pya Doeun: thoung, thoung-thoung-thoung, thoung-thoung-thoung, ay, thoung-thoung-thoung. We play like that with the dancers, but when we play without the dancers, we play it differently. It's like thoung, ay, thoung, ay, thoung-thoung-thoung-thoung, thoung-thoung-ay-thoung, thoung-thoung, ting-thoung, ting-thoung-thoung, ay thoung-thoung-thoung, ting-thoung...really different. It changes a lot. We only strike the drum three times per measure when we play with the dancers, but without the dancers, we fit more like six strokes into each measure. When the dancers hear that, they might not even believe that it's Pya Doeun.

Some people think you can play sampho if you know only a few changvak, but then they don't really know the music. You can't substitute one pattern for another.

Yeah, some people do that, but people who know, know that they're playing wrong.
(Ngek Chum, Interview 5/6/02)

“If You Don’t Know the Song, You Won’t Remember”

When she was a dance student at the University of Fine Arts, Masady Mani discovered the benefits of learning to sing.

When we studied dance, we also learned to sing, but we sat behind the teachers. They sang, and we repeated after them.

Then, after I passed the diplome, the teachers listened to the students singing on their own. They listened and said that I could sing well.

When you study there, you don’t take only one dance test. We were also tested in singing, mask making, and poetry. You have to know everything.

So whenever I had a singing test, I always passed. I always got an “A.”

The truth is, if you know the song, you tend to learn the dances quickly. You listen to the words. Like, some of the words indicate that you have to put your hand near your face. So then you do that kbach. If you know the song you learn real fast. If you don’t know the song, you won’t remember, because you don’t know what to do at each word.

That’s why I always learned faster than everyone else...because I sang every day. I tried to remember all of the wording. So everyone used to ask me, “Okay what’s the next one?” (Masady Mani, ADAPT Interview 7/15/01)

Linking Dramatic Expression with the *Skor Thom*

The set of two, large barrel drums, *skor thom*, serves as an important bridge between musicians and dancers in the context of dance-drama, or *roeurng*. The *skor thom* player follows the dancers' movements more closely than the rest of the music ensemble does, creating a tighter unity among dance, story, and music.

I started to learn to play the *skor thom* in April 2001. I learned it for the dance, *Moni Mekhala*. I was able to learn the part fairly easily, because I had already done my “homework” of knowing what resides on either side of the *skor thom* bridge: the story, the dance dramatization, and the melodies.

Focusing on the role of the *skor thom*, the following “sound-spheres” illustrate some of the interrelations among story, music, and dance dramatizations.¹¹⁶

Long ago, there were three students: Vorrachun, Mekhala, and Reamaysoer. They had the same teacher. When they finished school, the teacher wanted to see how smart they were. There were three prizes: a crystal ball, a crystal spear, and a crystal axe. The teacher offered first prize to the student who could most quickly fill a glass with the morning dew.

¹¹⁶ The story of *Moni Mekhala* is summarized by Sochietah Ung. The music is described by Ngek Chum while he was teaching me the *skor thom* part for *Moni Mekhala* between April and May 2001. Sochietah Ung (who plays the role of Reamaysoer in the *Moni Mekhala* story) participated in a portion of this instruction. Bonavy Chhim (who plays the role of *Moni Mekhala*) and Sochietah Ung explain elements of the dance-drama. Their narrations are taken from a workshop rehearsal held in September 1999.

Well, Mekhala was the smartest one. She put a towel down on the grass. It absorbed the dew, and she squeezed the dew into the glass. So she received the most powerful gift, the crystal ball.

Now, Mekhala is the Guardian of the Sea. Normally, she and the others are very busy. But there is one day when everyone has a holiday. They all have a party. So, the portion of the story we see shows her getting ready for the party. It talks about how beautiful she is making herself. (Sochietah Ung, Interview 7/15/99)

Moni Mekhala begins with Smoeu, right? That's when Mekhala comes onto the stage.

You hear that? [Lok Krou strikes each of the drumheads]. See? They're different. The right one is high. And the left one is low. Do you remember the song, Smoeu? You play like this. Okay, Smoeu. The sampho comes in before the skor thom. [Lok Krou sings Smoeu, playing the sampho as he sings]: [Touk, kting]¹¹⁷ thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung [touk, kting] thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung ... some people play this one first. Some play that one first. [Touk, kting] thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung. Three, right? [Touk, kting] thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung. Four. [Touk, kting] thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung. Five. And then switch your pattern. Fall into line with the sampho. Breathe {thoung-ay} and play: thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung. And keep repeating it: {Thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung. {Thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung. Repeat it

¹¹⁷ Vocal mnemonics in parentheses represent *sampho* patterns that occur in relation to the *skor thom* patterns.

around six times until we reach the end of Smoeu ...and the end: Thoung, thoung, thoung. Thoung, thoung, thoung. Thoung, thoung, thoung. Thoung, thoung, thoung. Thoung-thoung-thoung-thoung thoung-thoung-thoung-thoung thoung-thoung-thoung-thoung-rooooo.¹¹⁸ Thoung! You need to watch the dancers and play the end when they're ready. Then the sampho comes in, and the skor thom stops. Let's try again.

Okay, start. [Lok Krou plays sampho while I play skor thom.] [Touk, kting thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung [touk, kting] thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung [Touk, kting] thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung. [Lok Krou stops]: You're a little bit slow. When the music speeds up, you're supposed to speed up. Listen to the music.

[I try again, and we stop again. Lok Krou says]: Now, you're starting Smoeu a little bit late. Try again... Don't worry. Feel it. Don't stop. Don't wait. You know the melody for Smeou, right? So, just think about that, and you will get the beat right. You can do it yourself. Like this. [Lok Krou demonstrates]. Cambodian music is like this, [he moves his hands as if to imitate waves], like a boat.

[I try again. This time I make it to the end of the song and Lok Krou continues to sing through the end of Smoeu]:... da da da da da da da da daeEEEEEE.....after daeEEEEEE, take a rest, and then play thoung-thoung, right away after I finish the song. When the music's almost done, go faster. (Ngek Chum, Lesson 4/22/01)

While Mekhala is getting ready for the party, Reamaysoer, the Storm Spirit, finds her. He wants to get the crystal ball from her. He follows her around. Mekhala

¹¹⁸ The vocal mnemonic, rooooo, indicates a trilling or rolling with both mallets on one drumhead.

does not have a choice. He keeps bothering her, trying to get the crystal ball. So she begins to fight back. (Sochietah Ung, Interview 7/15/99)

Actually, Reamaysoer and Moni Mekhala, we're friends. There's no bad blood between us. It's just like when Reamaysoer visits me and he sees me anywhere, he's trying to chase me. He's trying to do everything possible to get my crystal ball. I know that, but I don't feel any bad blood between us. We're just playing around. (Bonavy Chhim, Workshop Rehearsal 9/19/99)

At the moment Moni Mekhala lifts the crystal ball into the air, she is ready to make Reamaysoer go away. Before that, she only held the ball next to her heart. In that position, the power of the crystal ball becomes stronger, because she transfers all of her own energy into it. That encouraged Reamaysoer. He claps while thinking, "Aha, now is the time to capture the crystal. It is really strong. And if I take it now, I will get Mekhala's energy. She will remain weak." However, he has difficulty, because he knows that if he simply tries to grab it, it will burn his hands. (Sochietah Ung, Interview 7/15/99)

Okay, Joanna, now you need to learn Cheut Chheung on the skor thom. Let's get Sochietah... Okay, when Reamaysoer comes onto the stage, you watch him. (Ngek Chum, Lesson 5/20/01)

Yeah, after I come out, wait a minute. Then I lift up my arms. My left hand is in front of my face, and my right hand is behind my head, holding the axe. As I stretch my arms out, that's when I'm opening the clouds and coming into the field to see Moni Mekhala. Roll the drum. Then, wait. I lift up my arms again and turn towards Moni Mekhala. Roll. Then, don't play the drum at all while I'm looking at her and deciding what to do. I put the axe in my belt. Then, I lift my hands in front of my mouth. When I do that, roll. Make this one longer. Again, don't do anything while I sneak up behind her, but roll the drum again when I try to grab the crystal ball. The sound shows that the crystal ball is burning my fingers. When I go to the other side and try to grab it from there, roll again. And I try one more time: roll it. Then, she falls to the ground and I follow her. As she moves away from me—one, two, three times—roll the drum. Then we stand up. I chase her in circles. As I take three heavy steps—one, two, three—play, thoung, thoung, thoung! (Sochietah Ung, Lesson 5/20/01)

Yeah, and Moni Mekhala knows that the crystal ball will blind Reamaysoer. So as he tries to steal it from me, I tease him and pass it back and forth in front of his face. See? Here I'm picking the crystal ball up. Reamaysoer's right there, and I'm basically admiring the crystal ball. And then, I'm showing him. (Bonavy Chhim, Workshop Rehearsal 9/19/99)

And, I'm so happy that she's showing me the crystal ball. I want it. (Sochietah Ung, Workshop Rehearsal 9/19/99)

I go closer to him. And that's when I kinda like tease him. I'm playing with his eyes. I'm going closer and closer. He's running away, because of the glare. I know that, so I keep doing that. Then, I'm trying to blind his eyes, and he's trying to get away.

(Bonavy Chhim, Workshop Rehearsal 9/19/99)

So when she puts the crystal out and tries to blind me, I try to back up. But she knows I'm dangerous, too. So, I point my finger. And then she knows I'm getting angry. So she has to back up, too. I'm very angry—I make a gesture to show that smoke is coming out of my ears. (Sochietah Ung, Workshop Rehearsal 9/19/99)

And then I'm running back. If I don't move fast enough, Reamaysoer's going to point. He will poke my eyes. So, then I run away from him. I look at him and smile, and he's like really mad, all bothered inside. He's thinking of ways of getting to me and getting my crystal ball.

And in the next part, I'm luring him back and forth, and he's coming straight for the crystal ball and trying to grab it. I'm waiting to see what his next threat is. (Bonavy Chhim, Workshop Rehearsal 9/19/99)

Reamaysoer holds out his hand saying, "Give me all of your power! I don't care anymore! I really want it!" (Sochietah Ung, Workshop Rehearsal 9/19/99)

Reamaysoer's threatening with the axe. But Mekhala's not afraid of that axe. I'm still teasing him with the crystal. (Bonavy Chhim, Workshop Rehearsal 9/19/99)

So that's when the storm comes. Reamaysoer tosses his axe at Mekhala. As it reaches the air, it booms like thunder. But Mekhala is too fast to be hurt by it.

(Sochietah Ung, Interview 7/15/99)

Finally, Reamaysoer's only hope is to catch the crystal ball when Mekhala tosses it into the air. She throws it into the air in self-defense: It sparkles like lightning, and when Reamaysoer tries to catch it, the ball glitters so brightly it blinds him.

(Sochietah Ung, Interview 7/15/99)

*Okay, let's learn Krao Va on the skor thom: [Tevi lengchea asora. Tevi lengchea asora¹¹⁹...Lok Krou sings the end of the *chrieng* section. He continues]: da da da da da thoung! You come in on thoung. [He continues to sing, while I play *Thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung-thoung-thoung. Thoung, thoung, thoung-thoung-thoung*. I keep repeating this second pattern].*

You know Cheut, right? ¹²⁰ To switch to Cheut Reay watch the dancer. Switch when she puts the ball in front of his face. Don't start Cheut exactly when the roneat starts it. The dancers don't really listen to the music, so sometimes the melody gets ahead of them. Sometimes, when the music's finished, the dancer is still going, so I want

¹¹⁹ These are lyrics in the song section: "The Goddess teases the demon. The Goddess teases the demon."

¹²⁰ I had already learned the simple *skor thom* pattern for *Cheut Reay*.

you to watch her. You follow her with the drum. Don't listen to the music, look at the dancer. (Ngek Chum, Lesson 5/6/01)

So Reamaysoer fell down. Mekhala was able to escape. I fell from the sky, but I didn't die, and I was only blinded temporarily. So I get up and look for Mekhala again. The story goes on and on... (Sochietah Ung, Workshop Rehearsal 9/19/99)

Performing Creative Conflict for a Prosperous New Year

I looked forward to performing *Moni Mekhala* on *skor thom* at an event scheduled for June. That is why I began to learn the part only one week after the 2001 Khmer New Year's celebration. At that observance as well, the *Moni Mekhala* dance was performed. As a narrative of tensions between life-destroying and life-generating forces, the dance-drama was traditionally believed to possess the power to hasten rainfall. Therefore, it is commonly presented during Khmer New Year's festivals. (Sam 1992)

"Touk, kting," called the *sampho*. Sovann controlled it; while the *skor thom* responded, "Thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung." Bori Khut¹²¹ performed it, electing to begin the composition on the left, lower-pitched drumhead. Simultaneously, *Lok Krou*

¹²¹ He and Keo Poeung (introduced in the next paragraph) were guest musicians from the state of Washington, invited to complete the *pin peat* ensembles at "Virginia" and the "Vatt" for this Khmer New Year's celebration. Bori began to study the *sampho* in the late 1980s under Noeung Poeung, a musician from Siem Riep known for his *sralai* playing. Before mastering *sralai* Noeung performed as a professional *sampho* player. (Keo Poeung, Conversation, 1/11/04)

began to play the melody, *Smoeu*, on the *roneat aik*. After these four definitive notes were sounded, the *kong thom*, *sralai*, *roneat thung*, *chhing*, and a second *roneat aik* joined in. This time, the ensemble included no *kong toech*.

As Sovath struck the knobs of the *kong*, she shadowed her father's *roneat aik* with harmonious, relatively unadorned counter-melodies. Together they provided the essential ingredients of the musical "soup" for that day. Woven between them was the high-pitched, almost whiny tone of the *sralai*. Keo Poeung¹²² played it. He had flown in from the state of Washington just two days earlier to fill out the *pin peat* ensemble for this performance at the "Vatt" (on Sunday afternoon) and another held the previous evening at "Virginia." He arrived on Friday in order to participate in a dress rehearsal for "Virginia's" production. Visal Um¹²³ sat next to *Lok Krou*. Guiding his softly padded mallets over the bamboo bars of the *roneat thung*, Visal added a lively mirth to the orchestration. Of course, the ever-dependable Sophy Hoeung shared a vocal microphone with Ra Khlay. She faithfully regulated the *chhing* as well. And I sat behind *Lok Krou* at my own *roneat aik*. While it is not customary to have two such instruments in a performance, *Lok Krou* indirectly offered me a place there, so that I could learn to perform with the dancers by simultaneously imitating him. By using my padded mallets, as opposed to the hardwood sticks that he used, my playing contributed an additional layer of density to the music as well. This role came with the extra benefit

¹²² Keo began to teach himself Khmer music in 1989 by listening to old recordings and later performed together with his relative, Noeung Poeung, an accomplished *sralai* player from Siem Riep. *Before that*, Keo told me before the performance described here, *I listened to Def Leopard, rap, or whatever*.

¹²³ Visal Um will introduce himself in Chapter 6.

of allowing me to make general observations about the event while I played, especially during pieces that I had not yet learned.

“Thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung,” announced the *skor thom* for a second time. The musicians and I were seated stage left, separated symbolically from the rest of the stage by a sheer, pink curtain. We were facing the stage, so that when the dancers appeared there, coordination could be handled efficiently. I looked toward the corner of the platform, just to the left of the ensemble, and there appeared Master Ny Sin¹²⁴ performing the part of Mekhala. With her feet close together, her toes curved upward, and her knees just a short distance apart, she glided diagonally toward the center of the stage. “Thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung.” Alternately touching the floor between her heels and the balls of her feet—golden bracelets adorning her ankles—Mekhala appeared to be riding an ocean wave. Even in this minutest of details, the ubiquitous aesthetic emblem of the distending and constricting of opposites (Cravath 1985) became apparent. “Thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung.” In Mekhala’s right hand, glistened the magic crystal ball that she received as first prize in a contest with her classmates. Created from a combination of the dew she collected during the competition and the mystical incantations of her teacher, the charm is said to gain additional fertilizing powers through its interaction with Mekhala’s feminine energy. (Sam 1992: 103)

“Thoung, thoung, thoung, thoung,” persisted Bori on the *skor thom* as Mekhala’s arms flowed delicately, successively extending and bending in synch with her buoyant steps. While her right hand grasped the ball with graceful firmness, her left hand constantly

¹²⁴ Ny Sin introduced herself in Chapter 6.

rotated with supple pulsation through a series of hand gestures that represented budding flowers and their leaves. The *skor thom* merged with the *sampho*:

{Thoung-ay}¹²⁵ thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung. {Thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung. {Thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung. {Thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung, {thoung-ay} thoung.

Mekhala continued to drift across the stage. The golden threads of her royal blue, silk *sampot*,¹²⁶ fastened with an ornate belt, glittered as she neared her destination.

As she reached center stage, Mekhala placed her left foot in front of her right, turning to the right. Then, she positioned right over the left, exhibiting her left side. “Thoung, thoung, thoung. Thoung, thoung, thoung. Thoung, thoung, thoung.” The excitement built as *Lok Krou* produced five, short, vibrant glissandi in the upper register of his *roneat*, followed by a relaxed landing on the tonic, repeated in gradually contracting time intervals, as water drips from a rooftop after a morning rain shower. Then, that singular note transformed into many as *Lok Krou*’s mallets accelerated across the keys of his *roneat*, high to low, then low to high. On the *sralai*, Keo followed him, emphasizing with distinct smoothness the three main pitches that defined *Lok Krou*’s voltage of sound. Lagging ever so slightly behind Keo, was Sovath on her *kong*, performing the same three pitches but with a strikingly different effect as the gongs’ reverberations floated toward the ceiling and across the theater.

¹²⁵ As described in the preceding section, the mnemonics within parentheses indicate rhythms that the *skor thom* player thinks but does not play.

¹²⁶ A traditional Khmer wraparound skirt comprised of a solitary piece of fabric tied together at the waist.

Mekhala turned back again, her arched back became apparent, outfitted in a skin-tight, blue bodice which peeked out from beneath a heavily gilded, velvet scarf that draped across her left shoulder and down her back. “Thoung, thoung, thoung. Thoung-thoung-thoung-thoung thoung-thoung-thoung-thoung thoung-thoung-thoung-thoung-rooooo.” A golden, bejeweled, multi-tiered crown, reminiscent of a temple spire, framed Mekhala’s conspicuous brown eyes and ambiguous, extremely elusive smile. Prominently displaying her marvelous jewel, she faced the audience.

The New Year is indeed the grandest of annual celebrations at the “Vatt.” As every other year, on this day, the great hall beneath the large *vihear* was filled beyond capacity. Hundreds of folding chairs were occupied by spectators of all ages, including elderly Khmer women, wearing lace blouses and elegant *sampot*; distinguished, mature men in two-piece suits; parents of many of the performers clutching digital cameras, still and video; and still more of their contemporaries who had traveled from across the United States for the event. Some children joined their parents at their chairs, but more of them squeezed between the standing onlookers, between the aisles, and most of all, between the front row and the stage. There, the most eager clung to the stage, tilting their heads up toward the stage lights to catch a full view.

Behind Mekhala hung a navy blue curtain. Suspended upon it were the words “Happy New Year 2001” in gold, Khmer script. The wishes were flanked with golden silhouettes of two *apsara* in flight. Even the areas behind and surrounding the stage were occupied by anxious observers. Young dancers costumed as monkeys and maidens claimed the precious backstage real estate.

This was the sixth segment of the day's presentation. The audience looked in anticipation like seasoned multi-taskers. There was a constant chatter and buzz of commentary about the scene on stage, and undoubtedly, other assorted topics. But it was clear that the focus was on the performance. Unflinching, attendees had cheered at the tossing of flower petals during the "Wishing Dance." They had celebrated the efforts of the petite, young girls who performed "The Flower of the World." And they had laughed with delight during an onstage contest between tumbling black and white monkeys. Now they awaited a demonstration of the interminable struggle between the Goddess of the Sea and the Storm Spirit.

As the *pin peat* ensemble continued through the final portion of *Smoeu*, the *kong* shimmered, the *chhing* echoing above it in a higher register still. Mekhala reversed her direction and floated toward a red *kre*, or platform, just in front of the blue curtain. It represented a garden hilltop where she would prepare herself for a holiday party. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 12/12/98) Agilely climbing upon it, Mekhala set down the crystal and modestly kneeled toward the audience, clasping her hands together, first in a gesture of respect to the divinities, and then toward all revered guests. The musicians rounded out the melody: "Da da da da da da da da daaeEEEEEE." A pause, and the *skor thom* resolved, "Thoung-thoung!"

Immediately, the musical narration began with the complementary female and male voices of Sophy and Ra. Every instrument except the *sampho* and *chhing*—their meters markedly sparser than the previous segment—dropped out. The singers imparted, *In outfits of sparkling designs, shiny gold belt, beautiful gems...* (Sam 1988: 254) Mekhala danced upon the *kre*, rendering the account in dance language. The

remaining ensemble instruments joined in, slightly increasing the tempo. Mekhala continued her pantomime corresponding with the music, as if to offer the audience more time to digest the meaning of the lyrics in visual, emotive, and aural as well as literal form. After one verse, the instruments faded out and the tempo decreased once more, while the narrators proceeded ... *the princess wears a crown of precious jewels, swaying magnificently.* (Sam 1988: 254) Again Mekhala dramatized the lyric, continuing to do so with yet another instrumental interpretation of the piece.

Then Sophy and Ra returned, singing, while the instruments again vanished, *Rising, holding the crystal ball...* (Sam 1992: 97) They added suspense to the scene by lengthening these words with extra syllables, while Sovann intensified their expression by lightly tapping on the *sampho*. He created an illusion of steadily pattering water droplets. Meanwhile, Sophy wielded the *chhing* gently—exclusively using open strokes—to contour this drizzle which seemed to rebound from a metallic surface. Mekhala paused ever so briefly, hands at her waist. She then raised her right foot behind her, sole to the sky, in preparation for flight. She lowered herself, remaining in flight posture ever so elegantly and with marvelous control, placing her left knee onto the *kre*. As Mekhala picked up the crystal ball, Sophy and Ra explicated, *very powerful.* (Sam 1992: 98) Their elaborations of “uuyyy, err-err-err” appeared to fuel her vehicle. And they resumed the text, ...*the precious woman departs from the Palace.*

On the final lyric, “Palace,” the *sampho* shifted to a clear, steady, and simple pulse, in fact, the same pattern needed for the next piece, *Cheut Chheung*, in this narrative. Sophy and Ra repeated the entire chorus, this time, in the same, even tempo

as the *sampho*: *Rising, holding the crystal ball, very powerful, the precious woman departs from the Palace.*

While the singers completed the phrase, *from the Palace*, *Lok Krou* jumped in, beginning the song, *Cheut Chheung*, on his *roneat aik*. Before reaching the downbeat of his first quotation, *Sovath* joined in with the *kong*. In anticipation of the third pulse of the piece, *Keo* leapt in with the *sralai* on the upbeat. His *phloev* were remarkably distinct from *Lok Krou*'s, sometimes voicing an identical passing tone, sometimes articulating a complementary one. And while he produced his grace notes and mordents within completely unique time intervals, his attack on the melody notes coincided perfectly with those performed by *Lok Krou*. *Sovann* and *Sophy* had seamlessly accelerated the speed of the *sampho* and the *chhing*, respectively, to support the pace of the ensemble. I also joined in. I had learned *Cheut Chheung* in the summer of 1999. I knew that *Lok Krou* was listening to everything. If he could not hear me... Besides, I was supposed to be playing there on stage!

Cheut Chheung is comprised of an introductory passage, followed by a musical segment, which *Lok Krou* refers to generically as *thao*. It is much like a refrain, since it is revisited between successive verses, or *that*. I had learned two *that* of *Cheut Chheung*, but judging from our rehearsals, I doubted that we would get far past the first *that* in this act.

As soon as *Lok Krou* initiated his descent of his keyboard during the preliminary clause of *Cheut Chheung*, *Mekhala* stood upon the *kre*, effortlessly balancing her entire frame on her left leg, while the sole of her right foot still pointed toward the sky. She gradually rotated her body, displaying the crystal from all directions. She was taking her

celestial walk (Sam 1992: 101) into the meadow. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 12/12/98; Sam 1988: 255)

“Rooooo!” Bori rumbled on the *skor thom*. Reamaysoer (being played by Sochietah) had appeared on the stage. The heavens thundered as he opened the clouds to find Mekhala strolling through the meadow. The *pin peat* proceeded to the first *thao* of *Cheut Chheung*. Reamaysoer looked at Mekhala, taking a moment to think strategically. As he gleefully positioned his magic axe in his golden belt, he raised his arrogant head. Protruding from the broad mouth painted across his mask, his fangs advertised his cunning and greed. “Rooooo! Rooooo!” the *skor thom* confirmed that Reamaysoer decided to approach Mekhala, as the *pin peat* advanced into the first *thao* of *Cheut Chheung*. While Reamaysoer’s coarse, hyper-confident steps foretold the fate of his anger, Mekhala continued to admire the gem, feigning to take no notice of him. “Rooooo,” Reamaysoer tried to grab the jewel, despite knowledge that it would scorch him. He attempted again, “rooooo,” and again, “rooooo.” Indeed, the stone was too hot. Moving on to Plan B, Reamaysoer—now accompanied by the second *thao* of *Cheut Chheung*—attempted to sweet-talk Mekhala. He snuggled up beside her, but she pulled away one (rooo-thoung!), two (rooo-thoung!), three (rooo-thoung!) times. Mockingly, Mekhala hastened away from Reamaysoer. He then lost his cool, demanding her to relinquish the gem. Although she refused, he tried to take it again, but to no avail: “Thoung, thoung, thoung!” confirmed Bori with the *skor thom*. *Lok Krou* instantly cut short the *Cheut Chheung* melody with six, firm, decelerating tones climbing the *roneat aik* keyboard and culminating in a trill. The remainder of the ensemble followed him without lapse, all, including the singers, joining him on this undulation.

The instrumentalists, except for the *sampho* and *chhing*—again imitating bouncing water droplets—ceased playing once more, and Sophy and Ra sang, “uuyy, uuyy, err, uuyy.” Their utterances exemplified the tension that was building between Reamaysoer and Mekhala as they confronted each other face-to-face. They stepped apart, and Mekhala exhibited her jewel with unflinching confidence. Reamaysoer watched in momentary consideration, and then started toward her. In response, Mekhala casually evaded him, initiating a circular pursuit. Stretching out the lyrics with added syllables as before, the singers communicated, *She flies in circles around the zodiac.* (Sam 1988: 257) Breaching the cycle of Reamaysoer’s stalk, Mekhala proceeded to flaunt her gem, center stage. Reamaysoer reacted by sneaking up behind her, striding resolutely and in time with the steadfast, distinct beat of the *sampho*. The vocalists underscored the dispute with more “err-err-err,” but this time conforming to the melody, *Cheut Chin*, which would soon follow. Reamaysoer seized his axe, as if to announce his next plan of action. Meanwhile, as Sophy and Ra reached the conclusion of their melody, the symmetrical pulse transformed into a more organic sputtering. *Lok Krou* broke the song, this time with eight upward pitches on his *roneat aik*, ending in a ripple. Then, with a five-note cluster of vibrantly voiced tones, he terminated the vocal description and led the ensemble into the prankish tune of *Cheut Chin*.

The musicians apprehended the affair and picked up the speed. Mekhala rotated toward Reamaysoer, and they resumed their circular chase. He waved his axe and pushed toward her. She retreated, although only briefly. Displaying the crystal ball, she reminded Reamaysoer to beware of its rays. He withdrew in turn. Back and forth, and

back and again, each of the deities menaced the other with intimations of the power that resided within their attributes.

With a rising sequence of commanding pitches, *Lok Krou* silenced the instrumentalists once more. The singers warned of the ensuing battle, “err-err, err-err-err.” Mekhala further teased Reamaysoer, showing him the ball, as though to confirm whether that was the object of his interest. Sophy and Ra explained, *She lifts the crystal ball*. (Sam 1988: 259) Predictably, Reamaysoer became irritated. Hoisting his axe, he indicated that he had now been driven to use its force to obtain his desire. Extending his palm toward her, he cautioned, “Give it to me, or else!” Yet, instead of complying, she retorted by dangling the crystal directly in front of his eyes. Aware of its blinding properties, he stepped back. She persisted, just long enough to boil his temper, as verified by the chorus, *And plays with the demon*. (Sam 1988: 259)

“Da da da da da da thoung!” entered the *pin peat* with *Krao Va*. Mekhala dashed off in the opposite direction, flashing Reamaysoer a sweetly devious smile. He did not conceal his anger. Rather, he pointed at her indignantly and reinforced his message by rotating the palm of his left hand just beside his left ear. Reamaysoer secured his axe again in his belt, outstretching his arms in solicitation of the inevitable conflict. The lovely Mekhala raised her arms, although much more delicately, in like fashion. They neared each other, and Mekhala waved the ball in his face.

The *pin peat* (including me, since I had learned four verses of this in 1998) commenced *Cheut Reay*. While Reamaysoer backed off, Mekhala turned away. Reamaysoer restated his anger, firmly clapping his hands to offer Mekhala one last chance to peacefully release the gem to him. The musicians moved on to the first *that* of

Cheut Reay. Mekhala remained stalwart in her resistance, causing Reamaysoer to fumble for his axe. He twirled it and tossed it in her direction, but she slipped out of the way. After retrieving the axe, he resumed face-to-face combat with her. The ensemble advanced to the second *that* of *Cheut Reay*. Reamaysoer attempted thrice to steal the ball from her. “Thoung! Thoung! Thoung!” With the crystal ball securely in hand, Mekhala extended her arm to Reamaysoer, derisively offering the precious stone to him. (Of course, he knew that he could not touch it). Nevertheless, as he dramatically paraded the axe with his left hand, he groped for the ball with his right. Aware that it was too hot to handle, he was lured back and forth, like a toy, by Mekhala, who advanced on and retreated from him in alternation.¹²⁷ The *pin peat* progressed to the third *that* of *Cheut Reay*. Confident that Reamaysoer’s gaze was locked on the jewel, Mekhala tossed it into the air. “Rooo-thoung!” His eyes followed, and he was temporarily blinded. He fell to the ground, and Mekhala escaped. As she exited the stage mid-way through the third *that* of *Cheut Reay*, *Lok Krou* guided the ensemble to the concluding motif of *Cheut Reay*. The theater was consumed with rolling, shimmering, high-pitched reverberations. For a moment, the audience stopped murmuring and submitted an appreciative applause.

¹²⁷ Chan Moly Sam indicates the deities traverse the four cardinal directions during this sequence, thus uniting the energies of heaven and earth. (1992: 105)

These pages have illustrated, from the vantage point of highly accomplished and engaged artists, how Khmer socio-cultural values and experiences are disclosed through performance practice. They have explored these *relationships between life and music* (Blacking 1969: 59) from a number of the perspectives advocated by ethnomusicologists and music educators introduced at the beginning of this volume. That is, the artists featured in these “sound-spheres” discussed the *pin peat* ensemble, instruments, rhythms, repertoire, and principles for melodic embellishment in terms of the connections between music and human behavior, communication through music, recurring cultural patterns or homologies, and music as interaction. (Merriam 1964; Blacking 1969; Feld 1982; Rice 1994; Small 1998) Preserving the synthesis of people and sound in this way has revealed how Khmer artists articulate the standards of their craft both as active music makers and as people who are musicians both on and off the stage. In other words, their musicality and their humanity are laced together in their personal stories.

With respect to the question, *What is music?* (Merriam 1964), the artists have demonstrated how *pin peat* music exists as a container of artistic and cultural knowledge, in terms of both its content and the processes of performance which surround it. Khmer cultural values and ideals for interpersonal expression introduced in Chapter Three and outlined in the manuscript’s introduction became evident in this chapter in reflections about both musical structure and performance practice. According to the artists appearing in this chapter, *pin peat* music is comprised of a particular configuration of instruments, melodies, and rhythms joined together in a way that displays mastery of *phloev*. This command refers not only to the production of physical

sound, but also to the thoughtful consideration of all relationships that fall within the parameters of a performance. *Pin peat* music therefore, is not simply a matter of reproducing sound vibrations, but rather, a combination of sound generation and prudent negotiation of individual talent and communal requirements. The chapter has elucidated how these mediations occur on multiple levels such as the interactions 1) among instrumentalists; 2) between musicians and music; 3) between music and audiences; 4) among artists, history, and community; and 5) among sound, movement, and storytelling.

Early in the chapter, Ngek Chum related the basic elements of the *pin peat* ensemble. Through his tangy simile for musical relationships we were introduced to the eight fundamental instruments of the ensemble: *roneat aik*, *kong thom*, *kong toech*, *roneat thung*, *sralai*, *chhing*, *skor thom*, and *sampho*. We gained extraordinary insight into how Chum classifies these instruments and how that categorization corresponds to the instruments' roles in performance. First, the *roneat aik* and *kong thom* interact as a couple. Second, the *kong toech* and *roneat thung* shadow each of these respectively. Third, the *sralai* meanders between the mates. Fourth, the *skor thom* and *sampho* rhythmically imitate and ornament the main melody but in abstraction and in conversation with each other. And finally, the *chhing* provides a regular pulse for the entire ensemble. In short, each *pin peat* instrument has a unique and significant role to play within the ensemble. Further, fulfilling that role depends upon each musician's interactions with and sensitivity to the other players in the group. Later in the chapter, Ngek Chum described some of the physical qualities, musical roles, and performance techniques associated with the *roneat aik* and *sampho* in greater detail. For instance, he

indicated that the *roneat aik* is a wooden xylophone with twenty-one keys, and he described the three basic *sampho* patterns.

Presenting *pin peat* instruments and their relationships in comparison to *koyteav*, Chum was able to convey the most critical dimension of Khmer musical performance: the twofold fruition of *phloev*. Knowledge of the instruments and their correspondences helped us to understand how they can accentuate linear divergence on one hand and superimpose overtones on the other. According to Chum and his son, Sovann, the mutable rhythms and overlays produced through *phloev* distinguish fine from mediocre performance. The contrast between the playful, personalized, down-to-earth sounds of melodic, linear variation and the *throbbing of pitches rubbing against each other* (Keil 1994: 168) draws audiences into a state of consciousness that expands perceptions about the simultaneity of mundane and supernatural worlds. This desired effect of *pin peat* points to the ways that the philosophical underpinning of Khmer music—presented in the text’s introduction—serves as a backdrop for the cultural patterns and relationships embedded within the music.

Together with Ra Khlay and Sophy Hoeung, Ngek and Sovann Chum elaborated upon *phloev* and their various manifestations, discussed the processes by which they developed their musicianship, and recounted multiple contexts in which they have applied their musical skills. These experiences evinced the shared traits that designate *phloev* across Khmer art and culture: independent study; learning through intellect, body, and soul; remembering through embodiment; focus on process; observing exemplars with honest aims; and investigating all prospects. As each artist considered how he or she grew as a musician, these attributes constantly resurfaced. Sovann

explained that he engaged in concentrated observation, repetition, and comparison with others. Ngek Chum stated that, *Having many teachers and studying on my own allowed me to master many different techniques and to excel at performing.* Ra Khlay reported that, in order to simultaneously play drums and sing, *you have to put yourself into it...I tried really hard!* And Sophy Hoeung indicated that learning classical music *took a lot of effort. For example, I'd study on my way to and from work: in the car, I popped the cassette in; on the way home, do it again.* For these musicians, the qualities of *phloev* translated into contributing the best of their abilities to current circumstances. For instance, Sovann began to learn *kong*, because that represented a gap in his father's ensemble at the time. Ngek Chum honored the request of a teacher who visited him in Battambang and urged him to *Pay attention to everybody* after so many teachers invested their own resources in coming to instruct him. Ra Khlay determined that he preferred to give up performing Khmer popular music in favor of maintaining *my culture, art, and tradition* in the United States. And Sophy Hoeung resolved that, although she never planned on becoming a singer, *Now, reminiscing on my childhood gives me the strength and happiness to perform like my father taught me.*

Finally, the dynamics of cooperation, interaction, and individuality in Khmer musical performance were demonstrated through the “sound-spheres” which highlighted the roles of the *roneat aik*, *sampho*, and *skor thom* in performance and through the concluding ethnography of performance. These narratives underscored the fact that, in the context of Khmer dance-drama, [*pin peat*] *music is nearly inseparable from dance.* (Cravath 1985: 309) For instance, Ngek Chum expounded upon many of the ways that the *roneat aik* player keeps together both the music ensemble and the

dancers and the musicians. He also told us that *the sampho has three jobs: keeping the beat, merging with the dancers' kbach, and playing the song.* The concluding sections offered specific examples of the workings of the exchanges among music, dance, and storytelling in both a learning and performance context. They illustrated how *The pin peat...introduces new actions and connects them with others; it signals changes of scenes and ends them; it projects the rhythmic patterns for the dancers' footwork.* (Sam 1988: 240) Ultimately, the reflections presented here have supplied rare insights into the ways that *pin peat* performance demands not only technical control and comprehension of compositional structure, but also understandings about one's individual role in advancing successful performances and in connecting contemporary experience to past and future worlds.

Chapter 5: Sounding the Spirit of the *Krou*

*Oh, my empty heart...
I don't know what I did to deserve this fate.
You have gone so far away.
Our bodies are worlds apart, but my heart remains close to you.
Oh my darling, I am praying that we will be joined together again
In the eternity of all of our future lives.¹²⁸*

This song is from my grandmom. It was my grandmother's favorite song. That song is very old. It was popular when my grandmother was young.

Grandma had a very good voice; it was so clear and smooth. But she never sang for anyone. She stayed home, so she only sang to herself...and to me. When I was young, she sang to me...like when I was crying or something. She sang to help me go to sleep, and she sang to help me stop crying.

I still remember that song from her. It's not from my grandfather or anyone else. Grandma just sang it to me, and I learned it. I remembered it as I was growing up...even before I could play music. The first two verses are from her. Later, I made up the third verse myself. So really, you can say that my grandmother was my first music teacher. (Ngek Chum, Conversation1/12/02)

¹²⁸ Lyrics to *Soy Phleng* (Song of Misfortune). Translation assistance by Saureth Ieng and Lany Lang.

Chapter Four demonstrated some of the ways that cultural values are embedded within Khmer music and dance-drama in terms of interactions among the instruments of the *pin peat* ensemble as well as among music, dance-drama, and story. It also introduced the proposition that the sonic effects of these relationships—through the sequential and layered performance of *phloev*—produce the requisite transformations of time and space that result in a successful musical event. This chapter now expands upon that portrayal to outline how Khmer music unifies the ideals of social interaction and communication with culturally shaped understandings of human ties to a broader universe. More specifically, it juxtaposes a series of “sound-spheres” that illuminate the conceptual parities and interconnections among the notions of teachers, mimetic action, sacred sound, consecrated instruments, perpetuity, and cosmic power in Khmer performing arts.

“Today is Thursday. I Come to Pay Respect to You.”

It has already been noted that, according to Theravada Buddhism, *Every individual is caught in an endless cycle of birth and rebirth.* (Smith-Hefner 1999: 43) Khmer music and dance-drama reaffirms this belief on multiple levels. For example, the *Moni Mekhala* story described in the previous chapter is a classic myth of continuity and regeneration. *The endlessness of the myth has far-reaching significance that epitomizes the continuity of life.* (Sam 1992: 105) In fact, *Moni Mekhala* has been traditionally performed as a *fertility dance that is meant to go on for an eternity, as long as there is life.* (Sam 1992: 106)

Recognizing the cycle of birth, aging, sickness, death, and rebirth through respect for one's teachers is an even more essential characteristic of Khmer music and dance-drama. Among other actions, behaviors, and attitudes, younger artists avow their connection to older masters through the *sampeah krou* ceremony described in Chapter Three. The ceremony may be performed before rehearsals and performances, in times of need, or to bless new instruments. It may be performed on a large or small scale depending on the situation. The grandeur of the ceremony is less important than students' intention, commitment, sincerity, and appreciation for their teachers.

Through her private observance of *sampeah krou* on Thursdays,¹²⁹ Monrya Srun, a dance teacher at the "Vatt," regularly acknowledges the lessons that she has learned from her dance teachers. She expresses her gratitude with offerings that symbolize fertility, and she commences her dialogues with the revered musical composition, *Sathukar*.¹³⁰

I was only six years old when I began to learn the dance. I started, because my mother wanted me to become flexible in my body. She did not want me to become a professional dancer. However, I wanted to study dancing seriously. When my mother brought me to the Palace, she personally entrusted me to the teacher. In the old days, parents handed their children over to the teacher saying, "I give her to you. Return only

¹²⁹ *Thngai Prohas* (Thursday) is named after *Preah Prohas*—the teacher of divination, communication, and other valuable crafts—in Khmer. Therefore, it was customary to embark on one's studies on Thursdays ("teacher day"), in traditional Cambodia. (Keo 1995 in Sam 1999:2)

¹³⁰ This sacred piece of music will be discussed below.

the bones.” Until I was eleven years old, I only studied dance on Thursday and Sunday mornings at the Palace and in the afternoons at the teacher’s house.

At twelve years old, I became a full-time dance student at the University of Fine Arts. I received my diploma before the communists came in 1975. After 1979, I returned to the University where I taught until I left Cambodia.

I came to the United States in April 1987. You know, it was because of my dancing that I was able to come here. When I went to take the test, they asked me what I could do. My file indicated that I am a dance teacher, so they asked me to dance. I danced Apsara. They liked it, and I passed the test.

So I never abandoned my dancing, even though there are so many pressures in my life like feeding my family, my son. I cannot depend on anyone else. I have been working for ten years. Now, I am a partner in my shop. I did it all by myself.

Thursday is sampeah krou day. At twelve-noon, I light the incense stick for Lok Yeay¹³¹ and for Lok Ta Moha Aysey.¹³² I don’t go to work. It is forbidden. Don’t call me on Thursday... I start work only at three in the afternoon.

I turn on the music, Sathukar. I offer water, perfumed powder, and fruits, and I pray. I say, “Today is Thursday. I come to pay respect to you. I pray that you give us peace and happiness.”

¹³¹ Here, she is referring to her teacher, *Lok Yeay Khatna Peou*.

¹³² *Lok Ta Moha Aysey* is a symbol of the spirit of the dance troupe. He holds the whole group together. His spirit shines through his golden face. He is not a dancer himself, but he always blesses the dancers. Whenever we perform, we pray to him first. We ask him to make us look beautiful, to not get stage fright, and to always be successful in the dance. (Raci Say, ADAPT Interview 6/17/01)

And if I have a special request—like passing my manicurist’s licensing test—then I pray to Lok Ta Moha Aysey. I asked him to help me succeed.

And after the test, I bought two chickens. I boiled and presented them along with fruit and other offerings, and performed the ceremony again. I said, “I have prayed and passed the test. My wish was granted.”

I make offerings every Thursday. Even during Pol Pot, I prayed to myself every Thursday at twelve-noon. I never neglected it.

Ever since surviving Pol Pot, at twelve-noon on Thursday, I put on the tape, Sathukar, and light incense. I ask Lok Ta Moha Aysey to continue to protect me in the future... This is our belief. (Monyra Srun, ADAPT Interview 7/22/01)

“Because I Had So Many Teachers, I Could Play Any Music Well”

The dynamics of reciprocity and exchange—distinctive features of Khmer Buddhism noted in Chapter Three—are evident in Monyra Srun’s description of her weekly *sampeah krou* ritual. It was also noted in Chapter Three that, in well-balanced teacher-student relationships, students respect and obey their teachers, while teachers act in the interest of their students’ future security.

Ngek Chum’s grandfather set the tone for this important lesson by providing him with the opportunity to study under multiple teachers. Below, Chum describes some of the purposes and results of this broad education. The initial “sound-sphere” offers an overview of the personalities behind this instruction, while the subsequent sections serve as humble memorial tributes to each of Chum’s five most influential teachers. These include his grandfather, Mr. Hieng Um; his grandmother, Mrs. Yin Um,

who was introduced earlier; his favorite teacher, Master Chou Nit; a *roneat* expert with legendary technique, *Krou Chhuorm*; and one of Cambodia's most famous *roneat* players, Master Van.

Chum's reflections upon the time he spent with his grandparents and *Krou Nit* highlight the permeable boundaries between filial and mentor-ship relations that distinguish fruitful teacher-student interaction in Khmer performing arts. Chum's memories of his grandparents underscore the significance that he placed upon his comprehension of the cycles of continuity and reciprocity: he entered monastic life for a short period in order to earn merit for his grandparents.¹³³ In a strange twist of timing, Chum's grandparents were even spared the suffering of the Pol Pot period. They both passed away just weeks, even days, before the Khmer Rouge restructured socio-political life in Battambang. Consequently, Chum was able to give his grandparents a respectable cremation and burial. *Krou Nit* stood out among Chum's teachers because he took a sincere interest in Chum's personal as well as artistic development. In time, Chum and Nit developed an affectionate bond with one another. Chum continues to this day to preserve and regenerate what *Krou Nit* taught him—about music, about teaching, and about life.

I learned to play musical instruments from six different teachers. First, I studied with my grandfather, but soon he decided that I should have many teachers. He wanted me to be well educated. Later, I realized that this is the reason that I have become such

¹³³ Readers are asked to recall the fact that Chum grew up with the understanding that his grandparents were his parents.

a skillful musician. Different teachers have different ways of teaching. They use various approaches and their unique knowledge to get a student to play well.

Because I had so many teachers, I could play any music well. I could play any instrument, so I could take any job that came along.

And my teachers did not compete with each other, because each knew his role in my education. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01) First, there was my grandfather, who taught me to play sralai, kong thom, and sampho. I also picked up chhing from going around with Grandpa.

But my grandfather was not a professional in roneat aik. So when he learned that I wanted to play roneat, he sent me to study with Master Chou Nit. Later, I studied roneat with Krou Van and Krou Chhuorm, too. So, in all, I had three teachers for roneat aik. Each of these teachers was different. One teacher played smoothly. Another teacher performed very quickly. And Krou Chhuorm played both smoothly and quickly. However, he was very, very lazy.

I learned a lot about kong thom from Krou Ton and Krou Oeur. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 6/6/98) In fact, I learned the some of the most fundamental things from Krou Oeur, who was my grandfather's cousin. I admired him the most. He taught me to play kong as well as the sampho and skor thom. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

“My Grandfather Was One of Those Strict Teachers”

Some teachers use inescapable methods—like beating their students—to make them learn. My grandfather was one of those strict teachers. He did not even let me eat until I learned my lessons. He told me that his tests were easy, so I shouldn't stop until I could pass them. He only gave me very short breaks when he knew that I would need them in order to study longer. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

Grandpa also taught me to appreciate my instruments. He told me, “You have an instrument, play it. You're lucky.” You see, my grandfather didn't have his own instruments. He had to play on instruments that belonged to the temple.

The first instrument he bought was kong thom. He saved and saved and finally bought it. That was before he got married. Then, the second instrument he bought was kong toech. He didn't buy it until his daughter (my mother) got married. When she got married, he felt he could finally spend the money on his instrument. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/20/01)

When I was twenty-one, my grandparents insisted that I become a monk. Like many other Cambodian parents, they believed that becoming a monk was the only way for a son to pay back his ancestors.

They picked a day for my ordainment, but I was not at home around that time. I was in O Chrouv playing music. Usually, men study for three months at the temple before they're ordained. But I was away from home, so I missed my chance.

While I was in O Chrouv, I realized that the date for my ordainment was approaching. I rushed home the day before and found out that my grandparents were unprepared. They did not expect me to remember, so they did not have the saffron cloth

ready for me. However, they were still able to organize the event, because the chief of the Buddhist monastery was their close friend. Everyone was wondering how I could become a monk if I was so unprepared. In reality, I was prepared, because I secretly studied during my free time, after my performances.



Figure 12-Ngek Chum as a Monk at Vatt Anlong Vil
(Photographer unknown)

To tell the truth, I don't think that any man can be blessed within the first few days of his ordainment. At that time, I still thought about how happy I was before I became a monk, how I enjoyed playing music and flirting around with all the pretty girls. It took a while before I felt that being a monk was a good thing for me to do. And then, I became such a quiet and calm living creature...I did not want to leave the monk-hood. I passed my first year and went into a second year of monk-hood.

I had just agreed to go on Tadong¹³⁴ with another monk, when my grandfather got very sick. He was so sick that he spent all his savings on medical services and medicines. Since all of his children were married and lived far away from his house, I was the one who had to take care of him. Based on the Buddhist rule, he could not ask me directly to quit the temple. So instead, he placed five areca palms and five cigarettes on a dish and came to visit me at the temple. This is how he let me know that he needed me. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

My grandfather passed away on the same day that Pol Pot's army marched into Battambang. It was around noon on New Year's day. Grandpa told me that he needed water, and then he went to sleep.

My grandmother was sick, too. She couldn't walk. She had been sick for a while. I think she had cancer. She passed away one week before my grandfather did. She was maybe sixty, or sixty-five years old.

About one week before the Khmer Rouge came into our city, Grandma had a serious accident. One rainy day, she came out of the house to pick something up off of the ground and bring it inside. As she was doing that, she heard a sound that scared her. She jumped back, and a piece of wood or something hit her hip. She was hurt pretty badly. She died soon after that.

In a way, I was lucky. I had a few days to spare between the time that my grandfather passed away and the Khmer Rouge relocated everyone to the countryside. I

¹³⁴ *Tadong* refers to a monk's physical and spiritual journey into the jungle. He leaves the temple to go and pray on his own and to study the *dharma*. The monk usually takes nothing more with him than an umbrella, a food bowl, and some pieces of saffron clothing. He will only return to the temple when he feels a need to.

used those days to cremate my grandparents. I took their ashes to Vatt Omani, a temple that is about two or three miles from my house.

When my sister went to Cambodia this year, she held a memorial service for my grandparents. She went to Vatt Omani to find their ashes, but she couldn't locate them. Although I marked the place where I left them, now the marker is gone. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 8/31/02)

“To Me, *Krou Nit* Was the Best Teacher”

Krou Nit was my permanent and master teacher. The other teachers taught me more voluntarily. To me, Krou Nit was the best teacher. He was very engaged and committed. He understood his students well. He knew when students were happy and not happy to learn. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01) He really cared about his students, and he tried to make them better step by step. He taught me so many techniques and always explained things to me very clearly. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

Krou Nit lived in Battambang, in Chamkar Samrarnng village. I was about twelve years old when I first started to learn from him. He came to live with us for about a month. After that, he traveled back and forth to teach me. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

My grandfather paid him at first to spend a lot of time with me. But then Krou Nit got to like me. He said I was like a son. He didn't want money. When he couldn't see me, he missed me.



Figure 13-*Krou Nit Chou*
(Photographer unknown)

When his wife met me for the first time, she said I was like a son. His five daughters called me Bong. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

When I was learning a new song, Krou Nit usually taught me one version of it. But once in a while, I would forget. When that happened, Krou Nit would review the piece with me, but he would show me an easier version of the song. When I was a studying, I didn't like learning so many versions of the same song. It was kind of confusing. I told my grandfather what Krou Nit was doing, and he told me that my teacher did that because he wanted me to learn a lot.

Later on, I realized what my grandfather was talking about. I discovered that seeing and hearing many versions of the same piece of music helped me a lot. When I became a better player, I remembered all of the different ways of playing the same song. Because of that, I was able to make up my own versions of the song.

So, now that I am a teacher, I see that this is a good way to teach. I guess that's how Krou Nit learned when he was a student. Then, when he became a teacher, he decided that it was a good way to teach. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 6/6/98)

Krou Nit not only showed me how to play well, but he also coached me on how to behave appropriately for different audiences...senior, young, and so on. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01) He taught me a lot about other things in life, too, like how to treat people, what to do when I get married...things like that. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

Krou Nit lived until the early or mid-1980s. I think that Giovanni met him. I told Giovanni that my teacher is in Battambang and he should go to see him if he goes there. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 7/25/01)

I teach like Krou Nit. He's the best teacher. When I teach, I use his ideas. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

“Everyone, Everywhere Knew Krou Chhuorm and His Roneat”

After a year of studying roneat under Krou Nit, I began to learn from Krou Chhuorm. Krou Chhuorm also specialized in playing roneat. He was a great musician. No one could beat him.

Lok Krou Chhuorm was a musical genius. People really had to be careful not to make him angry if they wanted to play with him. He had some crazy ideas. He would hear something on any instrument and then play it on his instrument. And he would mix up pieces of what he heard. He made it so hard that people didn't know what he was doing. They couldn't follow him. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

Krou Chhuorm only came to coach me once in a while, and he was very lazy. He was not a serious teacher. When he taught me, he would teach me half of a song and then say, “Oh, I’m tired.” He told me to practice while he slept.

He had a lot of students. He was the best player, so everybody wanted to learn from him. But he was hard to learn from. He would play a very difficult piece of music, and his students couldn’t copy him. But he would listen to the students and say, “That’s good.”

He didn’t consider each student’s strengths and weaknesses. If something was too hard, he didn’t simplify it for them.

It wasn’t that hard for me to learn from him...That’s why he volunteered to teach me. But his other students were mostly older people. He asked his other students, “Why can’t you play like Ngek?” So everybody wanted to know who Ngek was.

He didn’t need or want any money. So, I just gave him a little bit, enough to buy something to drink. That’s what he liked. He liked to drink.

Krou Chhuorm liked to play music in the morning before the sunrise. He was lazy, but when he played in the morning, he played for two hours. He didn’t stop. And when he played, everybody said, “Oh, it sounds so good.”

Everyone, everywhere knew Krou Chhuorm and his roneat. But most of the time, he didn't want to play roneat. He just played chhing! Not only that but, he’d play chhing with only one hand! He’d put one cymbal on the table so he wouldn’t have to hold it.

Everyone said that Krou Chhuorm was mentally abnormal because he was heartbroken. He once had a wife who was the daughter of his teacher. She was a great musician, too. She played the kong really well, like Thai: she crossed one hand over the

other, playing really fancy and really fast. So they'd play together: he'd play roneat and she'd play kong.

But she was sick, and two or three years after they were married, she died. They didn't have any children.

After that, he just wandered around. Everybody asked him if he wanted to get married again. He said, "No." He loved his wife too much for that. He was so loyal to her. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 3/17/01)

“His Hands Move Just Like Krou Van’s”

A little later, I began to study roneat with Krou Van. Krou Van was well known throughout Cambodia. He often performed at the radio station in Phnom Penh. Although Krou Nit knew a lot more than Krou Van, Krou Van was much more famous, because he knew how to promote himself.

Since he is so famous, sometimes, when people hear me, they say that I play like Krou Van. One time, the Voice of America recorded and broadcast me in Cambodia. People said that I sounded like Krou Van then. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 7/25/01)

Indeed, it is true. In July 2001, I traveled around Cambodia with *Lok Krou* and his family. On July 15, we walked around Battambang City. Our first stop was Vatt Damrey Saw. There was a group of senior men sitting on a bench under a tree in front of the main sanctuary. *Lok Krou* recognized one of them. It was Yoeun Mek, a musician who specialized in wedding music. *Lok Krou* turned to me and said, *He plays the best tro.*

At first, *Krou Mek* didn't recognize *Lok Krou*, but after studying his face for a moment he said, *Ngek!* and gave him a big hug. So many years had passed...they chatted for a while...

Then *Krou Mek* introduced *Lok Krou* to his friends saying, *He was the best roneat player in Battambang. His hands move just like Krou Van's.*



Figure 14- Ngek Chum and Yoeun Mek Cross Paths at Vatt Damrey Saw in Battambang in 2001 (Photo credit Joanna Pecore)

“I Coached Them, But They Were Still Considered to Be My Teacher’s

Students”

Above, Ngek Chum and Monyra Srun expressed their admiration for their teachers, highlighting the sharp distinction in status between teachers and students in Khmer performing arts and culture. Below, Ngek Chum recounts some of the qualities that mark the boundaries of this hierarchy.

Attaining the rank of *Krou* in pre-war Cambodia required much more than mastering technique or training some students. Rather, time-honored beliefs about the nature of one's chronological age and one's position in a sequential lineage of artists were serious considerations. Ultimately, however, Khmer cultural values that celebrate flexibility, social responsibility, and sincerity of intent have ensured that new generations of teachers continue to transmit their arts despite the destruction of the traditional public order.

I can say that I started to teach when I was about fifteen years old. I remember playing Koap Vong, Phtot Kao Sou, Tech Chhap¹³⁵ nearly every day after teaching and performing. But back then, I could not be called a “teacher.” People looked at me as an “assistant teacher.” If I had taken a teaching test, I would have passed; however, based on my age at that time, it was difficult for people to give me respect. People were more concerned with age. Yet, once in a while, when my teacher was busy, he asked me to coach on his behalf. And the fee was different; for example, the student might have paid one hundred riel¹³⁶ for my teacher, but he only paid fifty riel for me.

I coached them, but they were still considered to be my teacher's students. If something went wrong, my teacher would have been responsible for it.

¹³⁵ These are Cambodian games that are popular among rural boys.

¹³⁶ Cambodian currency.

Besides, there really weren't any exams in the village. Exams were only used in the cities and universities. In the village, teachers decided who could be a teacher.

And

age is one of the most important factors. Normally, you cannot become a teacher until you're forty years old. It is believed that if you become a teacher when you're young, you'll bring down your fortune. So, until you were forty years old, you could only be an "assistant."

And when you become a teacher, you're supposed to go through a grand ceremony, making all kinds of offerings to your teachers. One thing you need is baysey. It is a symbol of success, and we present it as a prayer for prosperity.

But, as you know, in my generation, the system was completely destroyed. Artists were killed, others fled, and no one could survive while devoting oneself completely to music.

In my case, I left Cambodia, and when I got to the refugee camps in Thailand, people wanted me to teach them. So I had to become a teacher, even though I was only twenty-six years old.

In the camps, there were not enough musicians around to perform my inauguration correctly. There were musicians there who knew how to play pin peat, mohori, and wedding music. But there weren't enough of them who knew how to play the ceremonial music. So I had to perform the ceremony with baysey only, not with music. And my teacher was not around to tell me what I should do. I was on my own. But I felt that it was okay to go ahead and do it this way, because we believe that if a

person has pure heart and is committed to teaching, he can make a wish and assume that things will go well. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

“Sathukar is a Teacher Song”

Ngek Chum’s reflections upon how he became a musician and music teacher and Monyra Srun’s regular interactions with *Lok Yeay* and *Lok Ta Moha Aysey* point to music’s power to transcend the boundaries of time and place. In these and other examples, music offers a bridge between the here-and-now with the distant past. Musical connections can transform the memories of *a distant, dormant past* into a *description of events happening in complementary time strata*. (Robertson 1996: 3)

Above, Monyra Srun pointed to the power of one song in particular—*Sathukar*—to create this bond. In April 2000, *Lok Krou* told me that he wanted to teach me *Sathukar* after the New Year.

Sathukar is a teacher song. You should respect it. When people hear it in Thailand, Cambodia, or Laos, they stop talking. They listen and bow with their hands together. We play it before performances and ceremonies to greet ancestor teachers. It is a way for us to get blessings to perform well. It also calms us down and helps us to warm-up and concentrate.

When you learn Sathukar, you need to rieb krou.¹³⁷ In Cambodia, teachers don’t tell students that they have to do that. Students are supposed to find that out on

¹³⁷ To display your humility toward the teacher (and teacher spirits) by presenting offerings such as *baysey*, fruit, candles, incense, flowers, and money.

their own and just do so without saying anything. But here, how are you supposed to know?

And, you're supposed to learn Sathukar from a teacher. It's not right to learn it another way, like with a tape. Some people learn it on their own, but my teacher wanted it done properly, so I learned it from my teacher.

Once you learn Sathukar, don't ever forget it. Practice it every day. Before you begin your practice, start with Sathukar.

Also, really, you shouldn't teach it to anyone. If you want to, you can. But you shouldn't. And be careful. If you play it slowly, someone can take it from you. But once you can play fast, they won't be able to. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 4/1/00)

I asked, So are you saying that Sathukar has a special power?

I can't say that, because I can't prove that. But I think that, if you believe it, it's true. If you don't believe it, that's fine too. But, yeah, I believe it.

Some people don't believe it. They don't play it before a performance. Especially in the United States, people don't play it. And we don't want to burn candles and incense here.

And other people, they believe too much. They always play it exactly right, with incense and candles, even when it's not allowed. Me, sometimes I do it at home the night before. I just tell my teachers that I can't do it the next day. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 4/1/00)

“Everything You Need is in *Homrong*”

How can a song like *Sathukar* link artists like Ngek Chum and Monrya Srun to their deceased teachers? As Ngek Chum indicates, *I can't prove that*. However, sound—or *the act of “sounding”* (Robertson 1996: 2)—has been employed by societies worldwide for millennia as a means toward bridging the boundaries of time, spirit, and matter. In her overview of myth, cosmology, and performance in the Americas, Robertson demonstrates that *sound appears again and again as an important tool for creation and regeneration*. (1996: 13) She indicates that *Like the boundaries of time, the boundaries that separate spirit from matter are fluid and susceptible to sound frequencies... the jump from spirit to matter to spirit can be accomplished through sonic technologies*. (1996: 3)

Sathukar is the most powerful, but not the only, *sonic technology* in the Khmer *pin peat* repertoire. In fact, *Sathukar* is the opening of a longer set of twelve ritual pieces known collectively as *Homrong*. Ngek Chum referred to the pieces of *Homrong* in his discussion of rhythms in Chapter Four. Here he elaborates upon the value and uncertain future of *Homrong*.

Homrong is the basic for *pin peat*. To play the whole *Homrong*, you need at least twelve pieces. They are *Sathukar*, *Trak*, *Kaman*, *Bathom*, *Smoeu*, *Lea*, *Cheut Chheung*, *Cheut Reay*, *Khloem*, *Chamnan*, *Krao Nai*, and *Chha Banhchoh*. *Chha Banhchoh* is really two different pieces. For the first part, *Chha*, you can choose from a few different pieces like *Yav*, *Khaek Muon Pi Choan*, or *Kyal Bot Cheung Phnom Pi Choan*. There are also some songs that you can use to lengthen some of these. For

example, you can add Khim Leuk or Khim Yay to Kaman. That arrangement is known as Kaman Chas. Nobody plays Chamnan or Kaman Chas any more.

You're supposed to play Homrong before you perform. All of my teachers told me that they used to play the whole Homrong before every performance. But now, people don't believe it so much, and so many people who knew it died under Pol Pot.

These days you never hear Homrong the way it should be played. We don't have enough time. The whole thing is really long. It takes at least one hour, maybe one and a half hours. These days, the most you might hear at a performance is three songs, but usually just one –Sathukar—or none. Or if they want to play three or more songs, they might make each of the songs shorter. Often we substitute the pre-performance Homrong with a sampeah krou on the day, night, or morning before a performance.¹³⁸

When you play Homrong, the order you play the pieces in depends on the situation you're in. For example, in the temple we play Sathukar, Trak, Kaman, Bathom, Smoeu, Lea, Cheut Chheung, Cheut Reay, and Khlom. In the afternoon we play Cheut Reay before Khlom. But in the morning and for ceremonies, we play Khlom before Cheut.

In Cambodia, before a performance, dancers come to the stage and pray while the musicians play the first three pieces: Sathukar, Trak, and Kaman. We ask our teachers to help us to perform well. Praying and playing Homrong also gives us confidence and makes us feel calm before a performance. It also blesses the stage, so

¹³⁸ A sampeah krou performed on the morning of an evening performance was described in Chapter 3.

that the monkeys, princes, princesses, and demons will all come alive during the dance.

After the third piece of Homrong, the dancers leave the stage to get dressed and put on their make-up. But the musicians keep on playing: Bathom, Smoeu, Lea, Cheut Chheung, Cheut Reay, Khloem, Chamnan, and Krao Nai. They might stop after playing eleven pieces and save the last piece for right before the performance. When the dancers come back, the musicians play the last piece, Chha Banhchoh. Chha Banhchoh signals the beginning of the performance. In the old days, every performance began with Chha Banhchoh. It's the way we initiated communication between the characters on stage and the human audience.¹³⁹

If you can play all of the songs of Homrong on your instrument, you can play any pin peat song. Everything you need is in Homrong. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 12/19/98)

Homrong keeps more than the songs for you. It keeps your phloey, too: the phloey your teachers gave you and the phloey you created yourself. Teachers give Homrong and phloey to their students, so the music can stay alive and so we can continue to call on our teachers after they die. But lately, I've been thinking. Since I got sick last year, I realized, "I don't have serious students. No one knows my whole

¹³⁹ From a dancer's perspective, *Chha Banhchoh* refers to a set of movements considered to be the *mother postures* of the classical dance. (Sam 1987: 74) The movements are separated into two categories (*chha* and *banhchoh*) that correspond to specific drum patterns that underpin the music that accompanies them. *Chha* music and postures are relatively slow in comparison to their lively *banhchoh* counterparts.

Homrong on every instrument. What will happen if I die? No one will have my Homrong. No one will have the Homrong and the phloey from my teachers.”

So now I want to make CDs of my music. First, I want to fill one CD with Homrong. If people have at least that, then they can play anything in my style later on.

(Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/28/99)

“Eight Pin Peat Groups Played and Played Until the Temple Was Finished”

The examples of *sampeah krou*, *Sathukar*, and *Homrong* above introduce the roles that *pin peat* music can play in contacting the supernatural, making offerings to deceased teachers, and appealing to ancestors for their protection. The following “sound-spheres” shed light upon the dynamics behind these processes, which involve the construction of sacred space with sound.

Chapter Four illustrated that the interaction of sound and movement in Khmer music and dance-drama is essential for connecting musicians with dancers and performers with their human and supernatural audiences. With respect to dance motion, Sam (1992) and Cravath (1985) have described ritually potent choreography that leads dancers through the four cardinal directions in order to invoke the *forces of high and low terrestrial and celestial alike*. (Sam 1992: 105) Above, Ngek Chum described how the sequential performance of the twelve components of *Homrong* transports performers, audiences, props, and stage setting into the world of myth. Music accomplishes this, in part, through the process of “*fencing*” *the four sides to guard them against negative forces*. (Khanna 1979: 101)

According to traditional Khmer cosmology, the four cardinal directions and the four sides mentioned here represent the totality of the universe. Their ability to *separate the archetypal sacred space from its surroundings* (Khanna 1979: 29) recurs throughout Khmer culture, religion, ritual, aesthetics, architecture, and performance. For example, supernaturally powerful diagrams known as *yoan*¹⁴⁰ and the construction of the legendary Angkor Vatt coincide with this pattern. Their designs are based upon the belief that humans can influence their circumstances by imitating divine worlds within the enclosures of consecrated territory. Successful construction of archetypal realms requires their union with sacred sound. (Khanna 1979: 44)

In July 2001, I visited Cambodia with *Lok Krou* and his family. July 15 was our first day in Battambang City. As *Lok Krou*, Vorn,¹⁴¹ and I explored the city, we crossed a bridge. It passed over the Sangker River, the city's main waterway dividing the busy downtown from the quieter districts. Just beyond the bridge, there was a temple, Vatt Sangker.

The temple was newly built and freshly painted with bold, bright colors. The bas-reliefs containing scenes from the Reamker were brilliant. Fair-skinned heroes stood out against the three-dimensional background of swirling, blue waves. Their regal red, green, and blue costumes were studded with jewels of gold and silver.

¹⁴⁰ This concept will be elaborated upon in the subsequent sections. Currently, it will suffice for readers to note that the area to be consecrated here, like a *yoan*, is “architecturally” separated from mundane space.

¹⁴¹ Vorn Chum introduced herself in Chapter 1.

As Vorn and I continued to admire the outside of the temple, Lok Krou went into another building to find someone who could unlock it for us. He wanted to go inside.

After a few minutes, Lok Krou returned with an elderly gentleman who wore red-rimmed glasses and loose-fitting clothing—just right for the Cambodian summer heat. The man unlocked the temple door and, after removing our shoes, we stepped inside. The floor gleamed with polished gray and maroon-toned marble tiles. “They were imported from Spain. Five dollars each,” the man volunteered.

When I lifted my eyes from the floor, I saw a radiant, golden Buddha seated on a pink lotus. Flowers, smaller Buddha statues, candles, and other sparkling gifts surrounded him. The walls of the room were covered with impressive paintings portraying the life of the Buddha.

After Lok Krou and Vorn made offerings to the Buddha, the elderly gentleman read their fortunes to them. Meanwhile, some young boys had entered the temple. Vorn gave them some money.

As we left the temple, Vorn told me that, in fact, this yatt had been destroyed during the war. Bombs were dropped directly onto it. The entire building had been demolished. Amazingly, however, the golden Buddha remained intact and unharmed.

A month and a half later, I resumed my regular music lessons with Lok Krou in Maryland. One Saturday, I arrived at his house and proceeded to set up for my lesson as usual. I took the phlai off of Lok Krou's roneat so that I could hang my own phlai from his sound box. I carried Lok Krou's phlai over to the corner of the room in order to rest it on the sofa. I wanted to put it somewhere safe. As I placed it on the sofa, I

glanced at the red, miniature altar in the corner of the room. I see it every time I come for my lesson, but I still haven't had a chance to ask about it. Is it for Buddha? Is it for music? Is it for both?

Today, I noticed something new. The small, wooden Buddha statue that Lok Krou bought in Cambodia was now on the altar. And there was a photograph, a picture I had taken of Lok Krou and Vorn having their fortunes told at the foot of the Buddha in Vatt Sangker in Battambang! Hmmm...was that Buddha important to them? Or is it just a nice photo? Or is it just a nice Buddha statue that is appropriate for enhancing the altar?



Figure 15-Ngek Chum and his Wife have their Fortunes Told in Vatt Sangker
(Photo credit Joanna Pecore)

After my lesson, Lok Krou walked over to the altar and picked up the photograph. “Do you remember this temple?” he asked. “That’s where I wanted to go.”

“You mean Vatt Sangker?” I questioned.

“Yeah.”

I wanted to know more, so I asked, “Is that the Buddha that survived after the temple was bombed?”

“Yes,” he replied and continued to relate the following story.

My grandfather told me a story. It’s very old. It was passed onto him by his father who, in turn, learned it from his father.

I used to pass this temple with my grandfather on the way some where, and my grandfather would always stop. He would take off his hat and pay respect to the Buddha. I asked him why he did that. The first time I asked, I was really small, so he only told me a little bit—something like, “That’s a powerful Buddha.” But when I got a little older, he told me the whole story.

Grandpa said that when they made that Buddha, they made a very big deal of it. Well, now it’s painted gold, but back then it was all covered in real gold, gold leaf. They placed diamonds and other jewels on the inside. The gems were wrapped in sheets of gold that had Pali scriptures engraved on them.

My grandfather told me that when they were building it, for about a week, there were eight pin peat groups, each with nine musicians, playing. They all played at the same time, and they never stopped playing the whole time...well, they probably took very short breaks to eat. But mostly, they kept playing music the whole time.

The music groups surrounded the Buddha, two groups on each side, so together they formed a rectangle. The groups performed in the places where the walls

would be built. So when they played music, it was kind of like creating walls of music around the Buddha.¹⁴²

That's how they did it, they built the Buddha first. Then they built the temple, and they put the walls up later. Eight pin peat groups played and played until the temple was finished.

Normally in Cambodia, if a musical group performs for the construction of a temple, it only performs for a short time, like for a ceremony, but not eight groups for a week!

But really powerful people in the community built that Buddha. And the story goes that, if you try to shoot it, it will not break.

Most people don't know that story about making the Buddha, but they have heard that that Buddha is especially strong. But they don't think about it much. They don't really care.

After the war, I wanted to go see it, but there was a fence around it. We were told not to go near it. They thought there were landmines over there. Well, it might have been okay to see it. Some people went. I wanted to, but I never did. Later, I kept asking myself "Why didn't I just go to see it?" So now, I'm happy that I went to see it.

(Ngek Chum, Conversation 9/1/01)

¹⁴² In addition to physically enclosing the space around the Buddha, eight ensembles were probably employed in order to symbolically locate the divinities of eight regents of space who guard and protect the microcosmic universe of the *yoan*. (Khanna 1979: 34)

“The *Sampho* is Like Everyone’s *Krou*”

The *sampho* stands out as the most revered instrument of the *pin peat* ensemble. Artists pay respect to the drum before performances and identify it with teachers, people of high status in Khmer society. This attitude suggests that in Khmer music, *sonic technologies* (Robertson 1996: 3) exist, not only within distinctive compositions and exemplary performance practice, but also within particular instruments. Below, Ngek Chum describes how such technologies reside within the *sampho* on multiple levels. He introduces the instrument’s associations with earthly and sacred social order.



Figure 16-*Sampho* (Photo credit Robin S. Kent)

Everybody respects the sampho. The sampho is like everyone’s krou. If the sampho plays wrong, everyone will get lost. So, everyone, musicians and dancers, respect the sampho.

My grandfather really respected his drum. He stored it on a shelf, so no one would step on or over it. He performed ceremonies for his instruments every month. He sprayed them with perfumed water, offered them baysey, and chanted in Pali.

But he prayed to the sampho every night. Before he went to bed, he offered three incense sticks. I never saw him doing it, but the jar was so full!

And my teacher told me, “We don’t let ladies play sampho.” It’s because ... ladies have, what do you say? They have their periods once a month. My teacher told me that, when ladies are having their periods, they shouldn’t go near music

...especially sampho. In the old days in Cambodia, there weren’t a lot of products around for women to keep really clean during that time of the month. So people thought it was kind of unsanitary for that kind of thing to be around something we respect as much as the sampho. Besides, we don’t know when it’s going to happen, so we wouldn’t know how to schedule performances with female musicians. Musicians had to be ready to play all of the time. It was kind of inconvenient.

But I want to remind you that Cambodia is not like the United States. Cambodians respect men. Ladies are lower...and actually, women in Cambodia can play instruments, like the skor thom, kong...but not the sampho. Well, that’s because in Cambodia, they put something inside of the sampho... (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/6/02)

In the previous anecdote about the *pin peat*'s power to construct sacred space at Vatt Sangker, a cosmic power-field was created through the fusion of an archetypal diagram (*yoan*)¹⁴³ with supernatural sonic reverberations. According to Ngek Chum's reflections below, this relationship is intensified within the province of the *sampho*, which simultaneously represents and constructs sacred space and sacred sound. That is, the *sampho* synchronizes archetypal territory with supernaturally potent audio phenomena both within its interior and, in performance, beyond its perimeter. More specifically, on one hand, the drum derives its power via a consecration ceremony that combines the vibrations of esoteric sound syllables (*mantra*) (Khanna 1979: 141)¹⁴⁴ with abstracted visual representations of the cosmos (*yoan*). A *yoan* is carved on the inside of the drum, and its *static shape is made kinetic when the inscribed mantras are chanted in ritual worship*. (Khanna 1979: 12) On the other hand, the very strength that is infused into the *sampho* through this ritual endows it with the ability to also engender mystical space through the voicing of sacred sound.

¹⁴³ Khmer *yoan* are clearly related to the Indic geometrical compositions known as *yantra* that are used in Vedic, Tantric, Buddhist, and Jain traditions for meditation or occult purposes such as attracting good fortune or warding off sickness. (Khanna 1979: 22-23) *The Sanskrit word "yantra" derives from the root "yam" meaning to sustain, hold or support energy inherent in a particular element, object or concept.* (Khanna 1979: 11) In fact, an alternative spelling for the term in the Khmer dictionary (*yoantro*) points to an obvious connection between these terms. (Headley, Chim, and Soeum 1997: 968)

¹⁴⁴ While Khanna's description and definition of *mantra* refers specifically to the Indian Tantric tradition, Khmer share the same vocabulary for and understanding of these magical incantations. (Headley, Chim, and Soeum 1997: 905; Sam 1999: 4) A *yantra*'s pattern makes visible the force of the *mantra*'s sound. (Khanna 1979: 6)

Well, it's not exactly something that they put inside, but it's something they draw on the inside of the drum. It is a yoan, which I will tell you more about later. But right now, I will tell you that a yoan is like a message. The yoan inside the drum says something like, "Be strong and powerful. Sound beautiful."

But I don't think that yoan are inscribed on drums that they just sell in the market. I just feel that that's true, because my grandfather made his own sampho. When we needed a sampho, we didn't just go out and buy one. We made our own. And if someone didn't know how to make their own sampho, they would ask a specialist to construct one for them. A real sampho-maker knows how to perform the necessary ceremony before making the drum. He knows what to do to imbue the drum with power.

When we want a sampho, we must first visit a krou, like an aachar, who selects an auspicious day for making the drum. In contrast, drums that are sold in the market can be made on any old day.

I feel like I can tell if a sampho has that power or not. I don't know why, but I think I might have seen something when I was young. I saw my grandfather making sampho.

And the vendors in the market don't take care of their drums like Grandpa did. When a sampho has been blessed, it must be cared for; keep the drum above ground, in a place where no one can damage it. You know, sometimes I see people stepping over the sampho, and it makes me feel sick.

Once my grandfather sanctified his sampho, he took great care of it. After he finished playing it, he would put it back on the shelf. He was afraid that people or

children might harm, or be harmed by, it. Some people believe that if a child goes near a drum with a spirit in it, if she leans over the drum or something, she might get a stomachache, or start crying, or something like that.

I believe in the power, because I play music. I'm supposed to believe in it. And, when there's power in a drum, the sound, the feeling, is very different. People react differently when they listen to a consecrated drum. They really respond. The audience says, "Oh! The music was so good! What happened today? The music was so good!"
(Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/6/02)

“Playing Music is Kind of a Dangerous Job”

With all of these powerful associations, transformations of time and place, and communications between humans, ancestors, and supernatural spirits through music and musical instruments, it is no wonder that accomplished musicians become targets of other people who might feel threatened by them.

Ngek Chum describes how Cambodian musicians can be victims of jealousy and how they might protect themselves from harm. Perhaps not coincidentally, the defense is rooted in sound.

Playing music is kind of a dangerous job. My teacher told me to be careful when I go to another place to play. He told me a story:

Twelve musicians from Battambang went to Phnom Penh to play for the king. They were so good, that the king really loved them. They stayed there and played for a while, and when the time came for them to return to Battambang, only two of the twelve musicians came back! Ten of the twelve musicians died while they were in Phnom Penh! People say that they were poisoned. And after the two musicians came home to Battambang, they never played music again. One, Krou Mot, became a farmer. And the other one, Krou Run, made his living as an instrument-maker.

Things like that happened a lot. There were other times that a king brought some musicians to the Palace, and they died while they were there.

You know, when my grandfather died, I cremated his body. When I looked at the ashes, I saw a big, hard object that didn't burn. I don't know what it was, but I guess that that's what killed him. I think that someone did that to him. That object made him sick. That's what he was complaining about. He told me that he felt pain in his heart and in his chest. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

I don't get it. Why would anyone want to kill people just because they're good musicians? Why would they want to destroy that and lose the music? (Joanna Pecore, Conversation 1/20/01)

People want to be the best. They don't want anyone to be better than them. They want to be famous...like Michael Jackson.

So in Cambodia, we have to be careful. That's why we get something from the krou—from the krou who knows how to make it. It's something to wear. It's khsae changkeh.¹⁴⁵ You want to see it? (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

Yes! (Joanna Pecore, Conversation 1/20/01)

Lok Krou went upstairs, and after a few minutes, he returned with a small package wrapped in plastic. He unwrapped it, and pulled out a belt made from a string of beads. The beads were made of rolled, gold leaf. Lok Krou unrolled one of the beads and explained.

See inside here? You can't read it now, but the krou wrote something on there in Pali. It's a charm to keep the bad luck away. See? I have another one. This one's bigger. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

*Lok Krou pulled another belt out of the plastic package. This one was made of red fabric and was thicker than the first belt that he showed me. He unwrapped the fabric and revealed the golden beads. This *ksae changkeh* was double-stranded; two sets of beads were sewn together and wrapped in the material. Lok Krou told me more.*

When I play in Cambodia, I'm supposed to wear these. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

¹⁴⁵ A beaded waistband that sometimes contains magical formulae to ward off evil.

What did your wife say when she found out about this? When she married you, she didn't even know that you were a musician. And then she finds out about this kind of danger! (Joanna Pecore, Conversation 1/20/01)

Now that she knows about it, she tells me to wear my ksae changkeh. I don't think that I need it in the United States. But sometimes, when I go far away, like to California, my wife tells me to wear it. So I wear it, even though I don't think that I need it...and I have something else... (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

Lok Krou went upstairs again, and returned with a plastic bag. He opened the bag and uncovered two handkerchiefs.

This is yoan, kansaeng yoan.¹⁴⁶ It is a yoan ke choel chett. It ensures that people will be friendly to me.¹⁴⁷ A krou made it for me. I didn't ask for it. I don't ask

¹⁴⁶ *Yoan* drawn on a cloth.

¹⁴⁷ Occult *yantras* are often used as talismans. (Khanna 1979: 23) John Meas, one of the founders of “the Vatt” (see Chapter Three) who holds two masters degrees from India in Buddhist as well as Eastern and Western Philosophy, indicates that, *Yoan mix Buddhist with traditional beliefs. This yoan appears to be the type used by the krou who officiated over musical and dance-drama performances. These type of yoan were used in ancient times before boxing and wrestling matches.* He also notes that, *During the war, General Lon Nol believed it so deeply, that all of his soldiers possessed kansaeng yoan, so that nobody could shoot them.* (Interview 10/29/02)

for yoan or ksae changkeh, but people know that musicians need them. So they make them for us. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01)

Lok Krou unfolded the square handkerchiefs. They were identical, except for the color. Each depicted a large rectangle containing two squares centered within each half of the rectangle and arranged in symmetry with each other. Each square encompassed another square, rotated ninety degrees, so that it appeared as a diamond within the square. Inscriptions in Khmer script¹⁴⁸ were arranged in different positions across the whole composition.¹⁴⁹ Beneath the rectangle, there was an illustration of an eight-point compass superimposed with a six-fold spiral emanating from its center.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Interpretation assistance by Saureth Ieng and John Meas.

¹⁴⁹ Khanna indicates that, *Occult yantras often draw their power from the deities that are symbolically invoked in them.* (1979: 156) The inscription in the center of this *yoan* roughly translates as, “I pay homage to: the father of the Buddha, the mother of the Buddha, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. I invoke the power of the Amita Buddha (Immortal Buddha), the bejeweled moon (*monichanda*).” Saureth Ieng notes, *When we say monichanda, we mean “make people like you forever,” or something like that.*(Conversation 10/11/02) Intermingled with *mantra* sound syllables including the primordial vibration, “om” (rendered as “a-ou” in this Khmer *yoan*), one square invokes the power of the Buddha; while the other appeals to the Dharma, Sangha, Amita Buddha, and the *arahans* (saints, or beings who have reached the highest stage of spiritual realization). The words in one margin of the diagram ward off evil, while the opposite margin summonses kindness and good will. Each of the four sides of the perimeter of the rectangle contains syllables that collectively invoke the Buddha (left-right=na-mo, “pay homage to” and bottom-top=bo-ta, “Buddha.”)

¹⁵⁰ Khanna describes one type of occult *yantra* that includes spirals around an invisible source. The spiral is associated with the seven major points of power in the body. (1979: 154)

See these two? One is blue, and one is pink. The drawings are the same. One is for me, and one is for my wife. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/20/01) I got this blue yoan from a teacher who specialized in making yoan. I got it before Pol Pot, right before I went to study to be a monk. The krou told me to rub it on my face and take it with me for good luck when I play music. But I never use it. Now, I just keep it to show my kids.

When I got married, I showed this yoan to a krou. You can ask any krou to copy it. If the teacher who made this were still alive, I would have gone to him to make another one. But Pol Pot killed him and a lot of other teachers. So I went to another krou and asked him to copy it. So he copied mine and made another one for my wife. So now I have two with the same pattern: my blue one and my wife's pink one...because I don't want my wife to die.

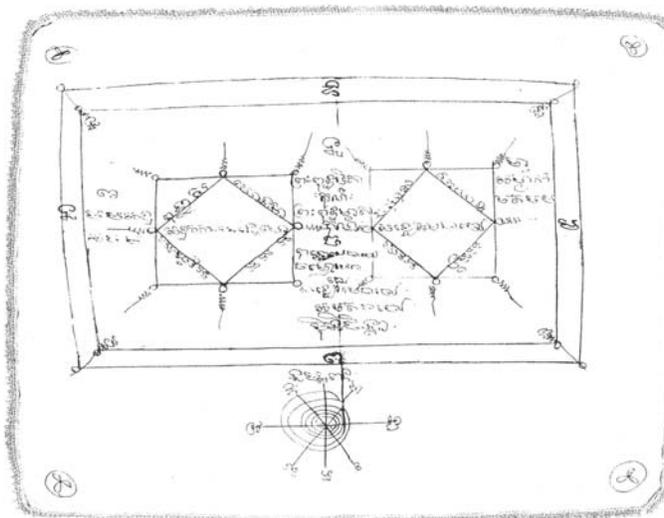


Figure 17-Ngek Chum's *Kansaeng Yoan*

I have two of my own yoan now, this one here and one that I got after Pol Pot. When I started to play music, I had a lot. This teacher gave me one, that teacher gave me one. So I had a whole stack of them. My grandfather had a lot of friends. When he told his friends that I was a musician, he asked them for yoan for me.

I didn't take them all with me to go to play music. Just, before I left the house, I would use them to pray or something.

But I did take one thing with me. It was a ksae changkeh that my father made for me. He made it even though he wasn't a krou. I kept it until Pol Pot came in. I never took it off.

I don't know what happened, but I'll tell you the truth. My father told me to never eat dog. It is not good. I never ate dog. But we were under the communists, and we didn't have food. And one day, the cook prepared dog. After I ate dog, and I went to bed, I think it was like one or two in the morning, and my ksae changkeh popped! It's true. I heard a pop, but I didn't pay much attention. But in the morning, when I woke up, the ksae changkeh was broken! It was no good any more.

My friend told me that my ksae changkeh popped because it was old. Maybe he's right. Maybe it got worn out from bathing and everything. On the other hand, it was big, and it was adjustable. When my waist expanded, I could just adjust the string to make more room. There was no reason for it to pop. So I still wonder, Why did it pop on that day? I ate, I slept, and it popped.

There are different kinds of yoan. Some protect soldiers from guns. Some help people find love. Some help you to perform beautiful music. Others make you look good or feel happy. Sometimes people even have yoan tatoored right onto their bodies.

When a teacher makes yoan, it's not like they're just drawing a picture. Anybody can copy the picture. But when a krou makes yoan, he chants secret words. He draws the figure and chants in Pali at the same time. That's what makes it work. You have to know how to pronounce everything correctly. You have to say it at the right time, in the right rhythm, with the right accent, and on the right pitch. It's very complicated.¹⁵¹

Normally, teachers don't want people to watch them making yoan. But the krou who made this yoan for me was just like my own grandfather. He wanted me to watch, and he wanted me to learn. But I didn't want to study that. If I had tried to learn that, I would have had to quit music.

Even though I told the krou that I did not want to learn, he let me watch. He chanted something different as he drew each line. He never stopped chanting until he was finished. When he finished, he prepared a lot of baysey, and he conducted a

¹⁵¹ *Yoan always have mantra words associated with them. The mantra words are a blend Pali and Cambodian. Sometimes they mix the words together so much, that they don't even make any literal sense in either Pali or Cambodian. They just have a mysterious sound. The sound is more important than the word itself. Some krou and Buddhist monks believe that the words are very powerful, very influential. (John Meas, Interview 10/29/02) The mantra (sound) is even more important than the yantra (form), since form in its essence is sound condensed as matter. (Khanna 1979:21).*

ceremony for nearly a half-hour.¹⁵² Usually teachers perform the ceremony for ten or twenty yoan at once. But my yoan was special, so he did it separately.

Some people believe that ksae changkeh and yoan have power, and some people don't. Usually people who are involved in music believe it, but not everybody. But musicians believe it more than your average person does.¹⁵³

All babies in Cambodia wear ksae changkeh around their necks to keep bad luck away from them. My son had one too. When people get older, like twelve or thirteen years old, they switch and wear them around their waists. Older people wear a different type of ksae changkeh than children do, and they wear them for a variety of more specific reasons. When you grow up, you can't wear it around your neck! You'll look like a child!

After the Khmer Rouge...I changed my mind. Before Pol Pot, I really believed in the magic. I believed in it one hundred percent. But after the communists, now, I only believe in it, like, seventy-five percent. That's the truth. When I first got these things, everyone told me that if I used them, no one could hurt me. But the Khmer Rouge tortured everybody. The ksae changkeh and the yoan couldn't stop them. Before Pol Pot came, the krou who made these said that no one could kill them or hurt

¹⁵² Khanna notes that *yantras* remain inert until they acquire their psychic forces through a *life-giving ceremony*. (1979: 97-154)

¹⁵³ The "technology" of *yantra* is based on the idea that a fundamental interrelationship exists between man, cosmos, and *mantra*. When man loses his connection to the cosmos, he can reunite with it through *mantra* vibrations. (Khanna 1979: 75) The physical arrangement of matter in the universe can be reorganized through sounds that have the power to shift anti-matter. An alternative and more common explanation for the efficacy of *yantras* is psychology: If people believe the diagram helps them, they will embark on their activities with renewed enthusiasm, confidence, and faith. (Khanna 1979: 160)

them. But I saw the Khmer Rouge kill those teachers. I saw that the power wasn't there. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 8/31/02)

This chapter has focused on the spiritual foundations of *pin peat*, showing how traditional Khmer belief systems and social morality converge in music's enduring roles as repository of cultural knowledge; sacred offering; and formula for establishing contact with ancestors, deceased teachers, and divine guardians of the universe. Essential Khmer life lessons about the perpetuity of human existence and the significance of behaviors by individuals reborn into specific times, places, and societies have reemerged as central to the tradition. They have resurfaced especially in association with, and often merging, the concepts of teacher, repertoire, protection, and sound. The synopsis below reviews these instances and proceeds with a summary of the ways in which mimetic processes, which paired visual with sonic devices, fostered *the harmonious correlation between the terrestrial and celestial planes of reality* (Cravath 1985: 48) within the context of the chapter. The outline also exposes the fact, stated by Rice in the introduction to this volume, that musical truths are not substantiated through logic and reasoning, but rather, through experience and recollection. (1994: 305)

In the introduction to this text, Merriam was cited for promoting the study of music in culture and as human behavior based on the idea that music is inseparable from the people who create it. (1964) In Khmer music and dance-drama, this fact is most strongly validated through the nature of teacher-student relationships. The importance of this alliance was introduced in Chapter Three and will be discussed

further in Chapter Six. However, the exploration of the philosophical basis of Khmer performing arts in the present chapter could not progress without observing the custom of reciprocal exchange between teachers and students. Indeed, as Cravath indicated with respect to Khmer classical dance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *it was certainly the direct transmission from the old teachers to the young and ever-willing students which allowed the dance to be perpetuated.* (1985: 148) Like sentiments were expressed throughout this chapter and revealed an underlying assumption that individual artistic ability is always a result of the combination of personal and mentor efforts. Ngek Chum first alerted us to this fact by escorting us into the chapter with memories of learning his first song from his grandmother. Monyra Srun followed him with reflections about her dedication to conducting weekly *sampeah krou* rituals in honor of her teacher and *Lok Ta Moha Aysey*. Chum returned as the exclusive narrator for the next few sections in order to recognize those who were critical to his musical education. He explained that his grandfather arranged for him to study under multiple teachers, because *He wanted me to be well educated.* Further, Chum noted that *my teachers did not compete with each other, because each knew his role in my education.* This conduct underscores the power of Khmer cultural models that promote and praise distinctive personal contributions to a greater social whole. In keeping with this theory, Chum fondly recalled the various ways that each of his principal teachers enriched his competency. Ngek Chum's narratives also demonstrated that, although teacher-student affiliations were mutual, they were also hierarchical. The standing of teacher was clearly a venerated one that could only be attained by demonstrating the requisite abilities and attitudes and arriving at a particular phase in the life cycle.

When Chum tutored students on his teacher's behalf, status distinctions were reflected symbolically in his title and pay and through the fact that he remained responsible for upholding the reputation of his teacher.

In conjunction with her memories, Monyra Srun identified one song in particular, *Sathukar*, as essential to the efficacy of the dialogues with her teacher and the defender of the dance. This recital was the first in the chapter to announce the complex synthesis of teachers, repertoire, protection, and sound in Khmer music and dance-drama. Ngek Chum subsequently equated the song with teachers. He specified that, in accordance with this posture, *You should respect it*. He proceeded to describe the mutually custodial relationship that students enter with the piece when they agree to learn it. Foremost, if the composition is to function effectively, it should be transmitted directly from teacher to student. Secondly, *Once you learn Sathukar, don't ever forget it*. And finally, students must protect it from unauthorized transfer. If musicians follow these guidelines with pure intentions, they can feel comfort in knowing that they have done everything in their power to activate the song's force. The remaining factors promoting the success of a performance reside in the hands of fate.

Ngek Chum described a similar covenant between a musician and a consecrated *sampho*. Like his portrait of *Sathukar*, he compared the *sampho* to a *krou*. He noted that, with this concept in mind, *Everybody respects the sampho*. In order to honor, preserve, and nurture the power of the drum, Chum's grandfather took special care of his *sampho* and made offerings to it every night. His grandfather even performed elaborate rituals for it once a month. Further, a musician's committed

relationship with his drum began with its acquisition. According to Chum, *When we needed a sampho, we didn't just go out and buy one. We made our own. And if someone didn't know how to make their own sampho, they would ask a specialist to construct one for them.*

Chum continued to discuss the connections among teachers, repertoire, protection, and sound with respect to the sequence of pieces known collectively as *Homrong*. He explained that, as a whole, these twelve songs provide musicians with all of the essential tools they need to perform any *pin peat* piece. They are, in other words, what Brinner refers to as *Special keys to knowledge...an item or group of items that is thought to contain the essence of an entire domain of knowledge.* (1995: 129)

Ngek Chum stated that the pieces of *Homrong* also contain the unique “voices” of the musicians who perform in a style that merges their individual with their teachers’ *phloev*. In addition to being a mark of fine musicianship, this condition enables ancestor teachers to distinguish their students from other musicians when they are being summonsed from the spirit world. Through the performance of *Homrong*, artists make offerings *to the deities or spirits* (Cravath 1985: 389) on the one hand, and they appeal to ancestors to bless performances with beauty, technical mastery, and the generative strength necessary to foster parity between the mundane and cosmic worlds on the other. The full and rare performance of *Homrong* promotes the fusion of earthly and heavenly territories by creating *a world of virtual time.* (Blacking 1969: 38)

According to Blacking, music can establish such a state by producing a break with daily patterns of time and space. Under these conditions, people tend to *experience greater intensity of living...[and]...appreciate the quality rather than the length of*

time spent doing something. (1969: 38) Ngek Chum indicated that, performed prior to a dance-drama presentation, *Homrong* constructed *virtual time* by advancing through three phases: 1) inviting and transporting music teachers and the deities of the arts to the scene through the performance of *Sathukar*, *Trak*, and *Kaman*; 2) calling the spirits of the dance teachers and the characters to be represented in the play to infuse the dancers, costumes, props, and make-up with their powers and to bless the stage during the costume change; and 3) gathering all participants—human and supernatural—to the stage to initiate the dance-dramatization with the performance of *Chha Banhchoh*.

The examples of constructing the Buddha and temple of Vatt Sangker, imbuing a *sampho* with sacred power, and producing Ngek Chum's *kansaeng yoan* illustrated how the energy and knowledge embedded within Khmer music and dance-drama and its sacred elements become animated through human action during intervals of *virtual time*. As indicated in the introduction to this dissertation, this action involves the auspicious union of a “*magical position*” and a “*magical moment*” in the structure and movement of the universe. (Swearer 1995: 74) In the “sound-spheres” presented in this chapter, such “positions” appeared as visual representations (*yoan*), while the “moments” emerged as sounds (*mantra*). For instance, in the example of Vatt Sangker, the *pin peat* ensembles were arranged in a formation that surrounded the location of the Buddha on eight sides, representing the totality of the universe (visual pattern). In tandem with this structure, the *pin peat* music continued without cessation, the sounds of one group layered upon the others (sonic pattern), for approximately one week: from the beginning to the end of the temple construction process. The formation of this twofold “wall” around the site of the Buddha engendered a protective barrier

between the statue and any harm that might approach it. Similarly, Chum described how a sanctified *sampho* gained its force through a ritual that joined the chanting of *mantra* syllables with a *yoan* that was designed on the interior of the drum. Further, it is notable that it was believed that the power of the *sampho* could also be disturbed by inappropriate human action: contact with females. Finally, Ngek Chum expounded upon the process by which a *krou* fabricated his *kansaeng yoan*, conveying how the ritual specialist decompressed and vitalized the structure of the *yoan* drawn on the handkerchief by reciting *secret words*. The *krou* instructed Chum to recharge the *kansaeng yoan* in times of need by rubbing it on his face.

With respect to this concluding example, it is significant to note that, despite the expertise of the adepts who created his collection of *yoan*, Ngek Chum only carried one of these—a *ksae changkeh* produced by his biological father—with him on a regular basis and into his life under the Khmer Rouge. This choice underscores the weight of family relations, especially parents, in Khmer culture. The importance of kinship among Cambodians was highlighted in the introduction to this manuscript and in Chapters One, Two, and Three. In the latter, this bond was presented in terms of the Sigala sutra, a Buddhist teaching about six directions comprising one's social system. Within that framework, parent-child relations supercede all other attachments. Corresponding to this perspective is the initial moral lesson taught to Khmer children: *that parents are their "first gods."* (Smith-Hefner 1999: 95) Demonstrating proper behavior toward teachers, ancestors, and deities is essentially an extension of this lesson to one's broader network. (Smith-Hefner 1999: 95) Moreover, this hierarchy of the parental over other relations is also evident in Ngek Chum's *kansaeng yoan* which

places the status of the Buddha's father and mother above that of the Buddha himself. It is in accordance with this inference that, concerning his personal use, Ngek Chum attributed greater potency to the talisman crafted by his father than to those created by occult specialists.

Commentaries in previous chapters have revealed that the importance of Khmer performing arts as a vessel of cultural doctrines, precious offering, and communications medium can only be authenticated through personal conviction and encounters.¹⁵⁴ During the course of this chapter, Ngek Chum reinforced this stance multiple times. For instance, in response to my query about the power inherent in *Sathukar*, he replied, *I can't prove that. But I think that, if you believe it, it's true.* With respect to the efficacy of a sanctified *sampho*, he maintained that, *when there's power in a drum, the sound, the feeling, is very different.* When contemplating whether the popping of his favorite *ksae changkeh* on the night he ate dog was a coincidence or not, he questioned, *Why did it pop on that day?* And comparing his pre-war and post-war perspectives on the power of *yoan*, he related that, *now, I only believe in it, like, seventy-five percent.*

These speculations about the connections between mystical life forces and sound elucidate the sanctity of *pin peat* as a source of knowledge that can transcend ordinary boundaries of time and space. It is with this perspective in mind (either consciously or intuitively) that dedicated artists pay frequent homage to their teachers with offerings that symbolize purity, beauty, fertility, and prosperity. By protecting

¹⁵⁴ For example in Chapter 2, Sochietah Ung determined that his artistry is *fate*, and Puthyrith Sek interpreted his participation in the arts as part of the *luck* of his relocation to the United States.

and nurturing the treasures passed on through countless generations, musicians who are the keepers and facilitators of sacred sound can continue to connect humans with the cosmos and to stir inexplicable delight among their audiences. How do the bearers of such marvelous forces develop their skills?

Chapter 6: *Rien Tam Krou*

(Learning through the Teacher)

The introduction to this dissertation highlights one overarching question as the basis for exploring the living tradition of Khmer music and dance-drama at “Virginia” and the “Vatt”: *What does it mean when this performance takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants?* (Small 1990: 3) The preceding chapters have illustrated how relationships, from the personal to the global, are ultimately the key to addressing this question. On one hand, they have shown that the performance of Khmer music and dance-drama is driven by a complex of artistic, cultural, and social practices that *integrates elements of individual responsibility, mutual obligation, and status into a broader whole.* (Smith-Hefner 1999: 205) Consequently, participation in the art form serves as one means of constructing, preserving, and reinforcing these relationships. On the other hand, the discussions have also introduced some of the roles that performance—in tandem with historical, political, economic, geographical, community, and personal change—has played in renegotiating the standards that inform approaches to balancing independence with community duty.¹⁵⁵ (Becker 1981; Blacking 1969; Brinner 1995; Feld 1984; Feld 1991; Kaepler 1996; McNiell 1995; Pemberton 1987; Roseman 1984; Roseman 1989; Seeger 1979; Stokes 1997; Turino 1993; Walser 1993)

¹⁵⁵ These ideas will be addressed in greater detail in Chapters 7, 8 and 9.

This chapter takes a closer look at the dynamics of counterpoising the ideals of individual identity and social relatedness within the context of transmitting Khmer music and dance-drama. In particular, it highlights and examines the centrality of six *historically enduring* (Hinton 1998: 97) factors—respect for teachers, commitment, destiny, patience, self-initiative, and active participation—that lead to productive teacher-student relationships. The constancy of the significance of these elements *despite historical and structural change* (Hinton 1998: 97) in the Khmer performing arts suggests that they are the keys to sustaining the healthy continuation of the art form. This proposition becomes particularly convincing when one considers that *the traditional process of learning is as important as the performance, i.e., the product...The product without understanding...the processes involved is an incomplete understanding.* (Trimillos 1983: 9)

The “sound-spheres” below, convey how interpersonal exchange steered according to the six conventions identified here leads to exemplary artistry. First, dancers Masady Mani, Sochietah Ung, and Vathana Say note how this process begins when students demonstrate their love for the tradition and a sincere desire to learn. Having accomplished that understanding, students and teachers embark together on a lifelong alliance that is based upon trust and unconditional sharing.

When you study, you obey the teachers. And when you obey the teachers, they love you in return. You start a relationship like that. You build trust. Once they trust you, they will teach you everything. That’s how the relationships work. (Masady Mani, ADAPT Interview 7/18/01)

Neak Krou Leas taught me the male roles, the yeak.¹⁵⁶ She never taught a male student before, but she taught me. I did everything for her. I got up early in the morning. I cooked and cleaned for her. This is the old fashioned way. When she saw that, she knew that I was serious.

But that's the way to really learn. Don't be so proud. Don't think, "I pay you, now you have to teach me." If you do that, teachers won't really give you details.

And teachers can be very picky and very mean. Sometimes they hit and yell. They act in a way that really gets to you. It makes you want to try harder. It makes you learn.

But they don't do that to everyone. Teachers only choose some students to work on. If teachers don't take you seriously, they say, "That's good. You learned enough." (Sochietah Ung, Interview 7/15/99)

It's true that if you go in half-heartedly, if you don't want to do it, you will not be successful. Unless you have the heart for it, unless you pay respect to the spirits, only then will you be successful. Like, when you're on stage, when I was little my teacher (Khatna Peou who passed away this year) was always telling me, "In order to be good, you must pay respect to the people who came first." So when you're on stage, they hold like a light towards you to make you beautiful. I look at other successful dancers and wonder, "Why? What makes them so good?" When I see them every day, I'm like, "They look normal." But on the stage, it's a spiritual thing that connects to

¹⁵⁶ *Yeak*, or the demon role, is one of the four major character types in Khmer dance-drama.

you and makes you successful. But if you don't want it... (Vathana Say, Workshop 10/29/99)

“Generations Later, This Tradition was Inevitably Passed Down to Me”

Smith-Hefner's studies of Khmer socialization and identity illustrate the belief that a child's future depends on his or her destiny. Parents and teachers must identify and nurture that fate. Children are thought to have particular qualities that are coded within their personalities, in part as a result of their behavior in past lives. (1995, 1999) *Caregivers consistently emphasize that it is important to pay attention to a child's behavior so as to assess that child's character and likely path.* (1995: 207)

The belief that individual fate and aptitude are conjoined with personal disposition (*nisaïy*) was introduced in Chapter Three. This notion is central to the effective transmission of Khmer performing arts.

Ny Sin and Kantya Nou are among the master dancers who moved to Maryland from *Khao I Dang* refugee camp in the early 1980s.¹⁵⁷ Their mother, Khatna Peou, was a dancer in the Royal Palace and later became the head dance instructor at the “Vatt.” In the following “sound-spheres,” Ny Sin and Kantya Nou describe how they became dancers. Their stories suggest that the combination of the will to learn (both conscious and intuitive) and personal, social, and physical circumstances commanded their destinies. These conjunctures encompass inherited talent, repeated observation of dancers at the Royal Palace, extended and intensive practice

¹⁵⁷ Raci Say introduced Khatna Peou, Ny Sin, and Kantya Nou in Chapter 1. Khatna Peou passed away on March 25, 1999. Ny Sin and Kantya Nou now teach at the “Vatt.”

opportunities, discipline, grace, and enthusiasm. Experienced teachers recognized these personal qualities and then guided the aspiring young dancers toward mastery of the roles that were most suitable for their physical traits.

Although I started dancing on stage at the age of five, I started learning much earlier, because my mother worked in the Palace as a singer and dancer. She was the third generation. My mother used to go with her aunt to the Palace.

So when my mother went to the Palace in the morning, I went with her. I was only learning how to walk, but I would dress just like the other dancers, just like I was ready to rehearse, and I just practiced and practiced.

I started out learning the female role. But as I got older, my hands and legs grew long. My body changed a little bit. And my face was a little long. So Neak Krou Yitho taught me the male role.

Since I was little, I always wanted to dance. I guess I was kind of crazy. Even at home I would dance in front of the mirror. And when I was very little, I watched some Indian movies. They inspired me to dress up and dance. All my life I wanted to be a dancer...all my life. (Ny Sin, ADAPT Interview 7/22/01)¹⁵⁸

I had a desire to become a dancer at a young age. I would go to the Palace with my mother to watch the dance when I was three years old. She was a teacher there. I would lift my hands and legs pretending to dance. Not too long after that, my mother took me there to study. I also studied academic subjects there. When I was six

¹⁵⁸ Translation by Sovath Chum.

years old, I went to school outside of the Palace. I took classes like everybody else, but I still continued to dance.

I was interested in dancing, because my mother told me that long ago the dance was born as an entertainment for the King. Back then, there weren't many professions for women, and dancing was an honorable, prestigious, and rewarding career. Generations later, this tradition was inevitably passed down to me.

During practices, there were many master instructors watching and keeping an eye out for students that had what it took to perform more demanding roles. Students do not choose which master instructor will teach them. The teachers watched, and depending on how well you executed the movements, they would choose you to inherit their skills and knowledge. It's all up to teachers to decide who will do what and what will become of them.

I was only offered a more advanced role when I proved that I had the discipline, gracefulness, and an eagerness to learn more. Neak Krou Leas was the first to instruct me in the role of the yeak. In addition to learning at the Palace, I also went to her house to practice. She was my teacher from the beginning until the Khmer Rouge took over the country. (Kantya Nou, ADAPT Interview 6/25/01)

“In the Old, Old Times, You Didn’t Ask Questions, Period”

Kantya Nou’s comments above point to the powerful role that teachers play in a student’s education. Her description of deferring to teachers is echoed throughout the experiences of Khmer performing artists. Their inclinations are grounded in the more general Khmer value system, introduced in Chapter Five, which places a high social status on teachers. Smith-Hefner indicates that this recognition is based upon karmic theory according to which *educated persons are believed to have amassed significant merit in their past lives in order to have achieved such an esteemed status in this life.* (1999: 132)

Ny Sin, Masady Mani, and Puthyrith Sek elaborate upon the experience of exhibiting respect for their teachers, noting that they demonstrate their reverence via obeisance, endurance, and ritual. Through these actions, they display an understanding that their skills are the combined product of their individual efforts and their teachers’ benevolence. They also emphasize the realization that the art form is one of incalculable richness and maturity, one that pales in comparison to a single human lifetime. With this awareness, these artists have continued to study, practice, teach, perform, and regenerate their traditions. They indicate that these behaviors have been reciprocated through their teachers’ care and generosity in imparting knowledge that bears value beyond any set of techniques. Rather, the wisdom they have gained enriches the quality of their lives.

Before dancing, we pay respect to the teachers as a ritual. I don't know why, but we always do it on Thursdays. I never asked questions about it. In the old, old times, you didn't ask questions, period. First of all, you respect, or the teachers say, "Why do you talk so much?" So we kept our questions to ourselves. In Cambodia, especially in the Palace, children had no say to older people. If children tried to say something, their teachers would think that they have a smart mouth and a bad attitude. They wouldn't like you, and you wouldn't be able to dance on stage. (Ny Sin, ADAPT Interview 7/22/01)

I had like four or five teachers, but I had only one main teacher, Om¹⁵⁹ Leas. She is very, very strict. She hurt me, too! But I could not show her my feelings. I had to keep smiling. I could not say, "Ooh, ooh, it hurts!" I couldn't do that, uh-uh. If she doesn't like you, you're going to be in the corner. And if you are in the corner, you cannot improve yourself. You cannot learn anything. If she doesn't like you, that's it. And when the teachers like you, they tend to give you everything they know. (Masady Mani, ADAPT Interview 7/18/01)

I can't tell you what my strengths are. I have no authority to speak on this matter. Only the master teachers can say I'm best in this or that role. Only the teachers can see that. I may think that I dance well in a certain role, but the teacher

¹⁵⁹ She is talking about *Neak Krou* Leas with whom Kantya Nou and Sochietah Ung studied. She uses the honorific "Om" instead of "Neak Krou." "Om," roughly equivalent to "Aunt" or "Uncle," is used towards elders who are older than one's own parents but not old enough to be one's grandparents. It is more endearing than "Neak Krou."

may see it otherwise. Many teachers—Khatna Peou, Rejena Nou, Ny Sin, and Kantya Nou—have watched over me and corrected me as necessary. Everybody has corrected me.

How could I stop paying respect to my teachers? Once you become a student, you have to respect forever, for a lifetime. You see, the teachers that taught me gave me something that was a part of them. That something is good. It is something that makes you a happy, well-rounded, nice person who is respectful of others. That is why I must carry on the tradition. This knowledge was passed down for generations. Therefore, I must do the same as the ancestors did. If I fail to pass down what was taught to me, I'm afraid that the teachers would laugh at me. (Puthyrih Sek, ADAPT Interview 6/17/01)

“It Was Soooo Difficult...But, Oh, I Got It”

Mere destiny, deference, and endurance do not lead to fine artistry. Aspiring students must also demonstrate sincere effort in their endeavors. Cheerful persistence in the face of a potential teacher's “rejection” and discouragement displays one's commitment, cleverness, and ability to solve problems with minimal guidance. Such performance not only wins a teacher's affection, but it also serves as an initial and essential lesson in extracting artistic secrets from a teacher. Masady Mani and music student, Lany Lang, share their memories of making their patience and commitment evident to their prospective teachers.

If you really put your heart into it, listen, and then take to heart whatever you study in class, then you will do a good job. In Cambodia, they call it yok chett krou.¹⁶⁰ You make offerings like fruit. And you don't give up.

One day, I brought food to my teacher at her home. But she wouldn't open the door for me. I don't know why. Maybe she wanted to know if I have patience or not. If you come again and again she thinks, "Oh she really wants to learn." Some people, they come one time, two times, and then they give up. When the teacher sees that, she thinks, "Oh, forget it. Maybe she just wanted to learn for fun."

You have to keep going. Even if she won't open the door, you have to keep going until she opens it. You have to be patient. (Masady Mani, ADAPT Interview 7/18/01)

Lok Krou¹⁶¹ did not take me seriously when I first started to study music. In Cambodia, boys usually play instruments, not girls. Plus, I'm older. I'm not a kid.

But I always wanted to play music. I love music. Then, in 1992 I went to do social work in Khao I Dang camp for a month. I was working with a psychiatric team from Howard University. There was a workshop at the camp with all kinds of instruments. I bought six tro. When I got home, I hung them up on my wall, hoping that someday I would be able to play.

Then I talked to the president of Cambodian American Heritage. He said that they had a music teacher, but that he only played for the dancers.

¹⁶⁰ Literally, "take the teacher's heart."

¹⁶¹ She is talking about Ngek Chum.

One day in 1995, I took my instrument there. I hoped they would change their minds.

Krou Ngek didn't really seem like he wanted to teach me. He didn't think I would go anywhere. And being a woman, people laughed.

I started out learning kheum. I guess that Krou Ngek realized that I was not going to go away until he taught me something. So he probably just thought, "Maybe just one song."

The first song was Lo Neang. The title means something like teasing or luring a young lady. It's a wedding song. Actually, it's for the honeymoon, to make the bride...to make the bride... whatever...So that was the first song. Then I was thinking to myself, "What is he trying to tell me?"

He showed me just one short piece. He didn't tell me how to hold the sticks. He didn't tell me how to hit the strings, nothing. He played the whole song. He played it so fast. He played the whole song, for twenty minutes. It meant nothing to me. When he finished, I asked, "When will I be playing like that?" His answer was, "You're too old."

So he gave me one section of that song. It was soooo difficult...but, oh, I got it. That's what I believe. There's nothing I cannot play. I was determined. I mean, you need time. And the first thing is that you really need to like it. If you really like it, then you'll want to commit to it.

I studied all day Sunday and all day Saturday, too. I practiced every night, two or three hours a night, sometimes all night. I worked really, really hard. I was exhausted.

I liked to do it. And I also liked the challenge. See? If Lok Krou didn't say I was old, I probably wouldn't have cared less. But when he said that, it just stuck in my mind. I thought, "I'm going to prove this guy wrong. It has nothing to do with age." I was nervous about that too. I wondered, "Maybe he's right. I am getting older. Maybe my hearing is not as sharp as it used to be. Maybe he's right..." But after a year or two, I thought, "If I can match the sound from the tape recorder to the hammered dulcimer string, it has nothing to do with my ear."

And the other day, I played Lo Neang. I practiced it for about two weeks until I was really good at it. Then I went to my lesson and said, "Okay, Lok Krou, you play tro and I play kheum." So we both played, and it went really well.

So now I put that song away. You're not going to hear me play it for a long time. It's all over now. (Lany Lang, Interview 1/12/02)

Finding Your Own Path

Knowledge comes from study; having comes from searching.

--Khmer proverb, in Smith 2001: 25

The "sound-spheres" above highlight key parameters of successful transmission of Khmer performing arts. Students and teachers are responsible for adhering to these guidelines if they wish for mastery.

Yet, Chapter Four introduced the importance of balancing loyalty with autonomy. It emphasized that individualizing music through *phloev*, or “paths,” plays an important role in maintaining artistic vibrancy.

This same philosophy applies to artistic study. That is, while acting in accordance with traditional social hierarchies, students are also encouraged to traverse along their own paths of knowledge acquisition. In an ideal situation, they are expected to join what they learn directly from their teachers with what they attain through their own observations and experiences. In Chapter Five, Ngek Chum attributed his musical proficiency to this educational process. He indicated that his exposure to a broad range of teachers, instruments, music, and versions of the same song resulted in his ability to *play any music well...play any instrument...[and] take any job that came along*. (ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

This instructional approach correlates with the notion of *nisaiy* discussed above. Remaining ever conscious of the futility of coercion, parents and teachers avoid pressuring students, believing that *educational achievement is ultimately up to the individual child*. (Smith-Hefner 1999: 18)

Below, Sovanny Chun, a dancer who graduated from Cambodia’s University of Fine Arts in 1989 and currently teaches in “Virginia,” introduces the role which self-initiative plays in the process of teaching and learning Khmer performing arts. She notes some exceptions to adhering to a teaching principle that condones a student’s self-exploration. However, she also indicates that such “resistors” ultimately admit that curiosity leads students along the most constructive path to enlightenment—a course that benefits both students and their artistic communities.

You know, eighty percent we learn from ourselves; the teacher, only twenty percent. I mean ...in school, you go to class for only one or two hours, and after that, you go home, and you learn by yourself. You search everywhere and everything for whatever you can learn. It's the same for dance and music. You only stay with the teacher for one or two hours. But you go back home. You practice by yourself, and you search, you know? I mean, it's not only true for art, but for everything.

Teachers actually like it when you study more. I learned classical dance for almost six years, and then I moved to folk dance. So I know both. When I suggested it, my main teacher said, "Fine, try it." It's especially good for when we travel. Fewer people can do more, so they save money. Masady learned folk when she came to the United States, too. She really specializes in classical dance. Only Devi didn't study both. The teacher didn't let her. It's kind of a rule that older teachers have, because Devi is the star of the classical dance. So Neak Krou Chea Samy wouldn't let her learn folk at all.

So I learned different types of drama. I learned basak,¹⁶² yike,¹⁶³ mohori ...and another one...they call it pramortaiy.¹⁶⁴ All of the teachers appreciated it.

¹⁶² She is referring to a classical theater genre (also known as *lkaon basak*) that features literary improvisation. It is associated with Cambodia's Basak River Region.

¹⁶³ A musical theater genre that integrates dialogue with singing and is punctuated by the accompaniment of drums of various shapes and sizes.

¹⁶⁴ A nearly extinct form of popular theater that blends dancing, drama, and singing (much like a Broadway musical) and which features sweet, romantic stories with titles like, "Wilting Flower." Sovanny had the fortune of studying this dramatic form under the great master, Em Theay, whose scripts for the dramas were printed only in Thai, not Khmer. (Sovanny Chun, Conversation 8/1/03)

Once in a while, teachers in Cambodia don't open their minds up, especially some classical teachers. You know, if the krou likes you, she takes only you. If someone else wants to learn from behind, the teacher doesn't like it.

So sometimes, they were mad. But in the end, they appreciate what you have. They say, "Okay, we cannot stop that girl." Because, you know, I'm not doing anything bad! I'm just learning! I'm a dancer. I have to know everything about art.
(Sovanny Chun, Interview 2/1/02)

*If you're timid with your teacher, you won't learn.
If you're timid with your wife, you won't have children.*

--Khmer proverb, in Fisher-Nguyen 1994: 95

The vignettes below feature commentary by four students—Lany Lang, me, Alisa DiCaprio, and Visal Um—of Khmer music. They illustrate how self-initiative and individualized adventurous study are critical aspects of the learning process. These qualities are therefore essential to acquiring the skills necessary for producing Khmer musical sound. Without this kind of personal connection to and engagement in the art form, the learning process becomes stifled, and the music is rendered meaningless.

First, Lany Lang describes how she employed keen observation skills, focus on particular goals, and determination to overcome challenges presented by the teacher. Second, I invite readers into two episodes from my first year of studying Khmer music. These narratives illustrate the repercussions of stepping too softly around the teacher and accepting only the literal content of a teacher's communication. Third,

Alisa DiCaprio reflects upon her encounters with Khmer music. Her exposure to it, via her more general interest in Cambodia, seems almost fateful. Further, her attraction to the *whole experience* of *pin peat* suggests that she possessed an instinctive understanding of the importance of group interaction and active participation in the genre. Then, her approach to study led her through a process of discarding her assumptions about music learning. She offers a clear recital of the process of internalizing Khmer music through a cycle of imitation, multi-sensory observation, and feedback. Finally, Visal Um experiments with the boundaries of directing the course of one's own musical education. He takes an unconventional, *scientific approach* to learning, one that is influenced by his personal history and motivation to standardize and produce accurate records of Khmer music.

So I just watched everything Lok Krou did. That's how I did it. I asked him for what I wanted. Then he was willing to show me.

One day, I brought a CD and played the exact song I wanted to learn. So, the following week, he was playing for me. Oh boy, it was so beautiful! The way he plays, it sounds so beautiful. You can fall in love with that song!

When I got home, I couldn't figure out what he was playing. So finally, I went back and asked him. Then he made it a little bit easier and showed me what he was doing. It was really helpful. So I learned that, for me, if I don't know the song, if I never heard it before, it's better to play it a straightforward, simple way. Then I can get used to it.

See, at first, I started with the hardest piece. What I concluded was that the teacher gives you a hard piece, as a kind of test to see if you're really serious or not. So he gave me all this fancy stuff, like the way he sometimes plays three notes at one time, like zoom-zang! Sometimes, he plays four: doong-trong! If you don't sit down with him and ask him to show you, there's no way you'll know how he did it.

To tell the truth, in the beginning, I didn't realize that I could do it myself. I complained about the first lesson. I said, "Lok Krou, maybe you have to change your teaching style. You know, the first lesson was really hard." But after I learned that difficult piece of music, he said, "See? Now whatever I give you is a piece of cake." I said, "You're right, but now I cannot play slowly. I have to play fast." Because of the way I started out, I learned to imitate him exactly. So now, I have to learn how to slow down.

The whole thing is really amazing. I don't believe I can play! It's just like I hit the lottery! But it's not just one time. It's like I hit everyday! (Lany Lang, Interview 1/12/02)

Preparing for my first New Year's performance at "Virginia" presented me with a powerful lesson in self-reliance.

The auditorium of the Fairlington elementary school-turned-community center felt larger and colder that day. The number of offerings on the altar was at least double that of each of the previous weeks. At least two chickens and a boar's head, an assortment of fruit, rice, and floral bouquets rested at the altar. All of these items were

interspersed with burning incense and candles. A stick of incense jutted out from the sampho as well.

Mothers sat on the straw mat to next to the altar busily sewing yellow beaks to red baseball caps. These were an important part of the costume for the Parakeet Dance.

This dress rehearsal, for the big New Year's performance the following week, was not to be taken lightly.



Figure 18-Students Preparing for the Parakeet Dance
(Photo credit Joanna Pecore)

Surely, I'd have a chance to practice before my turn came up, I thought. It will be okay. I'll run through it today and then work out a practice schedule with the other roneat aik students.

Theoretically, all of the students were supposed to share "Virginia's" instruments. In reality, I hadn't been explicit enough to cash in on my chance. So far, I was doing pretty well by recording my lessons and practicing in my head. I wasn't

becoming a master musician, but I was making progress. I had decided to ride out the dynamics of my first year with the school and then strategically plan to improve the situation over the course of the summer, fall, and following New Year's season. Non-confrontation. At least initially. I wanted to get to know my environment before I did anything that might be "risky."

What I believe I learned on this day, what I'm calling self-reliance, may be precisely what I feared as "risky."

I was getting nervous. My turn was nearing, and the student who brought the roneat home hadn't arrived yet. I sat on the sidelines, trying to remain calm and chatting with people in the community.

Then, Mrs. Tes shouted into her microphone. "Phleng Khmer!"

I continued to look for the student with the roneat...no sign of him.

"Phleng Khmer!" I heard Mrs. Tes screech again.

Suddenly, someone nudged me, "It's your turn." (Soon thereafter, I learned that "phleng Khmer" means "Cambodian music.")

I was stunned, but tried to keep my cool. This was especially hard for the minutes that were to come since I discovered two things that made me want to run away from the rehearsal and never come back: 1) I was to play a solo, and 2) I was up first.

I took a deep breath and picked up the mallets. They weren't even tied together! Beginners have to have their mallets tied together so they won't mess up when trying to hit notes an octave apart. Only professional musicians can play without

the string! Here I was: no practice, no string, and no hope. I tried to suppress my anxiety and frustration.

I was relieved momentarily when Lok Krou appeared and tied the mallets together for me.

Okay. It was time to play. To feign composure, I bowed to the altar. Then, I hit it...uh, them...I mean all of them. I hit just about every note on the xylophone. I didn't know where to start. This was Lok Krou's xylophone. It's tuning was a little different than that of the instrument I had practiced on. I was doomed. I started and zipped through the piece I had learned, fumbling terribly through the whole thing. I bowed when I was finished. I moved away from the xylophone and handed the mallets to the next student.

Seated center stage with the other students, I may have appeared cool to anyone who bothered to look, but I felt the heat conducting from my spleen out to my earlobes. Now I was desperate, I had to do something about this situation.

When the music students had finished their presentations, I dashed out into the hallway where Lok Krou was chatting with some people. I apologized to him profusely, begging him to help me find a way to practice before the performance. He smirked and said something. I couldn't understand it, really. It may have even been in Khmer and not directed at me. In any case, what he communicated was, "Now?"

I dashed away, embarrassed. I sought refuge in spilling my guts to some of the older students that I had gotten to know. The gist of their reactions was, "You have to practice, regardless of the situation." In a flash, I realized what I should have learned earlier: the right path to becoming a serious student with recognition by the teacher is

assertiveness. I went home and immediately arranged to share the xylophone with the other students for the entire week leading up to the performance.

I got my act together.

As memorable as this dress rehearsal was, months later, it appeared that I needed to be reminded of the necessity of autonomy in learning Khmer music. I had my opportunity when I attempted to start private lessons with *Lok Krou*.

After attending a Khmer music and dance performance in August 1997, I went backstage to greet Lok Krou. He seemed happy to see me, but not too interested in conversing with me.

I begged for his attention and explained, "I would like to take some private lessons with you."

He responded, "Ask Saroeum Tes about it."

I protested, "I did! ... but...but you're the teacher."

He did not answer and turned to his son, Sovann, who was standing next to him. After they exchanged words in Khmer, Sovann turned to me and said, "My Dad is too busy to teach you."

I was dumbfounded. "But ... uh...you know, I plan to pay him," was all I could think to say. Sovann told me his father's price but insisted, "He's too busy." They walked away from me.

All the way home and into the evening I felt horrible. I thought, "Why won't he teach me? What will happen to my field research?" After hours of worry and soul-

searching, I surrendered, thinking, “If he has no time, what can I do? I will just have to play the field research by ear.”

Perhaps fatefully, I had scheduled an interview with dance master Moly Sam for the following day.

After our interview, she asked me, “How is your roneat? You sounded really good at the New Year’s performance. Are you going to study with Krou Ngek? You, know, you should study with him.”

I told her that I wanted to take lessons from him but that he refused me, saying he had no time.

But she disagreed with me. She insisted that he had time. She gave me his phone number and directed me, “Call him tonight. Be direct with him. Tell him clearly that you will pay him.”

Once I went home, I was all ready to go directly to the phone and call him. But it was only 5:15. I had to wait at least until 7:00, when he arrived home from work.

As I waited around, I tried to put my mind on other things. But I kept feeling like I would wimp out.

Finally 7:00 rolled around. I went to the phone. I sat with it in my hand for a while. Suddenly, I thought of something I “had” to do. So I put the receiver down and walked away. I can’t even remember what it was. Start boiling some water? Cutting vegetables? Really, it was insignificant. I was procrastinating.

I went back to the phone and dialed the number. I asked for Chum Ngek and was told I had the wrong number.

Poor pronunciation?

I was temporarily debilitated.

I ran to the phone book but couldn't find the number. Then I called information, and they gave me the same number that was written on the paper.

I called again and tried to speak more clearly. I explained that I was calling about music lessons. The girl on the other end of the phone understood me but said, "He's not home yet. Can I take a message?"

I explained who I was, asked her to have him call me back, made a point of mentioning my intention to pay him for lessons, and hung up.

I was worried. "Will he call back? If so, when?" I wondered if he would get my message.

About thirty minutes later the phone rang. My heart pounded. I was tempted to let the machine pick up. But I couldn't do that! I ran to the phone and picked it up, "Hello?"

The girl I spoke with earlier was on the other end. "My father is here, would you like to speak with him?"

"Yes! Of course!"

Lok Krou was very gentle when he spoke with me. He was even apologetic, explaining, "I am busy now, but I can teach you in October."

"Really? That's wonderful!" I exclaimed. "I'll wait."

Alisa DiCaprio describes how her learning experience was a process of trial and error. Eventually, she found that she learns best through a combination of self-discovery and direct transmission from the teacher.

I started studying about Cambodia when I was twelve years old. I was taking summer classes. There was a two-hour lecture on Cambodia during that course. I thought it was interesting and kind of cool. So, I started studying. I studied it through college. But it was difficult, because Cambodia's not a big field. My professors would say, "Cambodia? How about Thailand?" So what I did was I decided, "Well, I have to do this by myself." So I took classes where the professors would let me write papers on Cambodia. And I took a Buddhism class. And the professor said, "Oh, there's this temple in Silver Spring! You should go there." But I didn't have a car, so I couldn't really go there. But I was so excited to find this great thing. It was this little treasure!

Later, I went to graduate school in DC. I thought, "Oh, my God! Finally! I can go to this temple!" So I called, and I talked to Mrs. Chhim.¹⁶⁵ And she said, "Oh yeah! Just come on Sunday." So I went one day, just to see what it was. I was so excited. So I got there, and they were worshipping already. So I just found someone...it was Vathana's uncle.¹⁶⁶ And he said, "Okay, come on in." So I just sat there and watched. It was the first day of language class. Then, I just went for the language classes every week.

¹⁶⁵ Sovanthary Chhim was introduced in Chapter 3.

¹⁶⁶ She's talking about Puthyrith Sek, who appears throughout this and other chapters.

And then I got into the music. I just thought it was so great. It was so beautiful. I wanted to play. I thought, "Oh my God, I'd love to do that music." 'Cause I would see them playing, and it sounded so...you could just feel the music going through you.

I played piano and trumpet when I was younger, so I always loved music. I started playing music when I was five. I played piano the longest. I played that the best. But my interest in Cambodian music in particular was not connected to that.

I mean, I already had sort of, the musical affinity, right? But it was really the whole experience. It's sort of like when you practice, you're playing it by yourself. But then when you play it with the whole group, it's just completely different. I mean, you can just feel it. You can feel the history, and you can feel the sound, and you can feel...everything about it is just completely different than when you're just sitting there by yourself or maybe listening to a tape.

Let's see. How can I explain this? When I'm playing a piano, it's just me, playing there. Oh, it sounds so nice. And I like piano because you can play all parts of the song by yourself. You don't need other instruments with it. But there's no, there's no sort of, spirit going through you while you're playing the piano. But then when you're playing as part of the ensemble, when you have the sralai and everything else...it's just a feeling that goes with it that I can't explain. It's just like there's something else.

So anyway, what I did was, I asked Lok Krou to teach me the kong thom. That's what I wanted to play. But he said, "Well my daughter plays that, and we don't really need somebody who can do that." At the time, I didn't understand that you don't really have more than one person in the ensemble doing the same instrument. I

was so upset! But then, he said, “Play the small one. It’s the same instrument, but it’s smaller, and it’s just a higher pitch.” So I said, “Okay.”

But then it was like tortuous to learn from Lok Krou! Do you know what’s funny? It’s something that you told me, Joanna. You know the kong is numbered, right? So when he first started teaching me, I wrote the numbers down. But that really didn’t help me. Whatever he would be hitting, I would write down the number. But then later on, because you don’t know the beat, the numbers mean really almost nothing to you. But I would try really hard. I would sort of write them down in different patterns, draw all over the paper in different colors...it was horrible! But then I remember. I was talking to you once, and you said, “You know, that’s not the way you’re supposed to learn it.” You said, “You’re just supposed to learn it by listening.” And you explained the whole thing to me, and I thought, “Huh. Maybe that’s why I can’t learn it. It’s because I’ve been sort of like bucking up against it, right? Saying, ‘Well no, I’ve learned music before by reading notation. So I need to write it down, so I can look at it and I can read it.’” But then I sort of said, “If that’s not the way it’s supposed to be taught, well then that’s not the way I’m supposed to be learning it.” So, yeah, then I stopped writing it down...and I learned it much better!

Actually, I don’t really like learning from a tape either, because the tape’s not perfect. When Lok Krou records the music for me, he might play it a little fast, or he might skip something, or...and I can’t evaluate if he’s skipping it on purpose, or if he’s just remembering the music on the spot and not playing it perfectly the first time. It’s horrible learning from a tape.

I prefer learning directly from the teacher. He shows me like ten or fifteen notes, and I play them until I am just on the edge of having it memorized. And he would say, “Okay, ten more!” And then ten more, and then, just keep playing.

Also he teaches a bunch of us at one time. So I can hear what other people are doing. And so, if it’s a similar instrument, like the roneat, then I get a better idea about what I’m supposed to be playing. I can figure things out a lot more easily. And Lok Krou constantly corrects me. So I would maybe memorize a piece and he would come back and say, “Oh no! Not like that! Do this instead.” And so he corrects it as he teaches, which at the time, of course, is really aggravating, but you don’t get that with a tape.

I know when I’m doing well ’cause Lok Krou smiles at me and says, “Good job!” I find that the one thing that makes him happy is if I have it memorized. It doesn’t matter how good it is, or how fast or slow I play it, it’s if I have it memorized. And he likes that I memorize it quickly. (Alisa DiCaprio, Interview 7/6/02)

In part, Visal Um’s *scientific approach* is driven by his desire to understand the physical properties of music.

I’m originally from Battambang province. In 1975, I went to Thailand to study aviation. That was just a few weeks before the Khmer Rouge took over. If I knew they were coming, I would have brought more money with me! I had only \$500 when I went there, because I was going to find out more about the school and then call home for more money.

So then, I applied to a lot of different countries for relocation. Canada accepted me first, so I went there. It's because I got married that I came to Maryland. I lived in Maryland for about one year, but then I found a better job in New Jersey. So I moved there. Later, I moved to Langhorne, Pennsylvania near Philadelphia. That's where I live now.

I started getting into music about four years ago. First, I brought my daughter to "Virginia" to study dance five years ago. There are some places where she can learn closer to home, but her cousins live in Maryland. She was only like four years old at the time, so I thought it would be nice if she could see her cousins on the weekends when she went to dance class. So that's why we still come here.

And then I started learning music. I tried before. When I was in Canada, I tried to learn the trō. You know, I listened to recordings and tried to copy what I heard. But I couldn't really do it. I wondered, "How is it that those sounds differ from Western music?" I tried that before when I was younger, with the guitar. I could copy some of it, but not all of it. I always wanted to know, "How do those instruments make those sounds?"

That's the kind of person I am. I always want to know why. I really won't do anything unless you can tell me why. You know, when I was a kid, when I was in school, the whole school had to line up to get their vaccines. All the kids just took it. They didn't know what it was or why they were getting it. Me? I refused. The teachers had to fight with me. They really had to talk to me to convince me to get the shot.

It's like the same thing, like when you taste good food, you want to know what ingredients they put in there. What makes it taste so good?

That's how I am with music. When I hear beautiful music, I want to know where the sound is coming from. When I hear Krou Ngek play, he's amazing. I want to know how he does that. It wasn't until later that I realized how lucky it was that I decided to take my daughter to learn dancing in "Virginia." I picked a place where there is a great musician. There aren't musicians like him near me.

So then, I started going to the library and reading everything I could about music. I wanted to learn about it. I wanted to learn about western instruments. So mostly, I read books about western music, western notation and things.

I think the reason I want to know about music is because of my grandfather. I think it's in my genes. He was a musician. And he was an engineer, too. He didn't have a degree or anything, but he was just like an engineer. He was always making, fixing, and learning how to put things back together again. He wanted to know how things worked. That's how I am, too.

I always want to know why.

I take the scientific approach. I guess that comes from my education. I studied physics. I want to know how things work. Cambodian music may be different from western music, but learning about western music helps me to understand Cambodian music better. It gives me something to work with. So first, I'll learn about things like, "What's a C chord?" I don't want just learn how to play it and then keep playing. That's how a lot of Cambodian musicians play. I want to go deeper. I want to know, "Why does this fingering mean C chord?" So I just researched it. I took some books and learned how to play different sounds and different pitches on western instruments.

Then I compare it to Cambodian music. Cambodian music is different, but it's still basically made from seven pitches.

The main thing that drives me is curiosity. I want to know. So I read about music or play music whenever I get bored. My main purpose is to know music in-depth. I'm an electrical engineer. I want to know how the sounds are produced. Studying western music helps. That way the sound can be standardized.

So now, you see what I do. I want to know everything. I look at the instruments, try to figure out how they are made. I try to figure out the frequencies of the tunings. You have the charts I put together.

You see, when the Khmer Rouge came, musicians forgot the exact sound of the music they were playing. The uneducated musicians could not remember what they heard from one minute to the next. I need to buy a \$800 piece of equipment to measure the pitches of what I hear. There's no way a musician can remember exactly what they heard. They listen to somebody play and walk away. What they remember five minutes later is different than what they heard. That's why, when a traditional group gets together, they spend all that time trying to get in tune with each other. There's no standard. When one person plays something, and another person plays the same thing a little bit later, the second guy plays it different from the first guy. He might start on a different note or something. There's no standard.

Like in a western orchestra, the musicians use electronic tuners and things. It doesn't take long for them to get in tune with each other. If there's a standard, people can learn fast. So I use books and tapes. When I learn something from Krou Ngek, I videotape it. I take that tape home, analyze it, and write it down.

I bet I'm the first person in your dissertation who's taking a scientific approach.

(Visal Um, Interview 5/12/02)

Learning from the Inside Out

I told you about Om Leas and how she was so strict. She even hurt me. But she and many other teachers do that, because they want you to remember. Sometimes, if you don't get hurt, you won't remember. When they pinch, you will remember, because you are hurting in the arm that you held wrong. So it is really required sometimes. It's hard, but you can't complain. If you want to learn from the teacher, if you really want to learn and to remember, you do not talk back. If the teacher hurts you, you don't say anything. (Masady Mani, ADAPT Interview 7/18/01)

In *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, Stoller illustrates that *one cannot separate thought from feeling and action*. (1989: 5) He advocates employing the senses in learning, contending that understanding grows in tandem with the expansion of one's sensual horizons. (1989: 4) Rice encourages this approach of diving headfirst into the learning experience. What results is the ability to examine one's own learning process. This examination ultimately leads to deep and long-lasting insights, because it yields *self-understanding*. (1995: 273)

Masady Mani's description above and Ngek Chum's observations below highlight the significance of learning Khmer performing arts through full-body participation. The artists featured in this study repeatedly point to the significance that

informal transmission (Trimillos 1983)¹⁶⁷ has played in their education. Through such experiences, they have been able to embody technique to the extent that it becomes *intuitive*. (Brinner 1995: 146) For example, in Chapter Two, Sochietah Ung attributed his efficient mastery of dancing and costume-making to spending time with his grandmother, who often took him to watch the classical dance in Phnom Penh. In Chapter Three, Sovath Chum says, *When I was a little kid, I hung around with my dad and the musicians. I was dancing the whole time.* And in Chapter Four, Ra Khlay indicated, *I remembered all of the songs that I heard when I was young. Maybe they were in my mind already, from my father. I had the basics in my blood already.*

In the following narrative, Ngek Chum tells me that his childhood surroundings were a major source of his musical abilities. He elaborates upon the role that the integration of *formalized, informal*, emotional, multi-sensory, and cognitive knowledge plays in the mastery of Khmer music.

¹⁶⁷ Trimillos highlights the distinction between *formalized transmission* (*any process in which a mutually acknowledged transactional relationship has been established between teacher and learner* [1983: 2]) and *informal transmission*, which involves situations (such as sleeping through a performance) in which *large amounts of musical information are subliminally absorbed*. (1983: 6) Students who enter into *formalized* educational relationships after or in conjunction with a significant period of *informal transmission* often harness the formalized settings to refine their skills or clarify comprehension of material that they already *know*. (1983: 6) Similarly, Brinner reports that acquiring *intuitive* (as opposed to *explicit*) knowledge through individual observation and participation is prevalent among musicians of Javanese gamelan. (1995: 146)

My ability today is based upon the fact that I grew up with music. Since I was very young, I started to learn step by step and was surrounded by many musicians.

(Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01) I was young. I didn't do anything else. Didn't think about food. Didn't think about money. I only thought about music. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/19/01)

To learn music well, you need to experience it. You need to hear, see, and feel it as much as possible. I believe that when you're learning, you need to see as many performances as possible. Go see and listen to whoever is playing. Whether it's good or bad, it doesn't matter. You can learn from it. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 6/5/02)

When I was young, I listened to music all the time. Sometimes my grandfather played with his group downstairs. I heard it, and I remembered. So now I think that when my teacher showed me the songs, I think that I knew them already. So, I didn't have to learn the song. I just had to listen and look at the way he played it.

I think I concentrated on music more than other people. When I was playing with other kids, when I heard music, like on the radio or something, I was always listening. No one really knew that I was doing that. But my ears were always in the music...because I liked it. I wanted to learn it. I heard a lot of different ways to perform the same pieces, too. So I picked up a lot from what I heard. So I want to tell you, when you hear people playing different versions of the same music, try to remember it. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/19/01)

Music is not something you learn in your mind once and then you're a master. No. You have to keep it in your body. Even if you're the best, you need to play. You need to practice before you perform. You need to warm-up your hands. Your head

might know it, but your hands...you need to remind them. (Ngek Chum, Interview 8/31/02)

Even something that sounds simple like ro¹⁶⁸ on the roneat, you need to practice it a lot. If you want to play well, I recommend practicing in the early morning. Go up and down the keyboard. Do exercises, from up to down, down to up. Start playing slowly and then, pick up the speed. On the first day, play it for one minute. The second day, two minutes. Then, three minutes, and keep going, up to five. That should be enough. In the beginning it hurts...your arms. But later on, it feels okay. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 5/5/01)

You need to keep practicing until you don't have to think anymore. Just play. You know, when you play music and you think too much about moving from this section to that section, you'll get lost. Keep practicing until you go from beginning to end without knowing that you did it. Do you know what I mean? (Ngek Chum, Conversation 9/1/01)

I think you mean that I should learn it until I don't have to think. So that way, when I perform I won't get stuck. But can I give you an example to make sure? I think it's like, when I was a kid...well, maybe this never happened to you, because you're a really good player...but when I was a kid, I did that with piano. I learned really fast, and I forgot. I mean, I didn't forget the music. I was playing it. But I forgot to think about what I was playing. I just played. But sometimes, I went to a competition. I sat in a room with some judges. Normally, I didn't think much, and I played well. But

¹⁶⁸ Creating a trilling sound.

sometimes, in the middle of a piece, suddenly, I'd start to think, "What am I playing?" And that's when I would completely forget what I was doing! I couldn't play anything any more! I could never understand. I knew the music. When I wasn't thinking, I could play it perfectly. But then, once in a while, I'd get nervous. I'd start to think about what I was playing, and that's when I'd get stuck! (Joanna Pecore, Conversation 9/1/01)

Yeah, I understand. The same thing happened to me when I was a kid. Back then, I didn't think about anything. I just played. Yeah, I remember one time, I got lost, and I couldn't continue... like you.

That's what happened with the songs, Khaett Oat and Khaett Lopburi. Now I lost them. I played them when I was young. I thought that I would never forget them, because I knew them so well. But now, I can't find them, because I never thought when I played them. Well, I thought a little bit, but it was not enough. I remember some parts of them, but I don't remember how to connect them together.

And now, I can't find anyone who knows those songs. I never heard them after I realized that I lost them. I've asked all of the teachers that I know. I even asked the teachers who visited here from the University of Fine Arts. If one person knows them, we'll be very lucky. But I don't think so. I think it's too late. There was one guy in California who knew them. He didn't play the pin peat way. He played the mohori way, but that's okay. It's the same song. It can help me remember. But when I called him to ask about it, they told me he died. I was too late. But there's one more person. His name is Kom. He lives in Battambang. I want to ask him about that.

I think what happened to you happens to everyone, almost everyone. The way I see it is, back then, I didn't make rules for myself. I needed some strategies for remembering. That's when I told myself to make some rules. So I made up some ways to remember. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 9/1/01)

So what were some of the rules you made up? (Joanna Pecore, Conversation 9/1/01)

It's hard to explain. But I can tell you to learn it piece by piece. You can learn the whole song quickly if you want. But after you're finished, remind yourself. Take it piece by piece. That's one of the strategies I came up with. I learned from experience. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 9/1/01)

These “sound-spheres” have revealed that Khmer performing arts can only be perpetuated and mastered through experience, experience that combines destiny, respect for tradition, commitment, patience, creativity, and embodiment. These principles, as described in the forgoing pages, resemble the concept of *phloev*, or “path,” discussed in Chapter Four with respect to *pin peat* performance. As proposed in the introduction to this volume, the duplication of this motif—which emphasizes process over content—in these and other aspects of Khmer music and dance-drama suggests that meaning and authenticity in these arts depends upon sincere investment in the dispositions and behaviors associated with *phloev*. After years of practicing Khmer music and dance-drama in accordance with these parameters, mature artists

recognize how their personal circumstances and actions are linked to their broader social and cosmological universes. They cultivate this awareness (either consciously or intuitively) by appreciating their skills as destiny (*nisaiy*); by developing symbiotic relationships with their teachers; and by gaining artistic, cultural, and existential wisdom through individualized and enterprising study that joins intellect, spirit, and body.

The relationships surrounding students of Khmer music and dance-drama are rooted in the two fundamental lessons of Khmer culture presented in the introduction to and repeated throughout this text: that human existence perseveres ceaselessly and that leading one's life in harmony with current circumstances is of supreme consequence. Cravath's analysis of Khmer classical dance choreography echoes these insights:

Thus, what the floor patterns suggest is that in the Khmer view, individual partners in the dance of life are always part of a society of equals. Within this society there may be a prince or a superior person, but everyone is pursuing the same pattern of action...Never does one structure simply change into another, but through the circular pattern of dissolution and rebirth, a new image emerges. (1985: 469)

The present study has demonstrated how teachings which parallel Cravath's proposition are coded within the sounds, structures, and performance practice of *pin peat* (Chapter Four), within the underlying principles of Khmer performing arts (Chapter Five), and, in the current chapter, within the processes of learning.

The preceding vignettes have disclosed the belief that to achieve artistic mastery, one must be preordained to do so. A sincere will to learn and personal, social, and physical factors distinguish this fate. For instance, Ny Sin expressed her genuine

interest in the dance when she reflected that, *All my life I wanted to be a dancer*. Her sister, Kantya Nou, revealed the importance of personal disposition by declaring that, *I was only offered a more advanced role when I proved that I had the discipline, gracefulness, and an eagerness to learn more*. Socially, these artists were in the ideal situation to pursue the dance, because their mother was a professional Palace dancer. And Ny Sin conveyed the significance of physical features to one's prospects as a dancer when she explained that she initially studied the female role, however, as her body developed, a master of the male role adopted her as a student.

These recollections and the "sound-spheres" which followed them accentuated the significance of proper behavior and attitudes with respect to personal development as an artist. In particular, these manners concerned the quality of a student's interactions with her teachers. Ny Sin attested to this fact by proclaiming that, *If children tried to say something, their teachers would think that they have a smart mouth and a bad attitude*.

This emphasis on the quality of teacher-student relationships as the foundation of artistic mastery corresponds to the stress in previous chapters on the significance of interpersonal relationships in Khmer culture and performing arts. While those examples demonstrated that parent-child relationships supercede all other affiliations, including bonds between teachers and students, *Khmer parents... often comment that they "give" their children to the teacher, which makes the teacher a "second mother" or "second father."*(Smith-Hefner 1999: 123) In the context of the performing arts, then, the master-apprentice connection substitutes this filial association. Accordingly, all successful students recognize the critical role that their teachers have played in

their development. This is the reason that each artist in this and earlier chapters has scrupulously identified his or her mentors. For example, in this chapter Ny Sin named *Neak Krou* Yitho, Kantya Nou designated *Neak Krou* Leas, and Vathana Say acknowledged Khatna Peou.

Like the parent-child relationship discussed in the concluding remarks of Chapter Five, this mentor-pupil relationship bears significance with applications that extend far beyond the exclusive interactions of two individuals. Rather, it serves as a template and vehicle for concretizing the more abstract lessons embedded within Khmer performing arts and culture proposed above. That is, it carries with it the knowledge that one's spiritual predilection and social conduct more accurately reflect one's artistic competence than one's external traits such as gender, ethnicity, age, or craft in executing technical aspects of the art form. This is the reason that, Devi Yim, Heng Vipas, and Masady Mani achieved artistic excellence despite the relatively older age at which they embarked upon their studies (Chapter Two). It also explains why, according to Sochietah Ung in this chapter, his teacher *never taught a male student before, but she taught me*. Similarly, it defines the cause of Lany Lang's success as a music student, notwithstanding the facts that, one, *In Cambodia, boys usually play instruments, not girls*, and two, Lany began her study as a mature adult.

The reflections of these artists and others in their community demonstrate that proficiency in Khmer performing arts arises from following a "middle path" between modeling teachers and independently directing one's own learning process. To gain access to a teacher, students must demonstrate their desire and potential for as well as their commitment to learning. Masady Mani reminded us of the critical role that

patience and endurance play in conveying these attitudes to one's future teacher: *You have to keep going. Even if she won't open the door, you have to keep going until she opens it.* Once teachers do *open the door*, in Masady's words, *they will teach you everything.* This reaction signifies a teacher's affection for his or her newly accepted student, and therefore, his or her commitment to sharing with that student *something that was a part of them.* (Puthyrith Sek, ADAPT Interview 6/17/01) This *something* encompasses, crucially, nurturing the student's ability to learn on his or her own. Through this process, teachers fulfill their obligation, as related in Chapter Three and revisited in Chapter Five, to educate in a way that ensures that a student can mature beyond the context of the one-on-one apprenticeship. In other words, teachers act as *agents for the development of the musicality that lies within each child.* (Small 1998: 212) This development begins with supervising students' self-directed investigations, a procedure that Sovanny Chun summarized when she stated that, *eighty percent we learn from ourselves; the teacher, only twenty percent.* Of course, however, successful artists continue to revere the role of their personal teachers, who enrich and fortify their students' explorations by continuing to present them with additional challenges. Sochietah Ung pointed to this circumstance when he noted that, *And teachers can be very picky and very mean. Sometimes they hit and yell.* Similarly, Lany Lang recalled the struggle of her first music lesson when she conveyed that Ngek Chum *showed me just one short piece. He didn't tell me how to hold the sticks. He didn't tell me how to hit the strings, nothing.* However, both of these students, like so many students of Khmer music and dance-drama, understood that acquiring strategies to overcome these obstacles yielded invaluable skills. Sochietah remarked, *It makes you want to try*

harder. It makes you learn. And Lany reflected that, *To tell the truth, in the beginning, I didn't realize that I could do it myself...But after I learned that difficult piece of music, he [Ngek Chum] said, "See? Now whatever I give you is a piece of cake."*

Sentiments that resound with these reflections recur throughout additional commentaries in the chapter by Alisa DiCaprio, Visal Um, and me.

Finally, this chapter demonstrated how mastery of Khmer performing arts is apprehended at the intersection of learning through *formalized* and *informal* (Trimillos 1983: 2-6) as well as emotional, multi-sensory, and cognitive methods. The significance of *formalized* and *informal* learning has been addressed above. Ngek Chum further underscored the power of the latter when he attributed his ability to learn songs quickly from his teacher to the fact that he *listened to music all the time. Sometimes my grandfather played with his group downstairs. I heard it, and I remembered.* In addition, the examples above of confronting the difficulties of artistic study articulate the impact of emotion on learning. Further, in the final pages of the chapter, Ngek Chum described the importance of combining the senses with intellect in music learning. He cautioned, *Even if you're the best, you need to play...Your head might know it, but your hands...you need to remind them.* He even expressed his view that fluid, high quality performance can be attained only once the process of consciously thinking about the music has been surpassed by a coalescence of mental, spiritual, and physical awareness. However, he recommended that students procure a solid, cognitive understanding of music, so that they can rely on that knowledge in the event that the flow of a performance becomes interrupted.

In short, the integration of these techniques offers students multiple opportunities to increase the skills necessary for commanding *phloev* as discussed in Chapter Four.¹⁶⁹ In this chapter, Ngek Chum revealed that these skills are not automatic for anyone, no matter how talented. Instead, they are nurtured through incremental, cumulative study within an environment that supports concentration. These circumstances, according to Chum, enable the critical steps of reflecting upon and analyzing music. With this goal in mind, Chum advised, *You can learn the whole song quickly if you want. But after you're finished, remind yourself. Take it piece by piece.*

Thus, the process of *rien tam krou* (learning through the teacher) shapes the quality of Khmer music and dance-drama by situating performance within a network of personal, social, and cosmological relationships. This experiential process guides students from a state of intuitive comprehension, through a conscious understanding of their actions, and to the ability to perform with the fluidity of intuition but also with the advantages of solid awareness. Reaching this milestone, accomplished performers can proceed to carry out their responsibilities of negotiating unanticipated situations while knowing not only when and how to be a leader, but also when and how to be a follower.

¹⁶⁹ Proficiency in technical realization plus productive negotiation of the relationships inherent in a performance, all in a way that maximizes individual contributions while maintaining coherence of the group.

Chapter 7: Local Bridges in the Present

In her article, “The Look of Music, the Sound of Dance,” Kaepler indicates that, *Music/dance are surface manifestations of the deep structure or underlying philosophy of a society which is realized by composers, performers, and audiences.* (1996: 134) The preceding chapters have illustrated how Kaepler’s assertion relates to Khmer music and dance-drama at “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” They exhibited the appearance of Khmer cultural patterns throughout various dimensions of the art form including musical structure, human relationships, and learning processes, highlighting the fact that *Often the process of performing is as important as the cultural form produced.* (Kaepler 1996: 134) All of these examples have demonstrated the ways in which history and the content and process of knowledge associated with Khmer music and dance-drama have motivated the participants of “Virginia” and the “Vatt.”

This chapter takes a closer and more contemporary look at the diverse meanings that the Khmer performing arts continue to generate across this community. It also unveils some of the dynamics that support this creativity despite ongoing change within the institutions that accommodate it. In particular, the reflections featured below introduce some of the major processes and challenges involved in transmitting cultural values, creating Khmer environments, and presenting Khmer culture to non-Khmer populations within the context of the United States. They underscore the definitive roles that a sense of responsibility, cross-cultural cooperation, bridge building across communities, adaptation, and traditional teaching philosophy play in achieving this agenda.

In addition to elaborating upon activities that are directly related to the classical dance-drama repertoire, this chapter delves into the experiences of a group of adults who have made the study and performance of *mohori*¹⁷⁰ music a significant part of their lives. The composite narrative of this group illustrates that performance has a dual function of self-fulfillment and creating *communitas* (Turner 1995)¹⁷¹ through the act of *dissolving the self in performance...working out a shared vision that involves both the assertion of pride, even ambition, and the simultaneous disappearance of the ego*. (Slobin 1993: 41) That is, through active participation in music, members cooperatively reorganize the parameters of their daily identities into alternative frameworks that embrace the ideals of a more desirable community, one that unites a collective sense of memory, time, and place. (Stokes 1993; Turner 1995; Van Gennep 1960)

¹⁷⁰ *Mohori* is a genre of Khmer songs depicting various aspects of daily life in Cambodia such as working in the fields and separating from a lover. Their general structure is comprised of alternating sung verse with instrumental interludes. Like *pin peat* songs, they feature a range of instruments of various timbres that are stratified polyphonically. Also like *pin peat* performance, fine *mohori* performance demands the creative employment of *phloev*. (See Chapter Four) Instruments featured in *mohori* ensembles have changed over the course of history, but generally speaking, a *mohori* ensemble can be distinguished from a *pin peat* ensemble by the presence of various stringed instruments and transverse flutes as well as by the absence of gong circles and oboes.

¹⁷¹ First published in 1969.

“Families, Certain Key Families, Are the Ones Who Seem to Keep it Together”

In Chapter Three, Sam-Ouen Tes and Saroeum Tes introduced the primacy of the notion of family throughout “Virginia’s” activities. Indeed, it was this very quality that captured the heart of Gary Marco who was named Executive Director of the organization in the late 1990s.

Gary’s story offers an example of how individuals from outside of the Khmer American community can become key members of local Cambodian performing arts families. Like teachers who evaluate the sincerity of their potential students, “Virginia” and the “Vatt” do not discriminate on the basis of ethnicity. Rather, they welcome (and even encourage—as in Gary’s case below) newcomers. In time, they assess the strengths and weaknesses of loyal supporters and guide them toward roles and responsibilities that simultaneously harness personal abilities and contribute to the well being of the community as a whole. Compassion for Cambodian victims of war, valuing priceless cultural treasures, and respect for dedication to nurturing that wealth were all major factors leading Gary along the path to his advocacy of the Khmer performing arts.

I learned about Cambodian American Heritage through my work in the Operations Management Division at the Voice of America. Among the radio services at VOA is the Khmer Service. Over the twenty years that I worked there, I have had a lot of contact with them. Over the course of time, we became familiar with each other, and I became aware of the Cambodian New Year program. And from about 1990 on, I would go to the performances. That’s how it started.

I've always been interested in Southeast Asia...American involvement in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. I've been pretty sympathetic to those people and what they went through.

Then around 1994 or '95, Mr. Tes asked me to provide the English narration to that year's New Year's show. I said, "Well, I don't know if I can do it. I'm not very good at pronouncing non-English words and names." And Mr. Tes, being very laid back, said, "Oh, you'll be fine." I couldn't really say no. So I said, "I'll try it one year, and I'll see how it goes." And so, they put me on the stage.



Figure 19-Surrounding "Uncle Gary"
(Photo credit Joanna Pecore)

And, you know, the rest is history! Then it kind of evolved into more and more things. And I was really kind of taken by the rehearsals, the kids running around, you know, the whole kind of community, or family, which is also a big part of it. A lot of it is family-oriented. Families, certain key families, are the ones who seem to keep it together. For example, Ngek Chum's family: it's him, his daughter, and his son. And then there's

the Tes family. And I don't mean just the family. I mean the extended family! And I think you find similarities at the "Vatt." Somebody's family or extended family seems to have more involvement.

Yeah, and then, others participate. They make a substantive contribution. But it's really being orchestrated by certain families who have a master artist—either dancer or musician—who's a key player.

Within a year or two, Mr. Tes had me appointed to the Board of Directors. That's pretty much what my involvement is now. The title I use is Executive Director. So I kind of coordinate between Mr. Tes, the Board of Directors, the master teachers, and the parents and students when necessary. I do all of the administrative paper work: writing the grants, doing the IRS tax returns, and a good part of the contact with the American community. I was responsible for establishing the website, and I upgraded their technical support for the New Year's program.

Everything I do is very complex. But I keep at it, because, well, I respect what Madame Tes does. She's a master from the Royal Ballet. You have to understand the context. To me, there are two women who are responsible for the survival of the Cambodian court dance. One of them is Princess Bopha Devi. In the 1960s, the dance had gone into a period of remission, and she, with her mother, the Queen, revived it. And then, again, in the late 1970s, after the Khmer Rouge, she got it back on its feet with the surviving master teachers and students who were still in the country. The other woman is Madame Tes. Madame Tes got it firmly anchored here in the United States, and then it's grown to something larger than that over the years. Her contribution is critical, because

she represents the old school. When she's gone, we will be in a different era. (Gary Marco, Interview 8/23/02)

“You Possess the Treasure”

Don't forget who you are, your Cambodian identity. You are the representatives for the Cambodians here in the United States. Remember your parents and ancestors. Make them proud. Be the best at what you do. We do this because we love you. We want you to know where you came from, your roots. (Raci Say, Statement 3/8/98)

You have to sacrifice your time to come here and learn, because you are Cambodian. You will benefit from your studies and your chanting. You will be blessed. You must understand that you are like an empty container. If you fill it with good stuff, the bad stuff won't be able to get in. That's why you are here. You were born Khmer. We had a good culture. You have to preserve it and dedicate your life to it. You possess the treasure. (Raci Say, Statement 11/1/98)

On more than one occasion, Raci Say has encouraged students at the “Vatt” to continue their studies and to take them seriously. Like Gary Marco above, she articulates the students’ connection to invaluable and imperiled cultural riches. Additionally, she invokes the students’ position within a lineage of ancestors, parents, and future generations of Khmer as justification for taking on the responsibility of preserving their inheritance.

Raci's statements echo cultural themes that endure throughout this volume: preserving cultural memory, resisting loss, and recognizing one's place within the cycle of human continuity. These concerns, joined with sense of obligation and the ability to adapt to local resources, guide her involvement in the "Vatt's" cultural program.

I cannot say that I enjoy doing it, but I feel that I have to do it. When it is no longer necessary for me to do it, then I will back off. I'll let other people do it. But if I see that the program is in danger, then I jump in to help. I don't want to take full responsibility for it, because I am not an artist. It would be foolish for me to take on so much responsibility for a thing that I am not good at. But I always support the teachers, and I love them. I admire what they have, and I want to promote them. If they still need me, I will continue to help them.

Most of the time I remember Lok Ta Oung Mean. He is still in my soul. He said, "You are the perfect person to hold this program together. I would not trust anyone else!"

If there is anyone who can take over the program, I will give it to them. Now I am encouraging Masady to do it.

I'll always want to help out with the program. But I do not want to do as much as I am doing right now. It's too much. I am not the kind who wants to lead everybody. I want everybody to take part in it.

My goal is to see the students come here because they want to. I am not talking about young kids. They come because their parents force them to come. That's okay. When you're young, you don't know anything. But once you have been here for a couple

of years, you should want to do this because you are a Cambodian who takes pride in and wants to preserve your culture.

I am doing this because I want to preserve the culture, and I love the children. We must keep it alive. We have constant war in Cambodia. All of our documentation is disappearing. But the temple is a place where we keep knowledge about history and culture. That's what we want to do here. The temple is not only for religion, but also for culture. (Raci Say, ADAPT Interview 6/17/01)

“The Music Spirits Come to Everybody while We Play Together”

Music has been used for centuries as a force for creating group solidarity. In order to achieve this purpose, groups, either intentionally or instinctively, select musical idioms that are replete with symbols associated with their causes. The acts of creating and performing music also contribute to its social effects. (Becker 1981; Becker 1988; Becker 1993; Brinner 1995; Feld 1984; Feld 1990; Feld 1991; Kaeppler 1996; Pemberton 1987; Rice 1994; Roseman 1989; Slobin 1993; Stokes 1997; Turino 1993; Walser 1993) This role is achieved through aspects of performance that overlap with ritual. Through rituals humans confront their anxieties via social enactment that leads to a state of *communitas*. (Turner 1995) In this condition, individuals lose direct consciousness of self and move into a temporary unity with others. (Herndon and McLoed 1990; McNiell 1995; Slobin 1993; Stokes 1993; Turner 1995; Van Gennep 1960)

The dynamic of sharing, expressing, and confronting common experience and distress has been an implicit element of the preceding accounts of participating in the Khmer music and dance-drama activities related to “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” More

recently, a band of adult music students was formed. Their earnest study and performance of *mohori* music demonstrates the varied purposes that Khmer music plays in their individual lives while revealing a number of common motifs.

In general, the “sound-spheres” that follow show that participation in the *mohori* group serves as a source of healing through the processes of both spiritual and physical connection. Partaking in the band’s activities is closely intertwined with personal journeys across geographical and political boundaries, belief systems, occupations, and lifestyles. Some of the group’s members point to concrete physical ailments that are remedied with music, while many others continue to engage in music, because it supplies strength in the face of emotional and spiritual discomfort. A look at these “sound-spheres” side-by-side discloses some recurring patterns that suggest that Khmer music is the medicine of choice, because it is linked to memories and dreams that date back to the participants’ lives in Cambodia, and because it embodies Khmer values of group cooperation and social interdependence. As an ongoing, evolving activity that fuses together the individual, the group, and their ideals, Khmer music offers an avenue for contributing to the preservation, reconstruction, and dissemination of knowledge about their wounded culture.

The group’s commitment to these objectives is pronounced by the members’ passion for making their musical activities a priority in their lives. Nearly every participant indicates that they reserve *Sunday, all day* for music, and they have all endured the challenges of learning music in order to become part of the group. The effectiveness of engaging in music within the context of this band is underscored by the group’s penchant for attracting new members.

I have participated in this group as well and remember preparing for our first performance together.

April 11, 1998 marked my second experience of performing in “Virginia’s” New Year’s show. This year, I was mentally prepared for the long day ahead of me. The designated time of arrival was nine in the morning, and I wanted to be a good researcher and be on time.

When I arrived, the Francis Hammond Jr. High School was really quiet. I had a carload of equipment and supplies with me and decided to enter the auditorium carrying only my knapsack and my clothing for the stage that evening. Once inside, I saw that some of the young dancers, student musicians, and their parents were already working on the stage set. The girls were striking at this early hour with their hair so delicately curled. They must have risen at five or six in the morning to prepare for the evening performance!

I proceeded back stage to the women’s “dressing room” and saw that the core of the new mohori group—the Veun family¹⁷²—had arrived as well.

Once in the women’s “dressing room,” Tevy¹⁷³ staked out an area for the mohori group. She directed me, “Put the baskets in a neat row over here on the right hand side.” Then, together, we set up our instruments to the left of the fruit baskets that everyone had brought as offerings to the teachers. We then placed food that we had

¹⁷² Tevy Veun and her husband, Amro Veun, will introduce themselves below. Their daughter and Tevy’s mother and two sisters have also been active members of this group. They have also hosted numerous parties and jam sessions for the group in their home.

¹⁷³ Tevy Veun. See footnote above.

purchased and prepared for lunch and dinner next to that. Next, Tevy placed a rattan mat in front of the space we just marked out with the food, instruments, and baskets. On it, we spread out our garment bags and suitcases containing our wardrobes.

During this time, Lany arrived. She added her own touch to our sector, arranging flowers in a vase at the corner of the mat.

Amro¹⁷⁴ continued to come in and out of the back entrance. The process of unloading his van seemed infinite.

It didn't take long for me to realize that the concept of a "women's" dressing room existed in name only. Through the course of the evening, boys and men wandered nonchalantly, yet respectably, in and out of the room.

Then Lany and Tevy opened their suitcases. They were both full of brightly-colored silks. Tevy asked me, "Did you bring an extra T-shirt for the sampeah krou ceremony?"

"Uh, no. All I have is the sweater I'm wearing and my blouse for tonight. I didn't think of bringing an extra shirt for the ceremony," I replied.

"That's okay," she said, shuffling through the silks in her suitcase. "Here, this will go with your sweater. Wear this for the ceremony."

As I thanked Tevy, her mother and sister proceeded to tie it around me. Once the kben was fastened around my waist, Tevy's mom and Lany proceeded to secure a beige and orange scarf across my chest. I was overwhelmed but happy about the attention I was receiving.

¹⁷⁴ Amro Veun. See footnote above.

Since their first performance in 1998, the *mohori* group has persisted in developing its skills, expanding its repertoire, and seeking performance opportunities. The group became so active that they began to hold lengthy weekly practices in the homes of group members as well as at the “Vatt.” The schedule became so demanding that Ngek Chum, who initially guided the group’s study, could no longer assist at each and every rehearsal. He asked his colleague, Sok Nou, an accomplished *kheum* player to coach the group on his behalf.

I come from Kampong Speu Province, and I started playing music in 1972. Actually, I loved music since I was very young, but I didn’t start to learn until 1972. I learned from Mr. Douy, in Sra Kao refugee camp in Thailand. I think he went to Australia.

When I was really young, whenever I heard wedding music, I just stopped, listened, and watched the musicians until the end of the wedding. I don’t know why, but that’s what I did. I just stayed there until the end of the ceremony.

So when somebody asked who wanted to study music in the refugee camps, I signed up for that. Then we had a music exam. I got number-one. There were three people. At that time, there were a lot of people, but only three succeeded, and I was number- one in kheum. The other two students mastered tro and takhe.

It was not that difficult for me to learn music, because I spent all day, every day on it. It’s not like here, where you just spend two or three hours-a-week learning. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, I played...I spent eight hours a day playing. I studied like that.

After studying music for three months, we had an exam. The test was difficult. You know the *mohori* piece *Chao Dak*? It's not easy. You know how they call out the instrumentalist, and when your instrument is called, you have to solo?¹⁷⁵ Well that's what the test was based on. I had to really pay attention. I didn't know when the teacher was going to call for the *kheum* solo. But as soon as the *kheum* was called, I had to come in right on beat. It was very hard. If you miss the beat, you mess up the whole song. They take points away from you. Everyone has to play *Chao Dak*—*chhing*, *skor*, *tro*, everybody— to pass the exam. (Sok Nou, Interview 2/7/02)¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ The remainder of this chapter will take a drastic departure from the pattern that has dominated this volume so far. In order to evoke the aesthetic of *phloev* as it is featured in the performance of the tune, *Chao Dak*, it will introduce the members of this *mohori* ensemble in alternation with each of the verses of *Chao Dak*.

As Sok Nou indicates above, a different instrumentalist performs his or her individual *phloev* between every sung verse of the piece. The song lyrics clearly indicate which instrumentalist is to perform solo. All players of the ensemble join together after each solo. So the pattern of the composition is: song-solo-group, song-solo-group, etc. The piece begins and ends with the whole ensemble playing together. This compositional structure accentuates the Khmer artistic and social values of balancing personal autonomy with social obligation.

The *mohori* group members featured here include the individuals who most consistently participated in the band during my period of intensive field research with them. They include Tevy Veun, Amro Veun, Sok Nou, Lany Lang, Seng Chao, Michel Chhor, Sodina Chhor, Kuon Hann, Son Kim Sin, (Lany Lang), Veasna Keo, and Key Ek. Their order of appearance is determined by a combination of their relationship to the instruments called out in the song lyrics and their social relationship to other group members (especially individuals whose instrument is not mentioned in this set of lyrics)

As noted earlier, each “sound-sphere” features a series of motifs that contribute to the group’s ability to create and derive spiritual energy from participating in music. Of course, each “sound-sphere” also includes unique reflections about one’s personal encounters with Khmer music. In order to maintain the flow of the song verse → “sound-sphere” → song verse → “sound-sphere” progression, I will use footnotes to list some of the general themes that distinguish the content of each “sound-sphere.”

¹⁷⁶ Translations by Narin Jameson and Lany Lang.

*Listen to my song, Bong.¹⁷⁷
When I wake up, I smell the flower of the screw-pine.
Oh, my precious one. I see you in my dreams.
The screw pine has the most intoxicating fragrance.
Oh shift the spotlight.¹⁷⁸ Shine it on the trabaik¹⁷⁹ tree.
I want to hear the roneat aik.
How do you make that beautiful sound?*

Actually, before I came to the United States, I never had any interest in mohori or pin peat or anything.¹⁸⁰ I never paid attention to the traditional music at all, only Western music.

It was just five or six years ago that I became interested in Khmer traditional music. What happened was, my sister went to Cambodia, and I thought, “Maybe I should have a Cambodian instrument like roneat to display in my house, since I am Cambodian.” I already had statues and pictures of apsara and things. The only things I didn’t have were instruments. So my sister bought me a roneat and a tro. Then later, I

¹⁷⁷ These are the lyrics to the first verse of *Chao Dak* as sung by the *mohori* group being introduced here. The lyrics were composed by Ngek Chum. One member of the *mohori* group, Michel Chhor, has altered the lyrics to the third and fourth verses. Translation assistance by Saureth Ieng.

¹⁷⁸ *Chao Dak* translates literally as “pick the guy,” to reflect the process of alternating solos as described by Sok Nou. In this translation, I use “shift the spotlight” to more accurately reflect the nuance and poetic connotations of the term, “*chao dak*.”

¹⁷⁹ The guava tree. I preserve the original Khmer here and in subsequent stanzas to illustrate the poetic convention in this piece of pairing each instrument with a flowering tree or plant that rhymes with it (e.g. *trabaik* and *roneat aik*).

¹⁸⁰ Tevy Veun’s initial encounters with Khmer music tested her commitment, patience, endurance, self-initiative and ability to overcome obstacles. Her commentary emphasizes the priority she places on cooperation and group interaction. This process activates the “spirit” of the music that supplies her with *strength*.

called my aunt in Cambodia who works for the Ministry of Culture there. I asked her to buy me more instruments to display in my house.

Then, after having the instruments for a while, I thought, “Why do I keep these instruments on display when we can play them? Maybe I should learn how to play roneat.” And then I asked my husband, “Why don’t you learn sampho?” Then we said “Well, we have someone to play the drum and the roneat, but we also have a kheum, and we have nobody to play that.” So I talked to my daughter—who was born and raised here in this country knowing nothing about mohori music—and I convinced her to play.

It was really hard! I had no clue, and I got disappointed. I even stopped for a while. Then I said, “There has to be a better way to do it.” So I convinced myself, I said, “I know this song. How come I cannot play it?” Then I started numbering my roneat. I started learning piece by piece, from Krou Ngek. I started to write notes in numbers, instead of notation, so I could remember.

I studied every night. After work, I spent at least two or three hours working on it. I’d play over and over again until, now, I can pick up any new song just like that.

A lot of people see me playing and say, “Oh, I’d love to learn how to play!” But, if they aren’t patient and they don’t devote their time, they’re not going to be able to do it. If you only say you want to learn it, you’re not going to make it.

I don’t believe you can play individually and have fun by yourself. In mohori, you have several instruments...and some spirits. The music spirits come to everybody while we play together. So we have fun, you know...and jam together, basically.

In the beginning, I stuck with practicing on my own, because I was anxious to learn. I forced myself. I convinced myself that I could do it. That's how I was motivated. Nothing is impossible for me.

Some people tell me that I am too involved and too old to start learning music. Besides playing, I kind of lead the group. It's not that easy. I try to make people feel like they're part of the team.

I never decided myself to be the leader of the group. I just took it on, because I care so much about the music. I care about the people playing the music.

Every Sunday morning I get up at five. Okay, I have to cook the food to bring the "Vatt." I pack my roneat and my karaoke speaker, a portable one, for the singer. Then I have my sampho and the food. I usually make one dessert and one dish for the team. I leave home by nine to get there by ten, because it takes about an hour from my house. I block Sundays out for music. I won't go anywhere unless it's very important.

My goal is to encourage everyone to learn the pieces in order to preserve the traditional music. Even though I spend some of my own money to help, you know, like, making food every week. And I invite them to my house once in a while to foster the group spirit. I don't mind spending money on the group. When you practice a lot, all day, five-six hours a day, you have to make sure that there's enough food for everybody so they have strength to practice together.

This is what I do as a profession. At work, I manage a team of fifteen people. So basically, I manage three teams: my group at work, the group over here, and my family. Unless someone keeps pushing, the mohori won't move forward.

As a group, we learn to respect and to listen to each other. We get along very well. Under Krou Chum Ngek's direction, the mohori group becomes stronger and stronger. To this day, we continue to learn new songs.

To commit to the group, it is also important to have good discipline. That's why we decided that everyone should wear the same uniform with corsages when we perform. It was my idea. I told my mother, "I want everyone to become professionals." In traditional Cambodia, people who knew this music weren't valued. Most people think that mohori musicians are low-class with no education. Back home, only a certain class of people play it. High-class people don't take time to learn. They have no interest. But I want to show society that this mohori group is disciplined and educated.

When we pick our pieces, everybody chips in. Sometimes I hear a song that I like. I write it down. I copy the song and give it to Michel.¹⁸¹ He's helping to compile the music. When we first started, I always hand wrote everything. I don't have Cambodian script on my computer. Then Michel said, "Oh I can set that up." So then he took over the job of putting the songs into the computer and making copies for everyone. After four years, thanks to Michel, we've collected one hundred and forty-three songs. He takes a lot of time to put those together for the group.

It's true that sometimes this all gives me a headache, and I feel tired. But I think it's worth it to keep working on it. Actually, addiction is a good word for it. Sometimes when you hear music, you get strength. The spirit of the music goes into you, especially when the whole group is into it. We play and play, but don't get tired at all. I hope that mohori music will continue on in future generations. (Tevy Veun, Interview 3/17/02)

¹⁸¹ Michel Chhor will introduce himself below.

I was born in Kampong Thom Province, but I always lived in Phnom Penh with my mother, father, sister, and brother.¹⁸² When I was young, I had no interest in music. I liked sports. Music was my wife and daughter's idea. They wanted to practice music together, so I joined them. My wife likes to play music, so I come with her.

I picked the sampho, because sampho is easy for me. I don't have to think about too much or practice a lot. Krou Ngek taught me what to play. He taught me the way to play, not every single song. But most Cambodian songs have the same rhythm. So I use the same pattern for different songs...and sometimes I make it up by myself. I don't know if it's wrong or right. Sometimes it's good, and sometimes Krou Ngek says that it's wrong. He says, "Do it this way or this way." I'm not a good musician.

I also wanted to do it, because I thought that I should do something, like a hobby, you know, to kill the spare time. It's like, on the weekend, you usually don't do anything. You think about the country, you think about a lot of family that you lost. I lost a lot of family. I lost my parents. So I came to do something.

I joined the Cambodian Navy after I graduated from the University of Science in 1970 with a degree in Chemistry. I was in the Navy from 1970 to 1975. In November 1973, the Cambodian government sent me to the United States to learn English at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas for three months. After that, I went to The Basic School (TBS) at Quantico Marine Corps Base in Virginia for six months, and

¹⁸² Amro Veun traces his path to participating in Khmer music, including his (non) musical history in Cambodia, his wartime and immigration experiences, and his relocation circumstances. His participation in music is fueled by his devotion to his wife and daughter as well as by his desire *to kill the spare time* on weekends, when he is most likely to reminisce about Cambodia and lost loved-ones.

then I went for training in small boat river operation and harbor defense at Coronado U.S. Naval Base in San Diego, California. I went back to Cambodia in December 1974.

In April 1975, the country lost the war to the Khmer Rouge, so I decided to get out. I thought that if I stayed there, I would be killed by the Khmer Rouge. I took my boat across the Gulf of Siam to Singapore. I wanted to stay there and asked the American Embassy for asylum to stay there. But they said that I couldn't do that. Instead, they helped me to take a trip around Borneo, Indonesia, and then go to the Philippines by boat.

I was with my crew, seventeen men. I felt confident with the Americans. They flew over our boat and watched us until we reached the Philippines.

I stayed in the Philippines for about a month, and then I came to Pennsylvania, to the refugee camp in Indiantown Gap. When I left that camp, I went to live in Harrisburg. I was sponsored by a Presbyterian church in that area.

I got married in 1976 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and then I decided to go to school in Paterson, New Jersey. My wife and I went to a computer school there. We took class in the daytime and went to work at night. So we worked the second shift, from three o'clock to twelve o'clock. We worked in an assembly line in a factory where they produced electrical equipment. We worked together, and then we took lunch. And sometimes we did our homework together. We did that until we got our degrees. Then, we decided to move to Virginia, because my sister-in-law lived in Virginia.

I like playing in the mohori band, because I want to show people what Cambodian music is like. Even Cambodians don't know the difference between mohori and pin peat.

I videotape a lot, too, because I want to document what Krou Ngek teaches...because Krou Ngek is the only one here who knows about this music. I keep the tapes in case somebody wants to use them in the future. I document him teaching the skor, sampho, roneat, kong, everything. I keep everything. I keep it all on small tapes. It's all in pieces, but whoever needs it can put them together, however they need them. Someday, somebody will need them.

I don't think that we'll ever give up, because we have our goals. We want to keep mohori alive. We want to show people this music, because there really aren't any mohori groups here. There's phleng kar and pin peat, but no mohori.

I'm not very good in music, but I'm proud of what we're doing. Our goal is to keep the traditional music alive. I think we're doing that. (Amro Veun, Interview 3/17/02)

*I heard the beautiful sound, Darling.¹⁸³
It is so delightful. Who did you learn that from?
Please tell me. Who is your teacher?
The sounds of the roneat aik float into the air.
The tevota¹⁸⁴ gather in excitement.
You can hear them rushing to the scene.
Oh, shift the spotlight. Shine it on the toteum¹⁸⁵ tree.
I want to hear the kheum.
How do you create that exquisite sound?*

¹⁸³ These are the lyrics to the second verse of *Chao Dak* as sung by the *mohori* group being introduced here.

¹⁸⁴ Heavenly benevolent spirits or angels.

¹⁸⁵ The pomegranate tree.

I mentioned earlier that I started playing music in Thailand, at Camp Sra Kao.¹⁸⁶ I learned kheum. After studying for three months and three weeks, I was able to master the kheum. I later moved to Khao I Dang refugee camp and continued to play music while I was there.

I came to the United States in 1984. When I left Khao I Dang, I went to Australia. Then I was sent to a processing center on an island in the Philippines. I studied English there, but didn't play or study music at all. Then after six months, I made it to the United States.

I stopped playing music for ten years when I came to the United States. When I came from the Philippines, I was resettled in Philadelphia. I stayed there for two years. Then I came to Maryland. I didn't play music at all during that time. I couldn't play. I just worked. I saved money. I had to pay for my home. I had to pay for my family. I didn't even have a kheum to play. I didn't have friends to take me to play. I didn't have anything.

Then, a year later, I moved to Washington State. That's when I started to play music again. My sponsor there found out that I could play kheum and asked me to play wedding music. But I never studied wedding music before that time. So, when she asked me to play that, I just taught myself by watching other musicians. For the three and a half years that I stayed there, I played wedding music. And then I returned to Maryland.

¹⁸⁶ Sok Nou recounts the intersections of his personal history with his engagement in Khmer music. Because of the demands of basic survival and supporting his family, he was compelled to take major breaks from music-making during his process of resettlement in the United States. Yet, thanks to a musical education (described earlier) that included childhood observation and intensive study, practice, and performance in refugee camps, he quickly revived his playing skills.

It has been about ten years now, though, that I haven't played. But recently, Krou Ngek asked me to play. I thought I forgot everything, but when I sat down to play, it all came back to me.

I joined the group at the "Vatt," because Krou Ngek was looking for a music teacher. So I just joined them a couple of years ago. I have known Krou Ngek for a long time. I met him in the United States. He asks me to join the phleng kar group once in a while. For the last few years, though, we have been playing together on a regular basis. We have a lot of weddings scheduled for this year.

I didn't play mohori for a long, long time, but when I started to play with the mohori group here, once they played the introductions to the songs, I knew the music right away. (Sok Nou, Interview 2/7/02)

Before, I told you that I started out learning kheum.¹⁸⁷ Now I want to tell you what happened. Actually, when I first went to Cambodian American Heritage to learn music, I was carrying an instrument. But it wasn't a kheum. It was a tro. That's what I bought in Thailand, and that's what I wanted to play. I'll tell you more about that later, but basically, when I carried the tro with me that day, Dr. Sam-Ang told me that the tro was very difficult, and he suggested that I start with kheum. I told him that I didn't know what it was. I didn't even know what it looked like. And the next week he brought a kheum for me. I traded a very old Gibson guitar for it. It was crazy. It's very valuable. I bought it in 1967. When I bought it, I went to a class at the YMCA to try to learn American folk

¹⁸⁷ Lany Lang shared her memories about learning kheum in Chapter 6. Here she elaborates upon her experiences with the instrument and describes how she endured stage fright in the name of encouraging people to show more appreciation for musicians.

music. I had a few lessons, but I quit, because it was difficult. Plus, I wasn't familiar with the songs.

I was pretty convinced that Lok Krou wouldn't teach me tro, so I thought I had to find somebody else. So after he taught me some kheum, I took advantage of that. I heard that Krou Pok, who lives in Philadelphia, was good at tro.

I was beginning to understand how most of these Cambodian teachers think. For one thing, they are very respectful toward good players. Also, they want you to respect them, and they want proof that they won't be wasting their time on you. If you do that, you're showing them that you value their music, and you appreciate their sharing and their teaching. So when I called Lok Krou Pok to ask him for lessons, he said he didn't know yet. So I stopped asking him for a while.

Then in 1993, I called Krou Pok back, and I asked if I could visit him. I told him that I played kheum. My kheum was so good. By that time, I mastered that piece, Lo Neang. So I decided to kind of show off a little bit, to show him that I can play, to show him that I am a really serious student. So when I played for him, he was amazed. He said, "How long did it take?" I told him, "It didn't take long." But actually, it wasn't true. I just said that so he would accept me.

He didn't know about the incident on the stage yet. The first time I went on stage for the New Year, I stopped right in the middle of the performance! I got myself into that mess, since I had the idea that musicians should perform right out on the stage. I don't like the way they play behind the curtain just to accompany the dancers. I know they get credit, but the audience can't see who they're supposed to appreciate.

Before I started taking lessons, I went to a Cambodian wedding, and Lok Krou, Sara,¹⁸⁸ and Ra, were playing music. I knew Sara. I knew the others' faces, but I didn't really know them. I saw Sara playing chhing, then he allowed me to do it. I did not do it right, so instead of doing that, I took a picture. So you know, I got Lok Krou's picture three years before I met him. And the first day I met him I said, "I think I have a picture of that musician somewhere." I looked in my book, and I found an enlargement of the photograph. At the time he had a full head of hair. He was cute.

See, Joanna, here's the wedding. People are everywhere. In this corner, there are the musicians. They play and entertain the people. And nobody pays attention to them. They all do their busy things. The musicians play, get paid, and goodbye. And I thought, "I'm going to do something to get some attention on the musicians." So when I played chhing, I was like, "Look at me!" I mean...I can't believe they sit there playing and people ignore them.

So I told Lok Krou, "I'm going to do something about that." And that's why I had to go on stage: because I advocated for that. And Dy¹⁸⁹ said, "Okay, you want to go up there?" And I said, "Sure." It was too late; I couldn't change my mind.

So there was another girl on stage with me. Lok Krou wanted us to each play our kheum solos. And she was so good. I was so sick and anxious. I tried not to look at anyone. She went first, and she did so well. We had a microphone. The whole thing blasts in front of you. Well, I played so fast, that the drummer couldn't keep up with me. Then I went blank. I couldn't even think. And I looked at Lok Krou, and he was looking

¹⁸⁸ Mr. Sara Say was mentioned in Chapter 2.

¹⁸⁹ Sam-Ouen Tes.

somewhere else. Then I looked at Sam-Ang and he was looking somewhere else, too. They didn't look at me at all. Maybe they were just trying to subdue me. If they looked straight into my eyes, I'd probably have been scared to death. Then I turned around. I said to myself, "I'm going to start again." So then I started all over again, very fast: vroom-vroom-vroom-vroom-vroom! Finally, I finished. Ohhhhhh! (Lany Lang, Interview 1/12/02)

I originally joined the mohori group to help out with the singing.¹⁹⁰ When they were first starting out at Cambodian Heritage, my older sister, Lany, asked me to help out. That's how I got involved. We were all friends who got together to play music. I perform with the mohori group, and I perform with a modern music band, too. We're the Morokat—Morokat means Jade—Band. So I do both. After mohori, I go there to rehearse. That's why I disappear from mohori practice around two or three o'clock.

When I was young, I liked to sing. At school, I sang for everybody, but more for the teacher. The teacher liked to hear me sing during break time and after school. I did that in elementary and high school.

Actually, when I first came to the United States in 1976, I didn't sing. I volunteered as a model for Cambodian fashion shows. We modeled different Cambodian costumes. There were other people who did it, too. I just modeled a couple of the

¹⁹⁰ Seng Chao recalls his musical history in Cambodia, his wartime and immigration history, and his relocation experiences. As a member of the Cambodian army, he was a prime target of the Khmer Rouge. Fortune and help from the U.S. government and family members made his escape possible. Family connections also played a major role in his desire to engage in Khmer performing arts and to share them with the mainstream population in the United States.

costumes. I did that with Lany, too. We once had a show at the University of Maryland, in 1978 or something.

Back then, Tes Sareoum came up with the idea to get us together to present our culture to American people, because most Americans have no idea where Cambodia is. A lot of Americans know Thailand and Vietnam, so if we tell them that Cambodia is near Thailand and Vietnam, they say, “Oh.”

And I danced, too. I performed folk dances like Robam Tralaok, Chhaiyam, and Khmer Leu. I learned with my younger sister. Do you know Phan?¹⁹¹ Phan taught us.

I sang for the dance, too, a little...but not much. I only really became involved in singing with the mohori group.

Lany was living in Virginia when we came to the United States, so she sponsored us from California to Virginia. I lived in Virginia until 1985. That’s when I moved to Maryland.

I left Cambodia in ’75, one week before Khmer Rouge took over. I crossed the border to Thailand from Battambang. I can’t say that I knew they were coming, but oh, ah! I felt like something was really wrong. I didn’t know we were going to lose the war, but I was in the Khmer army, and I thought it would be better if I left.

I crossed the border and stayed with cousins of mine who lived in Thailand. When the Khmer Rouge took control, the American Embassy offered to help anybody in the military who wanted to get out of Cambodia. So they got us to the camp right away, my mom, my sister, and my brother. They took us to Utapao Air Force Base in Thailand, and

¹⁹¹ Phan Phuong was mentioned in Chapter 2.

we stayed there for one year. Then we moved to California and stayed in Camp Pendleton, a marine camp there.

I do a lot for the “Vatt,” too. Besides practicing with the mohori group, I help them to decorate and arrange things for festivals and the New Year. And I was on the Board a couple of years ago. Back then, I ran everything for ceremonies and festivals. I was very busy, but I felt like I had to try. Most of the people at the “Vatt” are older people. They need help. If I didn’t do it, no one else would have.

I stay involved, because Cambodians are a minority group, and I like to help keep our traditions. I like to show our culture to other Americans. We have so many people here from different countries. Other people show their culture, and we like to show our culture, too. (Seng Chao, Interview 9/21/02)

*I heard the exquisite sound, My Darling.¹⁹²
It soothes my soul. My beloved, little virtuous lady,
Your music is so exceedingly elegant.
The sound of the kheum echoes so.
It makes my heart tremble.
It glistens like the purest of gold.
Oh, shift the spotlight. Shine it on the caliptine tree.
I want to hear the mandolin.
I don’t know what you’ll think.*

¹⁹² These are the lyrics to the third verse of *Chao Dak* as sung by the *mohori* group being introduced here.

I started playing music with the mohori group about three years ago, mostly because I was bored.¹⁹³ I wanted a new hobby.

I decided to learn mandolin and takhe, because when I was young, my uncle played mandolin and takhe. I used to watch him play. I never tried it myself. I liked listening to him, but I didn't know how to play.

Then, when I was around sixteen years old, I played mandolin a little. I was a student, and my friend had a mandolin. So when nobody was home, I played. I played a lot, but when he came back home, I put it back. I was scared of him.

So when I decided to learn music three years ago, I picked mandolin, because it's easier to find in the store. You have to buy takhe in Cambodia. First I asked my brother to bring a takhe to me, but he didn't want to carry it on the airplane. Then I asked his wife, and she brought one for me.

When I started up, I knew only one or two songs. I could not play with Tevy and Lany, because I did not know their songs. I forgot all of those. So then, I waited for two weeks. Every night, I came home from work and I tried to learn the songs. I learned from CDs, from cassettes...sometimes, I'd work on one sentence for one hour. Sometimes it's difficult. And sometimes it's easy; it just takes a minute! Later I learned some of the songs from Krou Ngek. Krou Ngek knows everything, but he doesn't have time to teach me every time I want to learn a new song. But the songs he gives me are better than the

¹⁹³ Michel Chhor recalls his route to playing Khmer music, including his history in Cambodia and his desire to cure his stomach ailments with music. At first, he had to employ persistence, patience, multi-sensory learning, and a combination of self-initiative and following the teacher's example in order to participate in the *mohori* group. Michel also derives great satisfaction from transcribing song lyrics and creating song poetry of his own.

ones I find myself...So anyway, after two weeks, I went back to join the group, and I could play with them!

I think I learned maybe five or six songs during that time. I figured them out, because I knew how to sing them already.

Once I learn how to sing a song, I write it down on the computer, and I give a copy to everybody. When somebody wants to learn a song, I ask for the cassette. Then I listen to it and write down the words on the computer, and I give it to everybody. It takes about one hour per song. I do it on the weekdays, at lunchtime. I work from six o'clock to eleven o'clock in the morning. Then I come home for lunch. At one o'clock, I go back to work. I write the songs at lunchtime...and sometimes on the bus.

Sometimes, I compose the words myself. I write songs about flowers, or the sky, or my feelings. I write new lyrics for melodies that we are already familiar with. And sometimes, if a song doesn't have any words, I'll write words for it. The words help us to learn the song. If you know how to sing, it's easier to play the music.

Sometimes, when I go to church—my pastor is Canadian, and he speaks Cambodian very well—after his sermon, I'll have a song ready for him. The songs are about the Bible. I gave you the Khmer hymnbook. Some of the songs in there are mine. An English church published the book. They distribute it to Cambodians all over the world. I wrote about ten or so of the songs in there.

I enjoy writing songs and playing, but the real reason I started to get so involved in music is that I have a stomach problem. When I play music, I feel better. It's true. When I don't play, I feel heartburn. So whenever my stomach hurts, I play music, and I feel better.

Actually, I've had stomach problems for a long time, like for ten years! But before, I didn't play music. I took medicine. Sometimes that would make me feel better, sometimes not.

Everybody says that music makes you feel better, and I kind of knew it. But I didn't really expect it to work so well. But when I tried it, I felt better. A friend asked me about that and said, "How do you feel after you play music?" I said, "Better." He said, "Right. Music can help you."

Basically, if you're happy about something, not upset, you'll feel okay, no heartburn. When I play music, I feel good. So when I feel bad, I play music. (Michel Chhor, Interview 3/16/02)

I joined the mohori group with my husband, Michel, three years ago.¹⁹⁴ At first, I just went with him to keep him company. I didn't play anything.

I started to play with the group at Tevy's birthday party. They needed someone to play chhing, so they asked me. I didn't need to practice, because I know the cadences. I know which beats to accent. So I just listen to the song, and I can play.

I liked music when I was a kid. I started to make my own music books when I was twelve years old. When I learned a song, I wrote the song in the book. I had three, four, five books...all the songs that I liked. And I sang a lot when I was young. I still sing, but only in the house.

¹⁹⁴ Sodina Chhor reflects upon her involvement in Khmer music, making special note of her childhood interest in music. Those experiences prepared her to join the *mohori* group as a *chhing* player. Sodina's engagement in the group was motivated by social partnerships: first to keep her husband company, then to support the group musically. Now she marvels at music's ability to help her relax.

When I was young there were two roneats in my house, too. My brother in law had one roneat aik and one roneat thung. I played on them a little, just like a little kid. It wasn't serious, just play. So I had music around me since I was young.

Actually, I wasn't really interested in this kind of music when I was young. I sang only the modern music, not traditional songs. I learned to like mohori music here. After going with Michel week after week, I started to like it.

So now we're both in the group. We play every Sunday. Normally, we either practice at the "Vatt" or at a friend's house. Like last week, we joined our friends in Richmond. We stayed over night there, too. We started out on Saturday at ten o'clock in the morning, played all day and all night, and on Sunday morning, we played again. And at noontime, we went to another friend's house in Richmond and started all over again!

It's strange. When I get home on Sunday nights, I'm physically tired. But I never feel tired when we're playing music. And then I have to get up every Monday to go to work. I've been with Headstart as a social service assistant for twelve years now. I work with families and children. I especially like helping families with low income.

I don't make that much money, but the job is good. Uh, maybe it's because of my background. When I was young, I liked to teach other kids. And when I grew up, I became a teacher. I taught children in the refugee camps, too.

I'm learning kheum, too. I started learning around six months ago. But I don't play in the group, just at home. And lately, I have no time because of my work. By the time I come home, I'm tired. And I'm taking a Spanish class, so I have to do my homework. When I learn that, I'll know French, Spanish, Khmer, English, Vietnamese, and Chinese. I learned Vietnamese from the children that I played with when I was

young. And my family speaks Chinese. We are Chinese-Cambodian. And I learned French in school. I taught French and Cambodian for two years before I escaped to the refugee camps.

So no matter how tired I feel at the end of the weekend, I have no intention of quitting the mohori group. You know, when you hear music, when you hear the sound, you can relax. (Sodina Chhor, Interview 3/16/02)

*I heard the spectacular music, Dear.¹⁹⁵
The sound was so crisp and clear.
Now I've seen it with my own eyes.
You imitate the call of the Sarika bird. I am healed.
That mandolin sounds just like Preah Pisnukar's¹⁹⁶ lute.
It resounds through the sky.
The tevota offer their blessings.
Oh, shift the spotlight. Shine it on the snao plant.
I want to hear the tro sao.
Does it sound stunning?*

I joined the mohori group, because I know Tevy Veun and Lany Lang.¹⁹⁷ One day, Tevy met me at our friend's house, and asked me, "Kuon, would it be possible for you to learn to tro sao, since our group is in need of a tro sao player?" I replied, "I don't know anything about tro." But then for some reason, she and Lany had everything

¹⁹⁵ These are the lyrics to the fourth verse of *Chao Dak* as sung by the *mohori* group being introduced here.

¹⁹⁶ Brahman architect of the universe who is considered to be a sacred patron of the arts.

¹⁹⁷ Kuon Hann tracks his course to participating in Khmer music, including his history in Cambodia, wartime experiences, and memories of immigration and relocation. Although he encountered serious challenges when he embarked on his studies, he endured and overcame them. Now Kuon continues his activities as a way of contributing to his community.

ready for me, meaning that Lany had a tro sao that she was willing to sell to me, since she wanted me to join the group. So to tell the truth, I had no choice. That's when I started to learn.

I do like music. I played harmonica and guitar about forty-five years ago. I never went to music school. I just taught myself to play. Although I always wanted to play music when I was young, people in Cambodia don't value music as much as they do here. Here, you can make money from that. That's why I decided to study science and literature rather than art and music. Regular elementary and secondary schools in Cambodia don't even have art and music in the curriculum. You have to go to special schools for that.

So when I got the tro sao, I couldn't make any sound at all...for two weeks I couldn't make a sound. I couldn't. I was frustrated, but I was patient, so I kept playing and playing until I produced the sounds I was looking for. I could play one song, Svay Chante. From there, I was able to learn five more songs that the mohori group was playing, because I was already familiar with them. In the beginning, I was learning by myself, because Lok Krou Ngek said he's not going to teach tro, because tro is hard for him to teach. Yeah, that's what he said to everyone, but he did teach me after all.

I know a lot of songs, because I used to sing along with the radio in Cambodia. I'm happy with tro, although it's hard for me. It's too hard! I mean I can play, but it doesn't sound good when I'm playing! Lok Krou Ngek just recently showed me how to make a good tone, but it's still difficult. Right now, I record his songs, and take them home to practice. If I have never heard a song before, I have to learn step-by-step.

I spend Sundays on music, because I want to help to conserve Cambodian tradition, and to help the Cambodian temple and community. That's my main goal.

I enjoy performing, because I like to show both Cambodians and other ethnic groups in the United States that Cambodians have something to share.

To be frank, I've always liked the United States and wanted to come here to continue my education...ever since I studied economics, history, and geography in high school.

I am very fortunate to be alive. I am sure that if I stayed in Cambodia, the communists would have killed me, since I was in the military. I was in charge of supplying gasoline to the third military region in Battambang Province, which borders Thailand.

Two of my friends—Y Sophana and Meas Samrouom—convinced me to seek refuge. It happened on the same day, around 1:15 PM, that the communists took over Cambodia. Sophana told me that I was in danger. He said that the communists would look for me first, since I was in the most accessible position. Then I went to the regional command office where I met another friend, Chan Saman, who was a tank captain. He told me he was going to drive from Battambang to Phnom Sampeou. He invited me to follow him, so I did. Then for some reason, when we arrived there, we decided to continue on to Pailin Province, which also borders Thailand. We were safe and sound during our trip, because the communists were busy celebrating their victory on that day. Later, we met our commander who suggested that we escape to Thailand instead of staying in Cambodia to try to resist the communists. At around 8PM, the Thai authorities permitted us to cross the border into Bakat. We spent the night—April 17, 1975—there.

Around 10AM the next morning, we continued our trip to Vatt Chhaman in Thailand's Chantaburi Province. I stayed in Vatt Chhaman's refugee camp from April 18

until September. Then, I stayed in a transit center in Bangkok until October 20, 1975. I flew to France under the sponsorship of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. I went to France first, because France accepted my visa right away. We could not enter the United States until Congress approved it. I was afraid that something might go wrong if I waited for the American visa. I was a little impatient, too. So to be safe, I went to France. I was there for about two months. On December 25, 1975, I came to the United States.

Somehow, I still want to go back to Cambodia. I'm telling you the truth, even though I know that the United States is the best country in the world, there's no better place in this world than my motherland. If possible, I would like to spend my retirement living in my native country. I miss the environment, the feelings, and the experiences of my youth. I see everything there in my mind: my neighbor, my brother, my sister, my mother, my niece, and my two children... Now they've all passed away... (Kuon Hann, Interview 2/6/02)

I started to play tro, because I liked the way it sounds.¹⁹⁸ It sounded good, like ancient music. Actually, I started to learn it when I was still in Cambodia, but not that much. I learned more here. I started to learn on my own in 1984. I just took the

¹⁹⁸ Son Kim Sin remembers how he became a member of the *mohori* band, including his history in Cambodia and his wartime circumstances. His penchant for music was influenced by his parents' love for music and theater. Now, Son enjoys learning *mohori*, in part, because it takes him *all the way back to the past*. In order to learn *the real songs* so he can *play with anybody*, he combines patience and perseverance with following the teacher's example.

instrument and looked for the sound. I looked for the songs that I already knew. Even back in Cambodia, that's what I did. I learned by myself.

Then in 2000 I started to learn a lot of real songs with Lok Krou Ngek, the real, traditional, classical songs. Before, I just knew songs that I picked up from the radio. But now, when I come to the "Vatt," Lok Krou Ngek shows me the real songs step-by-step. When you learn by yourself, you can play, but not really, you can't play with other people, no. I learned a few tricks from him, too. So now I'm getting better.

It takes a while to learn how to play, but if you're willing to do it...I never give up...just keep going. So, it's just, one day, I know how to play the song, you know? I try to sing the song, and then make the same sound with the tro. In the beginning, I don't do it right, but if I keep going, yeah, I can get it. And when you get one song, that's it, you can go to another song.

I found out about the mohori group from Ms. Lany...and from Lok Krou Ngek. He came to my shop to get his car fixed. We talked, and he told me that he knows all of the music and all of the instruments. I said, "Wow! Can I come to learn from you?" And he said, "Fine!" And that's the connection. That's how I decided to go to the "Vatt." Before that, I took my daughter there. She knows how to dance.

So now I like the traditional music. Besides tro sao, I play kheum, tro ou, and khloy, too. I learned by myself. It's not a whole lot. I don't know any songs yet, but I know how to make the sounds. If I know people who can tell me the songs, I can find the notes. But tro sao is the one that I know how to play best. I play it more than the other instruments.

I think I like this music, because I heard it when I was young. My father didn't know how to play them, but he had all of the instruments. He loved to listen to classical music. I used to play a little, too. You know, like the small drum? I played that when I was young. Now, my father had the instruments, and he would call someone to play them for him, so he could listen. And my mom, actually, she was an actress. You know the classical theater, lkaon basak?¹⁹⁹

The Khmer Rouge came when I was in high school, but at that time, school was closed because of the war. I didn't know what to do, so I joined the army. I was about sixteen or seventeen years old...sixteen...too young. Yeah, they take sixteen years olds into the army. And Pol Pot took twelve year-olds! They take them into the army to fight. They were just like me, I didn't know. I didn't know that if you go into the army, you could die, or...no, just a couple of friends, you know, young kids...you go together, you have a good time. That's why, teenagers are stupid, you know. Even now, they do crazy things! It's the same thing.

So under Pol Pot, it was very tight. Nobody could get out. So I just hid my identity. Nobody ever knew my background. When the Vietnamese troops came in, I decided to split the country. I left in '79. I stayed in Thailand for four years.

So now I go the "Vatt" to play music almost every Sunday. I really like to spend my Sundays there...that's all. Sometimes, if I have something else to do, and it's not so important, I just leave it there, and I go to the "Vatt" to learn music instead. I practice on the weekdays, too. Sometimes I play until eleven o'clock. I get up at seven or eight in the morning, work all day, come home, and I play until eleven.

¹⁹⁹ Introduced as *basak* in Chapter 6.

It's a lot of work. I am really dedicated. I spend a lot of time...I have to work six days a week. And when I get off from work, I try to do work around the house, like cutting the grass. I do that so I can have spare time on Sunday, so I can go to the "Vatt."

So then, when I'm at the "Vatt," I don't think about the other stuff. No, I forget about it. [laughs] If there's paperwork in this store, I'm not going to do it.

My goal is to learn every song. I want to know every song, and I want to be able to play with anybody. When I see people playing music, I want to be able to join them. That's my goal. I don't want to make money out of it...well, if I could, yes. But making money is not really my goal.

I also learned some guitar back in Cambodia. I think it was 1973. But I was too busy and too young. I didn't really concentrate on it. And when I came here, I went to school to learn more. I did that for maybe one year. I can play a lot of songs, some Cambodian songs, some American songs, but I haven't really touched it since '94. I have all the guitar books in my home, but I have no people to play with. It's not like Cambodian music: people get together, and you know, trade ideas. If I had people to play guitar with, I would go with them, and maybe I would play better. Maybe I could play in a band, too.

So there's the group thing, and there's the sound thing. I really like Cambodian music, the sound. I enjoy it more. When I was young, I didn't really like the classical music, but when I got a little bit older, I started to like the sounds. Sometimes the sounds bring you all the way back to the past. (Son Kim Sin, Interview 6/14/02)

*I heard the stunning strings, My Darling.²⁰⁰
They are so dazzling.
Indeed, these are the sounds of unmatched splendor.
The high-pitched sounds of the tro saou embrace my emotions.
Like an eclipse consumes the sun and moon.
Oh, shift the spotlight. Shine it on the kamphlou²⁰¹ tree.
I want to hear the tro ou.²⁰²
How well can you play it?*

After I took some tro lessons with Krou Pok in Philadelphia, I mentioned that to Lok Krou Ngek, and he was surprised.²⁰³ He said, “Why didn’t you ask me to teach you?” And I said, “I heard you telling someone else that you don’t teach tro.” Then he said, “Oh, I was just joking.” So then he started teaching me.

But it’s funny about the tro and the whole idea behind why I wanted to learn music. As I said earlier, girls do not usually play instruments in Cambodia. In fact, it’s not considered proper for women to sing or to play an instrument. I mean, you can sing in the house, but not really go out in public. But the main reason I wanted to learn Cambodian music in the first place is that, after I learn it, I want to teach it to young girls.

²⁰⁰ These are the lyrics to the fifth verse of *Chao Dak* as sung by the *mohori* group being introduced here.

²⁰¹ The dilennia tree.

²⁰² A low-pitched two-stringed bowed lute with a coconut shell resonator.

²⁰³ Lany Lang appears here for a second time to represent the fact that she alternates between performing *kheum* and *tro*. She notes that she pursued the study of the instrument despite—even in spite of—assumptions about gender. Lany is especially interested in learning Khmer music so that she can later teach it to girls.

Now, on the day I went to Cambodian Heritage to start learning music, I was carrying a tro. Now, it really doesn't disturb Lok Krou at all to see men, like Son or Key, carrying a tro. It's a norm, a man doing that. But for a woman...

It bothers my mom, too. To tell the truth, I think that's one reason I play tro: because of my mother, because she was against that. She told me, "A woman is not supposed to play music." And I answered, "I just play kheum." And when I showed it to her, she said, "Sounds okay. It's not that bad. As long as you don't play tro, that looks so awful."

Ever since she said that, I couldn't figure out why the tro looks so ugly for a woman. And so far, none of the men have wanted to explain it to me. So I know that it must be something dirty. But I honestly don't know what it is. Hmmm, let's see... You position it here...you go like this...I look at myself playing, and I still haven't figured it out! But my mother gets it and says, "Please don't play that." And guess what? The next thing I do... (Lany Lang, Interview 1/12/02)

I started playing Khmer music in 1998, or something, at the "Vatt."²⁰⁴ I have always wanted to play music, but I never had a chance. So when I saw people playing mohori at the "Vatt," I wanted to play, too. My sister introduced me to Tevy and everyone there. That's when I tried to play tro ou.

²⁰⁴ Veasna Keo recounts his route to learning Khmer music, including his history in Cambodia and his wartime and immigration experience. His participation in the *mohori* ensemble is linked to a childhood dream about learning music. He is most satisfied by the mere activity of making music, whether alone, or preferably, with the group.

I picked tro, because it's easy to carry around. Yeah, and my cousin gave one to me when I visited him a long time ago. He just had it hanging on the wall. He didn't know how to play. It was just a decoration in the house. I said, "I like tro." He said, "Go ahead. Take it."

Yeah, ever since I was small, I wanted to play, but I had no chance. I'd watch musicians playing wherever they were, on the street, at a festival, or at a wedding. Whenever I could, I hung around and listened to them. I didn't care about the festivals or whatever. I just enjoyed the music. But I was so small, that I never had a chance to learn. I just went here and there with my parents, and then they took me home. I never spoke with the musicians or asked anyone to teach me. So many years later, I came to the "Vatt," and that was my first opportunity.

It's funny, because I never planned on coming to this country. When the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia, I intended to join the Resistance, to fight back. But the Resistance fell apart. We could not survive in Cambodia any more. We just had to try to survive ourselves, like on the border. We crossed the border to Thailand. Then I lived in Thailand for four or five months, and then the Americans said, "You are free to come to the United States." Or we could have gone to France if we chose to. So I thought, "If I go, and I don't like the United States, I can always come back to Thailand." Then, when I got here, I went to a refugee camp in Pennsylvania, Indiantown Gap.

So now, I play music here at the "Vatt," but I'm still not any good. In the group, I'm the last one. I try to teach myself. I just put the cassette in the stereo, and try to follow it. I make my own cassettes. Each one has the same song, again and again, on it. The whole tape is filled with the same song, and I just follow that.

I work five days a week and am off on Sundays. I come to the “Vatt” on Sundays to play music. I’m busy, but oh, I enjoy it so much! I keep moving all of the time. And when I’m not working or playing music, I go fishing. Yeah, I’m off on one day during the middle of the week, and I go fishing all day. I like to eat fish. Fresh fish is better than the fish you can buy in the store. And I enjoy getting some fresh air, too.

After fishing, I come back home, and I play music again. I like the old stuff. I listen to it all the time like phleng kar, mohori, like that. I listen every day.

If the group’s playing, I join. If nobody’s around, I play by myself. The group is better. I can watch people who are better than I am. I can see how they play.

I planned to play music a long time ago, but I had no chance. Now I feel happy that I can play a little bit. Other people might say that I’m not a good player, but I don’t care. I’m happy to play music myself. It sounds good to me. (Veasna Keo, Interview 6/23/02)

Before I actually joined the mohori group...um, well, I had been thinking about it for a long time.²⁰⁵ I saw that there was a music class at the “Vatt.” And when I saw the group performing, I was just thinking to myself, “I’d like to be in that music group.” I’m sure that Tevy noticed me. Whenever they played, I walked around the group. I always walked around thinking, “How can I get in?” “How can I be in this group?” And I walked all around...

²⁰⁵ Key Ek describes his path to joining the *mohori* group, including his history in Cambodia and his relocation circumstances. Playing music here has enabled him to reclaim a childhood dream, to connect to his *roots*, and to share *good things* with others.

I first saw the group playing about a few years after I got here in 1992. I came to Columbia, Maryland, where my sponsor lives. There's a church there that my sponsor belongs to. After living here for a couple of months, I found out about the "Vatt," and I went there to help out. I was happy to help and to teach the children about their language and culture. I felt very comfortable, so whenever I had time, I went there.

In the beginning, I was going to my sponsor's church. But right now, I don't have time to go to church. I told my sponsor that I have to go to the Buddhist temple, because you know, I really appreciate it. I mean, I believe in God. All gods are good. They help people. But I come here for my roots...our history is long. I don't want us to forget where we come from. I want my children to know about our religion and our culture.

So, I went to the "Vatt" all the time, and I watched the mohori group when they played outside, like on the New Year. When I saw them playing music, I thought, "I wish...if I can..." And later on, I thought, "It's been at least three years now. I should try."

Then, I went to the "Vatt" on the first day of class in September 1999. The group was doing thvay krou,²⁰⁶ and I just joined them. I asked Tevy, "May I join? I want to learn, too." And Tevy said, "Okay." And then I asked Lok Krou, and he said, "So what do you want to play?" At that time, I knew I could play skor dai,²⁰⁷ but I wanted to try something else. And then, well, at first I thought about kheum, but I don't have kheum to learn on. So I said, "Skor dai's okay," and then I bought a skor dai.

²⁰⁶ A ceremony in which students pay homage to their teachers and teacher spirits. Disciples invoke the powers of their instructors to promote the success of their future endeavors.

²⁰⁷ A small, single-headed hand drum. *Skor dai* means literally, "hand drum."

I like skor dai, because it's so exciting. There are so many different ways to play. You can play with mohori, you can play with phleng kar, and you can play for the dance, for the roam vong.²⁰⁸

And also, I have experience with the skor dai. I knew how to play in Cambodia. I played skor dai for dances a lot when I was young. Yeah, I played the skor dai like during the New Year when the groups danced in our village. I was the one who made people enjoy themselves...with the drum, and with the tro...There were four people in my group. I played skor dai, my cousin played tro, another person sang, and another person played chhing. So we had a lot of fun. We tried to make all of the kids and older people enjoy themselves and dance during our New Year.

I started to do that, because when I was young, I heard music on the radio, and I dreamed that I wanted to be a music star. That's exactly what I was feeling when I was young. I wanted to be a music star, and a movie star.

No one in my family really danced or played music. Especially my father, he didn't understand. When I went out to play music and entertain people, when he saw that I enjoyed that, he said, "I don't know where you come from." I played so funny. People in the village, more like the whole county, who didn't know me? If they heard my name, they knew who I was. It comes naturally to me.

But um, I wasn't lucky. I didn't get my dream, because my family was poor. We lived in the countryside, and I didn't finish school. Then the war started. And then, my family disappeared...all dead. I lost my whole family. I lost my mom, and after that, my whole family disappeared. I lost my dad, too.

²⁰⁸ A popular social dance that is performed in a circle.

So I didn't get my dream, but I'm not going to lose my dream. I still, right now, I still have my hopes. At least I get to do something. Right now, I play. I think like, music makes life easier. Music is something that makes fun come into my life. It makes me forget things that are stressful, and it makes my life more comfortable.

I like to be in the group. I want to see everybody have fun, smile, be happy. When we enjoy each other and make friends, I think, "Well, I'm not alone. I do good things, so good things come to me." (Key Ek, Interview 6/15/02)

*I heard you play, Bong.²⁰⁹
Such gorgeous sounds, oh!
So lovely they give me goose bumps.
They completely cure my disease.
They stop my illness and release my pain.
The tro ou, so perfect, I can tell that it is a Khmer girl who plays.
So resplendent, it steals my heart.
Oh, shift the spotlight. Shine it on the kdungngear²¹⁰ tree.
I want to hear dangasknear.²¹¹
How enchanting it will be.*

Through the reflections of two cultural program administrators and the members of an adult music ensemble, this chapter has supplied readers with a vibrant, highly personalized, and contemporary panorama of the diverse meanings that Khmer music and dance-drama spawn at "Virginia" and the "Vatt." The forgoing "sound-spheres" have underscored how active participation distinguishes the potency of these arts in this

²⁰⁹ These are the lyrics to the sixth and final verse of *Chao Dak* as sung by the *mohori* group being introduced here.

²¹⁰ The ilang-ilang tree.

²¹¹ "Everyone playing together."

community. That is, they have shown how, on one hand, interpersonal interactions based upon traditional values and pivotal artistic qualities of Khmer performing arts (such as those discussed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six) underlie the significance of musical expression. On the other hand, they have also demonstrated how geographical, political, historical, economic, and cultural change fuel the strength of these arts in the local context. This depiction was enhanced by a “performance” of the song, *Chao Dak*, by the *mohori* group. Their “performance” represented a compressed version of the broader *interplay of voices* (Clifford 1986a) that comprises this text. It also mirrored the overarching framework of this dissertation, since it was enacted in two complementary dimensions: one demonstrating the compositional structure and performance practice of the song itself and one featuring the chronological and unique stories of each *mohori* group member.²¹² Consequently, in addition to revealing the diverse meanings of Khmer performing arts in this community, this presentation also illuminated the benefits of the *polyphonic* (Bakhtin 1981: 430) writing style used throughout this manuscript for conveying the layers of meaning embedded within Khmer musical performance.²¹³ This condensed and relatively current rendition of “sounding the spirit of Cambodia” in the Washington, DC area has edified how, especially in this community, *the relationships of*

²¹² These stories paralleled, whenever possible, the general linear progression of this dissertation, highlighting the interactions of personal, community, and artistic experience. Therefore, the narratives typically include summaries of pre-migration history, wartime experiences, life in refugee camps, journeys to the United States, resettlement experiences, and paths to involvement in Khmer music at “Virginia” and the “Vatt.”

²¹³ As noted in the introduction to this volume, these layers are experienced in various dimensions, including sound, movement, images, and feelings.

a musical performance are enormously complex, too complex, ultimately, to be expressed in words. (Small 1998: 13)

The various interpretations of Khmer performing arts imparted throughout the chapter echoed the overarching aims of “Virginia” and the “Vatt” identified in Chapter Three: conserving Khmer culture, passing on cherished values, forging Khmer environments, and presenting Khmer civilization to those with limited knowledge about Cambodia. For the majority of the parties, preserving Khmer identity and memories of homeland as well as exhibiting that heritage to others ranked prominently among the motivations for uniting around the activities of “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” For example, Tevy Veun was inspired to learn *roneat*, because she wanted to do something with the instruments that she displayed in her home as a symbol of Cambodia. Son Kim Sin recalled that, *I started to play tro, because I liked the way it sounds. It sounded good, like ancient music.* And Kuon Hann explained that, *I want to help to conserve Cambodian tradition... I like to show both Cambodians and other ethnic groups in the United States that Cambodians have something to share.*

According to Small, *It is only by understanding what people do as they take part in a musical act that we can hope to understand its nature and the function it fulfills in human life.* (1998: 8) This chapter has illustrated how participants of “Virginia” and the “Vatt” accomplish the above-mentioned goals through the processes of creating and maintaining a sense of “family” and through collective engagement in symbolically potent art forms.

The significance of family ties in preserving, transmitting, sharing, shaping, and presenting Khmer culture has been highlighted in the introduction to this volume and

tracked throughout the narratives in the subsequent chapters (especially Chapter Three). Here, readers again witnessed the critical role that family consciousness plays at “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” First, Gary Marco declared, *I was really kind of taken by the rehearsals, the kids running around, you know, the whole kind of community, or family, which is also a big part of it.* Subsequently, Raci Say reminded students of their parents and ancestors, stating that, *We want you to know where you came from, your roots.* Similarly, a number of *mohori* group members enumerated kinship as a major reason for their joining the group. For instance, Amro Veun related that, *Music was my wife and daughter’s idea. They wanted to practice music together, so I joined them.* Seng Chao noted that, *my older sister, Lany, asked me to help out. That’s how I got involved.* And Sodina Chhor indicated that, *I joined the mohori group with my husband...At first, I just went with him to keep him company.*

In combination with the concept of “family,” the “sound-spheres” have disclosed the influence of Khmer music and dance-drama’s symbolism on supporting the community’s vision for reviving, imparting, and molding Khmer environments and a sense of ethnic unity. As indicated above and throughout this text,²¹⁴ a significant number of the members of this community view Khmer performing arts as powerful symbols of an undying Cambodia. Thus, at “Virginia” and the “Vatt,” experience with these arts links memory to meaning. (Durkheim 1961) For instance, Veasna Keo related his desire to play music to his childhood, conveying that, *ever since I was small, I wanted to play, but I had no chance... Now I feel happy that I can play a little bit.* Similarly, Michel Chhor stated that, *I decided to learn mandolin and takhe, because when I was young, my*

²¹⁴ Recall especially Chapters 2 and 3.

*uncle played mandolin and takhe. Key Ek also associated his interest in the *mohori* group to his youth. For example, he recalled that, *when I was young, I heard music on the radio, and I dreamed that I wanted to be a music star*. In addition, Key bound his participation in the activities of the “Vatt” to a more communal notion of memory, affirming that, *I come here for my roots...our history is long. I don’t want us to forget where we come from*. The kinds of connections identified by these gentlemen explain, in large part, why so many in the Khmer community of the Washington, DC area dedicate their Sundays and much of their weekday time to their performing arts endeavors.*

The preceding “sound-spheres” have also portrayed how Khmer performing arts are not merely static, symbolic meeting grounds for individuals with common interests. Rather, the anecdotes have demonstrated that social enactment related to these symbols leads to a state of *communitas* (Turner 1995), during which time individuals advance into a interim sense of synthesis with others. (Herndon and McLoed 1990; Turner 1995; Van Gennep 1960) Consequently, community members regularly apperceive, express, and face common experience with each other. These experiences, in turn, often lead to a sense of relief or tranquility that is unmatched by ordinary daily activity. Such sentiments were expressed throughout the reflections in the foregoing pages. Tevy Veun’s ruminations offered one case in point. She contemplated, *Sometimes when you hear music, you get strength. The spirit of the music goes into you, especially when the whole group is into it*. Similarly, Sodina Chhor reflected that, *You know, when you hear music, when you hear the sound, you can relax*. Comparably, Key Ek related that, *Music is something that makes fun come into my life. It makes me forget things that are stressful, and it makes my life more comfortable*.

In his essay, “On Communal Ritual,” Durkheim proposes that, *If the movements by which...sentiments are expressed are connected with something that endures, the sentiments themselves become durable.* (1961: 959) In keeping with this theory, the stamina of the symbolic and performative rewards of musical experience at “Virginia” and the “Vatt” may be ascribed to the fact that Khmer performing arts embody and possess the power to transmit time-honored values and knowledge. These values and knowledge constitute the foundation of the three interrelated aesthetic principles that were presented in the introduction to this dissertation and explored in detail in Chapters Four, Five, and Six: the philosophical underpinnings of, relationships in, and cultural patterns that distinguish Khmer performing arts. Specifically, those discussions demonstrated that exemplary Khmer performance embraces the elements of *phloev*: autonomous research; education through mental, physical, and spiritual means; embodied memory; emphasis on process; following models with sincerity; and exploring diversity. They also revealed that mastery of *phloev* becomes evident when artists prove their ability to balance individual expression with social obligation.

The motifs that recurred throughout this chapter resonated with these essential characteristics of Khmer music and dance-drama. To begin with, conscious attention to the components of *phloev* reappeared throughout many of the narratives when individual *mohori* ensemble members reflected upon their learning processes. For instance, Sok Nou remembered learning music informally when he was a child. He also described his subsequent formal study of music in *Sra Kao* refugee camp under Mr. Douy where he spent eight hours a day concentrating on his practice. This background served him well after his ten-year hiatus from playing music upon relocation to the United States: because

of Sok's thorough mental, physical, and spiritual instruction, he promptly revitalized his performance facility when he encountered new opportunities to play in Maryland. Secondly, the motifs reiterated the fact that Khmer musical performance embodies cultural values that celebrate a balance of personal expression with group cooperation. This fact surfaced first in this chapter when Gary Marco relayed that at "Virginia," he was assigned multiple responsibilities that make use of unique skills and perspectives. It recurred in Raci Say's account when she encouraged students at the "Vatt" to relinquish their time for their culture and future benefit. And it emerged in various manifestations during the *mohori* group's "performance" of *Chao Dak*. That is, on one level, it came into view while readers experienced the compositional organization and "production" of the song, which depends upon the conversations among individual and group voices. It also rang through in the discrete stories of *mohori* group members. For example, readers learned that Michel Chhor transcribes the lyrics of the songs in the ensemble's repertoire and makes copies to share with the group. We also observed that Son Kim Sin's goal is to learn as much music as possible so that he will be prepared to perform with any group whenever an opportunity presents itself. And we discovered that Seng Chao has assisted whenever necessary at the "Vatt," because *Most of the people at the "Vatt" are older...If I didn't do it, no one else would have.*

By generating a feeling of "family" and sharing in social interactions attached to potent symbols of a resplendent Cambodia, those who participate in the activities of "Virginia" and the "Vatt" enjoy the benefits of reaffirming their heritage. They derive extraordinary satisfaction from the experience of regenerating the treasures that are

unique to their community, while preparing to introduce those treasures to more general audiences in the United States.

Chapter 8: Compromising with the United States

I'm telling you, Joanna, I think that every artist in the Cambodian community will die soon from trying to accomplish everything. We're so busy! There is so much demand in this community, and fulfilling each request is tremendous and time-consuming.

Lord, have mercy! Now I'm trying to monitor my schedule. I'm very tired. I'm so glad that the classical groups didn't call me this year.²¹⁵ I am busy enough with singing for the live band. I need to limit my commitments. (Sophy Hoeung, Interview 2/23/02)

In the preface to her ethnography of the Khmer American experience in the Massachusetts area, Smith-Hefner indicates that *Southeast Asian refugees tend to be extremely busy – or, to be more exact, socially overextended—in their struggle to adjust to life in the United States and make ends meet.* (1999: xiii) This is certainly the case for the members of the Khmer community of the Washington, DC area who participate in the activities of “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” The previous chapters traced some of the expectations that these individuals held about improving their lives by resettling in the United States. They also introduced the basic challenges that hindered both the immediate acquisition of these advantages and the fluid continuation of the community’s artistic endeavors. In particular, non-transferable job skills and educational backgrounds,

²¹⁵ As she was saying this in February, I thought to myself: *They just haven't called her yet, and she knows it. The New Year isn't until April. They'll call her soon and ask her to sing for them, and she'll sing for them. She's dedicated and committed to helping the community. She's there every year. When April rolls around, we'll see. She's just saying this now to temporarily relieve the anxiety of being stretched to the limit.* Sure enough, in April, Sophy was singing at the New Year's performances and was present at the dress rehearsals as well.

limited English language proficiency, and the immediate needs of providing for their families put the artists into situations that left them with little time and energy to devote to performing, practicing, and teaching Khmer performing arts in the United States.

How have these circumstances shifted over the decades? How have they effected Khmer music and dance-drama and the community's efforts to maintain a semblance of artistic and cultural continuity?

Chapter Seven introduced some of the challenges that currently face the Khmer community of the Washington, DC area, demonstrating how the performing arts activities are kept alive through collaborative community-building, cross-cultural teamwork, and personalizing tradition. This chapter offers readers a broader lens through which to view these dynamics. It explores more specifically the various advantages and challenges which master artists and their supporters encounter in their efforts to regenerate Khmer performing arts within the context of the United States. It highlights the factors that engender these opportunities and difficulties, the diverse reactions to these conditions, and the motivations behind these responses.

Sophy Hoeung offers an initial glimpse into the impetus behind persisting with performance despite daunting responsibilities and concerns about overload. I asked her, *If you're too busy, why don't you say, "No," to people when they ask you to do something?* She replied.

They always say something reasonable! There aren't that many singers who they can go to for help, and I want to contribute to the community in whatever way I can. That's why I never say "No." I always help...if I can. What do I have my voice for? I'll

continue to support them until someone younger, from the next generation, is able to take over. (Sophy Hoeung, Interview 2/23/02)

Sophy's statement points to the fact that *for the Khmer, particularly as Theravada Buddhist survivors of a holocaust, successful social adjustment does not necessarily mean the American dream of economic achievement and individual freedom, but success in personal and family interactions.* (Welarantha 1993: 275) The subsequent "sound-spheres" track the reality of the artists' *successful social adjustment* two decades after assembling the foundation of their newly-adopted home in the Washington, DC area.

“It’s Weird. Sometimes It’s Like I Have Two Worlds”

Chapters One and Two introduced a variety of circumstances that surrounded the artists' decisions to relocate to the United States. Many of the artists based their preference for life in the United States on the country's perceived advantages. Expectations about freedom (such as the liberty to make personal decisions and to express individual opinions); comfortable lifestyles; study opportunities; and reunion with friends, family, and fellow artists who had resettled in the country wielded the greatest influence over their choices. If the artists themselves could not benefit fully from these opportunities, their decisions to move to the United States have been legitimized by the privileges that the country offers to their children. Devi Yim explains.

Oh, I think it's a good thing that I stayed here...Well, sometimes, I wish that I stayed home...you know, I was a star in Cambodia! People respected me. Here, people don't care! They don't know who I am. At first, I felt like I didn't do the right thing. But now I reflect. I realize that I have a good life. In the United States, I have been able to learn about a new culture and to meet new people, including my husband. Even though my life is hard, I have these advantages.

And now I have my kids. This is a good place for them to grow up. So now, I just forget about me! I focus on the kids. That's what I think about and that's what makes me feel better when I start to feel homesick. (Devi Yim, Interview1/27/02)

The opportunities available to the artists' children are unquestionably vast and appealing. Ngek Chum's daughter, Sovath, and son, Sovann, describe how they manage their American and Cambodian worlds. Appreciating her parents' efforts to make her feel simultaneously American and Cambodian, Sovath shapes an identity that encompasses and builds upon the benefits of both. Her experiments with leadership are inspired by her cultural heritage. Similarly, Sovann marvels at his musical inheritance. Although time constraints and a feeling that *I was put here to do something else* limit his involvement, he intends to maintain the family tradition by sharing Khmer music with his children and grandchildren, the future generations of his *American family*. He will not, however, force them to learn if they do not want to.

It's weird. Sometimes it's like I have two worlds. One world is school. It has nothing to do with music whatsoever. And the other world is my Cambodian world, which involves music and a lot of other stuff.

I compare myself to my brother, who, I don't know, he's probably more American than I am. He's not really into culture sometimes. He doesn't really do a lot of Cambodian things, I guess. But I try to do both.

My Cambodian world is...for one thing, I'm a girl. So it's different. I have to be a good girl, blah, blah, blah. I can't do this. I can't do that. Sometimes I'm kind of limited. It's just tradition. I mean, my parents are a lot more Americanized than other Cambodian parents are. They give me a lot of freedom. They actually let me out. And they actually do let me drive.

Also, I try to learn as much about Buddhism as possible. I started to learn about it when we went to Sunday school at the temple. At first, I went because my parents wanted me to. I didn't want to go, but then I went to see my friends. It's kind of like school. You like it, but you don't like it. So I did that for like six years. Before reading class started, we learned how to chant. In class we practiced reading Cambodian script. Afterwards, we had quizzes and stuff. And then we chanted again.

And you know, I've been around the music all of my life. I started dancing and playing music seriously when I was thirteen years old. So that's a big part of my Cambodian world.

But music is what I do as a hobby. School...that's what I'm going to do with my life. School is different. I am thinking of majoring in molecular biology. I just have to

declare it. I could either go to med school after that, or just work, but something related to the science field.

So now that I'm in college and everything, it's hard to practice. So right now, I'm kind of taking a break. I do some performances with my dad, but not as much as before. And I'm not going to dance class on Sundays these days.

Even though I'm not dancing now, sometimes, when I feel out of shape, I do the exercises, just so I won't forget...so when I go back, I'll have my form. But most likely that won't be soon, because school's getting more intense. I'm doing well in school now that I'm not going to dance class on Sunday. I mean, I love to dance. It's not because of dance class, but because it gives me more time to study.

Music is different because my dad is always home. So I can practice whenever. Or not practice whenever.

I like to do it all, if I can. Last year, I had fun doing both—dancing and playing music. I wanted to dance more, but I then I figured, “If I dance more, I won't be able to play.” So it was a good balance. Also, with music it's different, because my dad is a musician. I kind of have that pressure to be good at my instrument. He knows it so well. I'm his child, so I feel like I have to do well.

I'm also busy with a multicultural sorority that I'm starting at Towson University. I never wanted to join a sorority. Just from what you hear—that they party and drink—I'm not into that. But this was multicultural...it kind of caught my attention. There are so many different types of people in this world. And since I'm the second child, the youngest, I don't get as much of a chance to be a leader. So I thought, “Learn to be a leader, more outgoing, not the quiet little Cambodian girl.”

Actually, I see the sorority thing as kind of overlapping with my Cambodian world. I wanted to start the sorority because of my background. I want to teach people about the Khmer culture and stuff. And I want to learn about other cultures, 'cause I know every culture's different, and they're all so wonderful. I'm amazed with what I have with my culture. I can imagine that other cultures have something that they respect and love, too.

There are a lot of privileges that my parents give me. I know it's hard for them to balance everything. They try really hard to make me feel like an American, yet also Cambodian. They want me to have the same privileges that other Americans have. But if I have too much freedom, what will happen to the Cambodian culture? (Sovath Chum, Interview 1/8/02)

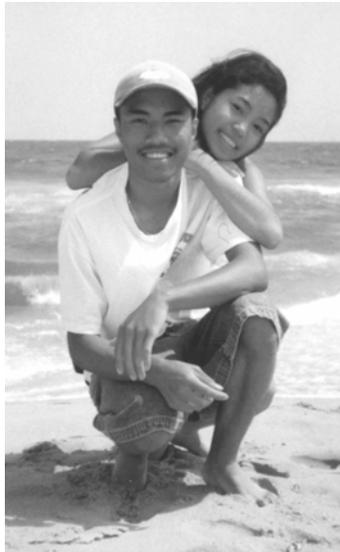


Figure 20-Sovath and Sovann Chum
(Photo credit Ngek Chum)

What I like about the music, is that it's like a family tradition. You know what I mean? It's something that my dad got from his grandfather. I like playing it 'cause it makes me think of the days that my dad was with his grandfather. I like the idea of continuing something that's in the family. It has been passed on through the generations. And here I am. So many years later, I can still do it!

Another thing I like about it is the creativity...and the fact that it's all by ear, not by notes. It's with me all of the time. Like even now, pieces of music are still in my head. I drive around, and they're in my head. Everywhere I go, I still have Cambodian music in my head! It's so weird. I don't play for months, and then, when I go to perform...a week...my dad shows me the pieces in a week, and there it goes: I'm ready for my performance.

Yeah, actually, I like all music. I would say that my music of choice would have to be reggae. To me, it's like...when I listen to that, I can relate to Cambodian music. 'Cause there's minor things that they do with the drums and the bass, that'll trigger me to do a little bit of slipping and sliding in the music that I play. I really like reggae and rasta. It's good music. It's a good religion. It's about one love, peace.

I'm saying that I play Cambodian music because I love it. I want to play it, because I want to play it, not because of anyone else, not because of money, not because of anything like that. And that's why I say, when I wanna play, I play a hundred percent. And when I don't wanna play, I really don't wanna play. It's zero or nothing, you know? But sometimes, if I have to, then I have to.

On the other side, I feel like once I've learned it, and know what to do, it gets kind of boring, because there's only so much you can learn. You know what I mean? There's

only so much you can learn from anybody. Like my dad, he really loves it, because there was so much he could learn. He was learning different things all of the time. So now, he plays in his original way. He changed the music that his teachers taught him. For me, to love it like my dad does...I'd have to create my own style of music. You see what I'm saying? So right now, it's at the point where there's nothing for me to really learn but little tricks to make it sound better.

...except for the roneat. I've tried the roneat. I can play it, but it's kind of hard. You gotta be really, really focused. When I'm out of focus, it does not sound right. That's why I could never master that...well, to tell you the truth, I never put a hundred percent effort into it like I do with everything else. I guess that's because I keep on telling myself, "I can't do it. I can't do it." It's the leader of the whole group!

But when I play the other instruments, I think about whatever. It doesn't even matter.

That's why people think that I'm not so interested. I don't play much. But if I had more time to come up with my own different tricks and stuff, people would be like, "Wow! Yeah, you really do love that music." But right now, I don't have time to really sit down, break the music into sections, and think about how I can make it sound a little better. Right now, I don't have time. But eventually, I will.

School takes up a lot of my time. I'm going to school full time. I have a lot of labs, because I work with computers. After lab, I go home, and I have to do the work on my own. Stuff like that keeps me busy.

I like computers. They're interesting, kind of like music, too: really creative. It's like you start out with one thing and then you try to turn it into something else. The way

you program them, fix them, take them apart, plugging in the right lines to the right ports...computers are just like music: plugging in the right pieces at the right time. It might not be interesting to other people, but I like it.

My life is just filled with a lot of things that were given to me. Everything that I have is like a gift. That's why I never thought that I needed to be a musician or anything. My dad taught me how to play music, and that's good. I know how to play music. I learn other things in life, too. That's just how it is. I never thought I should major in music just because I'm good at it. I'm more interested in learning different things, you know? I don't want to do the same old stuff all the time. Just because I'm good at music doesn't mean that I have to major in it or anything like that. I want to open up to other things. Maybe if I don't succeed at what I go in for, yeah, well, maybe I'll come back to music. That's always there. It's a gift. But in the meanwhile, why not take advantage of something else that I can do?

I don't know. I feel like I was put here to do something else. I guess the music skipped a generation. I can achieve a degree in something else. I need to be something else.

But now that I know music, I can tell my son that I know music. I can say, "Your grandfather was a musician. Maybe you should try, learn how to play. Do this, do that." I feel like I could show him without majoring in it. I can show him what music is and do something else, too. Maybe my grandkids will like playing music...something that my dad wanted me to do, but I couldn't do it. I still have the opportunity to teach my grandkids. But like I say, if it doesn't happen, it doesn't matter. I'm not going to push them. It's just an idea. But if they don't want to, I'm not going to force them.

I'm not saying that my dad's pushing me to be a musician. Maybe before, maybe he wanted that, because I'm good at it. But not now, now he wants me to be happy in what I want to do in life.

I just want to be successful and let my kids continue the family, be an American family. That's it. I don't want anyone to look at our race, our color, or anything. We're just another generation about to start: American. (Sovann Chum, Interview 1/26/02)

“You Can't Tell People It's Not Lost, If They're Not Listening”

The preceding “sound-spheres” illustrated the wealth of possibilities within the reach of aspiring young Khmer Americans. But as outlined in Chapter Six, the continuity of Khmer music and dance-drama is highly dependent upon devoted interactions between teachers and students. Within the context described above, this kind of dedication is arduous, if not virtually impossible to achieve. Brandon makes clear the paradox of the traditional Khmer teaching process.

Master-disciple teaching has two sides to it...it tends to preserve traditions and hand them on to the next generation quite exactly; but, because the master teaches all he knows to only one or two pupils, the diffusion of knowledge of the art form tends to be limited. (1967:156)

While warning about the tendency to create artificial oppositions between *pure* or *traditional* music²¹⁶ and *hybrid, cross-fertilized, pastiche, transplanted* music²¹⁷ (1981: 228), Kartomi agrees that certain aspects of culture contact lead to *musical impoverishment*. (1981: 239) Directly transferring methods of transmission from one context to another, for example, can lead to a decrease in *musical energy* (Nettl 1978 in Kartomi 1981: 228),²¹⁸ repertoire loss, adaptation to performance practice, and simplification of music. (1981: 239) All of these effects characterize the current situation of Khmer performing arts worldwide.²¹⁹

At “Virginia” and the “Vatt” the dynamics of conflicting interests and disparate goals for performance exacerbate these problems. On one hand, the coinciding of the six sources of power presented in the introduction of this volume²²⁰ have lent marked stability to the music and dance-drama activities there. On the other hand, however, the

²¹⁶ Simply because it measures up to “trait lists” established by some scholars and musicians and based upon qualities which dominated a specific type of music at a particular point in time, for instance.

²¹⁷ Music that obviously reveals the effects of musical change and the shifting boundaries of culture.

²¹⁸ The amount of time and energy that is devoted to music.

²¹⁹ While Khmer performing arts as practiced in Cambodia did not literally travel across geographical boundaries, historical circumstances have propelled them across comparable contexts. In fact, Khmer dance has shifted contexts and experienced drastic changes multiple times since it’s supposed time of origin, the Angkor period. (See Cravath 1985)

²²⁰ Credentials of tradition-bearers; cultural program administration hierarchies; individual interchanges guided by social network ordering according to perceptions about wealth, education, or political standing; level of experience with traditional arts and transmission processes; teacher beliefs about prospective students; and, degree to which individuals interact according to American versus Khmer cultural rules.

clashings of these same elements have strained the time, energy, and financial resources of the tradition-bearers beyond their limits. This tension is linked directly to the notion of “face” introduced in Chapter Two. That is, artists like Ngek Chum may be perfectly aware that certain practices such as teaching multiple students within the span of just a few hours or splitting weekend time among several teaching and performance commitments are counterproductive to healthy artistic development. However, they also remain conscious of the potential social implications of failing to contribute the best of their skills to the community or of sidestepping official hierarchies. Smith-Hefner reminds us that, *face is not a uniquely individual matter but a complex social evaluation that depends on the judgements of people in the community and the expression of those judgements in public ritual and etiquette.* (1999: 86) In fact, Khmer social interactions incorporate a *set of face-saving norms* that all but ensure *that people will act in accordance with preexisting rules of etiquette and respect.* (Hinton 1998: 103) Consequently, it is not uncommon to encounter significant gaps between the truth and widespread public understandings of the *impoverishment* of Khmer performing arts. For example, sometimes the perception that something has been lost leads to its precarious survival, its eventual loss, and even to newly constructed stories about a repertoire’s road to recovery. Ngek Chum reflects.

I teach a lot of the people who come to learn at “Virginia” and the “Vatt” every week. I also teach a few students who come to my house on the weekends and once-in-a-while in the evenings. I teach my brother-in-law, sister, kids, and friends to play different

types of music that we need when performances are coming up, too. So I have a lot of students, and I'm pretty busy teaching.

But it's different here in the States. No one has time. In Cambodia, when we studied music, we spent all of our time on it.

When students show interest in learning here, I teach them. But mostly, they are not so serious. Or, if they are serious, they don't have enough time to learn from me. They have things to do during the week and the weekends are short. At "Virginia" and the "Vatt," I have to divide my time. First of all, I have to divide my time between both places on Sundays. I go to the "Vatt" in the morning and to "Virginia" in the afternoon. And second of all, when I'm there, I have to split my time between teaching and accompanying the dancers. In spite of all this, once-in-a-while, I find talented students. But most of the time, they quit eventually because they go to college. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 8/25/99)

My kids can play—especially my son—but they're busy, too. And much of the time, Sovann is not even interested in playing music. He hasn't touched the instruments at all lately. Even though he never touches it, his sampho is the best. No one can beat him. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 3/17/01) His roneat aik is not bad either. Did you ever hear him play? (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/26/02)

This conversation followed my interview with Sovann, so he was in the room listening. Sovath was there, too. I responded to *Lok Krou*, *I've heard him play a little bit, but not really*. So I asked, *Sovann, let me hear it*.

Sovann walked over to the *roneat* and picked up the mallets. He played very softly, but very smoothly. He decorated the melodies beautifully, just like his dad! He was winging it, so of course, it wasn't perfect. But it was startling!

Then *Lok Krou* played another, short piece of music on the *roneat*. He handed the mallets to Sovann who imitated what he had heard. It was almost identical! *Lok Krou* added, *I never taught him that.*

Then *Lok Krou* said something quietly to Sovath in Khmer. He told her to explain it to me. She related, *Basically, he said that Sovann has "special arms," like my dad's own arms. That's why Sovann should play roneat. It is like a gift. It's even kind of like magic.*



Figure 21-Sovann Chum Demonstrated his Talent for *Roneat Aik* Back in 1984
(Photo credit Giovanni Giuriati)

Lok Krou continued, *It's a shame that he has these arms and he doesn't use them. I had to work hard to learn how to play well. My grandfather made me practice and practice until I got it right. Sovann doesn't have to work that hard. It's as if he*

simply inherited it. My grandfather wasn't that great at roneat, so he got teachers to come to my house to teach me. So I didn't hear it all day, all night. But Sovann, he has that. The sound went into his head. Now he knows everything already. All he has to do is sit down and play.

I glared at Sovann in amazement until he said something: *It's like I said earlier, it takes a lot to play the roneat right. It takes a lot of work to play well.* (Conversation 1/26/02)

To be honest, I don't want to push my kids. If they don't want to play music, I can't force them. But what I'm really worried about is losing the music. There's too much to lose. Who will help people to learn this music when I get very sick and old? I feel very bad that I have not been able to teach more of what I know.

It is hard for me to explain to anyone all of the music that I know and all of the skills that I have developed. We just don't have enough time to perform all of the different music. I don't have enough time to teach, and no students have enough time to learn. There has been no way for me to teach the real art of Khmer music.

That's why I want to make some recordings. The most important one is Homrong.²²¹ But there's a lot more after that. If possible, I'd like to record some music for the dancers, and I want to record songs that people think are lost.

Here, people don't really pay attention. Like the other day, we were trying to remember the music for a new dance that the students are learning. I remembered the

²²¹ See Chapter 5 for more about the significance of *Homrong*.

music, but the dance teacher said that I was wrong. When we finally agreed on something, it turned out that the dance teacher just had a shorter way of doing it. She must have performed it like that in Cambodia. And that explains why she didn't remember the whole song. But, like I told you before, when something goes wrong, they blame the roneat. So I cut the music.

She thinks she's right. I think I'm right. Who can say who's right?

When people see that happening they think that the music is lost. But I'll tell you the truth. You can't tell people it's not lost, if they're not listening.

Here's another story. It was about five years ago when some musicians came from Cambodia to see us. Their whole visit was about exchange, sharing knowledge. They remind us, and we remind them. Then everybody knows more.²²² So anyway, we all got together and played. At first, I played kong. Then one musician heard that I play roneat, so he asked me to play roneat. He really liked my playing. He said he never hears music like that.

Later, he asked me if I remembered one particular song. I said that I knew it and taught it to him. We were both happy about that.

But do you know what happened after that? One day, the dance teacher here wanted to teach a new dance to her students. Of course, she wanted me to play the music for them, and since it was new to her, she assumed that I needed a sample of the music. So she gave me a recording of some music that she brought back from Cambodia. Guess what? That was the song I taught the musician from Cambodia! But I didn't say anything... (Ngek Chum, Conversation 4/1/00)

²²² He is referring to one of the Cambodian Artists' Exchanges introduced in Chapter 2.

Below, four dance masters—Kantya Nou, Heng Vipas, Masady Mani, and Devi Yim—describe some of the circumstances that have stimulated the changing meanings and interpretations of Khmer dance in the United States. They illuminate the effects of time limitations, cultural discrepancies, and diverse motivations for participating in Khmer performing arts on various aspects of the art form, including the cohesion of music and dance, repertoire, instructional methodologies, and artistic understanding.

The students here are significantly different from the students in the Palace, because...let me explain it this way. When you start school, you first start learning the alphabet and then move on up. But these dance students did not start out that way. They have not been learning in the proper sequence. It's as if these students are trying to pronounce words without ever learning to annunciate the letters. Do you understand my metaphor? Do you know why this is happening? It's because of time constraints and cultural differences. (Kantya Nou, ADAPT Interview 9/25/01)

The students here are somewhat different from the students in Cambodia. Students in Cambodia listened to the teachers. They did whatever the teachers told them to do. They were more disciplined. When they were taught something, they would never forget it.

But here, you have to look at the society. You can't be too strict or too easy on the students. You have to find the middle path. You have to be nice to these students, because they need to go to school and learn things there. They don't have enough time

to learn the dance the way that we learned it. We only teach them for a short time each week.

In Cambodia, students and teachers had more time together. We met in the morning, spent all day together, and only parted ways in the evening. We had a lot of time to practice. Students had plenty of time to show respect to their teachers, and teachers had more time to talk to their students.

In Cambodia, the movements and steps had to be perfect and right on beat. Here, sometimes it's right and sometimes it's a little off. The musicians have to watch the dancers, and the dancers have to listen to the music. In Cambodia, we didn't even need to look at each other. We just knew what to do. We knew how to combine the music with the dance, because we had a lot of time to practice. When we practiced, we practiced with the musicians every day. Here, you don't practice together. You practice the dance, then before you perform on stage, you have music to dance to. But they don't match up, because you're not used to it. It's hard.

It's very different here. For example, sometimes we cut the dances, because we don't have live music. We have to make our dances fit the recordings. Other times, you dance in the middle of nowhere without a proper stage. It could hurt our hands and legs, so we have to cut some parts out. That happens a lot with the monkey role. You can't dance in certain places where you are going to get hurt. You have to have the right stage and equipment, because you have to do cartwheels and tumble and stuff like that. If the stage is not smooth, the movements won't come out right. When we don't have what we need, we have to cut some of that stuff out.

Here, when we dance, we need to do things faster. In Cambodia, everything is done more slowly. We go with the flow, step by step, smoothly. But here, we need to move at a faster pace, just like everything else is in this country. (Heng Vipas, Interview 8/5/02)²²³

It is very different here. It's a lot different. You want a list?

First of all, in Cambodia, whatever teachers want to do, they do. Students have no say so. If a teacher says that you have to do this, then you have to do it. You don't have a choice. Whatever they say, you do. Here, if students don't want to do it, what can you do? You cannot force them.

Another thing, you cannot compare the United States to Cambodia. In Cambodia, we have a lot of time to practice: four or five hours a day, straight. Here we have only two to three hours at the most per week. We teach them one dance each year. And we never have the time to explain the meaning of each kbach. They don't understand. They just lift their arms like this or like that. But they don't ask what it means. Most of them don't know. It's not their fault. We don't tell them, so how can they know? We don't have the time.

And one more thing, here, a lot of them dance for fun. They don't understand why the kbach are so important. In the School of Fine Arts, we wanted to learn and understand. We always had questions for the teacher.

It's hard, because in Cambodia, if you don't learn it all in one day that's fine. We continue to learn it the next day. But here, they study from September to March. And

²²³ Translation assistance by Sovath Chum.

two hours a week? It's like nothing! If you compare what they do here, though, I think they do a good job. (Masady Mani, ADAPT Interview 7/25/01)

I think it's different from back home...because they're raised here. We have to treat them differently. You can't compare.

Back home, parents allow teachers to do whatever they have to, to help their children learn. We compare the students to a tree: Parents hand their kids over to the teacher saying, "Do whatever you have to, to make this tree beautiful." That gives the teachers the freedom to tap the students, even spank them just a little if they think the physical contact will help them to remember. The goal is to help students learn.

But here, you can't touch or raise your voice a little. So, it's a little bit difficult.

And plus, the students here aren't studying to master the art and make it their profession. They just want...I don't know if they want to have fun, or they want to have culture, or they want to meet people, you know?

Do you see me teaching them the basics?²²⁴ At the University, we practiced that for two hours every day, every morning. If you learn that, it's easy to learn everything else. But how long have I been here? Since '92? My students here still haven't mastered those basics. So when I try to teach them something new, they don't understand. I have to keep telling them.

I mean, they're doing well, but they need to be more patient. I mean, in Cambodia we're scared of insulting the teacher, so we memorize everything without

²²⁴ She is referring to *chha banhchoh* noted in Chapter 5. This is also the *alphabet* that Kantya Nou discusses above.

delay. There are a lot of students, more competition. So if you don't want to listen, you're out. Whoever listens, gets it. But here, we need them, so we don't want to scare them. (Devi Yim, Interview 1/27/02)

Above, Devi Yim notes that many students come to class *to have culture* or *to meet people*. It is even accurate to say that many parents send their children to “Virginia” and the “Vatt” for these purposes.²²⁵ Of course, the preceding chapters have shown that serious engagement in Khmer performing arts—from the educational contexts, to the transmission process, to the staging of performances—will inevitably immerse participants in “culture” and traditional patterns of social interaction in a deep and meaningful way. Yet, the combined impact of the lack of time and experience, the influence of the U.S. context, and firmly-entrenched Khmer cultural values cause many participants to recognize “culture” only in its superficial manifestations. Approaches to celebrating multiculturalism in the United States through displays of discrete cultures, for example, have contributed to this tendency. This inclination has been further reinforced by the infrastructure of U.S. arts agencies that categorize Khmer music and dance-drama—an art form that was reserved exclusively for the elite for centuries—as folk traditions. Add to this the almost total destruction of Khmer society and culture during the 1970s and the Khmer propensity to ascribe status to individuals with institutional credentials, and we arrive at a situation in which ethnic purity and genteel representations of culture become community concerns. Some of the community’s

²²⁵ Not only for the kids *to have culture* or *to meet people*, but for the parents to do so as well.

approaches to dealing with these issues, however, often focus on surface traits and are not always consistent with the goal of perpetuating the arts.

Dancer and costume-maker Sochietah Ung introduced himself in Chapter Two, indicating that three things in particular distinguish him from the other artists. First, he is a male who performs and teaches roles that are typically carried out by females. Second, he is a Cambodian of Chinese (not Khmer) ethnicity. And third, he learned classical dance and costume making with resources available to him in the United States after resettling here in 1979. Sochietah senses that these qualities regularly cast their shadows upon his artistry.

After twenty-two years, people say less about the fact that I'm Chinese. But I think that deep down inside, they still think about the fact that I'm not pure Khmer. They associate with me, because I can help. I really think that, if they could find someone else to do the things that I do, they would have kicked me out already. I say that, because they often perform with my costumes but give credit to a Khmer craftsman for my work. When they're asked to exhibit the crowns, they invite another Khmer craftsman to show his work. They never ask me.

One reason they do that is because I learned on my own. I didn't study at a reputable school. So they'd rather find someone who has the official title of Khmer craftsman representing them.

That's the same reason that I have been teaching all of these years as an "assistant." In the late 1990s, they changed my title. But that didn't happen until more

and more Americans—like the Smithsonian and everybody—got to know me. They changed my title...but I'm still an outsider. (Sochietah Ung, ADAPT Interview 6/27/01)

I know, because they still try to hide me by giving me roles that require a mask, like yeak or nguoh. I'm happy to perform anything, with or without a mask. I performed without a mask for the Prince and Princess when they came here to celebrate forty years of Cambodian independence. But now, I'm back behind the mask, and it's wearing on me. If my face is good enough for the Royal Family, why should I hide it? I'm not going to do that any more. (Sochietah Ung, Conversation 5/24/03)

After more than a decade of involvement with “Virginia,” Gary Marco offers his observations and thoughts about the “precarious survival” of Khmer performing arts. He emphasizes the fact that valuable knowledge still thrives in the minds, bodies, and spirits of fifteen to twenty master artists who reside in the Washington, DC vicinity. Moreover, there exists an ongoing demand for their services. The only threats to the Khmer performing arts, therefore, are a lack of support, inequitable distribution of global resources with respect to the art form, and narrow perceptions about authenticity. Much of this threat, ironically, is based upon information supplied by individuals and institutions that claim to nurture Khmer music and dance-drama.

I worry more about people caring than I do about the art being lost. It hasn't been lost yet. I mean, look at who we have in terms of artists. We have one of the largest groups of artists available anywhere. I mean, on call, you've got Rady,²²⁶ Sochietah,

²²⁶ Sam-Ouen Tes

Devi, Sovanny, Neary,²²⁷ and Ngek. I don't know if I left somebody out. I don't think I did. And there's Bonavy, too. And you have five or six master dancers at the "Vatt," besides. So I mean, that's pretty heavy duty. In fact, Rady just came back from Cambodia last week, and she said that they still talk about Devi over there. Devi is the only one of the master dancers in this country that does all of the big female roles: Seta, Moni Mekhala, and Mera, the Apsara. Now, others may dance one or two, but she does them all. And believe me. When Devi is in front of a big audience, and the house is packed, she really puts it on. You should have seen her in Michigan doing Seta. I'm telling ya...unbelievable.

What we need to do is set it up so that we don't lose the opportunity to use the resources that we have. The future of these arts is stacked on the backs of a handful of very dedicated people. We have those people now, but I'm always asking, "What happens when you retire, Rady? What happens when Devi retires?"

Another big problem is the music. When Ngek goes, you've got a big problem. I don't see an awful lot of people learning to do what he does. Now Ngek and Visal Um are working a lot with the kids, but it's not the same thing. It's quite beneficial, and it's quite important, but it's not that immersion, where you're doing it every day, a couple of hours a day at the very least. Learning to command the repertoire like a Ngek is going to be very difficult for these young kids coming up. If something happens to Ngek tomorrow, the Cambodian community in DC and the United States is going to be in

²²⁷ She began teaching at "Virginia" in 2001 after coming to the United States as part of the *Dance, the Spirit of Cambodia* tour mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation.

trouble. But that's really...the whole art is at the mercy and personal health of these individuals.

We're talking money when you get right down to it. They haven't got the money. So you know, they're waiting for a miracle. As I tell Madame Tes, I say, "I play that Powerball twice a week." She says, "So do I." She even dreamed about winning it! And that's very important, you know, because she believes in that stuff. So I told her, "Okay, Rady. You keep dreaming that dream, and I'll keep buying those tickets."

And the interesting thing is, there's a demand for these skills out there. Just the other day, Tes and I got an e-mail from a fellow who suggested that we take our teachers here and travel them around the country to teach in Cambodian American communities around the country. It is a good idea, and it is a commendable idea. But how can we do it? You've got to pay for travel, accommodations. These teachers all have families and jobs. They can't just pick up and spend fifty weeks out of the year running around the country. Later, he wrote and asked if there was a how-to video, and I said, "No. I have never seen such a thing. I have never seen the teachers with such a thing. It's a poor substitute for the hands-on teaching."

And people want to see the performances, too. Remember the Spirit of Cambodia tour last year? Americans were putting down thirty and forty dollars a pop, plus parking, to come and see this art. And you go to the Kennedy Center, like I did for the last show; the thing was almost totally filled! And it was about ninety-nine percent Americans!

And the other side of this is that certain people or organizations that are in a position to help, don't want to, because they question whether or not what we have here is genuine. Somehow, they're under the impression that the real art is in Cambodia, and what's here isn't real. I mean, your master teachers are all Cambodians. They're all born in Cambodia. They've all studied either at the Palace or the University of Fine Arts. How much more real can it get? The kids for the most part are a hundred percent Cambodian. How much more real can it get? You know, globalization takes into account that certain people of certain abilities migrate around the world and preserve their art wherever they go. That kind of attitude is so stupid, number one; so ethnocentric, number two; and racist and prejudicial, on top of that!

I'd like to get the artists into the Kennedy Center and do a show there. But then you've got the politics of the Kennedy Center. You know, they're thinking, "Can we fill an auditorium with this?" They look at us like a local band. But the truth is, there is no difference between what they'd get from us and what they'd get from Cambodia. Because what Madame Tes would do, for example, is she would invite all of the master teachers from across the country to come and participate.

But as it stands now, it's all at the mercy of the mortality of certain key people.

(Gary Marco, Interview 8/23/02)

“This is Not the Kind of Thing That You Learn and Then Just Forget About”

Negotiate a river by following its bends; enter a country by following its customs.

--Khmer proverb, in Fisher-Nguyen 1994: 94

The commentary above illustrates that entering the United States has presented its share of challenges to the Khmer artists of the Washington, DC area. How have the artists responded to the limits on the time and energy they need to regenerate their traditions? How have they negotiated social interactions that may or may not support the ongoing development of their arts?

Fortunately, Khmer performing arts in particular and Khmer culture in general teach and model the skills necessary for adapting to new situations. Perhaps more importantly, they encourage a resilience that moves in tandem with present environments and social conditions. Who, then, could be better equipped to acclimate more successfully to the United States than master artists who have integrated this wisdom into their minds, bodies, and spirits? Below, some of the artists and friends in their community describe their approaches to continuing their arts in the face of some of the issues described above.

At the opening of this chapter, Sophy Hoeung identified the single, most difficult obstacle for the artists to overcome—lack of time.

I asked her, *If you don't have time to practice, when you get up on the stage, how do you know what to do?* She was quick to reply.

This is a good question. Guess what? I go to work, right? I run film, microfilm, microfiche in the patent inspection office. That's the time for me. Work...and my mind's

free. I just sit down, click the film. Let the film run...that's when I practice. (Sophy Hoeung, Interview 2/23/02)

In disbelief, I asked, *You sing in the office?*

Yeah...but it's not like I'm screaming! Just in my head a little bit. I try to remember the words. Because... I never read while I'm singing. I don't like to do that...because when you're reading, you lose your style.

Sometimes, I bring tapes. I work in a large production area. I'm by myself, so if I play music, it doesn't bother anybody. It's not like most offices where you sit in one place and two or three other people are right next to you. No, I'm in my area, and the other people are...way...over...there! There's a wall dividing us. I'm lucky!

Yeah, I'm so lucky ...and my boss knows who I am. He's really a nice person...understanding. He likes to encourage people. He's always asking me to try new things. I say, "I don't think so. It's too hard for me." But he says, "You haven't even tried it yet! Never say that you can't do it. Try first." I feel embarrassed that I never went to school to learn things like English and computers, but my boss says, "No, you can do it."

Yeah, I think if I had a different job, I would not have time to practice anything. But I don't overdo do it, because I don't want anyone to complain about my work. So I make sure I finish my job. Nothing is ever late...no complaints from the customers. I'm lucky I got that job... (Sophy Hoeung, Interview 2/23/02)

Ngek Chum shares some of his ideas for imparting and sustaining his musical knowledge. He maintains his hopes for harnessing his limited and unconventional resources.

By now, you have probably realized that over the years, I have learned so much music, that I cannot possibly teach it all. I don't like to think about that, but look, you know that I'm getting older, and I cannot predict the future.

It is tough for me to find enough time to simply play all of the music that I know. Replacing me is not easy. That is why I came up with the idea of making CDs for future generations to listen to. If one day I die, at least people will have the CDs to refer to. And they can learn from them if they want to.

And you know how hard it is for me to find eager students. I cannot even count on my own children. I want them to continue learning music, but I cannot be sure that my hope will materialize.

People always ask me about teaching my daughter and my other female students. You already heard some of the reasons why women do not normally play instruments in Cambodia. I didn't understand that myself at first, so I asked my teacher about that.

My teacher said that it is a traditional belief. If a woman plays music people make judgements about her. They assume that she wants to show off her beauty and encourage men to like and love her. In Cambodia, parents don't want any man to flirt around with their daughter. They want their daughters to stay at home. Once it's time for the daughter to marry, then a wedding will happen. But no parents want their

daughters to have boyfriends. Usually, if parents allow a daughter to play music, they have to be prepared to protect her from being surrounded by men.

But my teacher said that this is only a presumption. It does not mean that women cannot learn and play music.

Besides, now I live in the United States, and it's normal to see women playing music. Cambodia and the United States are different. We can compare life in Cambodia to life in a deep well, or life behind an opaque glass. Nothing can be seen behind the glass wall.

But in the United States, we have freedom. We see things differently. Men and women can learn equally, no matter what. Men and women deserve the same rights. Here, even if your daughter has a boyfriend, you can't do anything. It's her life. In Cambodia, the more parents love their daughter, the more they apply strict rules to her life.

To be honest, I have now identified one person who might be able to replace me. I hope she can do so, but I can't determine her future.

I guess Joanna is my best student. I don't think that anyone besides her can do it. Everyone else learns music slowly and just for fun. No one else pays attention and is committed to playing well. Joanna possesses the qualities of a good musician. But she has to make her own decision about whether or not she wants to continue to learn from me. If she does, she can be my successor.

I can't guarantee that Joanna will stick with this music, because she might find a good job or whatever. She might change her mind about her study and give up. As I said, it is her decision. I have no control over her.

Some people might think this is strange, since Joanna is not Khmer, and she is a woman. But I will tell you the truth. I am a teacher, and teachers don't want to teach just anybody. They don't care if a student is Cambodian, Vietnamese, Chinese, American, or whatever. Teachers don't care about that. I want to teach people who want to learn my music. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

Devi Yim tackles the challenges of teaching dance in the United States by swearing to tried-and-true methods. Her approach is motivated by a desire to foster deep, long-term learning that can be applied to future teaching situations. Through traditional methods, students can develop endurance, keen memories, and exceptional skills. Therefore, Devi adapts her techniques only when they discourage students from learning.

Even though it's difficult teaching here, I don't want to give up. We have to teach our students, so they will be able to carry on the tradition and teach later on. This is not the kind of thing that you learn and then just forget about. If you did that, there'd be no next generation. We wouldn't have any teachers here.

So when I think about it that way, I try to teach the harsh way, the way we do it back home. Parents might think, "She's so mean." But students remember better when teachers touch them and say things that get to them, even if it means screaming a little. When they feel it, they learn. So, I try doing that as much as possible, but if the students don't like it, if they cry, I ease up on them. I'm not trying to be mean. It's just a teaching

technique and the best way I know to make them learn well, so they'll be able to teach in the future.

Fortunately, some students do allow me to be strict with them. They don't get upset, and their parents don't mind. It's obvious. The ones who can take it have patience. They don't talk back, they listen, and they remember. Those kids are getting better!

Other kids learn quickly and forget quickly. And some kids don't want teachers to correct them. They feel embarrassed. But that's not good. Why do they have to feel embarrassed? When I was in school, teachers spanked us right in front of everybody. Tears were falling, and my teacher just said, "Don't cry. Keep smiling." You have to keep smiling. Your tears are dropping, but your mouth is smiling. You feel sad inside. But what can you do? If you can't take that, you can't learn.

But I know that some students here can't handle that. It's really difficult for them, especially because they only study for four hours a week. And sometimes, different teachers are telling them different things. It gets really confusing. So we try to help them as best as we can. At the very least, we encourage them to learn to help our culture. (Devi Yim, Interview1/27/02)

Sometimes non-partisan community members can help to communicate the intentions of teachers to parents and students and conversely, to convey student and parental concerns to the teachers. Sovanthary Chhim reflects upon her experience with reviving dance instruction at the "Vatt" during the mid-1990s.

After class on Sundays, we would go back to Raci's²²⁸ house. It would be four o'clock already. And we'd sit and talk, talk about what went well and what didn't go well. If things weren't going so well, we tried to figure out why, so we could make it better. A lot of that, we had no way of knowing, because it was all about how the students felt about learning and how the teachers felt about teaching. Fortunately though, Vathana²²⁹ was a student, and she knew what the students were saying, so she shared that with us.

And we asked people to tell their stories, the students and the teachers. We knew that there were legitimate reasons why the teachers do what they do. So we just asked them about their teaching: "If students do this, what happens? And this?" We asked how it was in the old days. And they'd say, "Oh if you do that, this would happen." You know, and they gave us examples.

When you understand what the teachers are doing, you realize that the students' complaints are not warranted. Students mostly fuss about the way teachers bend their fingers back and press their backs in. If teachers push a little bit harder, the kids kinda like cry. It doesn't involve pinching or anything like that. And sometimes, the students don't like the way that teachers speak to them or make decisions about who to put in front, or who they choose for the lead, stuff like that.

But we were not going to ask the teachers to change. No. We talked to the parents, instead.

²²⁸ Raci Say, who appears throughout this volume.

²²⁹ Vathana Say, Raci Say's daughter and a student at the "Vatt" who introduced herself in Chapter 3.

Actually, couple of times, we did ask the teachers about breaking conventions and teaching everyone the same thing. But they said that that was not possible, because everyone has different limitations. They can't teach students just for the experience, because then students will expect to perform on the stage. And the teachers won't put them on the stage unless they dance well and look accomplished, that's just part of the tradition. That's important. So they reasoned that, if they know that students cannot achieve that, why mislead them?

That's the kind of discussion that went on. (Sovanthary Chhim, Interview 2/8/02)

“At Times I Want to Give Up. But When the Weekend Comes, I Change My Mind.”

Clearly, creative adaptation to local and contemporary circumstances is an art in and of itself that the Khmer musicians and dancers associated with “Virginia” and the “Vatt” have mastered. But why? What are the forces that drive their ongoing efforts to regenerate their traditions in the United States?

Two fundamental elements of Khmer music and dance-drama—students’ will to learn and reciprocal teacher-student relationships—were discussed in Chapters Five and Six. Tied to a more general worldview that emphasizes social interdependence as well as continuity between past, present, and future worlds, they stand out as the key sources of inspiration for the artists’ resilience and desire to share their knowledge. Monyra Srun, Masady Mani, Sovanny Chun, Sochietah Ung, and Ngek Chum explain.

We have to help out, because students come to class. That means that they want to learn badly. They use their own time to come and study, so we have to do our best to teach them. Seeing them work hard makes us very happy, too. And if we teach and see that they are not working hard, we are unhappy. (Monrya Srun, ADAPT Interview 7/22/01)

Even though it's difficult teaching here, I do it for the students. Some of them really want to learn. If I do not go to teach, who will teach them? I may get frustrated, but I should not take it out on them. I'm glad that they like it. (Masady Mani, ADAPT Interview 7/25/01)

I started teaching in "Virginia" when I moved here in 1998. Devi²³⁰ told Neak Krou²³¹ about me. I've known her since I was eleven years old! We studied together at the University of Fine Arts. Then Neak Krou asked me to start teaching there.

Recently, the "Vatt" asked me to teach, too. So I'm thinking, "Maybe next year I'll teach there, too." It might get complicated, because sometimes people don't want you to teach in more than one place. But I think, "I'm a dancer. I don't care about politics. I have to help everybody. I just want to share what I have."

Especially here...because the resources are so limited, you know? So, I just follow my heart and do what I think is right. I have to do what I can to help. (Sovanny Chun, Interview 2/1/02)

²³⁰ Devi Yim who appears in this chapter.

²³¹ She is referring to Sam-Ouen Tes.

I get really angry and feel disappointed when people don't accept me. I spend all of my time teaching, performing, and making costumes. Sometimes I feel like I'm wasting my time and money, and I want to quit.

But I change my mind when I think about Pol Pot destroying Khmer culture and traditions. Even now, some Khmer don't care for what remains. I may not be pure Khmer, but I was born in Cambodia, and I consider it to be my country. It makes me sad to see Khmers looting and profiting from the ancient ruins.

I hope that maybe one day all Khmer people will see that they have so much that even I, who am not pure Khmer, love it so much. Maybe they will realize how much they should love Cambodia. I don't do this for me. I do it for the younger Khmers.

I always I wonder why some of the one hundred percent Khmer people don't care about their culture and let it waste away. When I displayed my costumes in the Smithsonian, thousands of people came, but no one was Khmer. I sent out nearly one hundred invitations, and how many showed up?

So, I don't care about titles or pure or half or anything. The people who teach and are involved in my life know who I am, and that's the most important thing.

"Master" or "assistant," the title means nothing. Besides, I don't feel that I am a master. I am more like the soil. Whoever wants to teach me can plant a seed on me. It will or it will not grow. You take your chances. I've met a lot of people over the years. Some people have master titles, and they cannot do anything. It means squat. There's no point in having the title if you don't have the skills. I'd rather be a student, so I can continue to learn. (Sochietah Ung, ADAPT Interview 6/27/01)

You know? My teachers gave me so much. I am not supposed to keep it for myself. I am supposed to give it to the students. That is why sometimes I stay up all night making costumes. The students need them.

The dance is not for me. It is for the country. It belongs to the country.

(Sochietah Ung, Interview 7/15/99)

Sometimes I do feel like I am tired of teaching. But I keep doing it, because I love it. It is just like someone who wants to walk. No matter how tired he is, he will walk. As a teacher, even though I am tired, I am very happy to see my students learn, especially if they are serious and attentive. At times I want to give up. But when the weekend comes, I change my mind.

It is not just that I like music, but also that I want people to have knowledge of the music. I want people to know the meaning of the music. I want people to like it. That is why I teach in a gentle way. I don't force. Many mothers bring their children to my class and tell me that I should beat them to make them learn. That's something I don't agree with, because I feel lucky to have a child coming to learn at such a young age whether or not he plans to be a serious musician.

I just want people to know that I am very happy to teach. I will teach anyone who wants to learn. It is my real pleasure to teach. Although I prefer to have serious students, I cannot blame those who cannot study a lot, because I know the situation in the States. (Ngek Chum, ADAPT Interview 7/1/01)

Khmer performing artists and their families have gained much by resettling in the United States, including the ability to explore diverse opportunities and a sense of relief about the well-being of their descendants. However, master artists also continue to experience anxiety about some daunting obstacles that seem to threaten the posterity of their traditions. The challenges that emerged in this chapter remained consistent with those identified in Chapter Two (essentially, balancing the requirements of daily survival with artistic responsibilities) and pointed to the six sources of power discussed in that chapter. They have also revealed how interest in creating Khmer environments and sharing Khmer culture with mainstream audiences (as considered in Chapters One, Two, Three, and Seven) contribute to the complex dialogues between community needs and regenerating fine Khmer music and dance-drama. Reflecting upon these complications, the artists and community leaders quoted here disclosed their current strategies for moderating the diverse interests of their community. Of particular note were comments by master artists that illustrated how cultural lessons embedded within Khmer musical performance (as described in Chapters Four, Five, and Six) guide their mediations. That is, artists consistently pointed to the two fundamental teachings of Khmer performing arts repeated throughout this volume—that life continues unceasingly and that it is important to live harmoniously with prevailing conditions—as their source of inspiration for confronting the difficulties that strain their arts in the present context.

In Chapter Two, it became apparent that *culture...[is]...composed of seriously contested codes and representations*. (Clifford1986a: 2) Namely, readers witnessed a range of concerns about Khmer music and dance-drama from professional artists,

members of their community, non-Khmer populations, and institutions involved in the administration of traditional arts both locally and globally during the late 1970s and early 1980s. That chapter illustrated how the interplay of six sources power²³² directed the course of artistic development within the context of the United States, often intersecting with global artistic change.

Correspondingly, the present chapter portrayed how similar transactions continue to shape the conditions of the art form more than two-decades later. For instance, Sophy Hoeung and Ngek Chum expressed their apprehension about contradictory objectives with respect to the time, energy, and financial resources needed for the community's artistic enterprises. At the chapter's opening, Sophy declared, *I think that every artist in the Cambodian community will die soon from trying to accomplish everything*. Similarly, Chum exhibited uneasiness about apportioning his time on Sundays among teaching and accompanying dancers at both "Virginia" and the "Vatt." His comments disclosed not only anxiety over his ability to physically meet these demands, but also over the limitations on the quality of performance and effectiveness of instruction that can be achieved under such circumstances.

These kinds of pressures have caused contemporary Khmer music and dance-drama to suffer a number of *impoverishments* (Kartomi 1981: 239), both perceived and real. This and other chapters have revealed that artists clearly improvise with the use of abbreviated ensembles, repertoire, and depth of understanding of the arts by their

²³² Including the professionalism of tradition-bearers; social interaction based upon wealth, education, or political standing; level of experience with traditional arts and transmission processes; evaluation of student potential by teachers; cultural program management hierarchies; and, choice of American versus Khmer social interchange.

students. In the current chapter, Chum reflected upon the dynamics of some of these compromises with two examples of “remembering” music in cooperation with dance instructors at “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” In one narrative, he described a misunderstanding resulting from a discrepancy in knowledge about versions of an existing composition. In another, he recited a circular tale of how a musical piece, for which he was the original consultant, was returned to him as the product of research conducted in Cambodia. In both of these cases, a perception of “loss” and “recovery” was less fact than inadvertent fabrication proceeding from a combination of the limited time and resources available to artists for collaboration and the parameters of Khmer etiquette designed to preserve face and social harmony. In addition, readers observed how artists watch the gradual disintegration of the concept of music and dance as a unified whole. Echoing the description of music and dance-drama interaction submitted in Chapter Four, in this chapter, Heng Vipas contemplated, *In Cambodia, the movements and steps had to be perfect and right on beat...When we practiced, we practiced with the musicians every day.* However, he continued, *Here... they don't match up, because you're not used to it.*

Further, the forgoing “sound-spheres” have denoted major compromises with traditional transmission processes—especially teacher-student relationships—as chief causes of the tradition’s *impoverishments*. For instance, considering the process of teaching in the United States, Heng Vipas relayed that, *In Cambodia, students and teachers had more time together...Students had plenty of time to show respect to their teachers, and teachers had more time to talk to their students.* Similarly, Masady Mani explained that, *in Cambodia, whatever teachers want to do, they do. Students have no*

say so. The impact of healthy mentor-apprentice relations on the fruitful development of Khmer performing arts was explored in Chapters Three, Five, and Six. In Chapter Three, for example, the significance of this alliance became evident through the concerns of arts program administrators at “Virginia” and the “Vatt” as well as through the procedures of the *sampeah krou* ceremony. Later, Chapter Five expanded this appraisal, illustrating how reciprocal exchange between instructors and pupils form the basis of Khmer music and dance-drama’s tenacity. Thereafter, Chapter Six demonstrated how successful artists embrace the wisdom of mentor-student bonds through experience that encompasses destiny, respect for tradition, commitment, and patience. That chapter also revealed how this knowledge is confirmed through student behaviors that demonstrate the ability to balance independent exploration with proper social conduct. Sincere appreciation and respect for teachers is the first step toward developing such proficiency. Yet, as stated by Kantya Nou and Devi Yim in this chapter, such an ideal is nearly impossible to achieve in the current setting. Kantya Nou observed that, *The students here are significantly different from the students in the Palace... because of time constraints and cultural differences*. Likewise, Devi Yim explained that, *it’s different from back home...because they’re raised here. We have to treat them differently*. Agreeing with many of her colleagues, Devi suggested that, at “Virginia” and the “Vatt,” traditional teacher-student relationships (and consequently, the knowledge that accompanies them) are threatened by a kind of “role reversal.” That is, the dearth of earnest and accomplished students leads to a predicament in which teachers wish to retain students as much as, if not more than, students desire to secure the attachment of their teachers. This “inversion” has occurred, in part, as a result of

teacher awareness of the responsibilities and opportunities facing their students (represented by the experience of Sovath and Sovann Chum in this chapter) as the latter work toward realizing their ambitions in the United States.

In addition to the limited resources and artistic adjustments discussed above, this chapter has also illustrated how artists and arts administrators factor the demands of constructing a sense of ethnic solidarity within the community (Hein 1995: 95) and creating products for cultural representation beyond the community into their decisions. As recorded in Chapters One, Two, and Three, these concerns date back to the late 1970s and early 1980s. In this chapter, commentary by Devi Yim, Sochietah Ung, and Gary Marco signaled that these kinds of issues remain alive and well within the contemporary context. They therefore continue to induce and effect fluid meanings and interpretations of Khmer music and dance-drama in the local community, the United States, and even the world. For instance, according to Devi Yim, students and parents often join classes for entertainment, cultural, and social reasons. Thus, their interest in promoting mastery of dance or music may only be marginal, if present at all. Sochietah Ung described how comparable viewpoints vis-à-vis cultural representation to general audiences often lead to decisions that privilege ethnic purity and official credentials over dedication, experience, and skill. And Gary Marco's narrative revealed how the impetus for accommodating such concerns often originates in assumptions by organizations and people with little or no knowledge of Khmer performing arts.

Indeed, this ongoing interplay of shifting and frequently contradictory appeals and objectives associated with Khmer music and dance-drama routinely overwhelms the relatively small number of dedicated people who keep these arts vibrant at "Virginia"

and the “Vatt.” This chapter has shown how a focus on standards that remain consistent with lessons embedded within Khmer performing arts steer artists’ reactions to this dialogue. In particular, this response revolves around efforts to secure the continuity of the tradition while performing one’s social duties in a manner that is commensurate with one’s individual abilities and resources. For instance, in the absence of a practicable heir to his musical knowledge, Ngek Chum expressed his desire to record the essential components of his repertoire. He even suggested that it would be advantageous to teach as much of his tradition as possible to me, an American woman who only trails behind him in age by thirteen years. These uncommon solutions enable Chum to less anxiously continue with his schedule of fulfilling multiple performance and teaching requests on the weekends. It also allows him to more comfortably abide by his standard of teaching gently to nurture his students’ love for music and to avoid pressuring pupils against their will, capability, or destiny. Like Chum, Devi Yim also related her interest in teaching to sustaining her knowledge across future generations. With this goal in mind, she indicated that, *I try to teach the harsh way, the way we did it back home...to make them learn well, so they will be able to teach in the future.*

Sovanny Chun and Sochietah Ung announced that they were also inspired by their visions for the future as well as their desire to contribute to their community. Sovanny was emphatic: *here... the resources are so limited, you know?...I have to do what I can to help.* Sochietah concurred: *My teachers gave me so much...I am supposed to give it to the students.*

This contemporary story of Khmer music and dance-drama in the United States disclosed that while the quantity of knowledge possessed by artists far exceeds their probable opportunities for transmitting it, their enthusiasm for teaching remains strong. This attitude emanates from the supreme value placed upon sincere and tireless intergenerational exchange in Khmer performing arts. Thus, as long as these artists, their community supporters, and their students sustain their ability to adjust to new and unexpected circumstances, the riches of their legacy will endure.

Chapter 9: Conversing with the World

Reassembling Angkor on Constitution Avenue

I descended the wide staircase and was greeted on my right by a serene, oval face. The man's eyes were downcast and his lips were fleshy. Short, tightly curled, locks of hair covered his head, humbly shrouding a bump at its crown.

*The bump indicated the vast knowledge possessed by this fifteen centuries old, sandstone head of the Buddha. He had traveled from kingdom to capital, Angkor²³³ to Phnom Penh, arriving in Washington, DC in June 1997 to welcome international visitors to the National Gallery of Art's majestic exhibition, *Sculpture of Angkor and Ancient Cambodia: Millennium of Glory*.*

After this calming reception, I stepped inside the first of nine subtly lighted rooms that enveloped me in images and stories of the great personalities of classical Cambodian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian religion and mythology.

An imposing neak overwhelmed the room, guarding the grand treasures to be encountered inside. Vishnu stood solid, holding his four attributes: a globe, a disc, a conch, and a club. These items related his powerful associations with the earth, the sun, heavenly links with the sea, and regal power. The Future Buddha, Harihara (half Shiva-half Vishnu),²³⁴ and even King Jayavaraman VII gazed upon me, guiding me through one hundred, two hundred, seven hundred plus years of history.

²³³ The celebrated Khmer empire dating from the 9th through 15th centuries.

²³⁴ According to Cravath, *This seventh and eighth century form is unique to Cambodia...and starkly exemplifies Angkorean conventions regarding duality*. (1985: 52)

Elements of ancient Khmer architecture graced the space, providing the sacred figures with a semblance of home. A miniature prasat (tower sanctuary) and a lintel depicting a scene from the Mahabharata were reunited. They made their voyages to Washington, DC from their respective residencies in Phnom Penh and Paris. They were created together in the tenth century as part of the rose-hued temple of Banteay Srey. The sacred site was built in honor of Shiva by King Jayavaraman V's teacher who was a master of the fields of Hindu and Buddhist doctrines, medicine, astronomy, and music.

Each room was more breathtaking than the last.

As I attempted to commit to memory as much information as possible about each of the ninety-nine objects in the exhibition, I neared its conclusion. I crossed paths with nine apsara carved in relief along the base of a pediment from Bayon Temple at Angkor. These dancers, too, had traveled to Washington, DC via Paris over the course of eight or nine centuries. (Jessup and Zephir 1997; Roveda 1997; Zephir 1998) Their poses were familiar. They remained alive and virtually identical to the movements and gestures that are performed by the Khmer dancers at "Virginia" and the "Vatt."

Exhibition organizers indicated that the assembly (arranged prior to the July 1997 political upheaval in Phnom Penh) of sculptural works constructed between the sixth and sixteenth centuries was a feat accomplished only as a result of the happy coincidence of international cultural and political cooperation. The world's two major collections of Khmer art, the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh and the Musee des Arts Asiatiques Guimet in Paris, joined forces to make it possible within the context of the 1991 Paris accords that ended decades of war in Cambodia.

Within this context, the exhibition served a practical purpose: increasing international understanding of Khmer culture. According to Nouth Narang, Cambodian Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, the exhibition aimed “to blot out the image of the killing fields and prove that our history is really that of a cultivated people.” (in La Batut 1997: 39) The Minister added, “Culture is what will lead Cambodia to find itself and its cohesion again.” (in La Batut 1997: 40)

A millennium is long indeed. Yet, the exhibition only guided visitors as far as the sixteenth century. What about the seventeenth through twentieth centuries? What about the cultivated Khmer artists who survived the killing fields, have been harnessing culture as a source of community cohesion, have been making Khmer culture accessible to the international community, and have been living in the Washington, DC area for nearly three decades?

*The National Gallery of Art did not forget them. Rather, the museum gave the artists of “Virginia” and the “Vatt” their day of living culture on Family Day. On Sunday, August 10, 1997, museum visitors were treated to performances of Khmer classical and folk dances by the artists of “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” They were also invited to attend Khmer sculpture and costume demonstrations; to view the film, *Angkor’s Shadow*; to join a guided tour of the exhibition, and to even make their own dance figures to take home. In keeping with the overall objective of the exhibition, “The goal of the Family Day event was to encourage mainstream American families to learn about and appreciate Khmer arts and visit the *Sculpture of Angkor* exhibition.” (Cambodian Network Council 1997: 8) I planned to be among these mainstream American families.*

The performance was scheduled to begin at 11:00 AM. I was on time and waiting just outside the doors of the museum. It was close to show time, and we were still told to wait outside. It was amazing to witness the sea of people expand behind me. “Good thing I arrived when I did!” I thought. I was at the front of the line.

The doors opened and I headed directly toward the large auditorium without so much as turning my head to see what was around me. Once inside the auditorium door, a line snaking up the ramp of the corridor and leading into the auditorium slowed me down. “How did all of these people get ahead of me?” I wondered. “Where did they come from?”

It was beyond me, but as the line moved and I turned the corner, I was startled to see nearly every seat in the auditorium filled. Museum staff set up metal folding chairs in the aisles. They asked those seated to raise their hands if there was an empty seat nearby. I suppressed my confusion and searched desperately for a seat. I found one, perhaps fatefully, along the aisle directly in front of and just five rows or so back from the musicians who were set up at the left end of the stage. I looked around began to recognize so many of the parents I had met at “Virginia.” I suddenly became aware of the familiar incense fragrance in the air.

I took a deep breath and consumed the scene more fully. I looked around and repeated my question: “Where did all of these people come from? When did they get here?” Looking around, I realized that a good ninety-percent of the audience was from the Cambodian American community.

This surprise set the stage for a program that brought Cambodian culture to life. A celestial dancer descended to the earth to gather flowers. She was Mera, the queen of

the apsara depicted on the pediment from Bayon Temple that I had viewed just eleven days earlier. Her blossoms symbolized the happiness and well being of the Cambodian people. (Cambodian Buddhist Society, Inc. 1998) Similarly, the tossing of flower petals in the Wishing Dance extended these sentiments of good fortune to audience members (Cravath 1985: 367-368) from around the world. Upbeat “folk” dances such as the Clapper Dance, that were choreographed at Cambodia’s University of Fine Arts during the late 1950s and early 1960s, offered a glimpse into the scenes of idealized Cambodian village life. (Sam and Sam 1987; Phim and Thompson 1999)

As part of this mainstream American audience, a recent visitor to the exhibition, and an ethnomusicology student, I started to recognize some of the connections between the great sculpture of Angkor and the Cambodia of today. But I also began to wonder: Is culture something that is tangible and associated with distant times and places? Or is it slippery and happening before our very eyes? Does cultural preservation demand definitive documentation? Or is it healthier in the course of human interactions that are subject to personal whims? Is one’s culture, heritage, or home bound to a particular geographical location? Or do these nebulous infrastructures of personal and social identity exist primarily within the realms of human thought, action, and emotion?

These questions—thrown into relief by the juxtaposition of ancient, material culture and contemporary, living traditions on Family Day at the National Gallery of Art—subsume the major issues that impact the course of Khmer performing arts today. Our visit to the world of Khmer artists in the Washington, DC area closes in this chapter with echoes of these questions.

Trusty Technologies

One means of making culture tangible and gaining a sense of palpable control over it is to “capture” it in physical form. This dissertation has illustrated that the essence of Khmer music and dance-drama resides, not in any material documentation or technical execution of the art forms, but rather, within the fluid interchange between people and knowledge. However, the possibilities for turning this abstract artistic ideal into something concrete and manageable with the assistance of modern mechanisms have not been left unexplored by Khmer artists, their families, and their friends.

Commentary about the positive and negative effects of meetings between scientific technology and Khmer music and dance-drama has inevitably crept up amidst the discussion of other topics throughout this volume. In Chapter Two, for example, Ngek Chum was startled to hear a recording of himself piping through the sound system of a New York museum. In Chapter Five, Monyra Srun noted that she is able to pay respect to her teachers on a weekly basis with the aid of an audio recording of *Sathukar*. Subsequent chapters reveal that many music students bolster their learning experience with the use of cassettes, CDs, and video recordings. In Chapter Eight, Heng Vipas reflects upon the weakening of the dance repertoire as a result of over-reliance on audio recordings.

Below, Ngek Chum, Gary Marco, and Sophy Hoeung elaborate upon some of the benefits and limitations of tools that “extract” the arts from their human sources and “freeze” their configurations in time. Specifically, they discuss the use of electronic tuners to simplify the process of unifying ensembles and the advantages and

disadvantages of harnessing recording technology as a preservation and communication tool that can overcome the constraints of physical time and space.

First, Ngek Chum considers the costs and benefits of converting to a mechanical and rigid tuning system. Although *Oral tradition can be very precise, transmitting a relatively continuous, if rearticulated, cultural substance over many generations* (Clifford 1992: 115), as was discussed earlier, it can also be very restricted in terms of scope of diffusion. To prevent excessive loss of his music, therefore, Ngek Chum sanctions the adoption of a variant of his ideal tuning criteria.

Listen to this, Joanna. You know how Visal²³⁵ is working with his machine to find out how I tune my roneat? He keeps saying that between each note, the sound changes the same amount. For example, from here to here [Lok Krou plays two consecutive notes] sounds the same as from here to here [He plays two different notes that are also consecutive].²³⁶

*But he's not right, because...listen to these two notes. [He plays two *phlai* that are separated by seven *phlai* between them].²³⁷ I say they're the "same." Well, one is high and one is low. The high one is double the low one, but not really. When I tune it my way, it's not exactly double. The high notes are a little higher, and the low notes are a little lower...except for these three low notes here. I like to tune them just a little*

²³⁵ He is referring to Visal Um who introduced himself in Chapter 6.

²³⁶ In describing Visal's tuning system here, Ngek Chum demonstrates the properties of an equidistant scale, upon which Thai tuning systems are based. (Morton 1980: 70)

²³⁷ The relationship between the two notes he is comparing here is roughly equivalent to an octave in Western music.

higher. It's supposed to be that way. It sounds better. But if I were to tune them Visal's way, they would be exactly double. So his way and my way are not the same.

Yeah, my way is hard. You can't figure it out with a machine.

My way is a little bit different, and it sounds better. But I am getting older, and I don't know how much longer I can trust my ears. When my ears go bad, there will be no way to tune the instruments, so now I want to use Visal's way. It's easier. With an electronic tuner, I can tune all of the instruments in just a few minutes. I can do it Visal's way and then adjust it just a little bit. Getting all of the instruments in tune with each other is more important than having them tuned according to my system. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 1/21/01)

Gary Marco reflects upon his efforts to document “Virginia’s” performances, especially the music, with video and audio recordings. On one hand, he aims to minimize the potential loss of an art form that is *hanging on the edge*. On the other hand, the recordings can be used when it is too expensive and too impractical to assemble full groups of musicians and to fulfill out-of-state requests for particular compositions.

I mentioned earlier that I helped Cambodian American Heritage to improve their sound system for their New Year's program. It's like what you're doing, Joanna. You're creating a historical record about the art as it is practiced here in the United States. That is very important. It's people like us who have to think about keeping

records of this, so that it's not lost historically, if for some reason the whole damn thing falls apart.

I'm sure the Tes' have records of their performances. We videotape everything. But you know, they're not thinking about that. They're too caught up in the moment of performing. They're not thinking about the fact that it's hanging on the edge.

But...you know, the dance is really probably a little more durable than the music. I really worry more about the music. Oftentimes we're asked to present with live music. But the people who make these requests don't understand that I can't always get on the phone and call Chum Ngek and get a ready-made ensemble. A lot of times, I've got to call Seattle, Los Angeles, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Ngek's gotta do the same thing if he can't pull everybody that he needs from right here in the DC area. If he needs every instrument, it gets very complicated...and expensive.

So that's why, archiving the music, the performances, is part of it...because we need the music. So we record the performances on both video and audio whenever we can. We keep the recordings as a record of the performances, but we also use them when we need them.

Now, video production has kind of gone through several evolutions. We used to shoot amateur videos at the New Year's program. Then it became semi-professional. Then this past year, a contract crew from Arlington Cable took the footage. It was done professionally.

And the sound technician, Jim Taylor, is a professional as well as a friend of mine. Jim records everything on digital audio-tape, you know DAT, and then he gives them to a fellow named Gary Jaffee for the post-production. Gary works here at VOA.

He has the right equipment. He's the one who then transfers the DATs onto CD. I usually keep one copy, Madame Tes keeps one copy, and I have additional copies made as needed. So we keep them for our records. It's an archive, and we also use them when we go out and perform.

And the video and audio recordings also come in handy...remember I was telling you about people asking us to send the teachers to other states to give classes? Well, most of the time, we can't do that. So the next best thing we can do is send them tapes of specific repertoire. So we've done that for a lot of people. (Gary Marco, Interview 8/23/02)

In the last chapter, Ngek Chum shared his desire to make recordings as a way of preserving and broadly disseminating the technical aspects of his art form. Here, however, he elaborates upon the downside of technology, noting that, although recordings can document physical sound, they also have the potential to degenerate the interactive and socially patterned aesthetic underpinnings of Khmer performing arts. Interestingly, he describes this process in terms of family relations.

I say that I want to record. I want to, because I don't know what else to do when it comes to saving the music that I learned. But you know, recordings can create a lot of problems, too.

In the old days, musicians didn't change the music so much for the dancers. The dancers and musicians worked together. They practiced together until it fit.

And back then, the dancers had more respect for the musicians. I saw that when I was young and assumed that, since that was the proper way of doing things, it would never change. It made complete sense to me, because when you think about it even just a little bit, you realize that dancers need music. So it makes perfect sense for them to respect it. By doing so, they ensure that the music will be played well; and therefore, they will have a successful performance.

Here, the dancers do actually pray to the music a little before they perform. But before in Cambodia, they prayed from inside their hearts. They really respected the music. When I was growing up, the music teacher was like a father, even like a grandfather. Now, no. Now, the music teacher is more like a mother. No...more like a son. See that? Actually, it's even lower than that. People act more like the music is their friend. Things have really changed.

I don't know exactly why things have changed. Maybe now, people want equality. Here, you don't care about status, like they do in Cambodia. So here, music is like a friend. Sometimes it's even less than a friend! Dancers just keep saying, "One more time." "One more time." Before it was not like that. When I was young, when they wanted to practice again they said, "Please." They said "please" from the inside, not from the outside. If the musicians said "no," it was "no." Here, they are lucky to have a good teacher like Mrs. Tes, though. She says, "Please Lok Krou. Can you play again for us?" Do you remember when we went to see the dancers in Siem Riep? Those students didn't pray when the musicians played Sathukar. Only you and Sovath bowed down to pray.

Either people want everyone to be equal, or I'm not sure if I'm right, but...now, the dancers can use CDs or tapes. They don't need real musicians all of the time. Before, without musicians, they couldn't dance. Now, dancers have the freedom to think, "If the musicians don't want to play, fine." They can always use a CD and tell the audience, "I'm sorry. Today the musician is in the hospital." (Ngek Chum, Conversation 9/8/01)

Finally, Sophy Hoeung relates a remarkable story about how the sound of her recorded voice communicated her whereabouts to her long-lost brother in Cambodia.

I've made some recordings, not of the classical music, but of the modern songs. So, it's not like it effected the tradition or anything. No, actually, the most amazing thing happened.

A guy in California who makes commercial recordings of Cambodian popular music visited here and asked around about vocalists. Someone mentioned my name to him, and that's how I ended up making a recording in 1987.

You know what? That recording helped me find my brother! Well, my brother found me, actually. Up to that point, we had had completely lost contact with each other.

Well, that recording was distributed in Cambodia, and my brother happened to buy it. As he listened, he was like, "That's my sister!" He knew my voice, but he didn't really believe it. So he a sent a letter to me through Guy Serat, a famous singer who was living in California. Guy Serat passed away already, though. He died very young. My

brother sent a letter for me to him, because he didn't know how else to get in touch with me. He had no idea how big United States is! But Guy Serat actually sent the letter to me here in Virginia.

When I read my brother's letter, it was very, very sad. I was crying and crying. I could tell by the way that my brother wrote the letter, that he didn't believe it was me. He used polite terms of address. For example, he didn't call me "Sister," but he called me "Ma'am," instead. And he offered proof, a list, about who he was. The list included the names of his parents and siblings: his father, his mother, his oldest sister, his second sister, and so forth. When I saw all of that I said, "Oh my God! We found each other!" Can you believe it? Wooo! I couldn't believe it myself at the time. That tape traveled all the way from the United States to Cambodia. (Sophy Hoeung, Interview 2/23/02)

Which Way is Home?

In Chapter One, Ngek Chum indicated that once the Vietnamese government took control over Cambodia and ended the genocidal rule of the Khmer Rouge, he was *in the mass of people fleeing with no direction*. From that day in 1979 through the present, the notion of a stable and identifiable home for Cambodians has been surrounded with ambivalence.

Throughout this dissertation, participants of "Virginia" and the "Vatt" have expressed their desire to return to Cambodia, a home of their memories. They have shown faith in the belief that their home has survived in the face of the most unthinkable atrocities of the world's history. In Chapter Two, Heng Vipas noted that he continued to dance when he relocated to the United States, because he wanted to show

people in the United States that *we still have our country and land left*. In Chapter Three, Sipo Dan conveyed his plans for retirement: *I really want to go back...[to] my little mountain in Cambodia*.

In tandem with these thoughts, however, members of this community have also pointed to some inconsistencies between the Cambodia of today and the Cambodia of their hearts. For example, while maintaining that Cambodia had withstood almost total destruction, Heng Vipas also expressed his wish for his children to return to Cambodia in order to modernize and rehabilitate it. In Chapter Seven, Kuon Hann stated, *I want to go back to Cambodia...to spend my retirement living in my native country. I see everything there in my mind: my neighbor, my brother, my sister, my mother, my niece, and my two children...Now, they've all passed away...*

Late in 1998, Ngek Chum began to share with me his plans for returning to Cambodia for the first time since he moved his family and his life to the United States. His experience—like the experience of so many other artists, their families, and their friends—reveals the fluid nature of definitions of home, identity, and culture and their attachments to political or geographical territories.

I want to go to Cambodia next year. I want to take my kids, especially my daughter, Sovath. She wants to go. I always told her that I would take her to Cambodia. Now she is asking me about that, so I want to go. (Ngek Chum, Conversation 9/19/98)

Unfortunately, NgeK Chum's trip to Cambodia was not destined to happen in 1999. Soon after our conversation, a number of events took place, causing him to postpone his plans. First, his aunt²³⁸ passed away later that fall. In addition to taking care of funeral arrangements, he also organized an elaborate "one hundred days" memorial service for her in January. As if it were not enough to undertake the ceremonies for his aunt, in the weeks preceding the memorial service, he became seriously ill and had to spend time going in and out of the hospital for tests. He was required to take heavy doses of medication that caused him to feel unusually tired and even depressed. Around the same time, his wife's father in Cambodia was becoming increasingly ill. She wanted to go to Cambodia to see him in the spring, but because the Cambodian New Year was approaching, NgeK Chum had to stay in Maryland to perform and teach music for the upcoming celebrations. Therefore, Vorn ended up going to Cambodia on her own in March, while her husband stayed at home with their kids. Things became even more complicated with the New Year's celebration at the "Vatt," because Khatna Peou, the head dance teacher there, suddenly became sick and passed away late in March. With all of these unplanned events and new strains on his physical, emotional, and financial resources, NgeK Chum stopped talking about his visit to Cambodia for a while. It was not until January 2001 that he brought up the topic again.

²³⁸ Her name is Yat Um, and she was the daughter of NgeK Chum's grandparents.

I want to visit Cambodia this year. Actually, I plan to go in July. I just decided. Sovath and I were talking about it. She wants to go to see her relatives on her mother's side, and she asked me about that last week. We'll try to go in July. I have phleng kar engagements in June. I don't have money for the trip yet, but I think I'm getting a refund on my income tax this year. So I can probably use that. (Ngek Chum, Conversation, 1/14/01)

A week later, I went to *Lok Krou's* house for a music lesson. After the lesson, we spent some time chatting. He started to talk about going to Cambodia again, but this time, with a new twist: *Do you want to come with us?* he asked.

I could hardly believe my ears! I thought to myself, *Me? Go to Cambodia with you? What could be more perfect?* But, for fear that he would change his mind or tell me that I misunderstood him, I didn't voice my doubt. Instead—although I had no clue where I would get the money for the trip—I accepted the offer on the spot, adding. *I'm not kidding* for a little insurance.

On July 6, *Lok Krou*, his wife, his daughter, his mother, and I were all on our way. The experience was at once exhilarating and disheartening. The recollections that follow illustrate some of these shifting impressions.

For example, family and close friends were generous with their time, assistance, and company. The natural environment was stunningly calming. And for Ngek Chum, traversing the neighborhoods of his youth and making proper offerings to relatives—living and deceased—supplied the initial steps toward healing the sharp

wounds of the multiple, abrupt breaks in his personal, social, professional, cultural, economic, and geographic identity.

In contrast, poverty and corruption were rampant, and the urban infrastructure appeared destroyed beyond repair. Reminders of the gruesome Khmer Rouge era gnawed the edges of any feelings of hope arising from the country's gracefulness.

On Sunday, July 8, we arrived in Phnom Penh, welcomed by Vorn's relatives. We were invited into the home of her brother who lived near Pochentong airport. Aunts and uncles, brothers, sisters and cousins all took us under their wings every step of the way, arranging for our food, lodging, and transportation for the duration of our four-week trip around the country.

It was hot, but not unbearable. The sun shone constantly, and as we drove away from the airport, my senses were bombarded with a bustle of pedestrians, pedi-cabs, bicycles, and pick-up trucks. They traveled this way and that, seeming to have no traffic laws to adhere to. I felt as if I just stepped onto the set of a movie staged in Southeast Asia. I had been to Thailand before, but I don't recall experiencing the same the rush of striking motion, sound, and feeling that I was perceiving on that day. It felt thrillingly new, yet oddly familiar at the same time.

As we drove around the city, through the provinces, and down to the coast in the coming days, I was treated to crystal clear blue skies and breathtaking landscapes. Sugar palm trees watched over the streams and over the fields. Small mountains and the colorful peaks of Buddhist temples added some texture to the scene. When we were

thirsty, we stopped for a drink of coconut milk. The salesman sliced a hole in the fruit for us.

As I took everything in, I watched people going about their business calmly and peacefully. A herder led his water buffalo to drink, while children splashed about in the stream. A farmer loaded an ox-drawn cart with watermelon. A merchant flagged our car down, inviting us to taste her seafood catch of the day. As we traveled along, I wondered, “Who on this earth would ever even think of dropping a bomb here? What could these people have done?”

When I could no longer stand the thought of my own questions, I focused my attention on the fissures in the road. They were everywhere, and the driver commanded our vehicle like an accomplished, video game-happy teenager. He threw us this way and that to avoid this pothole here and that chasm there. The gaps were reminders of Cambodia’s problems.

As symbols of the Almighty American Dollar, we were approached daily by beggars everywhere. One night, at a seaside “resort,” a group of children showed no restraint in displaying their hunger. As we ate our koyteav in an open-air restaurant, nearly seven children scuffled about. They were seasoned. They knew the procedure. When we were getting ready to pay our bill, they scoped the table for leftovers. When they identified the bowls with most soup left inside, they nearly snuggled up with the people who were about to part with them. As we stood up to leave the restaurant, in an instant, our bowls were snatched up from underneath us and joined with the slurping mouths and grumbling stomachs of the children.

The next morning Lok Krou asked me, "Did you see that last night? Those kids? Raci told me about that. Millions of dollars come into this country to help the children and the poor, but very little, if any, of it ever reaches those who need it. My sister told me about that, too. She said I would see hungry children like that everywhere. Cambodia wasn't like that before."

Of course, it is more effective to give directly to those in need, especially to one's family members. Lok Krou and his wife helped their families with cash donations each day that they were there. But they had to be careful to distribute their money equitably and within their own means. After a little over a week in Cambodia, Vorn voiced some concern.

We have used half of our money already. I gave fifty dollars to each relative. And then, one of my brothers asked me to buy him a motorbike. Did you see the motorbike parked at the house the other day? That's the one. He wants to drive people around on it, offer a taxi service. He has six kids. He had a motorbike before, but he sold it to pay for a funeral ceremony for his father-in-law. Sometimes his kids are so hungry, that they go to their aunt's house to eat. (Vorn Chum, Conversation 7/13/01)

Worries were mixed with anticipation. The next day, we were headed to Battambang, Lok Krou's hometown and the place where Vorn spent her teenage years. As we neared the city, Lok Krou and Vorn pointed out locations that were familiar to them. Heaven and hell were rolled into one.

Lok Krou pointed to different villages and houses where he had played music. He explained, “In those days, we just went from house to house. When we played somewhere, someone else might have heard us and then asked us to go over to their house to play when we were finished.”

Then he noticed another familiar spot. “There, on the right. That’s where I lived when the Khmer Rouge were here.” And another, “Oh, and over there on the left. That changed a lot. There weren’t any houses over there before.”

Vorn added, “See that mountain over there? That’s where the Khmer Rouge took people to kill them.”

Lok Krou pointed to another sight, “And the Khmer Rouge used that temple as a prison.”

Vorn pointed to the right, “See that road over there? We built that when we were living under Pol Pot.”

Lok Krou urged Sovath and I to look at yet another road. “That one leads to the house where I grew up.”

The driver parked the car just a few blocks beyond that road. We were in front of Vatt Anlong Vil, the temple where Lok Krou spent two years of his life in the monkhood. It was also the location of Aunt Yat Um’s²³⁹ ashes. We stopped to pay respect to Lok Krou’s aunt who his daughter remembered as her “grandmother.”

²³⁹ Yat Um is mentioned above.

I've always wanted to go to Cambodia. I thought I would have the chance to go when I was sixteen. I was going to go then, because my grandmother always wanted to see Cambodia again. But then, she passed away. She never had a chance to go. She was sick for a while, and when she started to feel better, we did some paperwork for her and looked for flights for our trip with her. But then, she got really sick again.

She was like my nanny, like my second mom. Even though I called her "Grandmother," I wanted to call her "Mom." When I tried that, she was like, "You already have a mom. Why would you call me 'Mom'?"

We were really close, and she spoiled me. Everything I wanted, she got for me. You know, when you're a kid you want everything. Your parents are supposed say "no" to you. But with her, she could not say "no" to me. My mom was so against that and asked, "Why do you keep buying stuff for her? She needs to learn that she can't have everything." But you know, when you have people you love and care about, and you can give to them, you do. I think that's how my grandmother felt. (Sovath Chum, Interview 1/8/02)

After visiting the chaidey²⁴⁰ which contained Aunt Yat's ashes, we went inside the Vatt. Lok Krou pointed to the rear of the sanctuary. Some portraits of monks were hanging on the wall. "See this one?" he asked. "He taught my grandfather. And this one? This is Lok Krou Ip. He was my teacher."

²⁴⁰ A stupa, or pyramidal monument, where ashes are kept in a Cambodian cemetery.



Figure 22-Memorial *Chaidey* to Aunt Yat Um
(Photo credit Joanna Pecore)

For the next few days, we explored Anlong Vil Village and Battambang City. During a visit to Lok Krou's sister's house in Anlong Vil, he asked me, "Do you want to see the house where I used to live?"

"Yeah!" I answered. This was something I had been waiting for from the moment we arrived in Battambang. Of course, I wanted to see scenes from his childhood. That was the main reason I wanted to go to Cambodia with him in the first place.

A white-haired woman, another of Lok Krou's "aunts," wrapped a red and black-checked scarf around her neck and led the way. She guided us down a garden path and across the yards of village neighbors. I became anxious as we passed one dog here and another dog there. But without incident, we arrived at a dirt road. As we walked along it, Lok Krou pointed to the trees. He recognized some of them and noted some of the changes in the scenery. As we passed one house, a dark-skinned, smiling

woman emerged from the gate. Lok Krou knew her from long ago. She posed for a photograph with him and joined us on our walk toward Lok Krou's house. Then, we came upon a man riding by on a red motorbike. Lok Krou knew him, too! He was an "uncle" who once learned roneat and played skor thom as well. We continued to walk, passing a few more homes until we arrived at the one we were looking for. "Here it is!" said Lok Krou. "This is my house."

The sturdy, but weathered, thatched house with faded, red aluminum roofing was built directly on the ground. Four or five women sat behind sewing machines on the front porch, working away. In just a few minutes, a petite man with high cheekbones came out of the house. He was the owner, one of Lok Krou's cousins who had been caring for the house for all of these years.

This house changed a lot. Before, it was three times this size. Now, only the middle section, supported by heavy, wooden poles, remains. Before, that section of the house was sandwiched between two others, one in the front, and one in the back. But the Khmer Rouge took them away to use in another place...It was a very strong house. My grandfather built it with the best materials. But now it has changed. Do you want to go upstairs? (Ngek Chum, Conversation 7/15/01)

We entered the house. It was small and dark. "Upstairs?" I thought. But then, I looked to my right and noticed a staircase—really a heavy ladder—leading to a second floor. We climbed the steps and arrived in a small, stark room. The hard wood floor was extremely strong. Lok Krou explained as he pointed in different directions around

the room. “See? I had my instruments over there. And my teacher²⁴¹ rested back here. I would move my roneat over here when Krou Nit came to teach me. And back here, I had my own a small room for sleeping.”

We looked around the house and yard until Lok Krou’s nieces and their neighbors arrived on their motorbikes. They drove us back to his sister’s house, where we relaxed, talked, and ate until it was time to leave. On the way back to our car, Lok Krou asked me, “Is this the best day you’ve had so far in Cambodia? It was mine. We walked around Battambang, and I got to see and show you my old house.”

We spent the remainder of our days in Cambodia touring Battambang, conducting ceremonies for deceased relatives,²⁴² visiting Angkor Vatt as well as active temples in Siem Riep, exploring markets in Phnom Penh, and visiting relatives in Takeo. In and around Battambang, we visited Vatt Damrey Saw, Vatt Sangker,²⁴³ Vatt Phipit, Vatt Aik Phnom, and Phnom Sampeou. Lok Krou continued to show me the different places along the way where he had performed: a stadium in downtown Battambang, the governor’s mansion, the home of a rich businessman, and so on.

Before we knew it, though, it was time to return to United States. In the airport, Lok Krou asked me, “Are you happy to be going home?”

²⁴¹ He is referring to *Krou Nit*.

²⁴² For Yat Um in Battambang and for Vorn’s father in Takeo.

²⁴³ See Chapter 5.



Figure 23-Ngeek Chum Descends the Staircase of his Childhood Home in 2001
(Photo credit Joanna Pecore)

“Hmmm.” I thought. “I’m not sure. Once I go home, I don’t know when I can come back to Cambodia again. I want to see more.”

I returned the question to him. “Are you happy about leaving?”

“Yes,” he said. “I miss my home.”

“You don’t want to stay in Cambodia?” I asked in surprise.

“No. I want to go home. Now, Cambodia is completely different than it was before.”

“Oh,” I responded in disappointment. “I really wanted to go to Cambodia to see how you lived before you moved to the United States.”

“Well, you didn’t see it. Everything has changed. Before, I missed my country. I missed Cambodia...but not now. The Cambodia I missed is not there anymore. The Cambodia I missed is gone.”

Conclusion: Tuning In to Musical Experience

Like the story of *Moni Mekhala* described in Chapter Four, the tradition of Khmer music and dance-drama in the Washington, DC area and beyond goes on and on. But here, we have been experimenting with the transfer of experience onto the pages of a text. As such, the narrative must come to a linear end.

Ideally, we would go no further and instead, the recital would linger with echoes of Ngek Chum's observations about "the Cambodia I missed." That kind of summation would, of course, be more fitting to, be more evocative of, and serve as a more accurate, long-lasting, and deeply meaningful mechanism for the transmission of the aesthetic and cultural underpinnings of his art than any explication that follows.

Yet, I cannot deny the fact that I took on the tasks of entering Ngek Chum's world and writing this volume as part of an extensive academic exercise. This manuscript has, therefore, been a merging of cultural experiences. With this fact in mind, then, I continue on with a final synopsis and representation of my analysis of the living tradition of Khmer music and dance-drama. I then proceed to highlight the processes that illuminated these insights and conclude with thoughts about how these discoveries might influence the work that ethnomusicologists might undertake with communities.

What Did We Learn through the Sound of Cambodia?

In this modest theater of just a few hundred pages, more than forty participants of the activities of “Virginia” and the “Vatt” shared their stories about the significance of their endeavors. No two accounts were identical. Some spoke from the perspective of superior artistic mastery, while others offered their thoughts as novices. Some embarked on their studies at a young age, while others encountered Khmer performing arts as teenagers and even as adults. Some engaged in these arts in response to a calling, while others stumbled into them as vehicles for reconnecting to personal and cultural losses. Some followed sanctioned guidelines for development, while others have all but discarded tradition, even in the name of preserving it. Some cherish their participation in Khmer performing arts as central to their existence, while others negotiate their commitment to it by defining it as an enriching, peripheral life activity. Some are inspired by artistic excellence, while others engage as a means of supporting their community.

In short, the range of motivations for and modes of joining Khmer music and dance-drama activities appeared in different combinations in different people at different points and places in their lives. With all of this variation, how are we to know which narratives were authentic? How can we identify the authorities? How do we know what to conclude about Khmer music and dance-drama?

According to Becker, musical meanings

...are multiple, many-layered and constantly shifting. No single strand, no one interpretation can capture the various nuances, the subtle suggestions communicated by an artistic performance...But one must take care not to give the impression that because interpretations are various, and even contradictory when abstracted from particular individuals, a given artistic expression can mean anything, or nearly anything. To collect interpretations and to pile one on another, unranked and undifferentiated, is to bleach meaning and is as much a distortion as the earlier strategy of presenting a unified whole, coherent and anonymous, unanimous “reading.” (1993: 1-2)

To introduce the “many-layered and constantly shifting” meanings in Khmer music and dance-drama, I have juxtaposed multiple “sound-spheres” throughout this text. Yet, to offset the potential for distorting these interpretations, I have also positioned them according to “rankings” that emerged throughout the course of my research and fieldwork experiences. That is, I identified a pattern, or “cultural theme” (Spradley 1980: 140),²⁴⁴ that recurred across personal reflections, community action, and existing scholarship on Khmer arts and culture, the motif of *phloev*, and used it to design a framework for sorting, arranging, and “classifying” the “sound-spheres.” The result was a composition which steered readers through two simultaneous stories—one chronological and one experiential—of the “sound of Cambodia.”

The configuration placed commentary about the making of Khmer performance at the top of the hierarchy and at the heart of the volume. It privileged the voices of individuals who are the most highly accomplished, the most intensively

²⁴⁴ Spradley indicates that “...most cultural themes remain at the *tacit* level of knowledge. People do not express them easily, even though they know the cultural principle and use it to organize their behavior and interpret experience... Themes not only recur again and again throughout different parts of culture, but they also *connect* different subsystems of culture.” (1980: 143-144)

engaged, and who happened to have elaborated upon this process vis-à-vis musical sound in interviews, discussions, and other personal exchanges. A combination of existing literature on and my own experiences and observations with Khmer arts and culture influenced my judgement about this ordering and inspired me to “mimic” emic visual representations of this ranking in my writing. That is, they spurred me to construct with the narratives a “diagram” of the universe of Khmer music and dance-drama in the Washington, DC area. The diagram portrays a creative center embraced by the contextual world that shapes its observable form. The “sound-spheres” comprising this diagram relay how sound sets the dynamics of this universe into motion.

With this organization in mind, then, we now revisit the center of the dissertation—Chapters Four, Five, and Six: the core of our experiential story—to identify fifteen essential properties of Khmer performing arts. The recurring commitment to these elements expressed by the engaged artists featured in this dissertation suggests that maintaining and constructively adapting these qualities within the context of historical, political, social, economic, and geographic transience ultimately distinguishes authentic from superficial performance. These themes have resonated beyond these central chapters and across the entire text, further supporting this proposition. The following inventory delineates these components and offers examples of how they have consistently reemerged throughout the manuscript.

1. Khmer music and dance-drama embodies timeless lessons about the continuity of life and one's personal and social role within that series. This quality may be viewed as one that encompasses all others that follow. It therefore has appeared invariably throughout this volume. In Chapter One, for example, we observed how Ngek Chum contributed his musical talents to dance troupes and schools throughout *Khao I Dang* refugee camp, when he realized that his knowledge would benefit both the future of his tradition and the residents in the camp. In Chapter Two, readers witnessed how the Khmer New Year and the classical dance—two symbols of ongoing life—offered the community one means of collective healing. In Chapter Three, three young artists—Bonavy Chhim, Vathana Say, and Sovath Chum—recognized their role as tradition bearers vis-à-vis uninterrupted artistic lineages. In Chapter Four, Ngek Chum described the purpose of *phloev* in connecting human with supernatural worlds and how each instrumentalist of the *pin peat* ensemble is responsible for making distinct contributions to this effect. In Chapter Five, Ngek Chum explicated how each of his teachers consciously played unique and non-competitive roles in his education. Chapter Six depicted how teacher-student relationships form the foundation of artistic mastery. In Chapter Seven, *mohori* group members consistently reflected upon ways that their playing reconnects to memories of Cambodia while requiring attention to the needs of the group as a whole. Chapter Eight outlined how these overarching lessons directed artists' responses to the challenges that face their arts in the current context. And

Chapter Nine highlighted how Ngek Chum and his wife's awareness of their kinship ties guided their itinerary when they visited Cambodia.

2. The tradition functions as sacred offering, communication device, and receptacle of knowledge. The functions of sacred offering and means of communication were denoted multiple times, and often, in tandem with one another. For instance, in Chapter Two, Devi Yim described her first experience performing the role of Moni Mekhala for a *sampeah krou* ceremony when she was a student in Cambodia. In this instance, she danced the part as an offering to ancestor teachers while also calling for their attention. In Chapter Three, the same transactions defined the *sampeah krou* ritual at "Virginia." Later, in Chapter Five, Monrya Srun discussed her practice of conducting *sampeah krou* with the music, *Sathukar*, each day at noon. In each of these cases, the procedure of these rituals also served as an educational tool for the artists. Each time they enacted the rite, they became increasingly intimate with the knowledge about life, art, and social relations embedded within it. This relationship between performance and wisdom was even more clearly illustrated in the three core chapters. For example, in Chapter Four, a host of artists described how *pin peat* music embodies cultural values in terms of both musical structure and performance practice. Chapter Five portrayed how abiding by the rules of reciprocal exchange between teacher and student leads to insights about the tradition on multiple levels. And Chapter Six explored this master-apprentice connection even more closely, making evident the

significance of experience (achieved through destiny, deference to tradition, patience, and dedication) in mastering the art.

3. Khmer performing arts accomplish these goals through the process of mimesis.

This process was first illustrated through the description of the *sampeah krou* ritual at the conclusion Chapter Three. Cultural wisdom about the cyclicity of life and a student's individual role in that sequence was patterned in various strata. It immediately reappeared when Ngek Chum and his colleagues discussed the performance of Khmer music and dance-drama in Chapter Four. In that chapter, it became apparent that the interactions among instrumentalists; between musicians and music; and among sound, movement, and storytelling all imitated the Khmer ideal of balancing individual talent and communal needs. And in Chapter Five, the examples of building the Buddha and temple of Vatt Sangker, infusing a *sampho* with sacred power, and making Ngek Chum's *kansaeng yoan* all involved invoking the force of designs which represented ideal worlds and benevolent spirits.

4. Sound provides the scaffolding of the environments which "house" mimetic

action. Sound also activates and drives the mimetic process. This characteristic was discerned in Chapter Three during the *sampeah krou* ceremony that was propelled by the non-stop music of the *pin peat*. Thereafter, it reoccurred in Chapter Four, when Ngek Chum contemplated the effects of well-performed *phloev*. However, Chapter Five illustrated this phenomenon most clearly

through multiple examples, including Chum's description of *Homrong*, the construction of Vatt Sangker, and the creation of his *kansaeng yoan*. First, Chum explained how a performance of *Homrong* can create "virtual time" (Blacking 1969: 38) enabling the transformation of mundane to mythical space. Second, *pin peat* ensembles surrounded Vatt Sangker, playing incessantly and protecting the temple until it was completed. And third, Chum recalled how a *krou* chanted "secret words" over his *kansaeng yoan* during a "life-giving ceremony" (Khanna 1979) for the handkerchief.

5. During the course of that process, musical performance collapses time/space barriers that ordinarily separate the human from supernatural worlds. Ngek Chum described this effect in Chapter Four when he discussed how the twofold execution of *phloev* in *pin peat* performance adjoins musicians to dancers and performers to their human and supernatural audiences. He then elaborated upon this phenomenon in Chapter Five when he explained the power of *Homrong*, the construction of Vatt Sangker, his impression of music performed with a sanctified *sampho*, and the potency of *yoan*. In Chapter Seven, *mohori* group members described this condition when they recognized feelings of "communitas" (Turner 1995) with other ensemble members during rehearsals and performances.

6. Technically, the *pin peat* musical tradition most effectively traverses time/space margins through a binary implementation of *phloev*: one that emphasizes linear, melodic variation while exploiting vertical, timbral layering. Embellishing upon property number five above, this feature refers specifically to physical sound production. Ngek and Sovann Chum explicated these techniques in Chapter Four.

7. Vibrant Khmer music and dance-drama depends upon the sincere investment of energy by the people who lead and participate in these activities. The critical role of people in music-making and thus defining music has been a major theme of this text. Support for the significance of this ingredient of Khmer performing arts has therefore been implicit throughout the manuscript. Here, I offer a few examples of the tradition's reliance on dedicated individuals drawn from Chapters Four, Five, Six, Seven, and Eight. First, in Chapter Four, readers heard a story from Ngek Chum about the many teachers from throughout Cambodia who visited his home to teach him. Second, also in that chapter, they listened to Ra Khlay and Sophy Hoeung recount the difficulties they endured in order to learn classical Khmer music for the benefit of their community. Third, in Chapters Five and Six, Monrya Srun, Ngek Chum, and many other artists and students declared the essential part that their teachers played in their development. And fourth, Chapters Seven and Eight offered

multiple examples of how the effort and will of particular, highly motivated individuals, keeps Khmer performing arts alive in the present context.

8. Artistic knowledge must be nurtured and passed on from one generation to the next. It is therefore critical to be ever cognizant of one's teachers as well as caring for one's students. The weight of mentor-pupil relations was first introduced in terms of the Sigala sutra—a Buddhist doctrine stressing reciprocal social behaviors—in Chapter Three. Chapters Five and Six explored this tenet in greater depth, illustrating how it serves as the philosophical bedrock of the Khmer music and dance-drama tradition.

9. Fine teachers guide students through a process of self-discovery that yields deep-rooted understandings of the tradition and enables flexible adaptation to new situations. The primacy of this approach to transmission was emphasized throughout the text, especially in Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven. For instance, in Chapter Four, both Ra Khlay and Sophy Hoeung described how they came to command Khmer classical music and reduce the time necessary to learn new pieces after they struggled independently with a few basic songs. Their ability to accomplish this was influenced by analogous music learning experiences which occurred earlier in their lives and which they had never forgotten. Thus, these artists were able to adapt their proficiency in popular music to the classical genre. Likewise, in Chapter Five, Ngek Chum appreciated the guidance that he gained from multiple teachers. Under their

direction, he was able to study comparatively. Consequently, he currently enjoys the ability to manipulate music as necessary in a variety of situations. Additionally, in Chapter Six, a number of professional artists and students ruminated over attaining their skills by combining independent study with emulation of their teachers. This strategy was repeated throughout Chapter Seven in the chronicles of individual *mohori* ensemble members.

10. Multi-sensory learning, emotional investment, emulating experienced practitioners, patience, commitment, sharp intellect, and personal exploration provide the foundation for artistic mastery. This essential composite technique for commanding Khmer performing arts also persisted continuously throughout the manuscript. In Chapter Two, for instance, readers became aware of the advantages of patience and perseverance in these arts through reflections by Sochietah Ung and Devi Yim. Subsequently, in Chapter Three, the *sampeah krou* ritual served as a classic example of the value of imitation and full-body participation in Khmer educational philosophy. Then, in Chapter Four, Sovann Chum divulged his tactics for learning the art of *phloev*: observation, rehearsal, and comparative study. Chapter Six focused on this process and illustrated how Khmer performing arts are grasped through this method. Further, the accounts by several *mohori* ensemble members in Chapter Seven underscored how a combination formal and informal instruction in conjunction with commitment, patience, endurance, self-initiative, and the ability to overcome obstacles has yielded facility in musical performance.

11. Khmer performance, bound to its social and dramatic contexts, conveys stories on multiple levels. This aspect of Khmer performing arts, like the position of people in producing music in item number seven considered above, has also been a dominant subject of this dissertation. Consequently, all of the stories in every chapter technically qualify as examples of this element. To point out just a couple, however, I cite Chapters One and Two. First, in Chapter One, the survey of Ngek Chum's musical education, wartime experience, and relocation to the United States provided an introductory insight into the ways that Khmer performance endures in tandem with individual narratives. Secondly, Chapter Two expanded upon this example by presenting the stories of other artists and community members vis-à-vis their participation in Khmer music and dance-drama in the United States. This pattern continued throughout the text and took on new dimensions within each chapter. For example, in Chapter Three, the stories began to highlight the intersections of cultural values and music, some of the ways that participation in music can heal, and the role that performing arts play in the construction of ethnic identity. Entering the pivotal story of musical experience in Chapter Four, these narratives began to reveal the unity of personal experience and performance (including processes of transmission) in a more intricate way.

12. The sounds, movements, and structures of Khmer music and dance-drama performance reflect and inform prototypical social interaction. As noted in the preceding section, this characteristic was introduced in Chapter Three. Thereupon, the correlation between musical sounds, movements, and structures and ideal social action were delineated in an array dimensions Chapter Four. Chapter Five followed with the correspondences among the concepts of teacher, repertoire, protection, and sound. The “sound-spheres” presented there revealed the unrivalled standing of teachers as the symbol of all that should be esteemed in Khmer performing arts. This metaphorical ranking explains why, as illustrated in Chapter Six, teacher-student bonds function as templates for ascertaining the social lessons contained within Khmer performing arts. The internalization of such lessons by Ngek Chum was accented in Chapter Nine where his visit to Cambodia was navigated according to his social obligations.
13. Exemplary artistic and social interactions (including proper communication between human and supernatural worlds) are discerned by the skillful balancing of individual expression (with a competitive edge) and group cooperation. This quality resounded throughout the text, serving as a basic premise guiding the involvement of the artists and community members active at “Virginia” and the “Vatt.” While in Chapters One, Two, Three, Seven, and Eight, many individuals pointed to this ideal as the impetus for their participation in Khmer performing arts, the accord of this standard with artistic

excellence was most clearly illustrated in the central chapters of the volume. For instance, in Chapter Four, Ngek Chum described how musical performance conducted according to the conception of *phloev* involves the judicious negotiation of personal skill and social necessity. This ideal reappeared throughout Chapter Five. For example, when Chum was compelled to become a *krou* in refugee camps, he accommodated traditional beliefs about acquiring that status before age forty with the appeals for his services. In the absence of a senior teacher in that situation, Chum adapted conventional rules in order to fulfill the needs of his community there. Subsequently, in Chapter Six, numerous artists and students described how traversing a “middle path” between independence and deference to teachers advances artistic proficiency.

14. Ideal social interactions revolve around hierarchies which privilege parents and teachers, but which also prescribe reciprocal exchange between parents and children as well as teachers and students. The significance of hierarchies between parents and children as well as teachers and students was expressed as early as Chapter One and repeated throughout the manuscript. In Chapter Three, however, a note about the Sigala sutra suggested that such relations are also reciprocal. There, a series of “sound-spheres”—including one by Sovath Chum and another by Sichantha and Nearry Ouk—illustrated how this philosophy plays out within the context of these organizations. In Chapter Four, readers again witnessed such reciprocity in action when Ngek Chum agreed to concentrate on the lessons he was receiving from the many teachers

who came to coach him voluntarily at his home in Battambang. Chum repeated this mutual behavior in Chapter Five (clearly within the constraints of hierarchical rules) when he trained students for his teacher, receiving half the payment that would have been due his *krou* but accepting full responsibility for the students' performance. In Chapter Six, the need for students to demonstrate their will and ability to compensate teachers for their services beyond the rewards of financial exchange (even before receiving an official lesson) became even more apparent. Masady Mani, Sochietah Ung, Vathana Say, Lany Lang and others related how patience, commitment, endurance, and creativity are the keys to conveying this intention to potential teachers.

15. These qualities of Khmer music and dance-drama can only be verified through personal belief, observation, and experience. Returning to the most general premise of this dissertation—that music is experience—here, I point out how practitioners of Khmer performing arts corroborate the properties listed above: they simply believe them, based upon their own experience. Commentaries throughout this text, including stories of an astrologer's predictions about Ngek Chum's powers or a monk's ability to sense the safest route through the jungle (Chapter One), imply that those who impart such tales feel no need to convince others of the legitimacy of their views. Rather, they remain unfettered by skeptics and confident of the personal experience that influenced their judgement. Thus, in Chapter Two, Sochietah Ung contentedly resolved that his dancing and costume making is "fate." In like manner, Ngek Chum relayed

stories of potent repertoire, sculptures, instruments, waistbands, and cloths.

When examined about the truth of such claims, the artists pointed the attention of doubters away from the pursuit of circumstantial proof and toward the recognition of the reliability of personal perception.

Of course, these fifteen characteristics of authentic Khmer performing arts are far from rigid attributes. Rather, their very subsistence demands adaptation to the challenges and tensions presented by local, national, and global history. As contradictory as this may sound, this relationship hardly differs from the skirmish between Mekhala and Reamaysoeur that we observed in Chapter Four. That is, just as the confrontation between the two deities resulted in an earth fertilizing thunder and lightning storm, so too do Khmer music and dance-drama's encounters with shifts in historical and global power configurations nourish its vitality and continuity.

For the participants of the activities at "Virginia" and the "Vatt," the struggle for artistic and cultural survival has meant undertaking countless compromises that have proven to be both rewarding and costly at different junctures along the way. For example, while these organizations offer a solid infrastructure for regenerating Khmer performing arts, their limited time, financial, and communication resources place severe strains upon tradition bearers. While these centers respond to the need for articulating a Khmer cultural identity, conflicting agendas sometimes distort representations of culture and often violate the equitable and constructive distribution of resources. While large numbers of students assemble for classes, cultural misunderstandings, real life distractions (such as educational, family, or work

responsibilities), and periodic interruptions of already infrequent teaching sessions undermine instructors' plans for nurturing the firm foundations of artistic mastery. While the community boasts a "heavy duty" concentration of professional artists (Gary Marco, Interview 8/23/02), weighty commitments to family, work, and existing artistic obligations make it difficult to take advantage of rapidly fading opportunities. While demand for the artists' skills remains strong, insufficient support encumbers the ability to fulfill those requests.

Again and again, these negotiations have edified the central lesson that the Khmer performing arts impart on multiple levels: that life is impermanent yet ever evolving. This insight suggests that the tradition should be embraced, not as a *product*, but rather, as a *process*. By encountering Khmer music and dance-drama, participants can learn how to navigate a world that is cluttered with inconsistent beliefs and objectives. They can learn to respond constructively to acts of greed, charity, desire, and honesty, because they are learning the art of balance. They are learning how to simultaneously nurture their personal strengths and contribute those skills to society.

How Did We Learn through the Sound of Cambodia?

In the introduction to this manuscript, I expressed my ambition of promoting an appreciation for Khmer performing arts as vibrant treasures that carry precious knowledge across the confines time, place, and cultural identities. This aspiration arose from the prevalence of an alternative view that patronizes these arts as vanquished traditions of a remote land. Despite the currency of the latter disposition,

however, the preceding account depicts Khmer music and dance-drama as remarkably brilliant and invitingly familiar. How did we arrive at this crossroad?

Also in the introduction to this volume, I announced my strategy of navigating Khmer music and dance-drama in the Washington DC area with the concept of “sounding.” This notion embraces the process of experiencing, interacting, and communicating with music in every sense possible. It is meant to underscore the fact that without personal connection to the sounds and actions of music, music remains pointless, meaningless. Therefore, before I could even consider writing about Khmer music, I had to first engage in it, take it into myself and offer myself to it. This process of personal learning, exploration, and exchange constituted the fundamental layer of “sounding” represented in this document. It involved:

- securing an apprenticeship with a master musician
- spending multiple hours and days with him, his community, and his family on a weekly basis over the course of seven years
- participating in rituals
- reflecting upon my experiences
- searching for explanations both in the field and out
- trusting that I could learn to play this music with seemingly minimal direct instruction by the teacher
- believing that spending lesson time in conversation with my teacher rather than in physical contact with my instrument would yield performance skills
- documenting these conversations in notebooks

- battling in private with tape recordings of songs that I vowed to learn in time for my lessons
- agreeing to perform music I had not yet learned
- simultaneously imitating my teacher's playing during rehearsals, however embarrassing the results
- taking note of my progress, no matter how slow

Quite simply, it involved observing and doing while sustaining the belief that a tradition like this, to which so many people have been dedicated for so long, must have something truly priceless to offer. I may never understand it in full, but certainly, if I tried, my life could be improved by it.

Then...I could no longer avoid it...The inevitable happened: The time arrived to *write it all down*. Again, “sounding” surfaced as a promising scheme. But then, this time the trick was to package and can it, to add all the necessary preservatives to keep it fresh. I needed a way to make “sounding” happen on command, when someone just happened to look at my text. I needed to “sound the spirit of Cambodia” along with my readers. How did we do it?

First, we accepted (if only skeptically) the premise that music is experience. From there, we began to observe. We observed mostly with our eyes, but also, to some extent, with our ears, by listening to numerous stories. We patiently followed our teachers—who did not remain nameless—across their histories, their contemplations, and their social worlds. We observed that common experience is often not that common at all. First we heard one view, then another, sometimes without a congruous

resolution. We often endured seemingly irrelevant reflections, sometimes making us laugh or making us cry. We invested in the process of meandering (Stoller 1989: 142), of entering this community and letting things happen. We discarded our assumptions about appropriate ways of attaining knowledge through text and adopted instead a “respect for other worlds, other ideas, ideas often preposterous to our own way of thinking.” (Stoller 1989: 156)

Second, I made clear that our point of entry into this community was obviously biased by my own temporal interpretations. Try as I did to balance community expressions and viewpoints, I was the one who consolidated the data. I was the one who arranged the “sound-spheres.” I was the one who produced the “cooperative story.” (Tyler 1986: 126) Moreover, my relationship to the community became increasingly blurred once I began to appear in both “sound-spheres” and transitional commentary. Do I belong on the inside or out?

Third, although fragmented and interrupted by re-orientations to the volume’s overall framework and signposts to how particular “sound-spheres” relate to that structure, layers of stories (two “cooperative” and countless individual ones) supplied the vehicle for our journey. This technique enabled us to encounter the world of Khmer music and dance-drama in the Washington, DC area in much the same way that I had done previously on my own. We saw, heard, smelled, and felt the images, vibrations, and sensations that I perceived during my studies. We learned Khmer terminologies, became acclimated to the logic of community perspectives, and were acquainted with personalities in unexpected ways. We gained this detail here, acquired that concept there, and were only able to synthesize the information to understand its

potential significance after definitive statements about the past, present, or future of Khmer performing arts were delivered in detached locations throughout the volume.

On one hand, this process of meeting musical information in all of its historical, geographical, political, economic, social, and cultural complexity demanded of readers a “tolerance for the ambiguity and difficulty” presented by the text. (Van Maanen 1988: 137) On the other hand, though, it rewarded them for their efforts by immersing them in a world that mirrored the holistic process by which Khmer performing artists simultaneously master the theory and practice of their craft. Life, experience, and music flowed out as a seamless whole.

Finally, the technique of storytelling allowed me not only to take readers along on my adventures, but it also helped me to relate a perspective that is *central to the Khmer musical aesthetic*. That is, storytelling equipped me with a *culturally appropriate* tool for illustrating the classical Khmer view that an individual’s current existence is the manifestation of only one among multiple stories being played out concurrently in the concrete and mythical worlds. In this text, then, storytelling served not only as an ethnographic foil for communicating experience across cultures, but it also doubled-up as a representation of a time-honored, deeply rooted Khmer artistic and cultural device for conveying the nature of human existence. This effect was further enhanced by two additional strategies: 1) placing the “sound-spheres” within a structure that mimicked Khmer classical visualizations of the cosmos, and 2) modeling the “sounding” of this universe through the echoes of personal narratives.

In effect, readers entered into the world of Khmer music and dance-drama through multiple, interconnected, and animated portals. Throughout the course of their tour, they felt, heard, and saw the connections between art and humanity.

Why Should We Learn through the Sound of Cambodia?

So what if Khmer performing arts resonate so cogently with other realms of Khmer life, such as society, philosophy, and culture? What is so significant about the continuity of humanity and art?

It is my hope that this volume can serve not only as a record of the contemporary tradition of Khmer music and dance-drama, but that it may also be used as an inspiration or model for investigating, teaching, and doing work in our communities with music. Recognizing the relevance of music to community—not only as a tool for serving, creating, or representing communal enclaves, but also as a manifestation of community in the most inclusive sense of the term—is the first critical step toward accomplishing these goals. The intrinsic intertwining of music and community has been depicted through the Khmer American case summarized in this text. Below, I return to this community’s predicaments in an effort to develop a proposal for increasing the durability of its treasures. Before closing, I briefly consider how the suggestions presented here, specifically inspired by the circumstances of Ngek Chum and his community, might be abstracted and applied to other cultural contexts to maximize the benefits of systematically joining music with the exchange of diverse human experiences.

Above, I have noted that the vibrancy of the Khmer performing arts thrives in an atmosphere of movement and change. This dissertation has shown that there is no shortage of such environmental factors for the artists of the Washington, DC area.²⁴⁵ On the contrary, the challenges they face are so confounding that, no matter how clever their solutions, the community's resources continue to dwindle at a rate that far exceeds their pace of renewal. Therefore, in the interest of constructing a more stable climate for the future development of Khmer performing arts, the following sketch offers a list of the community's strengths and weaknesses. This report is followed by some suggestions for overcoming these weaknesses and nurturing the life of the tradition's essential characteristics.

The "sound-spheres" comprising this text have revealed that the participants of "Virginia" and the "Vatt" embrace an extremely healthy overarching objective: to contribute to the future by sharing meaningful experiences that are enriched by the wisdom of Khmer civilization. The community featured in this study possesses a wealth of resources that it invests in this enterprise, including people, the performing arts traditions themselves, and a solid track record of successful programming. The number of dedicated individuals and the range of talents available to the community are overwhelming. The music and dance-drama traditions preserve and convey celebrated wisdom. The community has established solid infrastructures for advancing its goals. It regularly stages highly energized artistic productions of superior quality. And it has attracted the support of outside institutions with this work.

²⁴⁵ Or for Khmer performing artists across the world, for that matter.

Despite these advantages, however, the community continues to suffer from a dearth of precious time, financial, and communication resources. While there is an abundance of artistic and cultural knowledge to share, the number of individuals engaged in the process of embracing and carrying that knowledge on into the future remains inadequate. While the United States offers multiple venues for introducing and disseminating these riches to broader audiences, most of the paths to these resources have yet to be traversed. How might the community gain greater access to some of the resources it requires?

I recommend that individuals and institutions that wish to assist the Khmer performing arts community in accomplishing these objectives consider focusing on six basic goals:

1. Working with the community to develop a focused, productive agenda from the ground-up. A plan that takes into account the multiple concerns of various constituents within the community (such as artists, administrators, youth, and parents) should be devised cooperatively. A system should be designed to crosscheck on a regular basis whether the activities of the organizations are truly contributing to their goals, and an evaluation procedure should be implemented to identify the elements that advanced the plan's successes and shortcomings.

2. Opening channels of communication both within the community and between the community and outside supporters. While the members of this community, for the most part, share a common cultural heritage, it cannot and should not be assumed that internal communication is static-free. In fact, the opposite is true. For example, in the preceding paragraph, I identified four sub-groups within this community: artists, administrators, youth, and parents. Within the context of traditional Khmer social interaction, these categories are further subdivided according to one's age, sex, wealth, education, kinship, occupation, and political standing. Intra-community communication is further complicated by individual choices about conforming to either Khmer or American cultural principles or a combination of these. Consequently, measures should be taken internally to counteract the potential artistic damage that might be caused by cultural misunderstandings. The case of Ngek Chum's experience in the early 1980s when his musical abilities far surpassed his English language skills (see Chapter Two) stands out among such potential confusions. I wonder, would it have cost so much to make a translator available and dedicated to his cause? The immense losses incurred because of a failure to exercise such a simple solution are distressing.

3. Training artists and community leaders to navigate public systems designed to help artists present and receive awards for their work. Basic training in where to seek assistance, how to proceed with application processes, and how to effectively interact with general audiences should be readily available. Conversely, supporting institutions should reevaluate their criteria vis-à-vis community resources and needs. Are they demanding more resources from the community than they will provide? Are their expectations reasonable with respect to insider network systems? Further, invitations to perform or apply for assistance from public institutions and arts and humanities councils tend to reaffirm the community's sense of significance. However, community members should also be alerted to their own responsibility to critically assess these opportunities. If requests and guidelines compromise traditions, they should be forthright and instructive in discussing their reservations with program organizers. They should realize that these organizations are approaching them as authorities in their field.
4. Creating an environment in the mainstream that encourages interest in and appreciation for these traditions. Punching the clock on a shoestring budget in off-the-beaten-path meeting halls limits public access (a large and potential pool of supporters and future tradition bearers) to Khmer music and dance-drama. Efforts should be made overcome these obstacles, increase opportunities for access to, and highlight the many universally relevant general

benefits that these arts have to offer people, Khmer and non-Khmer alike. For example, intimate understanding of any or all of the six “historically enduring” (Hinton 1998: 97) factors introduced in Chapter Six (respect for teachers, commitment, destiny, patience, self-initiative, and active participation) that comprise the lifeblood of this art form hold the potential to enrich anyone’s life. They illuminate the truth of human interconnections across the generations and across the globe. They communicate that a single human life is only one, but a sacred, piece of a larger, eternal whole. If these and similarly enlightening lessons are overlooked even within the Khmer performing arts community, countless opportunities to foster appreciation for and interest in these arts could be lost. There seems to be potential here to foster a demand for these arts that rivals the popularity of drumming circles and the martial arts. If the process of engaging in Khmer performing arts is so much more than the sum of its technical traits, should not that fact be exploited in the interest of keeping that process alive?

5. Revamping perceptions about what should and should not be considered authentic in Khmer music and dance-drama. Earlier, I offered a list of fifteen properties of Khmer performing arts, noting that the tradition’s validity rests in the ability to maintain these qualities in the face of historical, political, social, economic, and geographical change. Adaptation requires strengthening one’s skill in self-discovery, inter-personal communication, and exploring diversity. These facts alone bring this tradition into the here-and-now (the artists in the

text *do* exist in the present, after all), making it relevant and accessible to interested parties of any age, race, nationality, or ethnicity. Change is real, and it is something that everyone can relate to. Yet, growth and development do not preclude rootedness. Rather, however close these traditions may seem to a twelve-year old from Hyattsville, they are still firmly linked to a Cambodia of a distant era. This dynamic between continuity and accommodation should inform all Khmer performing arts activities.

6. Addressing these goals at the earliest possible moment after giving them careful, judicious consideration. As Gary Marco observed so astutely in Chapter Eight, the art “hasn’t been lost yet...The future of these arts is stacked on the backs of a handful of very dedicated people. We have those people now, but I’m always asking ‘What happens when [they] retire...?’” (Interview 8/23/02) Do we really want to wait and see what happens when these individuals lose their ability to give? Or do we want to get to work and start creating an infrastructure that will ensure the endurance of Khmer music and dance-drama for future generations?

On one hand, these suggestions pertain solely to the cases of “Virginia” and the “Vatt” as explored in this volume. On the other hand, however, their essence can be extracted and adapted to serve as guiding principles for conducting community-based music projects across the United States and across the world.

To begin with, they call attention to the importance of developing, clarifying, and articulating goals for community outreach on a case-by-case basis. Terms such as “community programs” do not in-and-of-themselves transmit intention. For some, such outreach focuses on institutions sharing their resources with local communities. For others, it means encouraging a community to inform the general public about its traditions. Still other programs foster dialogue within and between communities. All of these approaches have their advantages, but it is vital to be aware of which we are adopting before moving on to the implementation stage. This reflection will help in determining whether selected methods will lead to the desired results.

Secondly, collaboration is key. As complex and time and energy consuming as it will inevitably be, the program that involves the community will benefit the community. Representatives from diverse constituents within a community should take part in each phase of the project from inventing to developing to publicity to performance.

Finally, it is crucial for program managers to listen continuously and carefully to the stories of the people they intend to assist. Everybody has a story to tell, and each story sheds new light upon the meaning of music in community. If they want to discover what music is and means in any tradition, they should listen to its practitioners and follow their lead in exploring that knowledge.

It is not an administrator’s job to decide whether or which of these stories is significant. Rather, it is his or her duty to assume that the whole of every story is valuable and will yield some useful insights about the tradition. S/he is responsible for gaining an understanding of these stories in order to identify the community’s

strengths and weaknesses and to work with the community to reconfigure the game plan accordingly. Navigating new circumstances and meeting new challenges is the name of the game. If s/he tunes into the spirit of the sound, s/he will surely find her way.

The Jersey Girl System of Romanizing Khmer Terms:

Some Words about Transliteration

Unlike Japanese, Chinese, and other languages written in local, non-Roman script but studied and translated broadly across the world, to date, there exists no universally accepted standard for the transliteration of either written or spoken Khmer into Roman letters. Rather, there exist several approaches to transliterating Cambodian words. For instance, Cambodia's French colonial administrators designed one commonly employed system in the early twentieth century. This method contains a number of accents and diacritical markers whose effects on pronunciation are not readily understood by the average speaker of English. Other systems have been utilized primarily in academic environments. Consequently, they incorporate phonetic symbols that are commonly understood among linguists. But again, the typical English speaker may experience difficulty in yielding any practical meaning from these transcriptions. (Sam 1988; Sam 2002; Smith-Hefner 1999; Smyth 1995)

Because of the inconsistencies and complexity of the transliteration of Khmer script as well as the non-linguistic but rather, communicative goals of this volume, I have "constructed" a unique system of transliteration that will be used throughout this text. This scheme combines a number of approaches that I have encountered throughout my course of study of Khmer language, music, and culture. In essence, this system relies heavily upon the system employed by ethnomusicologist, Sam-Ang

Sam.²⁴⁶ However, it also includes my own adaptations to transliteration which were influenced by the methods used by language course author, David Smyth, and the Franco-Khmer transcription system used in publications by Nancy J. Smith-Hefner (1999) and May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (1994).

Two major criteria dominated my process of determining the ultimate shape of this system. First, I wanted to maintain as much consistency as possible with spellings of Khmer musical terms that have appeared in the ethnomusicology literature over the past decades. Second, I wanted readers to encounter spellings that bring them as close as possible to the pronunciation of Khmer words as I, a native English-speaker raised in New Jersey, U.S.A., hear them.²⁴⁷ Therefore (with the exception of proper nouns, such as personal appellations, names of geographical locations, song titles, and other designations that have been pre-determined by the individuals under consideration or that have entered common usage according to a particular spelling), I have transliterated Khmer terms in this manuscript according to the formula depicted in the subsequent charts. I should also note here that artists and others in the community use a number of terms that appear in this text in their spoken language only. Consequently, the “transliteration” process for these words involved two-steps: consulting with informants

²⁴⁶ Here, I would like to thank Dr. Sam for generously sharing his transliteration tables and word-processing fonts with me.

²⁴⁷ Of course, it is impossible to convey a good portion of what I “hear” with only the twenty-six letters of the Roman alphabet, since Khmer consists of thirty-three consonants, twenty-four regular vowels, and fifteen independent vowels.

about the best way to write the terms in Khmer script and transcribing that selection according to the charts that follow.

Consonants

ក	ខ	គ	ឃ	ង
k	kh	k	kh	ng
ច	ឆ	ជ	ឈ	ញ
ch	chh	ch	chh	nh
ដ	ថ	ឌ	ធ	ណ
d	th	d	th	n
ត	ថ	ទ	ធ	ន
t	th	t	th	n
ប	ផ	ព	ភ	ម
b	ph	p	ph	m
យ	រ	ល	វ	ស
y	r	l	v	s
ហ	ឡ	អ		
h	l	a		

Table 1-Transliteration of Khmer Consonants

Vowels

(First Series Reading/Second Series Reading)

				
a/ea	e/i	ey/i	eu/eu	oEU/eu
				
o/u	oe/ou	uo/uo		
				
ar/eu	oeur/oeur	ie/ie		
				
e/e	ae/ae	ai/ai		
				
ao/o	ao/eou			
				
om/um	am/om	um/am	ah/eah	
				
oh/ooh	eh/ih	oh/uoh		
				
ai	ay			

Table 2-Transliteration of Khmer Vowels

Appendix

List of “Community Voices” in this Volume²⁴⁸

Bloesch, Jean-Daniel. A Swiss filmmaker who met some of the artists while he was on mission for the International Committee of the Red Cross in *Khao I Dang* refugee camp in Thailand. He played a significant role in helping them to resettle in the United States. Appears in Chapter 1.

Bel Long, Viradharawar. (Venerable). A Buddhist monk who supervised the establishment and construction of the “Vatt” in Maryland in the early stages of its development. Mentioned in Chapter 3.

Chao, Seng. A vocalist who participates in the activities of the *mohori* group introduced in Chapter 7. He has also been a long-time supporter of “Virginia” and cultural, social, and religious activities at the “Vatt.” Appears in Chapter 7.

Chea, Khann. A master dancer from Cambodia’s Royal University of Fine Arts. She visited the United States and taught as part of international exchange programs during the 1980s. Mentioned in Chapter 2.

Chea, Samy. One of Cambodia’s masters of the female classical dance role. She visited the United States and taught as part of international exchange programs during the 1980s. Mentioned in Chapters 2 and 6.

Chhieng, Proeung. A top administrator and dance teacher at Cambodia’s Royal University of Fine Arts. He participated in many international exchange programs between the United States and Cambodia. Mentioned in Chapter 2.

Chhim, Bonavy. A niece of Sam-Ouen Tes and one of “Virginia’s” most accomplished dancers. Appears in Chapters 3 and 4. Mentioned in Chapter 8.

Chhim, Phan. One of the founders of the “Vatt” in Maryland. Mentioned in Chapter 3.

Chhim, Sovanthary. An active supporter of the cultural programs at the “Vatt” and “Virginia.” She was instrumental in getting the music program started at the “Vatt.” Appears in Chapters, 3, 6, and 8.

Chhor, Michel. A mandolin and *takhe* player who participates in the activities of the *mohori* group introduced in Chapter 7. Appears in Chapter 7.

²⁴⁸ Names appear as family name, given name.

Chhor, Sodina. A *chhing* player who participates in the activities of the *mohori* group introduced in Chapter 7. Appears in Chapter 7.

Chhuorm (Krou). One of Ngek Chum's music teachers who specialized in *roneat aik*. According to Chum, no one could surpass Chhuorm's skill and creative genius. Mentioned in Chapters 4 and 5.

Chum, Ngek. The master musician whose experience forms the basis of this dissertation. He changed his family name to Chum when he moved to the United States. In Cambodia, his name was Ngek Pinn (or rather, Pinn Ngek).²⁴⁹ Appears in Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9. Mentioned in Chapters 3 and 7.

Chum, Sovann. Ngek Chum's son who is an acclaimed *sampho* player and possesses many other untapped musical talents. Appears in Chapters 2, 4, and 8. Mentioned in Introduction, Chapters 3, 6, and 7.

Chum, Sovath. Ngek Chum's daughter who is an accomplished *kong thom* player as well as a talented classical dancer. Appears in Chapters 3, 4, 8, and 9. Mentioned in Chapters 1, 2, 6, and 7.

Chum, Vorn. Ngek Chum's wife who helps to manage wardrobe and other critical details of her family's performances. Appears in Chapters 1, 2, 5, and 9.

Chun, Sovanny. A dancer who graduated from Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts in 1989. She moved to the United States in 1996 and now teaches and performs in the Washington, DC area. Appears in Chapters 6 and 8.

Chuon, Voha. One of the founders of the "Vatt" in Maryland. Appears in Chapter 3.

Chuon, Bonara Heng. One of the founders of the "Vatt" in Maryland. The father of Voha Chuon. Mentioned in Chapter 3.

Dan, Sipo. A singer who is especially active in the program at "Virginia." Appears in Chapter 3. Mentioned in Chapter 9.

Devi, Bopha (Princess). Daughter of Norodom Sihanouk. She was a celebrated dancer prior to political upheaval in Cambodia in the 1970s and spent many years in exile in France. Now, she actively promotes Khmer performing arts in Cambodia and throughout the diaspora. Mentioned in Chapters 2 and 6.

DiCaprio, Alisa. One of Ngek Chum's music students who became enthusiastic about studying Cambodia when she was twelve years old. Appears in Chapter 6.

²⁴⁹ See note on Cambodian names in the Introduction.

Douy (Krou). Sok Nou's music teacher in *Sra Kao* refugee camp in Thailand. Mentioned in Chapter 7.

Dy. A nickname for Sam-Ouen Tes. Mentioned in Chapters 3 and 7.

Ek, Key. A *skor dai* player who participates in the activities of the *mohori* group introduced in Chapter 7. Appears in Chapter 7.

Giuriati, Giovanni. Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology at the Università di Palermo, Italy. He received a Fulbright scholarship to study Khmer music under Ngek Chum in 1983, continued working closely with Chum until 1987, and completed his doctorate at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in 1988. Mentioned in Chapter 2.

Hann, Kuon. A *tro sao* player who participates in the activities of the *mohori* group introduced in Chapter 7. Appears in Chapter 7. Mentioned in Chapter 9.

Hoeung, Sophy. A favorite singer of both popular and traditional music among Khmer communities across North America. Appears in Chapters 4, 8, and 9.

Ieng, Saureth. A supportive member of the "Vatt" in Maryland who is also a Khmer language teacher. Mentioned in Chapters 5 and 7.

Jameson, Narin. An active participant in the cultural programs at the "Vatt." Appears in Chapter 3. Mentioned in Chapter 7.

Kennedy, Richard. Now the Deputy Director of the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, he worked with the National Council for Traditional Arts (NCTA) on resettling artists from *Khao I Dang* refugee camp to the United States and organizing performances and tours for them over a period of five years. He was also involved in the production of the award-winning film, *Dance of Tears*. Mentioned in Chapter 1.

Keo, Veasna. A *tro ou* player who participates in the activities of the *mohori* group introduced in Chapter 7. Appears in Chapter 7.

Khlay, Ra. Ngek Chum's brother-in-law who was known in his school for singing popular music. He became Ngek Chum's friend in the Khmer Rouge communes and "converted" to classical music when he came to the United States. Appears in Chapter 4. Mentioned in Chapter 7.

Khut, Bori. A musician who resides in the state of Washington and studied *sampho* under Noeung Poeung. Appears in Chapter 4.

Kom (Krou). A musician who lives in Battambang. Mentioned in Chapter 6.

Kroch, Ken. One of the founders of the “Vatt” in Maryland. Mentioned in Chapter 3.

Kruoch, Sina. The artist who painted the scenes from the life of the Buddha that decorate the walls of large sanctuary of the “Vatt” in Maryland. Mentioned in Chapter 3.

Lang, Lany. One of Ngek Chum’s music students who first encouraged the idea of including music as well as dance lessons in the activities of “Virginia.” Appears in Chapters 6 and 7. Mentioned in Chapters 2 and 5.

Leas (Neak Krou). A master dancer of Cambodia’s Royal University of Fine Arts. She visited the United States and taught as part of international exchange programs during the 1980s. Mentioned in Chapters 2 and 6.

Lok Krou. A generic honorific term for a male teacher that roughly translates as, “Mr. Teacher.” When this term appears in this volume without an obvious referent, it designates Ngek Chum. That is, it signals that I (Joanna Pecore) am talking about or to Ngek Chum who is my teacher. Appears in Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9.

Lok Krou Ip: A Buddhist monk who was Ngek Chum’s teacher when he joined the monk-hood at the age of twenty-one. Mentioned in Chapter 9.

Malis, Keo. The director of Cambodia’s School of Fine Arts when it was re-opened in the early 1980s. Mentioned in Chapter 2.

Mani, Masady. A graduate of Cambodia’s University of Fine Arts who moved to the United States in 1990. Now, she is the master dance instructor at “Vatt” in Maryland. Her maiden name is Meas. Appears in Introduction, Chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8. Mentioned in Chapters 3 and 7.

Marco, Gary. The Executive Director of “Virginia.” Appears in Chapters 6, 8, and 9. Mentioned in Conclusion.

Mean, Oung (Venerable). A Buddhist monk who promoted the establishment of a cultural program at the “Vatt” in Maryland. Mentioned in Chapters 3 and 7.

Meas, John. One of the founders of the “Vatt” in Maryland. He is also a member of the Board of Directors of “Virginia.” Mentioned in Chapters 3 and 5.

Mek, Yoeun. A musician who lives in Battambang. He specializes in wedding music and excels on the *tro*. Mentioned in Chapter 5.

Nit, Chou. Ngek Chum’s primary music teacher who specialized in *roneat aik*. Chou was a highly skilled musician and an inspiring teacher who Chum emulates in his own performing and teaching. Mentioned in Chapters 4, 5, and 9.

Nou, Kantya. A daughter of Khatna Peou. She accompanied her mother to the Palace when she was three years old. She became a professional dancer of the Royal Dance Troupe, later performed and taught in *Khao I Dang* refugee camp in Thailand, resettled in the United States, and now teaches at the “Vatt” in Maryland. Appears in Chapters 6 and 8. Mentioned in Chapter 1.

Nou, Rejena. A leading dancer and teacher among the group of artists who established a troupe in *Khao I Dang* refugee camp in Thailand and later resettled in and toured the United States under the auspices of the National Council for Traditional Arts (NCTA). Mentioned in Chapters 1, 3, and 6.

Nou, Sok. A *kheum* player and music instructor who participates in the activities of the *mohori* group introduced in Chapter 7. Appears in Chapter 7.

Oeur (Krou). One of Ngek Chum’s music teachers who was also his grandfather’s cousin. Oeur taught Chum to play *kong thom*, *sampho*, and *skor thom*. Mentioned in Chapter 5.

Ou, Vanna. Played a significant role in the departure of some of the artists from the *Khao I Dang* refugee camp. She later managed the troupe when the artists relocated to the United States. Mentioned in Chapter 2.

Ouk, Nearry. An advanced dancer at “Virginia” who began to learn when she was six years old. Appears in Chapter 3.

Ouk, Sichantha. The father of Nearry Ouk. He encouraged her and his other daughters to participate in “Virginia.” He has also served on “Virginia’s” Board of Directors. Appears in Chapter 3.

Pecore, Joanna. One of Ngek Chum’s music students and the author of this dissertation. Appears in Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9. Mentioned in Chapter 8.

Peou, Khatna. The star of the Royal Dance Troupe during the 1930s. She later helped to build a performance troupe in *Khao I Dang* refugee camp in Thailand, resettled in the United States with the troupe, and became the head dance teacher at the “Vatt” in Maryland. Mentioned in Chapters 1, 3, 5, and 6.

Pinn, Chum. Ngek Chum’s father. When Ngek Chum moved to the United States, he changed his family name to Chum—his father’s given name—as a way of remembering him. Mentioned in Chapters 1, 4, and 5.

Phuong, Phan. A dancer who was trained at Cambodia’s Royal University of Fine Arts in Cambodia during the 1960s. The Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia while he was studying manipurti, khatakali, kuchipudi, and bharatanatyam in India, so he then immigrated to the United States. He worked with other artists in the Virginia area to reconstruct Khmer dance, was one of the original founders of the “Virginia” program,

and helped with sponsorship of the artists from *Khao I Dang* refugee camp in Thailand. He currently resides in Connecticut and continues to teach in Massachusetts and Canada. Mentioned in Chapters 2 and 7.

Pok, Van. A musician who specializes in the *tro sao* and resides in Philadelphia. He moved to the United States together with some of the other artists from *Khao I Dang* refugee camp in 1981. Mentioned in Chapter 7.

Peoung, Keo. A musician who lives in Washington state. He began to teach himself Khmer music in 1989 and later performed with his relative, Noeung Poeung, an accomplished *sralai* player. Appears in Chapter 4.

Peoung, Noeung. A musician who lives in Washington state. He is an accomplished *sralai* player from Siem Riep province with expertise in accompanying shadow plays. Mentioned in Chapter 4 (footnotes).

Rady. A nickname for Sam-Ouen Tes. Mentioned in Chapter 8.

Ros, Kong. A master dancer of the Royal University of Fine Arts. She visited the United States and taught as part of international exchange programs during the 1980s. Mentioned in Chapter 2.

Sam, Moly. A graduate and former teacher of the Royal University of Fine Arts. Since resettling in the United States during the 1970s, she has been active as a performer, teacher, and scholar of Khmer dance. Appears in Chapter 2. Mentioned in Chapter 6.

Sam, Sam-Ang. A well-known ethnomusicologist specializing in Khmer music. He is the author and producer of numerous publications and recordings cited in this dissertation. Mentioned in Chapter 6.

Say, Raci. Formerly named Sek Meau Raci, she is the Vice President of the Cultural Committee at the “Vatt” who became involved in Khmer music and dance while working in Thai refugee camps. She coordinated the activities of dance troupes in *Ban Samet* and *Khao I Dang* and continued to work with the artists throughout the process of their resettlement in the United States. Appears in Chapters 1, 2, 5, and 7. Mentioned in Chapters 8 and 9.

Say, Sara. The husband of Raci Say who was active in the musical activities of the artists in *Khao I Dang* camp and later in the United States. As a social worker for Montgomery County, Maryland, he played an important role in ensuring the smooth resettlement of the refugees. Mentioned in Chapters 2 and 7.

Say, Vathana. A daughter of Raci and Sara Say. She began to study the classical dance when she was nine years old. Now she is a highly accomplished performer affiliated with the “Vatt.” Appears in Chapters 1, 3, and 6. Mentioned in Chapter 8.

Sek, Puthyrith. A dancer and teacher at the “Vatt” who became a serious student of the classical dance in *Khao I Dang* refugee camp. He is also a quick music learner and often performs drums or *sralai*. Appears in Chapters 2 and 6.

Sheehy, Dan. Now the Director & Curator of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, he spent twenty-two years as a leader in the office of Folk & Traditional Arts at the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA). It was during his tenure as Assistant Director there that the artists from *Khao I Dang* sought resettlement as a coherent group in the United States. He played an important role in facilitating their move. Mentioned in Chapter 1.

Sin, Ny. A daughter of Khatna Peou and a leading dancer of the Royal Dance Troupe during the 1960s. She later performed and taught in *Khao I Dang* refugee camp in Thailand, resettled in the United States, and now teaches at the “Vatt” in Maryland. Appears in Chapters 4 and 6. Mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3.

Sin, Son Kim. A *tro sao* player who participates in the activities of the *mohori* group introduced in Chapter 7. Appears in Chapter 7.

Sieng, Lapresse. Served as the president of the dance troupe from the *Khao I Dang* refugee camp after they arrived in the United States. He had been living in the United States since 1962 and worked for the Voice of America. Mentioned in Chapter 2.

Son, Snguon. A mutual friend of Phuong Phan, Sam-Ouen Tes , and Moly Sam who offered his basement as a place to hold practices around 1979. He later became active in “Virginia” and a long-time member of the Board of Directors. Mentioned in Chapter 2.

Soth, Sam-On. A master dancer of Cambodia’s Royal University of Fine Arts. She visited the United States and taught as part of international exchange programs during the 1980s. Mentioned in Chapter 2.

Srun, Monyra. A dance teacher at the “Vatt” who began to study in the Palace when she was six years old and became a full-time student at the Royal University of Fine Arts when she was twelve years old. She graduated in 1975 and moved to the United States in 1987. Appears in Chapters 5 and 8. Mentioned in Chapter 9.

Tes, Sam-Oeun (Madame/Mrs.). Raised on the Royal Palace grounds, she was invited to study dance when she was fourteen years old. In the 1960s she became a star dancer. She moved to the United States in 1971 and is now the head dance teacher at “Virginia.” Appears in Chapter 3. Mentioned in Chapters 2, 6, and 8.

Tes, Saroeum. Husband of Sam-Oeun Tes. He is the president of “Virginia.” Appears in Chapter 3. Mentioned in Chapter 6.

Ton (Krou). One of Ngek Chum’s music teachers who taught him to play *kong thom*. Mentioned in Chapter 5.

Tun, Sovann. An active member of the “Vatt’s” Board of Directors. He recently served as the Board’s president and regularly serves as the liaison between the “Vatt” and the general public. Appears in Chapter 3.

Um, Hieng. Ngek Chum’s grandfather and his first music teacher. He taught Chum how to play *sralai*, *kong*, and *sampho*. Mentioned in Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6, and 9.

Um, Pech. Ngek Chum’s mother. Mentioned in Chapters 1 and 9.

Um, Visal. A music enthusiast and student who has recently become the leader of a children’s music ensemble at “Virginia.” Appears in Chapters 4 and 6. Mentioned in Chapters 8 and 9.

Um, Yat. Ngek Chum’s aunt, who was the daughter of his grand parents. Mentioned in Chapter 9.

Um, Yin. Ngek Chum’s grandmother who also holds a place in his heart as his “first music teacher.” Mentioned in Chapters 1 and 5.

Ung, Sochietah. A leading teacher, dancer, and costume-maker who resides in Washington, DC. He mastered these arts through unfaltering dedication and study in the United States. Appears in Chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8. Mentioned in Chapter 1.

Van (Krou). One of Ngek Chum’s music teachers. He was well-known throughout Cambodia for his *roneat aik* playing. Chum studied *roneat* with him and later gained a reputation for sounding a lot like Van. Mentioned in Chapters 4 and 5.

Veun, Amro. A *sampho* player who participates in the activities of the *mohori* group introduced in Chapter 7. Appears in Chapter 7.

Veun, Tevy. A *roneat aik* player who participates in the activities of the *mohori* group introduced in Chapter 7. She has also taken on a leadership role with the group. Appears in Chapter 7.

Vipas, Heng. A nephew of Rejena Nou, he began studying dance at the Royal Palace when he was twelve years old and eventually mastered the monkey role. He came to the United States in the early 1980s with the other artists from the *Khao I Dang* refugee camp in Thailand. Now he teaches and performs at the “Vatt” in Maryland. Appears in Chapters 2 and 8. Mentioned in Chapters 1 and 9.

Wilson, Joe. Executive Director of the National Council for Traditional Arts (NCTA). He happened to be touring Southeast Asia with American musicians when Bloesch and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) were exploring the possibilities for

moving the artists from *Khao I Dang* to the United States. He visited the group in the camp and proposed NCTA as the agency who could sponsor them. Mentioned in Chapter 1.

Yim, Devi. Cambodia's star dancer during the 1980s. She now lives and teaches in the Washington, DC area. Appears in Chapters 2 and 8. Mentioned in Introduction and Chapter 3.

Yithho (Neak Krou). A master dancer of Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts. Mentioned in Chapter 6.

Glossary

Aachar: A ritual specialist who may or may not possess divining skills. First appears in Chapter 1.

Angkor: The celebrated Khmer empire dating from the 9th through 15th centuries. First appears in Chapter 9.

Angkor Thom: The royal Khmer city of the Angkorean empire. First appears in Introduction.

Angkor Vatt: An impressive twelfth century temple located in Siem Riep, Cambodia. First appears in Introduction.

Apsara: Celestial dancers. Also refers to a dance piece which features *apsara*. First appears in Chapter 2.

Ban Samet: The name of a refugee camp in Thailand. First appears in Chapter 1.

Basak: A classical theater genre (also known as *lkaon basak*) that features literary improvisation. It is associated with Cambodia's Basak River Region. First appears in Chapter 6.

Bathom: Title of a musical piece that accompanies the actions of monkey characters. First appears in Chapter 4.

Baysey: An offering presented to teachers, ancestor spirits, and other deities, usually during ceremonies such as *sampeah krou*. They are miniature tower-like structures created from rolled-up banana leaves attached to a section of a banana tree trunk. First appears in Introduction.

Bey: Three. First appears in Chapter 4.

Bey choan: Level three (*sampho* pattern). First appears in Chapter 4.

Bong: A term of address for older siblings. First appears in Chapter 1.

Brahma: Deity who is considered to be the creator of the universe. First appears in Introduction.

Chaidey: A stupa, or pyramidal monument, where ashes are kept in a Cambodian cemetery. First appears in Chapter 9.

Chamnan: The title of a musical piece. First appears in Chapter 4

Chao Dak: The title of a *mohori* song. First appears in Chapter 7.

Cheut Chheung: The title of a musical piece that generally denotes walking calmly in the classical dance. First appears in Chapter 4.

Cheut Reay: The title of a musical piece that generally denotes running or flying in the classical dance. First appears in Chapter 4.

Chha banhchoh: A series of requisite dance postures that constitute the vocabulary of Khmer classical dance. First appears in Chapter 2.

Chhaiyam: An improvised and playful musical dance genre accompanied by long drums, gongs, and other percussion. Often performed at festivals and fundraising events. First appears in Chapter 7.

Chhlary: To respond, answer, or reply. First appears in Chapter 4.

Choan: Level. Used in reference to basic *sampho* patterns. First appears in Chapter 4.

Chou Chhay: The name of a dance piece and the music that accompanies it. First appears in Chapter 4.

Chrieng: To sing. First appears in Chapter 4.

Chumrum: (Refugee) camp. First appears in Chapter 1.

Chumrum Thmey: The name of a refugee camp in Thailand. First appears in Chapter 1.

Chhing: Bronze hand cymbals. First appears in Chapter 1.

Dharma: The Buddha's teaching. First appears in Introduction.

Hao: To call or be called. First appears in Chapter 4.

Hao-chhlary: Call and response. First appears in Chapter 4.

Homrong: Sacred repertoire of the *pin peat* musical tradition. First appears in Chapter 4.

Karma: The general belief that good deeds will yield good fortune and bad deeds, bad luck. First appears in Chapter 3.

Kbach: Dance posture or pose. More generally refers to a figure or pattern. First appears in Chapter 2.

Kben: A traditional Khmer garment fashioned by twisting a length of fabric between the legs to create pantaloons and fastening it at the waist. First appears in Introduction.

Khao I Dang: The name of a refugee camp in Thailand. First appears in Chapter 1

Kheum: A hammered-dulcimer. First appears in Chapter 1.

Khloy: Flute. First appears in Chapter 1.

Khloam: The title of a musical piece. First appears in Chapter 4.

Khsae changkeh: A beaded waistband that sometimes contains magical formulae to ward off evil. First appears in Chapter 5.

Kong: General term for circles of tuned gongs. When used independently of a qualifier (such as *kong thom* or *kong toech*) in this volume, it refers to the *kong thom*, the “partner” instrument to the *roneat aik* in the *pin peat* ensemble. First appears in Introduction.

Kong thom: Circle of low-pitched gongs. First appears in Chapter 3.

Kong toech: Circle of high-pitched gongs. First appears in Chapter 4.

Koyteav: A Cambodian-style noodle soup. First appears in Introduction.

Krao Nai: The title of a musical piece that is performed for the *yeak*. First appears in Chapter 4.

Krao Va: The title of a musical piece. First appears in Chapter 4.

Krou: Respectful title for a teacher, expert, spirit, or doctor (medical, academic, or traditional healer). Related to the Sanskrit word *guru*, connoting one who offers spiritual as well as technical guidance. First appears in Introduction.

Krou teay: An astrologer. Fortuneteller. First appears in Chapter 1.

Lea: The title of a musical piece that is performed to signal the conclusion of many dance-drama pieces. First appears in Chapter 4.

Linga: A phallic symbol associated with Shiva. First appears in Introduction.

Lkaon basak: A classical theater genre that features literary improvisation. It is associated with Cambodia’s Basak River Region. First appears in Chapter 7.

Lo: Title of a musical piece. First appears in Chapter 4.

Lok: A Khmer honorific term for an adult male, roughly equivalent to “Mr.” Also used in combination with honorific terms for mature females. First appears in Chapter 1.

Lok Krou: A generic honorific term for a male teacher that roughly translates as, “Mr. Teacher.” When this term appears in this volume without an obvious referent, it designates Ngek Chum. That is, it signals that I (Joanna Pecore) am talking about or to Ngek Chum who is my teacher. First appears in Chapter 2.

Lok Ta: A Khmer honorific term for an elderly male. First appears in Chapter 3.

Lok Yeay: A Khmer honorific term for an elderly woman, especially those of high status. First appears in Chapter 2.

Lo Neang: The title of a musical piece. First appears in Chapter 6.

Mantra: Sacred sound syllables that infuse kinetic energy into *yoan* or *yantra*. First appears in Chapter 5.

Moha Aysay: The spiritual guardian of the arts. First appears in Chapter 5.

Mohori: A type of ensemble that performs a genre of Khmer songs depicting various aspects of daily life in Cambodia such as working in the fields and separating from a lover. Generally speaking, a *mohori* ensemble can be distinguished from a *pin peat* ensemble by the presence of various stringed instruments and transverse flutes as well as by the absence of gong circles and oboes. The sounds, structure, function, and performance practice related to *mohori* are explored briefly in Chapter 7. First appears in Introduction.

Moni Mekhala: Goddess of the Sea. Also, the title of a dance-drama which features this character. First appears in Introduction.

Muoy choan: First level (*sampho* pattern). First appears in Chapter 4.

Nisaiy: The idea that one’s destiny, fate, and aptitude are an integral part of an individual’s existence, an existence that is bound to a universal cycle of birth and rebirth. First appears in Chapter 3.

Neak: Mythical cobras identified with water. These beings are known as *naga* in Indian mythology. First appears in Introduction.

Neak Krou: A Khmer honorific term for female teachers, roughly equivalent to “Ms. Teacher.” First appears in Chapter 2.

Neang: Female role, one of the four major character types in Khmer dance-drama. First appears in Chapter 2.

Neayrong: Male role, one of the four major character types in Khmer dance-drama. First appears in Chapter 2.

Nguoh: Ogre or ugly mythical creature who appears in Khmer dance-dramas and other stories. First appears in Chapter 2.

Om: Roughly equivalent to “Aunt” or “Uncle.” Used towards elders who are older than one’s own parents but not old enough to be one’s grandparents. First appears in Chapter 6.

Phlai: The bars, or keyboard, that extends across the sound box of a *roneat* (xylophone). First appears in Chapter 4.

Phleng: Music. First appears in Chapter 4.

Phleng kar: Wedding music. First appears in Introduction.

Phloev: Literally, road, path, way, or style. Also refers to a musician’s particular style of performing variations. First appears in Introduction.

Pi: Two. First appears in Chapter 4.

Pi choan: Second level (*sampho* pattern). First appears in Chapter 4.

Pin peat: A Khmer musical ensemble type and repertoire that is performed in conjunction with dance-drama, court dance, shadow theater, and religious ceremonies. The sounds, structure, function, and performance practice related to *pin peat* are explored throughout this dissertation. First appears in Introduction.

Pou: Uncle. First appears in Chapter 2.

Preah Pisnukar: Brahman architect of the universe who is considered to be a sacred patron of the arts. First appears in Chapter 7.

Pyä Doeun: The title of a musical piece that denotes the procession of royalty. First appears in Chapter 4.

Ream: The protagonist of the *Reamker*. Known as Rama in the Indian Ramayana epic. First appears in Introduction.

Reamker: Cambodian version of the Indian Ramayana epic. First appears in Introduction.

Rev: The title of a musical piece that is performed toward the end of many dance-drama pieces. It is also commonly performed as the second, and fast, section of *chha banhchoh*. First appears in Chapter 4.

Rieb krou: To ceremoniously display humility toward teachers (and teacher spirits). First appears in Chapter 5.

Riel: Cambodian currency. First appears in Chapter 5.

Rien: Learn, study. First appears in Chapter 6.

Rien tam krou: “Learning through the teacher.” First appears in Chapter 6.

Roam vong: A popular social dance that is performed in a circle. First appears in Chapter 7.

Robam: Dance. First appears in Chapter 4.

Roerng: Story. First appears in Introduction.

Roneat: General term for xylophones of different pitches and produced from different materials. When used independently of a qualifier (such as *roneat aik* or *roneat thung*) in this volume, it refers to the *roneat aik*, the leading instrument of the *pin peat* ensemble. First appears in Introduction.

Roneat aik: A high-pitched xylophone with hardwood or bamboo bars. First appears in Introduction.

Roneat thung: A low-pitched xylophone with bamboo bars. First appears in Chapter 3.

Saay: Refers to a specific variation on the rhythmic pattern *bey choan*. First appears in Chapter 4.

Saen Lav: Name of a musical piece. First appears in Chapter 4.

Sathukar: The title of a musical piece that is considered to be the most sacred in the *pin peat* repertoire. First appears in Chapter 4.

Sampeah krou: A ritual that is performed to pay respect to one’s teachers as well as to ancestor spirits and other deities. First appears in Introduction.

Sampho: Small barrel drum. First appears in Introduction.

Seta: The wife of Ream, the protagonist of the *Reamker*. First appears in Introduction.

Shiva: A Brahmanic god who, in Khmer cosmology, is considered to be a benevolent creator. Also known to Cambodians as *Preah Isour*. First appears in Introduction.

Sinuon: The title of a musical piece. First appears in Chapter 4.

Skor: A generic term referring to drums of various types. First appears in Chapter 7.

Skor dai: A small, single-headed hand drum that is often used in *phleng kar* and *mohori*. *Skor dai* means literally, “hand drum.” First appears in Chapter 7.

Skor thom: Large barrel drum. First appears in Introduction.

Smoeu: The title of a musical piece that is usually performed to signal the entrance of a main character onto the stage in classical dance-drama pieces. First appears in Chapter 4.

Sralai: A kind of oboe. First appears in Chapter 1.

Sva: Monkey, one of the four major character types in Khmer dance-drama. First appears in Chapter 2.

Ta: Grandfather. Old or elderly man. First appears in Chapter 1.

Takhe: A three-stringed zither. First appears in Chapter 4.

“Ta Khloy”: A nickname that a Khmer Rouge leader gave to Ngek Chum. First appears in Chapter 1.

Tam: By, along, through, with, according to. To follow, pursue, agree. To imitate. First appears in Chapter 6.

Tayai: Name of a musical piece. First appears in Chapter 4.

Tevi: Goddess or princess. (Variations in spelling appear in this volume in the personal names of Princess Bopha Devi, Devi Yim, and Tevy Veun). First appears in Chapter 4.

Tevota: Heavenly benevolent spirits or angels. First appears in Chapter 7.

Thao: A category for a segment of music that appears in some Khmer compositions. It resembles the refrain in Western music, as performers repeatedly return to it in between successive verses, or *that*. First appears in Chapter 4.

Thmey: New. First appears in Chapter 1.

That: A musical sequence or step. First appears in Chapter 4.

That bey: Third sequence or verse. (Also, *that ti bey*). First appears in Chapter 4.

That pi: Second sequence or verse. (Also, *that ti pi*). First appears in Chapter 4.

Thvay krou: A ceremony in which students pay homage to their teachers and teacher spirits. Disciples invoke the powers of their instructors to promote the success of their future endeavors. First appears in Chapter 7.

Ti: Term used to indicate numerical sequence. First appears in Chapter 1.

Ti bram muoy: Sixth. First appears in Chapter 1.

Ti muoy: First. First appears in Chapter 1.

Trak: The title of a musical piece. First appears in Chapter 4.

Tro: A bowed lute. First appears in Chapter 1.

Tro ou: A low-pitched two-stringed bowed lute with a coconut shell resonator. First appears in Chapter 7.

Tro sao: A medium-pitched two-stringed bowed lute. First appears in Chapter 4.

Vatt: Buddhist temple or monastery complex. First appears in Chapter 3.

“Vatt”: The term used in this volume to refer to the Buddhist temple in Silver Spring, Maryland, where many of the community members introduced in this dissertation meet to perform, teach, and learn Khmer music and dance-drama. The official English name of this temple is the Cambodian Buddhist Society, Inc. The romanized Khmer name is *Vatt Butthikaream*.²⁵⁰ First appears in Introduction.

Vihear: A building or sanctuary that is utilized for worship within a Buddhist temple complex. First appears in Chapter 3.

“Virginia”: The term used in this volume to refer to the organization, Cambodian American Heritage, Inc., which meets in Arlington, Virginia and where many of the

²⁵⁰ While all members of this community may not refer to this temple and these activities with this term, the people that I work most closely with—especially those who work both at the temple and at Cambodian American Heritage—do. Therefore, this is the term that I use throughout the volume. I explain in the introduction some of the benefits and pitfalls of documenting the activities of this community through the lens of my own experience.

community members introduced in this dissertation meet to perform, teach, and learn Khmer music and dance-drama.²⁵¹ First appears in Introduction.

Vishnu: A Brahmanic god who is considered to be the guardian of the universe. Also known to Cambodians as *Preah Neareayea*. First appears in Introduction.

Yav: The title of a musical piece. First appears in Chapter 5.

Yeak: Demon or giant, one of the four major character types in Khmer dance-drama. First appears in Chapter 2.

Yeay: Grandmother, old woman. Polite term of address for elderly women. First appears in Chapter 2.

Yike: A musical theater genre that integrates dialogue with singing and is punctuated by the accompaniment of drums of various shapes and sizes. First appears in Chapter 6.

Yoan: A supernaturally powerful diagram. First appears in Chapter 5.

“Yok chett krou”: Circumstance in which an aspiring student so pleases a teacher that a teacher no longer refuses to teach her/him. Literally, “steal the teacher’s heart.” First appears in Chapter 6.

²⁵¹ While all members of this community may not refer to this organization and these activities with this term, the people that I work most closely with—especially those who work both at the Cambodian Buddhist Society and at Cambodian American Heritage—do. Therefore, this is the term that I use throughout the volume. I explain in the introduction some of the benefits and pitfalls of documenting the activities of this community through the lens of my own experience.

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