# Cambodia's *Seasons of Migration*

Toni Shapiro-Phim

In classical Khmer dance dramas, the fluidity of gestural and choreographic movement is complemented by the seamlessness with which mythical figures move between the realms of sky, earth, and sea. Such mythical migrations have been the subject of Khmer dance dramas for centuries. In this essay I explore the recent development and performance of one specific danced story of migration and the performers' social realities that complicate their relationship to their art and to this story in particular. I discuss transnational migration's impact on current and future possibilities for Khmer classical dance, and the lessons Cambodia's female dancers take from the fluidity, adaptability, and flexibility required of Khmer choreography as they negotiate their immediate social, cultural, and political upheavals.

I investigate these topics in relation to the work of Cambodian American dancer and choreographer Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, in particular her 2005 *Seasons of Migration,* a dance choreographed in the Khmer classical idiom that addresses the topic of migration.[1] *Seasons* tells the story of celestial beings' adjustment to life on earth as a reflection of the choreographer's own migrant experience. Immigrating as an adult to the United States, Sophiline was born and came of age as a dancer in Cambodia. Her *Seasons* features four scenes in which classical dancers portray divine beings who confront the elation, anger and frustration, experimentation, and eventual equilibrium of a person dealing with the fine-tuning of a life in flux.

This essay considers, as well, a film, also titled *Seasons of Migration,* that documents the performance and lives of the Cambodia-based, all-female troupe of dancers who toured the United States with the choreographer in 2005 to perform this new work.[2] The docu-

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mentary presents unique perspectives on the relationship between a danced representation of migration and actual migration stories of Cambodian immigrants in the United States who reflect on their evolving bond with their adopted land (Figure 1).

Sophiline[3] was among the first generation of classical dancers trained in Cambodia following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, a government whose policies and practices had resulted in the death of an estimated 80 to 90 percent of the country's professional artists (dancers, musicians, playwrights, painters, and so on) in under four years.[4] A teacher at the University of Fine Arts, Sophiline left Cambodia in 1991 and immigrated to the United States with a fiancée visa. After marrying and graduating from the University of California at Los Angeles's program in World Arts and Cultures, she returned to Cambodia in 1999 as a choreographer, creating an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* for dancers there. In 2004, with support from the National Dance Project of the New England Foundation for the Arts, she returned to Cambodia again, this time to develop another new work, *Seasons of Migration*.[5]

I attended a dress rehearsal of *Seasons* (the dance) in Cambodia in 2004. The work inspired me to reflect further on Cambodian women's lived experience and the balancing they must do given their unique histories, whether in Cambodia or in the United States, and on the ways in which Khmer dance is being reshaped, in part, by and because of these experiences. Examining the negotiation of the contemporary clouded divide between "here" and "there," and the implications of movement away from and back to Cambodia, I want to pay attention to the ways in which a new configuration of the world influences women's creative choices in their art and lives. Both a recent past of tremendous political, geographical, and social displacement and the contemporary ease of and opportunities for international communication and travel factor into this new framework. In addition,

*Figure 1.* Seasons of Migration *rehearsal and sound recording (and nap time) at a Long Beach, California, studio soon after arrival from Cambodia. Sam Sathya (standing). Still from movie. Used with permission.*





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deeply entrenched cultural attitudes and practices related to gender roles and expectations continue to impact women's professional and personal volition.

## Part One of the Dance: Euphoria

*Seasons of Migration,* the dance, begins with an ensemble scene in which ten dancers, five portraying female deities and five performing as male deities, express joy and fascination with the new. They render the emotions subtly, as befits the expressive qualities of Khmer classical dance. Taking in the surroundings—nature, people, buildings—they point with their forefingers arched upward and the other fingers curved toward the palm, or note something's greatness by raising one arm to the side, elbow bent, palm to the sky. Movements unfold at a measured pace. Travel across space is fluid, balanced with a sense of solidity that comes from weight being centered and low.

In the opening sequence of the film *Seasons of Migration,* bejeweled dancers perform to the accompaniment of gongs, xylophones, and drums. The film cuts to an austere panorama of a wide sandy shoreline, shipyards, and oil rigs that line the coast of Long Beach, California, the home of more Cambodians than any other city in the world outside of Southeast Asia. The film then shifts its focus to a huge park on a sunny southern California day, the grounds teeming with people of all generations, mostly of Cambodian descent, playing on swing sets, walking by vendors' colorful tents, and taking a moment to be blessed by a Buddhist monk. This Cambodian New Year festival, which attracts thousands annually, is a central focus of community engagement each April.

In Cambodia itself mid-April is a time of both renewal and transformation. It is the height of the hot dry season, shortly before monsoon rains wash away the dust and bring nourishment to the fields. At New Year in April, *tevoda* (divine beings) embark on their own migration; a new *tevoda* comes to watch over the earth just as the cycle of nature is undergoing dramatic alteration. For centuries, as part of the spiritual engagement with this change, dancers associated with royalty have performed specific sacred stories as a way of entreating the *tevoda* to bestow blessings upon the land and the populace. One very popular such story is that of the goddess Moni Mekhala and her adversary, Ream Eyso, the ogre. Through the representation of this tale in dance, people address the need to counter a perceived potential for chaos at New Year time by recreating what is, in part, a clash between good and evil, honesty and greed.[6]

The masked dancer portraying Ream Eyso wields an axe that, when tossed at the goddess, rattles the skies. Moni Mekhala, high-spired crown atop her head, possesses a jeweled ball, the object of the ogre's desire, that ultimately lights up the heavens once she has traveled from the waters to the sky. Together, representing thunder and lightening, they bring rain, the source of renewed life as it imparts fertility to Cambodia's farmlands. When Cambodians see dark clouds forming in the sky, they imagine that Ream Eyso and Moni Mekhala will soon be engaging in their eternal battle, and, they hope, the rice fields will be flooded before long.

Transplanted to urban California (or born there), Cambodians at Long Beach's annual New Year gathering may be unconcerned with the agricultural cycle. Many may be



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unacquainted with some of the spiritual beliefs and ritual and artistic practices customarily related to the rotations of the seasons. Nonetheless, they come together to reaffirm a sense of belonging to this community each spring, absorbing, perhaps subconsciously, aspects of what it means for them to be Cambodian in the United States, participating in traditional games and rites, and performing in or watching classical and folk dances.

Dance and music have long held prominence in Khmer life. The history of classical Khmer dance, in particular, is linked with that of temples and monarchs. Inscriptions from as early as the seventh century attest to the association of dancers with spirituality. In the mid-twentieth century the royalty had classical dancers not only continue the tradition of performing sacred pieces as a way of asking the deities to bless the land and its people but also took them on tours abroad as symbols of the nation-state of Cambodia. When the royalty went into exile, following a U.S.-backed coup d'état in 1970, dancers continued practicing in the palace, touring overseas, and dancing for state guests as civil servants; however, they were no longer called upon to be the monarch's mediators with the gods.

Civil war erupted in the late 1960s. It intensified in the early 1970s and ended only when the communist Khmer Rouge took over from the Khmer Republic in 1975. During their rule, all dance and music—as the Khmer had known them—were forbidden. Only revolutionary dances and songs could be taught and performed. Any known connection with the royal family or the republican regime, in power from 1970 to 1975, might have been reason to be put to death. Indeed, artists tell stories of people they knew who were tortured or killed by Khmer Rouge soldiers because they were state-supported dancers. Yet, remarkably, in secret (which was a feat in itself because of government spies who were everywhere, even at night) some individual dancers—starving and separated from family and friends as nearly the entire population was under the rule of the Khmer Rouge—risked their lives by trading precious grains of rice for incense and praying to the spirits and teachers (*kru*) of the dance to guide them out of this horrific torment (see Shapiro-Phim 2002).

With the installation of a new government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (another communist regime), after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, the population, which had been in forced labor under the Khmer Rouge, was free to move about. People sought sustenance—material, spiritual, and emotional—by returning to home villages or cities or by finding or forming a community with which to share in the joy of liberation and the necessity of rebuilding. For surviving artists, the changed circumstances meant the chance to teach and perform again.

*Seasons'* first scene concludes with the ten dancers on a layered platform, together in a pyramid configuration. Hands raised to forehead level, palms together, they are offering a gesture of respect to the heavens from which they have come. But they may also be foretelling a distancing from their new surroundings. According to Sophiline's narration in the film, the placement of the hands in this salutation to the spirits "can be the symbol of [a] barrier between the personal and the external world."

"Euphoria," the section that opens the dance, is ultimately about a sense of wonder that is about to get undone. From initial fascination and elation at being in a novel environment, Cambodians in the film speak about the growing awareness they experienced



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of being an "other" in terms of language, appearance, and even in ways to pursue a fulfilling life in a social and cultural context they do not completely understand and in which their knowledge and skills go unrecognized. Positive encounters with "otherness" unravel, leaving those sharing their stories in the movie and the celestial beings in the dance floating on uncertain ground. It is my contention that some of the dancers themselves—not only their on-stage personas—have also begun losing their bearings, or begun seriously questioning where and how they should be living their lives.

## Part Two: The Naga

A Cambodian origin legend supposes the creation of "Cambodia" as a result of the migration of a prince from foreign shores to a particular island. There the prince, Preah Thaong, meets Neang Neak, a *naga*[7] (serpent) princess who has emerged from her abode in the sea. They fall in love and marry. To create a kingdom for his daughter and son-in-law, Neang Neak's father, the *naga* king, exposed the land we know today as Cambodia by swallowing great amounts of water. *Seasons'* second section features a solo dancer in the role of Neang Neak.

*Nagas* occupy a place of great aesthetic and spiritual import in Cambodia and elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia. Inhabitants of both earth and water, *nagas* are sacred beings who bridge realms and feature in people's imagining of a sense of place. During one ritual in the elaborate Cambodian wedding ceremony, for example, the groom takes hold of the lower corners of the bride's long embroidered scarf, an accessory draped over her shoulder and down her back, symbolizing Neang Neak's tail. Connected by the scarf, they leave the room (see McKinley 2002). This evocation of the legend places the couple in (a mythologized) Cambodian history and reinforces their physical and symbolic ties to Cambodian soil. Just as the serpent does, the bride carries the spirit of Cambodia's land and water within her.

Stone balustrades carved in the shape of a sacred serpent lead worshippers into the sanctified realm of ancient Hindu temples, as well as Buddhist ones, connecting the human and divine worlds. (Cambodia has been a predominantly Theravada Buddhist country since about the fourteenth century. Yet, worship involves a syncretic mix of pre-Buddhist Hindu/Brahman and indigenous beliefs and practices, along with Buddhism.) When Cambodia's classical dancers trace a figure-eight pattern across the floor, as they often do upon entering or exiting the stage, they are, their dance teachers tell them, re-creating and honoring the image and spirit of the *naga.* With fingers curled back into a half-moon, toes flexed upward, and the lower back arched, the dancing body, movement fluid across space, reflects the curvilinear form and motion of the serpent. And just as people move from mundane to sacred space along a *naga* banister or bridge at places of worship, the dancers link earth to heaven through the enactment of sacred stories to the accompaniment of the *pin peat* musical ensemble.[8] Offering movement and sound to the deities and spirits in exchange for blessings (water, fertility, peace, and so on), dancers, too, embody the history and sense of place exemplified by Neang Neak.

This history and sense of place were both ruptured violently in the late twentieth



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century, as civil war resulted in the internal displacement of millions. Revolution, genocide, and further civil and international strife left nearly a quarter of the country's entire population of seven to eight million dead,[9] more than half a million in exile, and the rest in search of the family, friends, homes, and lives from which they had been torn by the policies of oppressive regimes and by poverty and fear. Artists who regrouped in the capital city of Phnom Penh following the genocidal years under the Khmer Rouge discovered that many of their colleagues had perished from starvation, overwork, execution, and lack of access to medicine in the previous three and a half years alone. Surviving dancers have spoken to me of the mission they felt, at the time, to bring some order to the chaos and to fill the loss through re-creation of their artistic heritage and through teaching and performing anew. They offered prayers to the spirits and former teachers of the dance to guide them in hopes of eventually being able to provide those spirits and the nation with a new generation of classical dancers. Documentation of the tradition was limited, and what little there had been in Cambodia in the way of photographs, film, and written records was for the most part destroyed in the brutality and chaos of the country's recent history. Thus, the traditional knowledge and skills carried by the surviving dancers and musicians took on added significance.

The relationship between teacher and pupil afforded a stabilizing force for dancers in the aftermath of extreme disruption and loss. The strict and exacting demands of the dance provided a clear focus, and, together with the respect felt and expressed toward teachers, imparted a sense of order and one of collective continuity. Dancers continue to look to their teachers as bearers of wisdom that extends beyond a particular style of movement or choreography. Elder accomplished artists embody an understanding of ways to communicate with the deities as well as a host of stories that connect contemporary practitioners with both mythologized and historical dancers and royal, state, and other patrons. In addition, the kinesthetic aspect of the relationship between learner and instructor—as the teacher presses just under the student's shoulder blades to help her open her chest and arch her back, or guides a protégée's head in a slight figure-eight-like motion between her two experienced hands—imparts knowledge directly through touch and through close proximity of bodies as complex gestural passages are demonstrated, often without detailed verbal discussion.[10]

The power and significance of the teacher-student bond in the handing down of accumulated wisdom is recognized in a ritual called *sampeah kru,* a salutation (*sampeah*) to the spirits and teachers (*kru*), both living and deceased. In return for the gratitude and respect they show through weekly offerings of incense and elaborate pre-performance and annual ceremonies, and for the acknowledgement of their proper place in the artistic and spiritual hierarchies, dancers receive blessings for continued growth and protection from their teachers and, it is hoped, from the spirits of the dance.

On stage in *Seasons,* swathed in a shimmering brocade ankle-length skirt and with a stylized, serpent-headed golden tiara on her head, Neang Neak, danced by Sam Sathya, takes her place as the chorus sings, "My name is Neang Neak; I come from a very long lineage." An intricately embroidered scarf reaching down her back and trailing about a yard over the ground symbolizes the serpent's tail and all she carries with her from the past. At first blissfully unaware of her tail, enjoying her new surroundings, she then, at



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one point, studies the appendage, caressing it with long strokes. Eventually, however, unable to reconcile the weight of what she brings from before with her newfound reality, she turns in place, becoming entangled in her lengthy attachment (see Figure 2). The tail, part of how she has identified herself, appears to be a burden. And though she tries she cannot separate herself from it nor let it go. The attempts to rip it in fact cause her pain, as it is a component of her identity. Indeed, Sophiline sees the tail as symbolic of attributes that set her, as a Cambodian in the United States, apart from the surrounding majority—in a positive way. Neang Neak's tail fosters connections to an artistic, spiritual, and cultural heritage, connections severed by cultural and physical dislocation. Before leaving the stage, Neang Neak, too, accepts it as a constructive aspect of her being.

In talking to Sam Sathya and other dancers in Cambodia over the past fifteen years or so, I have learned of the enormous pressure imposed by the responsibilities they carry, and have noticed a decided shift in discourse. Cambodia's dancers have continued to express a drive to restore order to their world through the transmission of cultural knowledge (the stories, the movements, the rituals). The aesthetic and spiritual heritage that they pass on through teaching and through performance in gold and silks exists alongside other aspects of their everyday reality. As they reflect upon it, that reality includes an AIDS epidemic that has yet to be contained, as men infect their wives with HIV after visiting prostitutes. Men take second wives or mistresses and beat their spouses with impunity. According to a report by the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, domestic violence, rape, and human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation are some of the paramount human rights violations in contemporary Cambodia (LICADHO 2007). In addition, as women in a society that places a premium on racial/cultural survival as part of its strident twentieth- and twenty-first-century nationalism, they are saddled with the "onerous burden . . . [of being the] nation's reproducers, ideological protectors and cultural guardians," roles they have played regardless of which administration has been in power (Frieson 1998).

*Figure 2. Sam Sathya portraying Neang Neak in* Seasons of Migration. *Phnom Penh, Cambodia. (2004). Photo by James Wasserman. Used with permission. Courtesy of the Khmer Arts Ensemble.*



As these artists go about redefining themselves from regime to regime, with the attendant cultural and economic shifts, ties to a spiritual and artistic legacy may help them adjust to new situations. But those ties may also fray under mounting pressures. Whereas in the early post–Khmer Rouge years artists embraced the nationalistic master narrative



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focused on the continued civil war in which they felt (and were told by government authorities) they had an important part to play, by the early twenty-first century, as individuals and as artists, they spoke more, and firstly, of themselves as women with unique weight to bear.[11]

Sathya, having come of age under a genocidal regime, followed by the constraints and isolation of the communist People's Republic of Kampuchea in the 1980s, has adjusted to the return of the royal family to Cambodia in 1991 and the opening up of her country to the world. Wined and dined by presenters and officials in theaters across the globe, receiving payment in U.S. dollars when touring abroad, with access to information through television and the Internet, she and her colleagues nonetheless return home to Cambodia's painful realities, and they worry, in particular, about their daughters' futures within the culture of violence in which they are being raised and about their own almost surreal existence as the embodiment of aspects of Khmer spiritual and aesthetic potency while remaining vulnerable to being discarded (or worse) in their homes. In addition to the responsibility of representing the nation, dancers live with the indignity of objectification by others—being seen simply as "otherworldly" beings—and patriarchy, as when teenage dancers are selected by much older men as marriage partners, only to be abandoned a few years later. For the dancers of Cambodia, then, Neang Neak's solo is a vehicle for a certain public manifestation of resentment and rage. The agony she displays through facial expression as well as through movement (her attempts to tear her tail and her eventual turning away from it) relates to all these real life crises.[12]

Sophiline explains the *naga*'s struggle within the context of *Seasons* as a reflection of her own efforts at defining herself since emigrating to the United States (Figure 3) rather than the plight of Cambodian women in general. (An earlier piece that she created in 2002, *The Glass Box,* deals directly with some of women's painful dilemmas in Cambodia.) Yet, the resonance of the story reaches beyond a personal vision and experience highlighted through choreography. As performers from Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts have explained it to me, Neang Neak's dance intrinsically concerns questions such as, Who am I in my essence? Who or what do others see me as?—as well as questions about (im)possibilities, obstacles, and choice: Do I remain stuck? How will I address the barriers to realization of my own sense of balance?

This dance, through its interpretation by the women performing it, becomes a site for steps toward resistance and subversion of the status quo. Cloaked in a culturally acceptable aesthetic, young women are expressing frustration and hopes for change in ways that will not endanger them or dishonor their families. A new story offers possibilities for safely re-imagining both identity and the dance tradition itself. Juxtaposed with the narratives of Cambodians residing in the United States, as it is in the film, the dance holds the potential to inspire a re-imagining of immigrants' relationships to aspects of their heritage and to their future.

## Part Three: Adjustment

*Seasons'* third section is an ensemble piece in which a central dancer, the "spirit of the present," is attracted to light—representing the future. Dancers in darker costumes (her



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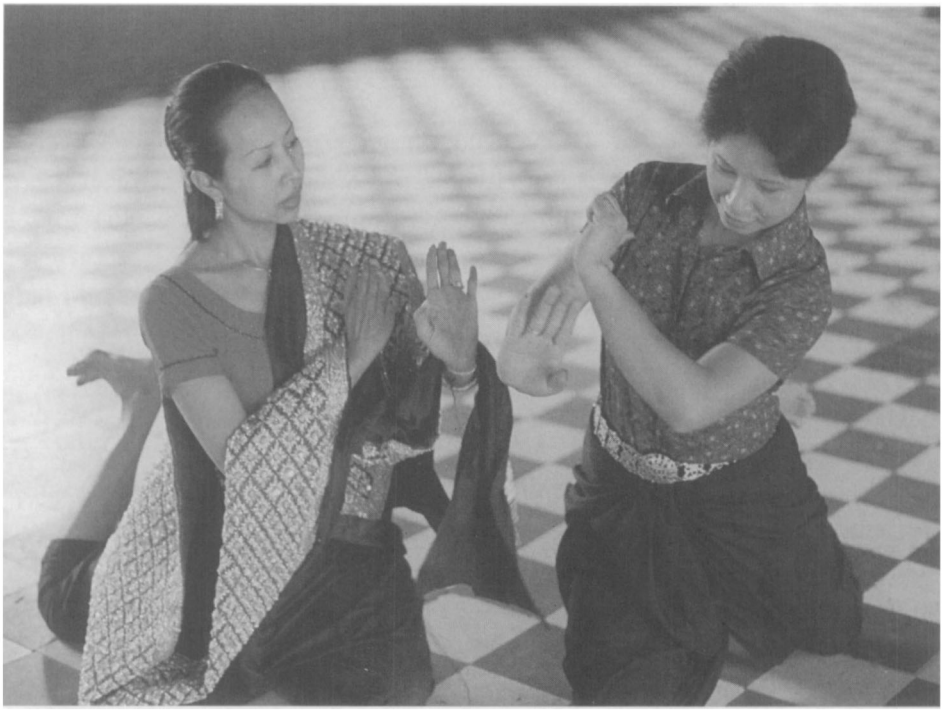


*Figure 3. Sophiline Cheam Shapiro (right) teaching the Neang Neak solo to Sam Sathya. Phnom Penh, Cambodia. (2004) Photo by Toni Shapiro-Phim.*

shadow/the past) interrupt her quest to effortlessly move toward the light, until through (choreographic) explorations of possibilities she realizes that moving forward with her shadow intact will not hold her back. She then chooses to venture onward, acknowledging that the past, as well as what might lie ahead, are both of value.

Anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson wrote of honoring the improvisatory nature of the act of "composing a life," of celebrating the inspired navigation of the zigzags, discontinuities, and conflicting loyalties that women, especially, experience over and over again. These "lifetimes of continual redefinition" (Bateson 1990, 7) are works of art in themselves, based on the inventive use of energy, tools, and circumstances that one creates or finds along the way, just as the "spirit of the present" does in *Seasons*.

Cambodia's dancers have re-imagined their lives and their centuries-old art at many historical and contemporary junctures, often by force of circumstance. They could do this because of the adaptability of this highly codified art form. Confined within the palace walls until the mid-twentieth century, court dancers would emerge to perform lengthy sacred dramas as part of national and religious rites. In the 1940s dancers moved outside of the royal compound, beginning soon thereafter to choreograph shorter discrete dances and to perform them on proscenium stages. Classical dance prior to the 1970 coup had remained closely associated with the royalty. Under the republic (1970–1975) dance was still linked with the national agenda, and, again, it served as a tool of the powerful as the Khmer Rouge oversaw the staging of folk dances depicting hatred of state enemies and support for the spilling of blood that sustained the revolution (see Shapiro-Phim



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2002). Dance in the 1980s answered to and reflected political leaders' priorities and aims as well but with different messages. New dances in the classical canon exalted the friendship of Cambodia with Laos and Vietnam (two other communist nations), for example, or sought to bestow blessings on the soldiers still engaged in a civil war as all political factions (the royalists, the Republicans, the Khmer Rouge) had armies amassed at Cambodia's western border, fighting the sitting government. In addition, the Ministry of Culture sent young performing artists out to contested areas of the country, laying claim to leadership of the nation by harnessing and displaying the symbolic and aesthetic power of classical dance (see Shapiro 1994).[13] Displaced persons camps along the Thai-Cambodian border housing more than a quarter of a million Cambodians fleeing drought, poverty, political repression, or ongoing war were sites for the development of numerous dance, music, and theater ensembles. And as hundreds of thousands of refugees eventually settled in countries throughout the world, they took the practice of dance—for many, an art they had learned in a squalid camp—with them to their new communities.

By late 1990 a peace accord had been signed by all of Cambodia's warring factions. The royalty returned. Following United Nations–supervised elections, a new government was formed and Cambodia was once again a kingdom. The classical dancers, no longer civil servants of a communist regime, were, anew, "royal." The dancers had been considered "royal" until 1970 as well, but the intervening decades had shifted the cultural, political, and economic landscapes so dramatically that little of the dancers' lives resembled what they had been a generation earlier. While opportunities have arisen in the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century (for some) to perform domestically and internationally for U.S. dollars, and to engage in artistic exchange programs, and while they are asked to dance on behalf of the monarch on special ritual occasions, their salaries are not enough to make ends meet, forcing many to take on extra jobs. This had never been the case in the mid-twentieth century.

Sophiline's creation of a classical Khmer dance based on an individual's interpretation of a modern-day phenomenon and her personal experience of it—as opposed to a received narrative or image, whether literary or mythological (or even political, as under communist rule in the 1980s)—had been unheard of previously.[14] By representing the migration of thousands of Cambodians to the United States and their subsequent adjustment process as a story of celestial beings—even though the experiences may have some universal and historical resonances—Sophiline was pushing the boundaries of a canon that for centuries aimed mainly to either communicate with the heavens, depict complex mytho-historic tales with specific characters and plot lines that were interpreted as models for appropriate social behavior, or to evoke, abstractly, a sense of the divine. Though *Seasons* comes closest to the kinds of dances that evoke the divine, she expanded upon this part of the tradition by taking chapters out of her own life narrative and "mythologizing" them in a Khmer aesthetic. "Mythology provides lessons for us about love, about betrayal, persistence . . . and about doing good things to the universe," explains Sophiline in the film. In addition, the fact that she was an independent choreographer and artistic director, unattached to any official Cambodian institution, was somewhat revolutionary.



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Here was classical dance, freed in part from its usual constraints and patronage, just as some dance in the displaced persons camps and in diasporic communities had been.[15]

Claiming ownership of the tradition, while placing herself squarely within the classical lineage, Sophiline was asserting her right to be both innovative and respectful of the canon, using the dance to make new endings and new life stories, some of which not even she, ultimately, anticipated.[16]

## Part Four: Equilibrium

The final scene of the dance is one of communal balance, performed for the most part in pairs (Figure 4). At one point, the eight dancers stand one in front of the other, arms raised at varying heights, elbows bent, evoking the appearance of the multi-armed Harihara, an ancient Khmer figure who combines the attributes of two Hindu gods, Vishnu and Shiva. All of the performers are dancing the male role as they represent a joining of those deities. The symbiosis is reinforced when, at moments, a dancer kneels with one knee on the floor, her partner positioned behind her, still standing. The dancer to the rear lifts one leg and gently places her foot, toes flexed, on the thigh of the other's bent leg. Such a sense of equilibrium is evoked again during discrete passages as one dancer places her hand, palm up, just below the bent elbow of another. They are there with and for one another.

In the film, Cambodians who have settled in Long Beach tell of feeling, ultimately, that the United States has become their home. Some travel back and forth, either between countries or between cultures, with no sense of discomfort or alienation. For many of the dancers in Cambodia, however, such a state of balance is elusive. The nationalistic "master narrative," so prevalent in war time, has been replaced, at least among women, according

*Figure 4. Harihara section from* Seasons of Migration. *Still from movie. Used with permission.*





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to my observations and interactions, by a gendered one, as mentioned earlier. They love their art yet are wary about their future, especially as women. They suffer from seemingly undiagnosable aches and pains, nightmares, and headaches.

In the Preah Thaong–Neang Neak legend, a foreigner joins with a local woman to give birth to the Khmer people. Neang Neak carries the honor and burden of embodying the spirit of the earth and waters and of representing the female half of an entire people. A medium of connections on many levels (spiritual, historical, aesthetic), the *naga*—as danced today in Cambodia—is at once calling those connections into being and asserting the search for a new identity for herself, one that incorporates the dynamics of her lived reality.

The lived reality for the performers in *Seasons* is such that some have spoken of Sophiline as a role model because she left home and seems to them to be so comfortable in the world at large. Each day they face a myriad of controls and restraints to which their teacher, Sophiline, appears, at least in part, immune. This disconnect between the "balance" Sophiline purports to have achieved and the emptiness and anxiety spoken of by the dancers runs counter to the possibility of a pat, harmonious ending for their "dance of life." The equilibrium they all seek, and all perform, remains beyond the reach of so many.

Twenty-eight dancers, musicians, singers, and dressers from Cambodia, along with Sophiline, premiered *Seasons* in the United States in the spring of 2005 at Cambodian New Year time. The program consisted of two parts: it opened with a staging of the Moni Mekhala/Rema Eyso story, and *Seasons* was performed after the intermission. By combining an older work with ritual origins with a new dance that, though evocative of the divine, makes no claim to the sacred, Sophiline was acknowledging the interrelationship of the two and, in a sense, modeling the design of her own life and creativity as an innovator within a traditional form and canon. The movie of the same name was filmed in the United States during the tour. The social and material conditions of the tour, however, did not in all ways support Sophiline's hopes for what the performances across the United States might mean and do for the women at its core. Before the conclusion of the trip, four dancers clandestinely parted from the group, deciding not to return to Cambodia.

This was demoralizing and upsetting to Sophiline on a number of levels. Having been their teacher, she was hoping the dancers would continue training and performing with her in future projects, in Cambodia.[17] In addition, overstaying a visa is illegal. As leader of the troupe, she was responsible for everyone. She had trusted that they would fulfill their obligations to perform and go back home. The actions of a few might jeopardize the choreographer's chance to bring other works to the United States.

In 1990 five dancers had stayed in the United States after the first tour to North America by Cambodian dancers in almost twenty years. Each of those performers claimed, in later personal interviews, that she or he had wanted a chance to further her/his education or to make money to send to family in Cambodia.[18] They were of a generation that had lost close to four years of schooling under the Khmer Rouge. They had worried that their choice would negatively impact their colleagues, their teachers, and perhaps even their families back home. But they felt they "had" to stay for the sake of their own futures and wished that the others would understand someday. Their departures during the 1990



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tour devastated many troupe members who saw this as a slap in the face to themselves and their art. Others were crushed at the loss of talent. After a decade spent rebuilding knowledge, skills, and repertoire, some of the brightest stars, the elder teachers' hope for the future, had forsaken them.

In 2005 the circumstances both in Cambodia and in the United States were decidedly different from what they had been during that earlier tour. In 1990 Cambodian Americans put enormous pressure on the visiting artists to "defect" and stay behind. Cambodian American political factions were actively opposed to the communist regime then in power in their homeland and openly supported the military efforts to topple it. Attempts to destroy the dance troupe representing the nation were also attempts to hurt the government at the symbolic level. By 2005 Cambodia was no longer at war and had been a kingdom again for more than a decade, with normal diplomatic relations established with the United States. The dancers who chose to make the United States a new home during the 2005 tour were all artists with many opportunities to travel and perform. Most had been students of Sophiline and her peers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, presenting incense to Sophiline and other teachers then as well as throughout the rehearsals and performances of *Seasons*. (Sophiline had been on the 1990 tour of the United States but chose to return home to Cambodia with the troupe.)[19]

Three of the four who stayed abroad in 2005 left telephone messages for Sophiline at her Long Beach home months after the tour had concluded. They said they were truly sorry but believed that if she "knew our stories," she would understand (Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, interview with the author, 2007). Interviews with a couple of these young women elaborate on this. One dancer spoke of the pain and embarrassment of having been a spurned fiancée and not being able to face society back home as such. Cambodian girls and young women are under constant and harsh scrutiny. Cambodian children recite "rules for girls" that set strict behavioral imperatives—not making too much noise when one walks, casting eyes downward, maintaining one's reputation so as not to tarnish that of one's parents and husband, and so as to help bring proper order and balance to the social world. A small or misinterpreted infraction, especially one involving a man, may result in censure.[20] This woman feared she would never be considered "marriageable" given her history. Another dancer interviewed had been the "Cinderella" of her adoptive family, taking care of everyone's needs and having to give her earnings from her art to the family as well. The tour offered her a chance to escape.

All expressed regret for hurting their teacher, Sophiline. They were eternally grateful, they said, for all she had done for them. Her creativity and bravery (in expanding the possibilities for Khmer dance) were models for them, and her teaching capabilities were described as second to none. So they had been torn. Ultimately, their place in Cambodian society at that moment in time dictated their choices. The misinformation they had about life in the United States (that everyone is free and able to do as she pleases, that it is easy to make money and learn English, that most Cambodians in the United States are happy and successful, etc.) also factored into their decision. This is the message that comes across in the film *Seasons of Migration* as well.[21] Indeed, one of the dancers who stayed behind spoke openly about wanting to have a life just like Sophiline's. Now finding



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themselves somewhat isolated from the surrounding mainstream culture, they all struggle with unanticipated limitations and responsibilities.[22]

There is an additional aspect to the experience of these young women that is directly relevant to the focus of this essay. Before they left the dance troupe, they had been performing a story of triumph over culture shock, of ultimate adjustment to the initial discomforts of immigration—immigration to the United States no less. They are featured beautifully in the film, dancing as divine beings through the elation and ordeals of adjustment to a new existence. Here they were expected to embody the message of the piece yet not internalize it to such an extent that they would seek their own permanent migration to North America as part of this trip. Tour leaders, anticipating the temptation to stay in the United States (but not necessarily recognizing the irony in having the artists perform the subject matter of the dance at hand), had warned the performers against this before departing Cambodia. (Tours of the United States by Cambodian dancers in 2001 and 2003 also ended with some artists staying abroad.) They encouraged people to honor their commitments to the tour and to plan other ways to return to the United States if they wanted to go back—prospective husbands can apply for fiancée visas, relatives can sponsor them, and so on. However, this New Year season turned into an unforeseen actual "season of migration" for those who gave up their places in the Khmer Arts Ensemble to take up residence in the United States.

Cambodia's dance community has been responsive, to some extent, to the far-reaching transformations impacting societies the world over. No longer isolated as they were in the late 1970s (during the Khmer Rouge years when there was no communication allowed or possible between individuals inside and outside the country) and throughout the 1980s when an international embargo led by the United States limited outside contact mainly to the communist Eastern-bloc countries in the Soviet sphere, Cambodian dancers have taken part in regional and international workshops, conferences, and festivals. Dancers and musicians of Cambodian heritage have returned from North America and Europe to teach and develop collaborations in a range of styles. Nonetheless, many in the performing arts community in Cambodia, especially those in administrative positions, tend to turn inward, toward re-creation and preservation of a heritage and repertoire they feel is still endangered, rather than to embrace innovation. Almost every official activity related to the performing arts is conceived of and spoken about in terms of what was lost, what has yet to be recovered, and who is no longer there (see Ly and Muan 2000). Their artistic repertoire is endangered, they explain, because of the loss of people in the 1970s, subsequent deaths of accomplished elders, emigration of talented young people, and lack of resources and time to recall all that had once been practiced. Perhaps, if it is endangered, it is for additional reasons, as well: stifling artistic leadership; salaries, already tiny, consistently paid two to three months late; oppressive gender relations; and the sensing of opportunities to get out of personal or professional distress by moving to a new country with little understanding of the actual complexity of such a migration.

Meanwhile, Sophiline is once again redefining her life; she now lives in Cambodia, as a mother, wife, choreographer, and artistic director of a company of Khmer classical dancers, the members of which, she hopes, will "bring their own voices to the fore as dancers



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and perhaps choreographers" and push the tradition to grow (Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, interview with the author, 2006). It will be important to watch as the young women she is teaching—ages seventeen to late twenties, all graduates of the National School of Fine Arts or the Royal University of Fine Arts dance programs—go about composing their lives in an artistic environment that encourages self-expression (within the confines of Sophiline's Khmer Arts Ensemble), set within the broader context of the scars of war and loss entrenched in Cambodian society, the often repressive gender relations that are the surrounding norm, and the internalization of a pervasive message that to leave the country, or even to have left for a while and then return, is better than to stay.

## Notes

1. "Khmer" is the official term for the majority ethnic group of Cambodia and for the national language. In English, however, the words "Cambodian" and "Khmer" are generally interchangeable. "Classical" (sometimes called "court") dance refers to a discrete tradition with roots in Hindu/Brahman spirituality that was nurtured by the Khmer monarchy over centuries.

2. *Seasons of Migration* (2006) was filmed in California in 2005 and directed by John Bishop. The dance sequences were shot at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts at the University of California, Davis.

3. Cheam Sophiline (Cambodian given names follow family names) married my brother, John Shapiro, in 1991. He had visited me, and first met her, while I was undertaking dissertation research in Cambodia. As I have worked with her over the years, I have been variously (or all at the same time) scholar, sister-in-law, teacher, student, and colleague.

4. The official name of Cambodia while ruled by the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979 was Democratic Kampuchea.

5. Sophiline moved back to Cambodia in 2006.

6. In addition to royally sponsored ceremonies with ritual classical dances, ceremonial folk or masked dances play an important part in New Year celebrations in certain rural areas of Cambodia. These, too, may re-enact stories in which traditional order is threatened and, ultimately, restored. See Phim and Thompson (1999).

7. I first wrote about the *naga* and the dance of this character in a short article a few years ago (Shapiro-Phim 2004) upon which this essay draws.

8. The *pin peat* orchestra accompanies classical dances, shadow puppet plays, and all-male masked dance-dramas, as well as Buddhist ceremonies. It includes xylophones, gongs, cymbals, drums, and an instrument akin to an oboe. See Sam-Ang Sam (1988) for an extensive study of the instrumentation and repertoire of this ensemble. Sam also includes an explication of the relationship between the music and the dance.

9. Scholars' estimates of the number of deaths have ranged from 750,000 (Vickery 1984), to 1.7 million (Kiernan 1996), to 2 million (Heuveline 1998).

10. I have found Tomie Hahn's work on the teacher-student relationship in Japanese dance (2007) interesting in thinking about the many-layered communicative bond, and attendant responsibilities, between experienced elder and younger dancers.

11. Chris Hedges, a former war correspondent, reminds us in his treatise on the culture of war that during times of armed conflict, a master narrative emerges that prioritizes state over family or individual needs (2002).

12. Moisala and Diamond (2000) assembled essays delving into the role of music and gender in the web of dramatic global shifts; my emphasis here is on dance and gender, looking to better understand the overall give-and-take of the creation of individual selves in the midst of recent



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extraordinary political and social transformations within Cambodia and the Cambodian diaspora. Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren edited a volume in which the contributors explore connections between such political instability and personal and collective subjectivity. Along with them, I look at the "new kinds of creative energy [of] people who inhabit these states" and their "contemplations of their altered social lives" (2002, 1, 5).

13. The micro-management of art for nationalistic ends is not uncommon around the world. See Manning's study of Mary Wigman, including her time creating work under the Third Reich (1993), Margaret Chan's essay on Beijing Opera during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (2004), and Joan Huckstep's dissertation (2005) about the political manipulation of dance in Zaire.

14. See Phim and Thompson (1999) and Cravath (1985) for examinations of nonnarrative Khmer dances, as well as dance-dramas, and their inspirations or origins.

15. The performers in *Seasons,* however, were all employees of the Royal University of Fine Arts, whose participation had to be approved by those in positions of power. Sophiline was careful to work closely with her former teachers in Cambodia, respected elders who listened and watched intently and gave, according to Sophiline, invaluable feedback and suggestions as *Seasons* took shape.

16. Indian choreographer Chandralekha is also identified with a discrete artistic heritage, yet her dances revisit the idea of female "historically charged" bodies "to envision a possible liberatory sexual politics, particularly for women" (Chatterjea 2004, 228), while Sophiline's do not by design explicitly foreground women's creative potential.

17. Since relocating to Cambodia in 2006, she has established the Khmer Arts Ensemble. Ensemble dancers, who are not connected in any way to the Ministry of Culture or the Royal University of Fine Arts, went to Vienna in December 2006 and to the United States in the fall of 2007 to perform an adaptation of Mozart's *The Magic Flute,* choreographed by Sophiline.

18. I was on that fall 1990 tour with the dancers and musicians from Cambodia's University of Fine Arts. I had just arrived in Cambodia to undertake dissertation research the previous April. The dean of Cambodia's choreographic arts faculty—where the dance program was housed—asked tour producers if they would bring me along to the United States and have me help with communication as the troupe prepared for the trip. So I was at once graduate student, researcher, friend, translator, and all-around helper who became enmeshed in the complexities and controversies of the tour.

19. "I was tempted to find a better life [by staying in the United States], but I didn't see a place for myself there. I knew that someone who looked like me and who had my set of skills belonged in Cambodia. When I first arrived and we were driving on this enormous freeway, I felt so small and I didn't like that feeling. I also didn't want to be a minority. And I didn't want to start my life over again" (Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, interview with the author, 2007).

20. Even though hierarchy and appropriate behavior are valued greatly, gender expectations are not monolithic, as political, economic, and social contexts differ. Nonetheless, with women's potency related to "proper behavior" and their ability to preserve harmony and order both within and beyond the immediate family, societal scrutiny and pressure are intense. See Annuska Derks's (2008) study of female migrants to Cambodia's capital city from the countryside, in which she reviews the literature on Southeast Asian, and particularly Khmer constructions of gender, and explores the "negotiated tension between choice and constraint" in which women "do have room to maneuver" (204).

21. There is little critical discussion in the film of the chronic and often traumatic problems of immigrants to the United States.

22. At least 175,000 Cambodian refugees and immigrants live in the United States. Studies of Cambodian communities in the United States note acute levels of economic, mental, and social distress. "Cambodians as an ethnic group have some of the lowest socioeconomic indicators among the Asian American population. Approximately 54 percent live below the . . . poverty . . . line." And, "[H]igh rates of past-year PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] (62 percent) and



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depression (51 percent)" were found in Long Beach, California, and reported in an Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum brief (2006, 1, 4). There are also high rates of violent crime and gang activity among Cambodian American young people. However, see Smith-Hefner (1999) for an insightful examination of cultural logic (in family organization, Buddhism, and so on) that both supports adjustment to and comes in conflict with the surrounding reality for Khmer immigrants.

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