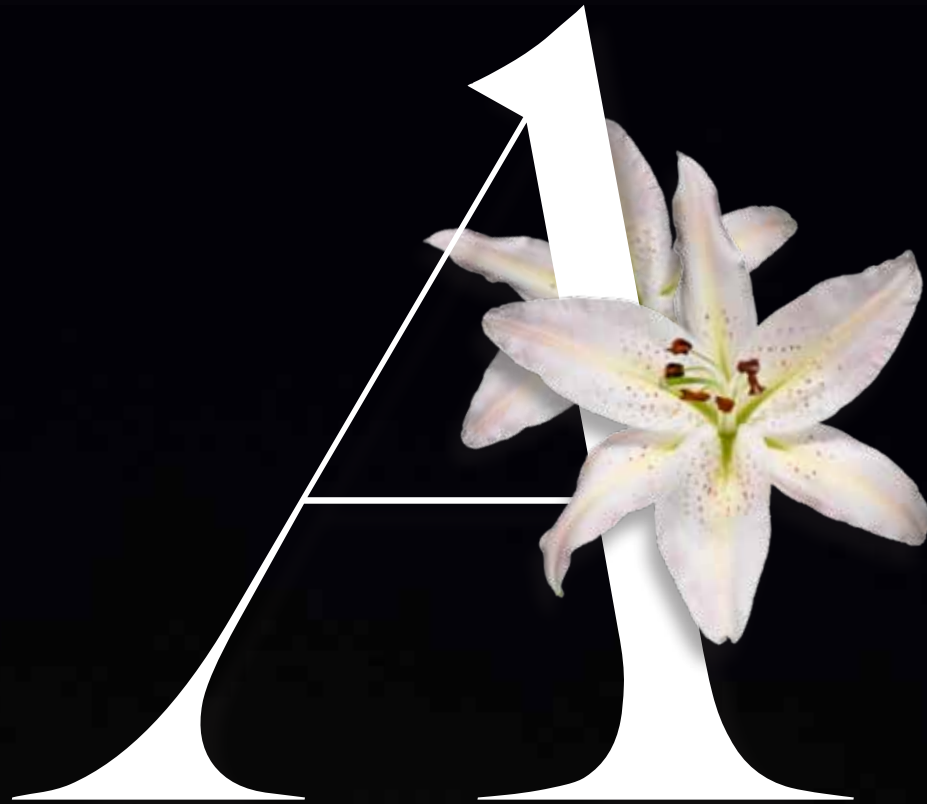




SACRED DANCERS OF ANGKOR



WORDS
TERESA LEVONIAN COLE

IMAGES
XXXXXXXX

Few phrases resonate with nostalgia and heady indolence as intensely as 'l'Indochine française'. Sixty years have now elapsed since France lost her hold on Cambodia and, the following year, suffered a humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Today, few people routinely speak French, besides the fortunate few who escaped into gallic exile during the Khmer Rouge period, or who were sent to France on NGO-funded studies after those traumatic years, returning with peace to help regenerate their ravaged homeland. The fabled opium dens of the capital, which survived into the 1970s, have gone the way of the colonial tongue. Only the ruins of grand colonial mansions remain as mute testament to a lost way of life, some — like the beautiful Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor — restored to recreate, within its 1930s confines, a world of bygone elegance and exquisite indulgence.

It is, in fact, in Angkor that the most evocative cultural legacy of Cambodia survives; a culture which long pre-dates the arrival of the French, in 1887. It manifested itself in the magnificent temples of Angkor, which reached their apogee between the eighth and the twelfth centuries to exert, hundreds of years later, a magnetic fascination on France's men of letters and adventurers, alike. Among those — and straddling both categories — was the 21-year-old writer, André Malraux, later to become De Gaulle's Minister for Cultural Affairs. At the time, however (1923), he was arrested by the colonial administration for plundering statues from the jungle-shrouded temple of Banteay Srey — a tale that is dramatised in Malraux's 1930 novel, "La Voie Royale".

Such material depredations would pale in view of the human tragedy that was later to unfold in Cambodia — and the villages of Angkor in particular — in the wake of America's involvement in Vietnam. Following on from the allegedly American-backed coup against Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970, the Viet Cong installed themselves in Angkor to fight the government troops of General Lon Nol, while the Khmer Rouge guerrillas quietly consolidated their power base, before marching into Phnom Penh and to decisive victory, in 1975. From being a battlefield, the sacred site of Angkor became a stronghold of the Khmer Rouge. Their very name a byword in cruelty, with 1.7 million of their fellow countrymen killed in the name of a new order, they targeted artists and intellectuals, enslaved and terrorised villagers, destroyed millennial traditions, customs and religious practices, and reduced those who survived to famine and destitution. What remained was a spiritual vacuum.

"When I returned to Angkor, in 1998, I could not believe my eyes" says Ravynn Karet-Coxen, an extraordinary woman who, within the next paragraph or so, will be transforming this sad tale into a triumph of the human spirit. "The villagers were still suffering from the legacy of the Khmer Rouge. The people were so poor, they were living like animals, in squalor, without even basic sanitation or hygiene. Children, were running wild, or were working in the fields, to survive. Worse, there was a total loss of hope, a deadness of expression. Noone smiled, or looked you in the eye. The people had lost everything, and dared not even believe in the possibility of a better future." In memory of her father, Ravynn immediately set about creating the Nginn Karet Foundation for Cambodia (NKFC) — that now encompasses 14 villages and some 12,000 souls in its programme — to provide, among other benefits, education, sanitation, agriculture and healthcare. But, she came to understand, material benefits were not enough...

SACRED DANCERS OF ANGKOR

—



CAMBODIAN DANCERS HAVE GIVEN US ALL THAT ANTIQUITY HAS TO OFFER... IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SEE HUMAN NATURE BROUGHT TO A HIGHER DEGREE OF PERFECTION ...

AUGUSTE RODIN, 1906

That I met Ravynn at all was the result of a happy accident. I had just been to visit the tenth-century Temple of Banteay Srei (of Malraux infamy), renowned for its exquisite pink sandstone reliefs so fine they resemble wood carving, and was on my way to what I thought was a bird sanctuary. Instead, what I found, down a dirt track in the middle of the jungle, surrounded by Cambodia's most historical sites and sacred mountains, was a raised stage. It was set amid a garden, in an open sala, on which a group of some 40 children, immaculately turned out in white T-shirts and colourful sarongs (kben), were engaged in silent meditation. Here, I was greeted by an improbable Papagena, dressed in mourning (for the late King Father, I subsequently learned). "Birds?" said repeated in French, in response to my question. No birds here; only children. This was Ravynn, who presided over them, a strict but benevolent mother-hen. I had chanced upon her groundbreaking project, a rural Dance Conservatoire for one of the most deprived communities in all Cambodia.

I remained to watch, spellbound, as these children, with perfect concentration, went on to perform yogic exercises, before being led by Ravynn in a prayer and offering to the 'Spirit of the Dance' at a small altar beneath a photograph of Her Royal Highness Princess Buppha Devi. Only then was the dance permitted to begin.

The NKFC Conservatoire Preah Ream Buppha Devi Chhouk Sar, Banteay Srei (to give the Conservatoire its full, if-not-entirely-catchy title) was founded by Ravynn Karet-Coxen in 2007. Born in Cambodia of a Cambodian father and Swiss mother, she studied dance for six years under the Queen Grandmother, at the Royal Palace and, with the coup of 1970, escaped with her family into exile in Paris. Twenty-two years later, she returned and, calling upon her connections, embarked on various projects to help mend her broken country. "I had first to persuade the Princess to support the idea of a dance and music school in remote villages for children of the most humble backgrounds," she says. "The Princess was very sceptical at first, because classical dance was traditionally the reserve of royal children and children of the élite, to be performed at the Palace, and she thought the project was too ambitious and could not succeed." With customary determination, however, Karet-Coxen not only obtained the necessary permission to proceed, but also saw her school accorded the unique honour of bearing the name and Patronage of the Princess who, at the time, was also Minister of Culture. "Her grandmother, Her Majesty Queen Kossamak Nearireath, entrusted the Princess with the responsibility of perpetuating the spiritual legacy of Cambodia's Royal Ballet tradition," she explains. "The children may be poor, but as the true heirs of Angkor, it is fitting that they should be recreating and perpetuating the sacred dance rituals of their ancestors."

It is precisely the emphasis on the sacred element of dance which marks this school as so special. "We do not allow tourists to come and gawp,"

she says. "We are a serious Conservatoire, and discipline is all-important. Nor do I allow my dancers to defile their art by dancing for the entertainment of tourists in restaurants. They must be pure, in both body and thought — hence the meditation and prayers. They dance sacred rituals for our Gods and our King, and, if they give a public performance, the audience should attend respectfully, as in a theatre."

By now, a classical Apsara dance was being rehearsed, accompanied by a classical orchestra of young musicians. I watched Manin, a beautiful 17-year-old girl, go through the prescribed movements that require not only concentration and balance, but that uncanny double-jointed grace of elbows, wrists and fingers, whereby each gesture — many hundreds of which must be memorised — is invested with specific meaning. "She is like a professional, no?" says Karet-Coxen proudly. "And this, in just five years! The Princess was astonished when she first saw these girls perform, after two years' work, and was very moved by them."

An Apsara, incidentally, is a semi-divine female dancer from Hindu and Buddhist mythology, such as is seen depicted in stone on the temples of Angkor. And it is not just the talent, or the precocious professionalism, that astonishes. It is the grace and poise, at once modest and aristocratic, which carries over from the stage persona into the natural bearing of these children, belying their humble origins. This is in part due to Karet-Coxen's holistic approach. "One of the conditions of our Conservatoire is that the pupils complete their formal schooling, until at least Baccalauréat [year 12]," she says. "Some of the older children have to cycle two hours to secondary school, and back again, each day. They attend the Conservatoire six half-days a week, the other half-day being devoted to their schoolwork. It is a lot to ask of them." The Foundation also provided bicycles for the children — the initiative of her god-daughter, who successfully drummed up the necessary sponsorship on the occasion of her tenth birthday party, at a London hotel. I ask one of the girls — is it not exhausting, having to travel so far and attend rigorous dance classes, as well as pursuing her academic studies? "On the contrary", comes the surprising reply. "The meditation and dancing make me feel healthier: calmer and more centred." Good manners, respect for the gods, and rigid discipline — all part of the old-fashioned educational diet fed to the children at the dance school — yielding lambent results.

Thus prepared and polished, on 28 February 2009, Karet-Coxen, introduced the girls to court, one might say, taking them to the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh for a performance before King Norodom Sihamoni — himself a classically trained dancer. It was a mind-boggling feat, given that, as Karet-Coxen concedes, "these children had never seen a flush toilet before, and many had never even handled money. When, afterwards, the King blessed them and gave them each a banknote, the girls were thrilled, because they thought they had been given his portrait!"





One can only wonder what it must have been like for the 32 children who participated in this royal performance, held in the splendour of the Chanchhaya Dance Pavilion — the first time in recent history that a sacred dance was performed for a Cambodian King. Srey Neang, one of the troop's star dancers, demure and composed beyond her 17 years, put it simply: "We felt excited, and scared, and fortunate", she told me. "It was such a rare honour, which is not even accorded to professional dancers." Any reservations the Princess might have had were dispelled; the King was enchanted. It opened the door to further performances and dedications, under the seal of royal approval. Three months later, Karet-Coxen had the idea of recreating a Buong Suong — a sacred ritual — at the temple of Banteay Srey itself, the first of 15 ceremonies, to date, staged at major Angkorian temples — including the famous Angkor Wat. It must have been a thrilling experience — the temple stripped of tourists for the private ceremony and, following a consecration ritual, reinvested with its numinous spirit; and one redolent of the sense of mystery experienced by Pierre Loti who, in 1901, camped in the deserted grounds of this temple, and wrote of the intimidating mystery of its cavernous galleries. "With love, the ancient artists chiselled and polished their virgin breasts," he wrote of the Apsara sculptures that adorn virtually every surface. "Who knows what has become of the ashes of the beauties who served as models for these perfect torsos?"

I returned the next day, to speak further with some of the students, and found them in the middle of a drawing class. Currently, there are 124 children at the music and dance school, ranging in age from five to 18, of whom three are orphans, supported entirely by the school. "We used to have 176 students," says Karet-Coxen, "but after the floods, some parents obliged their children to go and work in Thailand, as cheap labour. Three boys joined the army, and a few of the girls were married off, against their will. None of the children wanted to leave us." One boy, Samon, refused to join his parents when they moved away, and now lives at the school. "I asked my parents to be patient," he says, "And wait for me to become an artist. Then, I told them, I would be able to help them properly."

In the main, however, parents are delighted by the opportunity afforded their children to escape a life of hard labour and misery. How do

their less fortunate friends react? I ask, "It might be different in the cities, where young people have other values", says Srey Neang. "But in the villages, we are treated with respect, and our friends see us as a source of inspiration. My dream is to become a professional artist, and then return to help a new generation of children." Ravynn beams with pleasure.

The beneficial effects of the Conservatoire, however, run much deeper even than the future of its students. "When, in 2005, I arranged an evening of music and entertainment for the villagers, with a film made by the late King Norodom Sihanouk which featured dancing by Princess Buppha Devi, the parents became very emotional, and begged me to open a dance school," says Karet-Coxen. "Only then did I realise the psychological significance of dance; how important it is, as a medium, to reconnect these dispossessed people with their roots and their traditions, their family values and their gods. Because our dance not only teaches our most ancient legends and Buddhist values, these ancient rituals purify the soul and make Cambodian people one with our land. Dance, so central to Khmer culture, was a way of reconciling the people with their past, giving them back their sense of identity, and healing all the psychological scars of the Khmer Rouge years. That is how the idea of school first came about. And I only wish I had realised its importance sooner."

All the while one five-year-old, in an over-sized red sarong, was listening to us intently, gradually edging closer to the conversation whilst pretending to draw. "Come here, Kakadal!" says Ravynn. "How long have you been dancing?" "Since I was in my mummy's tummy", replies the child, with an air of utmost seriousness, much to the amusement of the older girls. "We had seen her watching the dancers from the sidelines, since she was three years old," says Ravynn. "Then one day, she says to me, 'I want a red kben'. 'Why do you want a red kben?' I asked her. 'Because I want to be a dancer', she says. So here she is, in her red kben. And she is spoilt rotten by the older children! Would you like to dance for us?" she asks the child. Whereupon the tiny creature, knee-high to a grasshopper, embarks on the Bopha Lokri — one of the first classical dances taught to a child, to the accompanying singing of the older girls, a professional in the making. The mutual support and lack of



rivalry is one of the most enchanting aspects of the school, along with the dedication of everyone involved. It is the teachers who decide — according to the physique, abilities and spiritual qualities of each student — in which of the three traditional disciplines they should specialise: classical dance (exclusively the preserve of girls, with the exception of the role of monkeys, played by boys), folk dance or music. Little Kakada is ear-marked for classical dance. As for the assignment of roles and participation in performances, there is no sign of envy. “We all accept that it is decided purely on merit,” says Srey Neang.

The subject of performances raised another kind of problem. What to do about costumes which traditionally, cost thousands of pounds? “Obviously, that was not an option for us,” says Karet-Coxen. “And besides, it would be ridiculous for these children to dress in such a lavish way. Nor do they wear make-up or heavy jewellery.” Since the emphasis of the school is on purity in all its forms (the girls have to be virgins, and attest to a remarkable lack of interest in marriage), Karet-Coxen drew inspiration from the Vestal Virgins of Ancient Rome and, ever-resourceful, fashioned the first ever variation on costumes in the history of Cambodian dance — “out of white muslin mosquito nets, decorated with flower blossoms, to represent purity, innocence and humility”. All the more striking for their simplicity, these floating robes add a frisson of danger when the girls dance with lighted candles — as they did, earlier this year, in a ceremony before the coffin of the late King: 46 dancers each with two candles, representing the [Cambodian] age of the deceased royal. The risk is not only of fire, but of ill-omen, should a light fall or go out. “There is no danger,” insists Karet-Coxen. “We are protected by the gods.”

Buddhism, in the Cambodian countryside, varies from the Buddhism of the capital, which is based on ancient Sinhalese texts. Outside the cities, there is a greater syncretism, with the official religion blending with older shamanistic beliefs. On the day of my second visit to the school, teachers and students of the Conservatoire were preparing Baseis — offerings to the gods — made of banana trunk and leaves, cut washed and hand-rolled into cones in groups of uneven numbers, with jasmine buds. Two thousand of these were being made, for presentation to the gods of

the Temple of Bayon, in a Buong Suong ceremony which would be held, two days hence, to commemorate Meak Bochea — one of the holiest day in the Theravada Buddhist calendar, when 1,250 disciples gathered spontaneously to hear the Buddha’s preaching. It would turn out to be, by all accounts, a magical experience — but one which, alas, saw me thousand of miles away.

“It is important for the children to perform,” says Ravynn, “in order to have a sense of what it is that they are working towards. The sacred rituals we perform in Angkor, and the performances we give in Siem Reap, are indeed wonderful — but they are not enough to secure the future of these children. If they are to become professional dancers, and earn their living from dance, they must be seen to perform more widely, in order to gain the necessary recognition. And this must happen soon, otherwise I shall lose the older girls, who will be forced to abandon their dreams to make some kind of living, by other means.”

And with that, Ravynn Karet-Coxen returns to her latest and perhaps most ambitious project yet: to secure the necessary support to enable her to take 23 of her best dancers, along with seven musicians and four teachers, to America in October, to celebrate ‘Ancestors Day’. “We want to connect with the large Khmer-American communities in California, Washington, Boston and New York,” she says, “to link them spiritually to their roots and to our Motherland.” Should her plan succeed, the tour, with its associated performances of classical and folk dances and fund-raising galas, will also provide the much-needed show-case for her students. It is a very long way from the impoverished villages of Angkor — but for Ravynn Karet-Coxen, one suspects, ‘impossible’ is a word two letters too long...

P.S. Since the time of writing, a 30-strong troop of the Sacred Dancers of Angkor has returned from a triumphant month-long tour to Boston, New York, Washington and Los Angeles.

Teresa Levonian Cole travelled with Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.co.uk) and stayed at The Raffles Grand Hotel d’Angkor (raffles.com). To learn more about the Ngin Karet Foundation and its programme to support traditional dance training please visit nkfc.org