

Discovering Cambodia

- journey through the land of puppets and *apsaras*

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This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled **Discovering Cambodia** – journey through the land of puppets and *apsaras* submitted by the undersigned research team was carried out under my supervision. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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PREFACE

We are in a new place. A place we don't recognize. A place that excites us and scares us at the same time. We are out of our comfort zone. The butterflies in our stomachs remind us that we are nervous and excited. It is what we are about to witness that is affecting us so. This is it. This is what we have travelled across borders to see. This reality hangs over our heads as we enter a beautiful house filled with light and shadows.

We are invited to witness something spectacular. It is the kind of thing you don't realize the beauty of until you see it, until you hear it, until the light, dark and colour blend together and make you move. From within outwards.

We are around people we do not know, people who speak a different tongue and smile in a different way, but, we still feel comfortable and wanted because that is the beauty of Cambodia and its people. They can make you feel at home even though they can't speak your language and know nothing about you.

As we sat down on the ground, we faced a white screen. We tried to clear our minds. All that we had read did not matter now. Now it was no longer us looking in. The outside perspective was not important as we were immersed in it. Right in front of us was a beautiful piece of art about to unravel itself, just for us.

The screen was white and a light shone brightly through it. It was a simple screen, made of white cloth tied on either end to pole about 12 feet high. In front of it were beautiful instruments we had never seen before. There was one man per instrument and boy did they know how to make the most beautiful sounding melodies. Behind the curtain, invisible to us sitting on the floor were four other men. They were the magic makers. They were about to make the most beautiful show we had ever seen come to life and we would not even see their faces. Even now, it is their voices we remember. The way the

can sound like any animal or person and make us believe that the beautiful puppets behind the screen actually live and breathe. The fact that these magic makers

could create life from behind a screen with flat, leather characters and a beautiful orchestra of traditional musical instruments helped us uncover the beauty of Cambodian Art forms. We sat in awe, as the white cloth came to life. One after another, puppet after puppet came up projecting the most beautiful shadows on that simple cloth suddenly creating a story that unfolded before our eyes.

We saw the enactment of the Ramayana through shadow puppets, light and music and voice. It was beautiful. But this wasn't the only art form we saw. We were also in Cambodia to see something else. Dancing goddesses- The Apsara dance was the other art form we were there for. After the shadow puppets faded into darkness, out came the beautiful Apsara dancers that were hidden from view. This was a completely different art form but our enthusiasm level had not changed.

These beautiful women, with crowns and makeup fit for goddesses floated towards us and began to dance. We could not believe our eyes. The women began to enact scenes from the Ramayana as they glided from one position to another with their intricate hand poses and stunning facial expressions. The music played by the beautiful orchestra is what guided their paths and helped them flow through the story they were enacting. This dance captivated us, holding our attention the entire time as these women really did look like goddesses, telling stories of the Ramayana in different costumes. Each more beautiful than the one before.

The difference in the art forms was great. One was made of leather illuminated from behind a screen while the other was living and danced right in front of us. The difference was substantial but the stories being told were so similar. It is the stories of these art forms and the stories they enacted that helped us write our own story. The story that changed our lives forever. The story you are about to read.

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ABSTRACT

This research project looks at studying and documenting the art forms of Shadow puppetry and Apsara Dance in the country of Cambodia. It also looks at the Indian influence on these art forms and compares them to similar Indian art forms. The ‘Discovering Cambodia’ group has written this report after travelling to Cambodia and interviewing Apsara Dancers and dance associations along with Shadow theatre puppeteers and Puppetry associations. From these interviews and pre field research, the group has managed to document most aspects of the art forms such as theme, movement, technique, puppet making and comparison with Similar art forms, to name a few. The goal of this report is to document these art forms through the interviews, pre field research and first hand experiences of the ‘Discovering Cambodia’ group



INTRODUCTION

Journey of thousand miles begins with a single step...

The choice was ours. We could go anywhere. We could research any topic under the sun. The boundaries were endless! And we were excited. Our group had won a grant to research India's influence on an aspect in any country as long as it fit the budget. We had to go there, study a topic in great depth, come back and present what we've learnt by writing a comprehensive report and making a formal presentation for our parents, friends and entire college. The pressure was on!

We wanted to go to a place where Indian culture had been immersed and blended with the culture of that country. This result would be this big bubble of harmony in the way in which one set of beliefs and ingredients influence a completely different recipe to form an ever-changing way of life. We saw this blend of thoughts, religion, spices, language and values in the country of Cambodia.

It was now that we started to think about which genre of topics we wanted to research. The art form of 'Tamasha', the project we had previously worked on last year had held our interest and taught us enumerable things about the daily life of the artists, technique of the art form, costumes and make-up and themes and traditions of rural Maharashtrian society. This art form was a big part of rural Maharashtrian culture. We sought to partake in a similar experience and therefore knew instantly that it was art forms we wanted to study again.



Picking our research topic: What a task!

Cambodia is a country that has so much Indian influence and is not extensively studied and accessed by Indians. It is far away and to us seemed exotic. We knew that Angkor Wat, the biggest Hindu temple in the world is situated in Cambodia. We knew that India had had a big influence on the country of Cambodia but did not know how exactly. We could see our epics and stories embedded in their architecture, carvings, books, language, stories and art forms but we were blurry on the details. As we conducted more research, two integrated parts of the country caught our eye- the art forms of the graceful Apsara dance and magnificent Shadow puppetry/ theatre of Cambodia.

As we delved deeper, we started to uncover many things about these art forms that seemed to inspire us. The stories told through humor and satire grasped our attention and the way the Apsara dancers moved, as if they were gliding on water, it was mesmerizing. When we saw the intricacies of the shadow puppets on the internet, we knew it would be an even better experience to see them up close. And the beautiful costumes and ornaments that the Apsara dancers wore just seemed to shine and glisten from every angle. But it was not only these reasons that kept us interested.

The fact that Cambodia was influenced by different religions, stories, cultures and food excited us. And to know that India was one of those influences was an amazing thought. We wanted to see how India had influenced Cambodia or see the Similarities between India and Cambodia through these beautiful folk arts that seem the blend the movement and technique of one nation with the stories and epics of another, into two beautiful art forms waiting to be uncovered by us. We wanted to document this blend of culture in these folk arts.



By now, we had set our hearts on Cambodia, this exotic country that lives the myths and legends of India in its everyday life. A country that is influenced by India in numerous ways. A country that has Indian influences from over seven hundred years ago which are prominent and visible in their everyday life, traditions, religion and architecture. It was Cambodia we were going to explore and we couldn't wait!



RESEARCH QUESTION

**“To study the Cambodian folk arts of shadow puppetry and Apsara Dance and
explore the Indian influence on them”**



AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The various components of our research question deal with documenting Cambodian folk arts and the Indian influence on them. Thus, our aims and objectives are defined in a way to answer the questions related to various Indian influences on Cambodian folk arts: - Shadow Puppetry and Apsara dance. These aims and objectives are-

1. To document Cambodian Apsara dance and study India's influence on it with respect to

- description and historical overview of the art form
- themes of the dances
- costume and make up
- music
- movement and technique
- comparison with similar Indian dance forms

2. To document Cambodian Shadow Puppetry and India's influence on

- description and historical overview of the art form
- themes of the performance
- types of puppets and the making process.
- movement and technique
- comparison with similar Indian art forms of shadow puppetry
- analysis of Cambodian shadow puppet theatre performance and Indian Shadow puppet theatre performance.



GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Cambodia is situated to the southeast of India at a distance of 2913 km. It has a history of India having influenced it since 1st century AD. It is a land of legends, myths, kings, princess, warriors and monks. We found the country to be widely influenced by Indian myths and religions.¹ While travelling through its villages, we realized that the religions of Hinduism and Buddhism were not just represented in the architectural grandeur of temples and *pagodas*² in the country but were incorporated into the way of life of the masses. This is reflected in the themes practiced in the folk arts of Shadow Puppetry and Apsara dance. We visited two important cities in Cambodia – the capital, Phnom Penh and another city called Siem Reap. These cities gave us a glimpse of these Cambodian folk arts that were said to be rich in Indian flavor. In the following pages we welcome you all to a journey called -

“Discovering Cambodia, journey through the land of puppets and *apsaras*!”

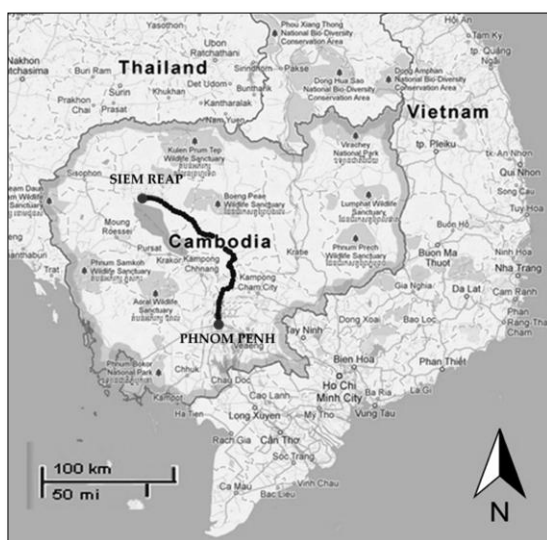


Figure 4 - Map of CAMBODIA, Google Map

¹ Vincent, Jr., Frank. *The Wonderful Ruins of Cambodia, Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York*. Vol. 10. N.p.: American Geographical Society, 1878. Print.

² Pagoda – Khmer word for Buddhist monasteries

HISTORY OF CAMBODIA

Our journey in Cambodia was like time travelling into the past. We were transported back into the land of myths, legends, warriors, kings, monks, palaces and temples previously known as *Campudia*.³ As we walked on the streets of Cambodia we could not avoid noticing the impressions of the golden era of the Angkor Wat temple (the largest Hindu temple in the world situated in Siem Reap), the smiling faces of the Buddha and the ugly memories of the civil war and the genocide. To understand this cultural blend of different influences, specifically Indian that has resulted in these human creations, it became mandatory for us to have an overview of the vast history of the country of Cambodia.

A brief look at Cambodian history explains the reason for the religious diversity in this region - Hinduism, Buddhism, Animism, Islam and Christianity.⁴ Hinduism and Buddhism were brought into the country due to a process called *Indianisation* which began in the 1st AD and continued till the 5th century AD.⁵

Legend says that Cambodia as a region came into existence due to the interactions between different cultural forces in which India played a significant role. The story goes like this- An Indian Brahman named *Kaundinya* and the princess of a dragon king once met in the waters of Indian Ocean. This short interaction culminated into a marriage. The dragon king drank up all the waters of his land and presented this piece

³ Bastian, A. *A Visit to the Ruined Cities and Buildings of Cambodia*, *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*. Vol. 35. N.p.: Wiley on Behalf of The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers), 1865. Print.

⁴ Chouléan, Ang. *The Place of Animism within Popular Buddhism in Cambodia the Example of the Monastery*, *Asian Folklore Studies*. 1st ed. Vol. 47. N.p.: Nanzan University, 1988. Print.

⁵ Murray, Bennett. "The Indianisation of Ancient Cambodia." *South East Asian History*. N.p., 22 Dec. 2010. Web.
<<http://suite101.com/article/the-indianization-of-ancient-cambodia-a322347>>.



of land to Kaundinya as dowry. This new kingdom was named as *Kambuja* now known as Cambodia.⁶

The interactions between the traders, merchants and holy men introduced Indian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, Sanskrit and Tamil languages and scriptures like Ramayana and Mahabharata to the Khmers⁷. According to Chinese documents, the birth of Cambodia was said to have begun in the costal kingdom of Funan in 1st century AD.⁸ This kingdom was a vital port in the trade route between India and China. After the Funan era (1 – 6th century AD), Cambodia saw the Chenla period(6th to 8th century AD) , which was marked by the coming together of the small provinces ruled by autocratic kings who followed the hierarchical caste system borrowed from India. It is here that the spread of Indian culture reached the interiors of Cambodia blending in with the pre-existing Khmer culture.

It was at this time that India's religious, royal and written traditions began to coalesce with the Khmer culture to become a cultural entity in its own right. This process was strengthened with the advent of Indian rule of *Devaraja*⁹ Jayavarman II in the 802AD marking it as the birth of the golden Angkor era. Chinese records show that Cambodia embraced the worship of Hindu deities like Shiva and Vishnu and even Buddhism. The *linga* (the phallic totem) became the focus of rituals, the emblem of the kings and the Angkorian cult of the god-kings. In 1125 A.D, Cambodia saw the commencement of the construction of the magnificent Angkor Wat by king Suryavarnam II, a devotee of

⁶ Chandler, David P., and Leonard C. Overton. "Cambodia". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 2013. Web. 14 Feb. 2013
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/90520/Cambodia/129475/History>>.

⁸ "History of Cambodia." *University of the Nations, Cambodia* (n.d.): n. pag. YWAM International. Web. 14 Feb. 2013.
<<http://uofncambodia.org/about/history-of-cambodia/>>.

⁹ Sanskrit term for god-king



Hindu deity, Vishnu. However, 1219 A.D saw the decline of the Angkorian era after which Cambodia fell into the hands of foreign rulers.¹⁰



Figure 5 - Angkor Wat temple at a glance.

¹⁰ Andrew. "The Modern History of Cambodia." *Gandhara*. N.p., 2000. Web. 14 Feb. 2013

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As we had to travel across countries to get to Cambodia, a pre-field field trip was not possible. Instead, we collected secondary data in other forms. We read up on the art forms through whichever books and Internet sites of traditional shadow puppetry and Apsara Dance associations we were able to acquire. The Internet was where we found most of our pre-field information about these art forms. But this information was still limited. There seemed to be a lack of secondary data available in the libraries and therefore we knew that we would only be able to acquire this information as from primary sources when we went there. So we focused on developing our contacts in the field of Apsara dance and Shadow puppetry by speaking to experts in India and Cambodia.

Our main barrier throughout our entire project has been language. We realized that we could not obtain a lot of information by speaking to people via email (as they spoke simple, broken English) therefore we needed to meet them and have a translator present for most of our interviews. So, we focused more on setting up interviews and appointments along with making sure a translator would be with us as often as possible.

While in Cambodia, we visited 2 Apsara Dance associations and 2 Shadow Puppetry associations along with a cultural village across 2 different cities. We also visited Angkor Thom district where a translator explained the stories of the Hindu temples as well as the historical and mythical stories carved on the temple walls. Even though



none of us spoke Khmer; translators were very expensive; hence we tried to use them only when absolutely needed.

We decided to use Qualitative methods of research as opposed to Quantitative methods. We focused on interviews as our main form of acquiring data. Most of these interviews were documented via voice recorder or video camera. Due to the fact that none of us spoke Khmer, the type of questions we could ask had to be very basic in nature. We could not go into as much depth as we would have liked.

As these art forms are a great part of tourism, we found that we really had to probe to find out what was really going on inside the art form as people had a tendency to exaggerate how great it was. They were reluctant to give us a realistic view of the predicaments of the art form. This seemed like our second biggest drawback. To them, we were outsiders and they were apprehensive to talk to us. We were not able to build relationships as much as we would've liked because of the lack of time and the language barrier. In fact, in a few places, we were even turned away.

We also used observation as a form of collecting data. This was because one of our objectives was to compare these art forms to Indian art forms as well as see the Indian Influence on them. As the Khmer people were not sure what part of their art forms had been influenced by India, it was up to us to observe these similarities and differences and document them.



Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

As there isn't a vast amount of Information in English on the folk arts of Cambodian Shadow Puppetry and Apsara Dance, we focused on books which gave a detailed description of Indian influence on Cambodia folk arts particularly. We have discussed and analyzed these books and incorporated them into our report.

The first book that we referred to was entitled **Shadow puppet stencils**. We were able to acquire this book only because of Mr. Mr. Phoeung Kompheak. It contained stencils of over a hundred and sixty shadow puppets along with the names of the characters they represented in English and Khmer language. It also contained a basic explanation of the scene being portrayed in the puppet. We were also very interested to see the little notes made by Mr. Mr. Phoeung Kompheak himself on random pages on a few Shadow Puppet stencils. Length markings, Breath markings, some were even gridded in pencil. This book was useful in helping us understand how a stencil went from paper onto the leather cow skin to be carved.

This book was also useful in explaining to us certain aspects about Cambodian Shadow theatre that we would not have been able to see if we had just looked at a few puppets. The fact that the same puppet is used to depict different characters was an interesting piece of information derived from his book. A description of each puppet and the scene it enacts is given which helped us to understand which puppet is used in which scene to depict what. This book is a good source of information with regard to shape and description of various types of Sbaek Thom puppets and we have used some of this information in our report.



The second piece of literature we studied was excerpts from a book called '***Sbek Thom, Khmer Shadow Theatre***', *Khmer version edited by Thavro Phim and sos Kem, English Translation by Sos Kem.*

This book was very useful in giving us detailed information about Cambodian Shadow puppets. This information ranged from the history and evolution of the puppets, the types of puppets, the types of instruments used, how these puppets are made and themes of the performances. This information was very useful to us as we were able to use it as a backbone to our study until we were able to clarify and cross check this information with the interviews we conducted. We were able to adopt a lot of information from this book, as it gave insight into aspects we would not have been able to find otherwise, from interviews (due to lack of time), internet, etc

The third book we referred to was '***Beyond the Apsara- Celebrating dance in Cambodia***', **Stephanie Burridge**. This book gave us a detailed description about Cambodian Apsara dance. The basic premise of this book was to explain how Cambodian Apsara dance was almost abolished during the Khmer Rouge and understand how it is slowly recovering and becoming a popular art form after the fall of the Khmer rouge.

This book explains stories of different women who are trying to revive the art of Apsara dance in Cambodia. The author gives us a lot of information about the past, present and future situations of Apsara Dance. It is from his book that we were able to acquire information about one of Cambodia's most famous Apsara Dancers- Princess Buppa Devi.

It also explains how the Cambodian Apsara Dance is flourishing and surpassing borders. Each Apsara dancer's story is different and unique giving us different pieces of information that we did not previously know about the art form. As we were only be able to interview a limited number of dancers from a certain part of Cambodia, these interviews helped us in understanding the psyche of Cambodia Apsara Dancers all over the country and



across generations.

The author was able to give us invaluable information about the process of becoming an Apsara dancer, the themes of different shows and the hardships faced by the dancers. As language was a great barrier for us, this book was very helpful in giving us information about the aspects of Apsara dance we could not find out for ourselves.

As we were able to interview limited number of artists over a span of 8 days, these books were very helpful to us. We have incorporated the information from these books along with the information we received from interviews with artists and other secondary sources.



Chapter 3

CAMBODIAN SHADOW PUPPETRY



Today if we happen to ask any individual about how life would have been without any sort of audio-visual entertainment, we would get a non-verbal look that emanates how dimwitted the question was to begin with. But even though the question sounds dimwitted, it does make you think, doesn't it? Televisions and movies arrived somewhere in the early 19th Century, right? So what did people do before that?

Amongst the many forms of entertainment before the television, one of them was puppetry. Puppetry is a unique blend of music, drama and motion. It grabs the attention of the viewer just like a feature film does today. Amongst the many different forms of puppetry, we decided to concentrate on shadow puppetry, as it is famous and celebrated in Cambodia.

According to a myth, Shadow puppetry started when the wife of a Chinese emperor passed away. He missed her a lot and desperately wanted her back. At this time a person saw two little girls playing with their dolls under a light. The shadows of the dolls created by the light made the dolls look real. Inspired by this idea, he made some cotton puppet dolls, painted them and brought them to life from a behind an

illuminated screen of cloth. The emperor was extremely thrilled by this dance of puppets as it gave life to the memories of his lost wife and thus the art form, from then on was supported by him.¹¹

Shadow puppetry is considered to be one of the most sophisticated art forms in the field of puppetry. For any puppet show to be successful, it needs good puppeteer, good music, good puppets and the probably the most important of all, a steady story or a theme. A good puppeteer might grab the viewers' attention for a limited period of time but a great story will exemplify this effect and take it to a completely different level.

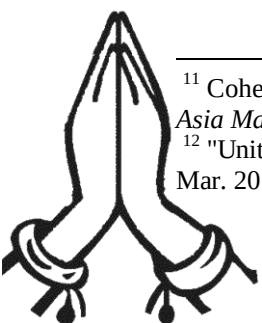
Shadow puppet shows across South East Asia have varied themes. Some themes have stories that are related to daily affairs, and issues, while also there are stories that refer to ancient mythological scriptures.¹²

Historical Overview:

In Cambodia, Shadow puppetry is one of the most traditional forms of storytelling. This art form still exists today and is very popular. Cambodian Shadow Theater is one such art form that reflects and influences the culture of Cambodia. To an extent, it does represent the religious identity of the Cambodian people. These performances are usually scenes enacted from Reamker (the Cambodian Ramayana) and are very important as they pay homage to the gods as well as give people a way to communicate with the gods through these performances. Each performance begins with a tribute given to different gods. These gods can be from a Hindu or Buddhist background. This fact shows emphasizes on the confluence of culture and religion in Cambodia.¹³

¹¹ Cohen, Alvin p. *Documentation Relating to the Origins of the Chinese Shadow-Puppet Theater, Asia Major*. Vol. 13. N.p.: Academia Sinica, 2000. Print. Ser. 3.

¹² "Unit 2: The Beauty of Shadow Puppets." *Unit 2: The Beauty of Shadow Puppets*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Mar. 2013.



Shadow puppetry in Cambodia originated due to the influence of the art form through its neighboring countries, i.e. Thailand, Vietnam & Indonesia. The myth that circulated around about how shadow puppetry began in Cambodia is this: - During the Angkorian era, the royal households had carpets made of cow flesh. One day, the maids of the household decided to replace them, as they were getting old. So they hung them up against a light. As they had been walked on for years and years, there were many holes in them. It was these holes that made an interesting pattern on the cowhide, which looked very nice once held up against the light. It is said that these maids/ housekeepers developed the idea to make shadow puppets from this incident, so they cut characters from the Cambodian Ramayana out of the carpets and then used those characters to tell stories.¹⁴

Shadow puppetry in Cambodia has many stories that are related to ancient Indian myths. Considering that Cambodia has a lot of Hindu Influence, a major part of these stories are related to the Ramayana and related myths. During our field research we noticed that a lot of figures portrayed by the puppets were Hindu gods such as Rama, Indra and Brahma. At first sight, no Indian would be able to notice this relation as they looked a little different but to our utter shock when our guide described them as Gods, we suddenly saw the resemblance. From this, we realized how ancient mythological stories are adjusted and modified in different countries to suit that particular country's culture.

Cambodian Shadow Theatre stories are performed for audiences, weddings and cultural ceremonies but the artists make their livelihood mostly from performing for

¹³ "Sovanna Phum - Khmer Art Performance." *Shadow Puppet Theatre*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2013.

¹⁴ Radhakrishna, Shobana, and Asha Gupta. "Shadow Puppetry." N.p., 1998. Web. 15 Mar. 2013. <<http://ignca.nic.in/bibsp001.htm>>.

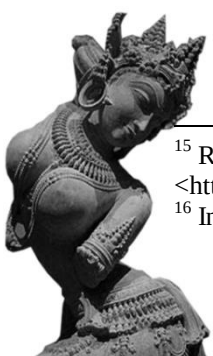


tourists.¹⁵ We visited 2 Shadow puppet associations in Cambodia - Sovanna Phum Arts Association and Artists association of Cambodia. We spoke to 2 important experts in the field. One of them was Mr Mann Kosal who worked at Sovanna Phum and had been in the shadow puppet making business for over 20 years. He is an artist who makes stencils for new puppets. It was Mr. Kosal who helped us out and was one of the two people who gave us all the invaluable information we received.

Mr. Phoeung Kompheak, our other contact was a French teacher who is a part of the Artists Association of Cambodia. He was very helpful and welcoming, answering all our questions patiently and explaining everything to us in detail. It was his Association that put up a special performance just for us to see. The performance was beautiful. It was a Sbaek Touch performance and had a full Pin peat orchestra as well, making it a very memorable experience.

Process of making Shadow Puppets¹⁶:

Shadow Puppets are made from leather. One major reason for this is because leather gives the puppets longevity and the stability needed for performing. As shadow puppetry is done from behind a screen, the puppets do not need to be three-dimensional figures. To prove how durable they can actually be, Mr. Mann Kosal showed us a 600 year old puppet made by his ancestors. This puppet convinced us that the puppet making process ensures that they stay durable for centuries.



¹⁵ Radhakrishna, Shobana, and Asha Gupta. "Shadow Puppetry." N.p., 1998. Web. 15 Mar. 2013. <<http://ignca.nic.in/bibsp001.htm>>.

¹⁶ Information received from Interviews with Mr. Mann Kosal and Mr. Thompeak.



Figure 6 - A 600 year old puppet at Sovanna Phum Art Foundation

Mr. Mann Kosal also explained the process of making shadow puppets and even showed us a few puppets that were currently being made. As we could not stay long enough to watch the whole process of Puppet making, we were able to take pictures of the process in steps as well as take candid pictures of the puppets currently being made. Below are all the pictures of the process of Cambodian Puppet making conveyed to us by the Expert, Mr. Kosal himself!

The process of Puppet making from start to finish.¹⁷

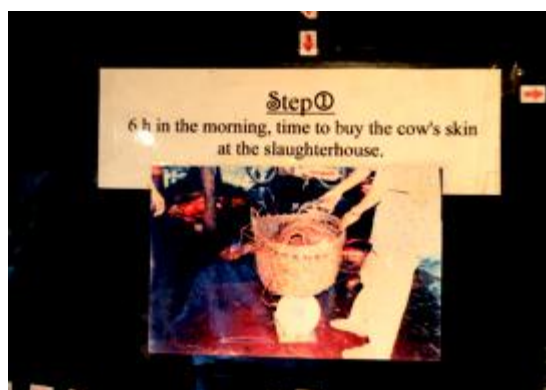


Figure 8.1 - Step 1



Figure 4.2 - Step 2

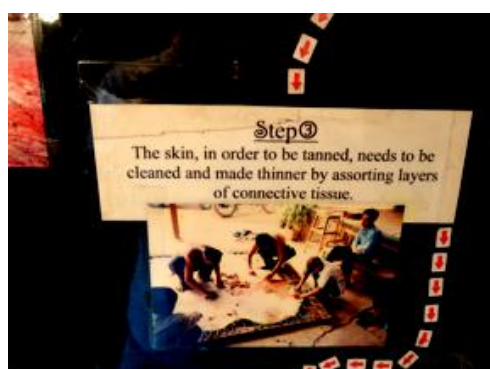


Figure 4.3 - Step 3



Figure 4.4 - Step 4



Figure 4.5 - Step 5



Figure 7 - Step 6

¹⁷ Pictures taken from Sovanna Phum Art foundation, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

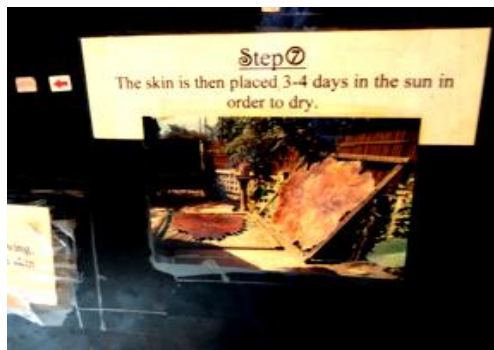


Figure 4.7 - Step 7



Figure 4.8- Step 8



Figure 4.9- Step 9



Figure 4.10 - Step 10



Figure 4.11 - Step 11



Figure 4.12 - Step 12



Figure 4.13 - Step 13



Figure 4.14 - Step 14

The shadow puppets in Cambodia are made generally from cowhide. This hide is first fitted on an iron frame, which stretches the hide to its fullest extent.



Figure 5 - A cowhide kept for drying.

This process is very crucial as the hide dries like this and all the moisture is removed. It becomes extremely thin and even. The evenness helps in making the puppet translucent. This is important because the most translucent part can become the head so that it looks better in the light. This stretched hide once fixed on the frame is kept in the sun for approximately three days. While the hide is left to dry, a lot of organic chemical thinners are applied to the hide to make it smooth and easier to cut. A brown natural dye is also put on it to make it look better once behind or in front of the screen. It is this colour that makes them glow from behind the screen and look more translucent.

The main design of any puppet is first made on a paper stencil. It is then placed on the dried hide. Mr. Mann Kosal was a man we met who drew the stencils that would later be stuck onto the cowhide. He was very talented. Each stencil is hand drawn with a

pencil on a piece of paper. This paper is then stuck onto the puppets. These pictures also have the stencils for where the holes should be made on the puppet and where it should be outlined in black dye. Below is a picture of a puppet in the making. Carving is being done on top of the stencil. Later on, the stencil will be peeled off as it has been simply stuck on with cello tape.



Figure 6 - Shadow puppet in making.

An important part of a shadow puppet is that it has a lot holes and reliefs in it. So when the puppet is placed under a light, the shadow of the puppet makes a unique image on the screen. To give this effect the stencils are made with holes and reliefs in them. The dried hide is placed beneath the stencil and then holes are carved out from the leather.

After the puppet is cut out, a black natural dye is used to outline certain parts of the puppet giving it more definition. We saw puppets that were animals like elephants, horses, butterflies, etc. and puppets of people as well as large puppets of scenes from the Ramayana. The Sbaek Touch puppets (small puppets) were also attached to sticks and the arms were separated and re attached with thread and wire so that they can walk

and talk behind the curtain.

Below is a picture of the contraption used to make this puppet man's mouth move so from behind the screen it looks like he is actually talking.



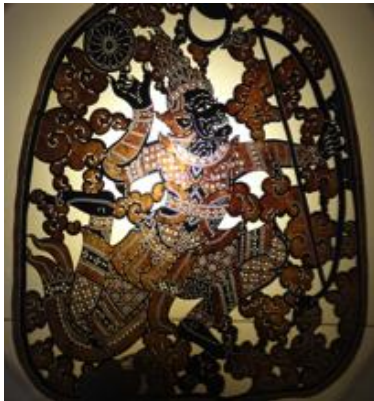
Figure 7 - An image showing the working of the puppet.

Once this process is complete, the puppet is ready to be used. But as the image is cast on the screen, we need some sort of handle to hold up the puppet in a way that the puppeteer's image is not cast on the screen as well. These handles are normally made up of bamboo sticks attached to the puppets. The puppeteers hold them from below. The thickness of these bamboo sticks depends on the size of the puppet as they directly affect the stability of the puppet.

Types of Puppetry:

Cambodian Shadow puppetry is decided on the basis of the size of the puppet. The three main types are:

Sbaek Thom



Sbaek Por



Sbaek Touch



Sbaek Thom

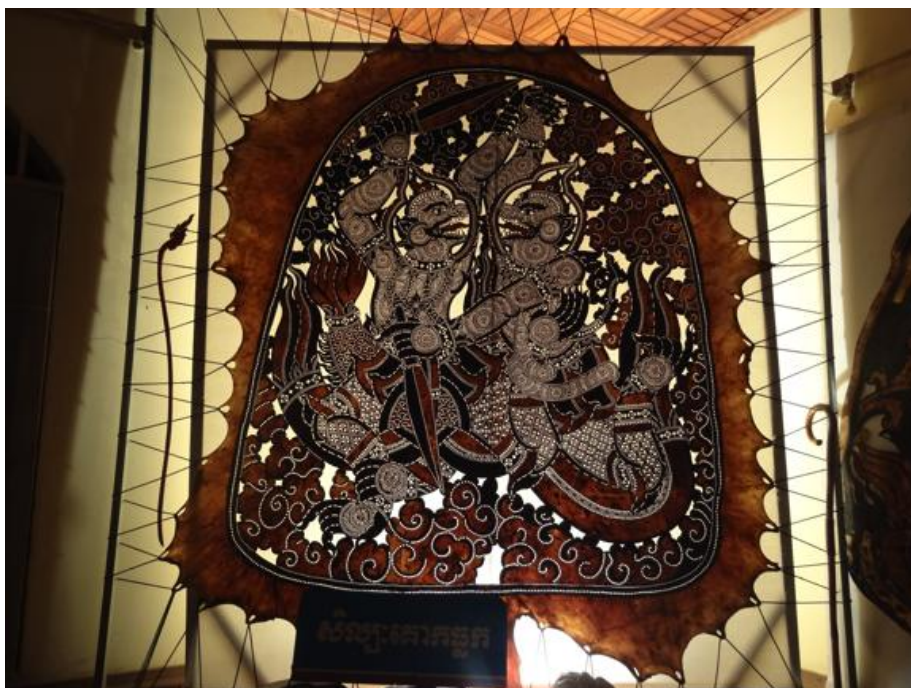


Figure 8 - A Sbaek Thom puppet.

The word 'Sbaek' means leather and 'Thom' - large. It is the Royal form of Cambodian puppetry. Also known as Nang Sbaek, The puppets usually are as large as the entire cow skin and can often weigh between 10-20 kilos.¹⁸ Each puppet depicts one or more characters and does not move its arms and legs separately like the smaller puppets. Sbaek Thom puppets have no articulated limbs. Along with their Thai cousin, Nang Yai, this form of puppetry is very unique.

In Sbaek Touch performances, the puppeteers stand behind the screen, but in Sbaek Thom performances the puppeteers and their puppets move from behind the screen to the front. They become completely visible to the audience and perform in the space between the audience and the screen. These puppeteers use their strength to move these puppets over their heads, creating shadows on the screen behind them. But, they are not exactly shadows. They are more like silhouettes that are being viewed by the audience. There are approximately 160 puppets in a full Sbaek Thom set.¹⁹ The puppets represent characters of Cambodian folk tales as well as the stories of the Cambodian Ramayana. Each show will have a few stories in it. In order to perform the entire Ramayana, it takes a long time sometimes even more than a day; this feat has not been tried by the artists since a very long time.

The show traditionally was performed in the open air using a screen as large as 10m by 5m and lit by a pile of burning coconut husks placed on a table behind it.²⁰

Nowadays, a bright halogen light has replaced the coconut husks. The audience is free to move between the front of the stage and the back. An interesting fact about Sbaek

¹⁸ Radhakrishna, Shobana, and Asha Gupta. "Shadow Puppetry." N.p., 1998. Web. 15 Mar. 2013. <<http://ignca.nic.in/bibsp001.htm>>.

¹⁹ Radhakrishna, Shobana, and Asha Gupta. "Shadow Puppetry." N.p., 1998. Web. 15 Mar. 2013. <<http://ignca.nic.in/bibsp001.htm>>.

²⁰ Chen, Fan Pen. *Shadow Theaters of the World, Asian Folklore Studies*. 1st ed. Vol. 62. N.p.: Nanzan University, 2003. Print.



Thom performances is that there are no words in these performances, only action. In the smaller shadow puppet performances, there are dialogues but not in Sbaek Thom. Only action, light and shadows are used to tell these remarkable stories.²¹

Sbaek Thom Puppets are for sale but are very expensive. Each puppet can take anywhere from a week to 14 days to be made. Their starting price is usually well above 200 dollars and it gets higher and higher based on the level on intricacy and time spent on each puppet.²²

As we were not able to see a Sbaek Thom performance, all the information we received were through the interviews and videos we conducted. We did however get to see how they were made, painted, carved, carried and even a small demonstration was done to show us how they are used in a performance.

In the recent years of turmoil, the Sbaek Thom style has been threatened by extinction.²³ Following 1980, entire Sbaek Thom sets had to be remade by finding and fixing scattered incomplete sets salvaged from different locations in Cambodia. Through the efforts of individuals such as Kosal Mann, Sbaek Thom has managed to survive, and has recently been inscribed by UNESCO as a treasure of intangible and oral culture.

Thankfully, we were able to bring back a bit of this culture in the form of three puppets. One Sbaek Thom and two Sbaek touch.

²¹ Chen, Fan Pen. *Shadow Theaters of the World, Asian Folklore Studies*. 1st ed. Vol. 62. N.p.: Nanzan University, 2003. Print.

²² Information received after confirming with Mr. Mann Kosal about the price of puppets.

²³ Radhakrishna, Shobana, and Asha Gupta. "Shadow Puppetry." N.p., 1998. Web. 15 Mar. 2013. <<http://ignca.nic.in/bibsp001.htm>>.



Sbaek Touch



Figure 9- Sbaek Touch puppets.

Sbaek Touch (literally small leather) is also known as Ayang or Nang Thalong and resembles the other shadow styles of Asia. These puppets are much smaller than Sbaek Thom and are without a frame. These popular puppets have articulated limbs and moving jaws. The characters are drawn from both the Ramayana and contemporary life. The plays are traditionally performed using a screen approx. 4m by 2m, with the puppeteers seated behind. Below is a picture of Sbaek Thom performance where the puppets have moving limbs and you can see the artists sitting at the bottom.



Figure 10 - A Sbaek Thom performance from behind the curtains.

As with Sbaek Thom, the Sbaek Touch performance is accompanied by an orchestra

called Pin Peat.²⁴ The Sbaek touch performances have themes that have a religious or mythical background but do also incorporate everyday life. The stories can be everyday folk tales or scenes from the Ramayana. Even though there is usually a background storyline, there is plenty of room for improvisation to add humor, satire and drama. These stories are enjoyed by a wider group of people and they are also more accessible than the Sbaek Touch performances. It is unknown when the Sbaek Touch style first appeared in Cambodia, although records indicate it originated in the village of Kampong Tayong in the Siem Reap province.

Sbaek Por



Figure 11 - Sbaek Por puppets.

Sbaek Por was created in the Chaktomuk period (1859-1904) with the support of Queen Sisowath Kosamak Neari Rath. These puppets are smaller than Sbaek Thom but larger than Sbaek Touch. They differ from the rest as they are not carved in as much detail because they are colorfully painted. Their characters are more contemporary like

²⁴ Explained in detail on page no. 56

the people we see everyday. The characters are colorfully painted and usually played with in the daytime. These puppets do not have attachable limbs and their carvings are not very intricate. It is thought that these puppets were more commonly used to represent people rather than Gods as their poses are more lifelike than those of the Sbaek Thom. Although revived with the help of UNESCO in 2001, there are currently no performances of Sbaek Por.

Comparison with similar Indian forms and analysis:

Art forms are like a long voyage, they travel. They travel through time, space and most importantly, in this instance, through cultures. Shadow puppetry is one such art form that has crossed borders to sustain itself. In India, this art form is called Chaaya natak (Shadow theatre)²⁵. The origins of shadow puppetry in India lie in Gujarat from where it migrated to Maharashtra. A part of the clan then migrated to the south of India where the art flourished due to patronage from the royals.

Shadow puppetry in India and Cambodia has a lot in common. From the themes of the stories performed to the different ways the puppets look, there are many differences between them. However, the major differences that exist between them are language and the features of the puppets.

Indian Shadow puppetry today majorly exists in south India in the states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Shadow Puppets in India are also made from leather, owing to stability. But in India the puppeteers are of the Shudra class which is one of the lowest tiers of the caste system. According to the scriptures, handling leather is considered a sin therefore no members of the higher class would handle the

²⁵ Roy, Anurupa. "Not Only with Strings Attached Puppets." *Heritage India* 1.4 (2009): 76-85. Print.



puppets.²⁶

In India, the stories are mostly parts of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. There are also small tales from the Jatakas and the Chitrakathas.²⁷ This also is extremely similar to Cambodian shadow puppetry because their major theme is also the Ramayana. One main difference is that a lot of names are different and so are the appearances of the figures as they have to match the different styles and appearances of the characters in the Reamker (Cambodian Ramayana) in Cambodia.

There are three main types of shadow puppetries in India:

Togalu Gombeyatta, Karnataka-

The shadow theatre of Karnataka is known as Togalu Gombeyatta. These puppets are mostly small in size. The puppets however differ in size according to the social status of the people the theatre is being performed for. For instance, large sized puppets are used to entertain kings and religious people and smaller size for common people or servants.

Tholu Bommalata, Andhra Pradesh-

Tholu Bommalata, Andhra Pradesh's shadow theatre has the richest and strongest tradition. The puppets are large in size and have jointed waist, shoulders, elbows and knees. They are coloured on both sides. Hence, these puppets throw coloured shadows on the screen. The music is dominantly influenced by the classical music of the region and the themes are drawn from Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas.²⁸

²⁶ Radhakrishna, Shobana, and Asha Gupta. "Shadow Puppetry." N.p., 1998. Web. 15 Mar. 2013. <<http://ignca.nic.in/bibsp001.htm>>.

²⁷ Radhakrishna, Shobana, and Asha Gupta. "Shadow Puppetry." N.p., 1998. Web. 15 Mar. 2013. <<http://ignca.nic.in/bibsp001.htm>>.

²⁸ Chen, Fan Pen. *Shadow Theaters of the World, Asian Folklore Studies*. 1st ed. Vol. 62. N.p.: Nanzan University, 2003. Print.



Ravanachhaya, Orissa-

The most theatrically exciting is the Ravanachhaya of Orissa. The puppets are in one piece and have no joints. They are not coloured, hence throw opaque shadows on the screen. The manipulation requires great dexterity, since there are no joints. The puppets are made of deer skin and are conceived in bold dramatic poses. Apart from human and animal characters, many props such as trees, mountains, chariots, etc. are also used. Although, Ravanachhaya puppets are smaller in size-the largest not more than two feet in length, have no jointed limbs, they create very sensitive and lyrical shadows.²⁹

Comparison and Analysis

If we now compare these styles with the aforementioned Cambodian styles, there are a lot of similarities. Even the Cambodian styles are divided based in size. Except for the last Indian type of Ravanachaya, all the other styles match Cambodian Styles. One more interesting fact in Indian shadow puppetry is that the same puppet can be used to represent different characters. A single shadow puppet doubles up for other roles such as Laxmana in the *Ramayana* coming back or as Arjuna of the *Mahabharata*. Again, the same epic character may be represented through several puppets according to the story or the situation, such as the flying Hanumana, gradually getting smaller, approaching the other coast of the sea, or the royal Rama being different from the Rama in exile. The back-stage arrangement of the puppets is always sequential and new puppets are inducted along with a ritual. There are different animal characters as well, apart from the properties like trees, chariots, bows and arrows, and thrones. Each regional style has its own stock characters to create comic

²⁹ Roy, Anurupa. "Not Only with Strings Attached Puppets." *Heritage India* 1.4 (2009): 76-85. Print.



situations.

Ravanachhayain Orissa is similar to Sbaek Touch in the way in which other than main characters, a lot of trees and animals, birds, etc. are also used to give a background or scenery to the scene. These puppets are also small in size and remind us of the Sbaek touch puppets of Cambodia.

Tholu Bommalata, Of Andhra Pradesh also has Similarities to Cambodian Shadow puppetry, to be more specific, Sbaek Thom. Even though Sbaek Thom puppets do not have joints, they are still very large. But the only difference is that they are not painted in bright colors whereas the shadow puppets of Andhra Pradesh are. The only Cambodian puppets that have bright colors are Sbaek Por and they are rarely used these days.

We were lucky enough to be able to compare a Cambodian shadow puppetry show by Mr. Mr. Phoeung Kompheak's troupe in Phnom Penh Cambodia and an Indian Shadow puppetry show by M.V.Bhaskar's troupe in Pune. After watching both these shows, an influence of Indian traditions on Cambodia could clearly be seen. The stories which are the backbone of the performance are mostly taken from Ramayana or Reamker – Cambodian version. The Indian shadow puppet performance that we witnessed in India has a lot of similarities with the Cambodian Sbaek Por version.

The Indian shadow puppetry show depicted Ranganath Ramayana, which is a Telagu version of Ramayana. It was interesting to know that within India itself we have around 300 different versions of Ramayana.³⁰ The show had selected certain scenes from Ramayana, particularly known as 'Sundarakandam'

³⁰ Interview with M.V. Bhaskar. He is a passionate preserver of Indian murals and has been working with Indian Foundation for Arts on projects like 'Moving Murals'. He studies Indian shadow puppetry to support his research in murals.



which tells us the story of Hanuman flying to Lanka and bringing back the message of Sita's³¹ well being.

Apart from differences in language and music style, both the shadow puppetry shows were similar. Another major difference was the style of the puppets; the designs on the puppets were different in both the cases. This difference was so stark that it was difficult for us to identify the characters like Lord Rama or Ravana unless our guide explained to us. Yet, apart from this aspect, the Indian influence was stark because of the stories and characters. The identity of the characters remained the same, only their physical appearances changed. This is because the stories and characters have adapted to the Cambodian culture and are represented in a Cambodian style.



Figure 12- A villager in Indian shadow puppet.³²



Figure 13 - A villager in Cambodian shadow puppet.³³

M.V. Bhaskar's troupe is a group of Maharashtrian puppeteers who had been following puppetry as their livelihood for the last 18 generations. We saw that even in Cambodia, shadow puppetry was a tradition passed down from one generation to another. It is only now that people have started learning the art of shadow puppetry out of interest.

³¹Lord Rama's wife who was abducted by Ravana.

³² Image from the performance by Mr. M.V Bhaskar's troupe, Pune.

³³ Image from the performance by Mr. Thompeak's troupe, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Chapter 4

APSARA DANCE

"Performance in and of itself is an offering to the gods" ³⁴



Figure 14 – Apsara dancers

Historical Overview:

Cambodia's Apsara dance is one of the traditional Khmer dances of Cambodia which has been an important part of Khmer culture for over a millennium. It is known as 'Robam Tep Apsara' in Khmer, which literally means Dance of the Apsara Divinities.³⁵ For Cambodians, it is not just entertainment but is essential to life and for

³⁴ Miller, Terry E. Dance in Cambodia, Review. 3rd ed. Vol. 57. N.p.4: Kent State University, March 2001. Print.

³⁵ Descutner, Janet W. World of Dance: Asian Dance. 2nd ed. New York: Infobase, 2010. Print.

the identity and maintenance of what is called Khmer culture³⁶. This dance is considered to be spiritual and sacred. These dance performances are usually preceded by rituals called *sampeah kru*. These rituals are actually a practice where the participants ask the gods, local spirits and the spirits of the deceased dance masters to guide the artists in an appropriate manner.³⁷

An Apsara (also called Apsarasa) is a female spirit of the clouds and waters in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. The central role of the Apsaras, the heavenly dancing maidens and consorts of the kings is not just that of providing entertainment but to act as the mediators between man and the gods. People used to consider the dancers to be living Apsaras, thus the dance form is considered to be sacred and connected to all the Khmer culture's religious traditions like Animism, Hinduism and Buddhism. They are also supposed to please the gods so that they may provide them with rain and fertility on behalf of the kings. According to some sources, the dancers are believed to be the Goddesses of Fertility.³⁸

After viewing documentaries and live performances of Apsara dances in Cambodia, we were really curious to trace the origins of this art form. It had influences of Indian culture and religion not just in its presentation but also in the ritualistic aspect of it. The Sanskrit name 'Apsara' is of Indian origin, which literally means the heavenly bodies

³⁶ *Cambodians developed a unique Khmer belief from the synthesis of indigenous animistic beliefs and the Indian religions of Buddhism and Hinduism. Indian culture and civilization, including its language and arts reached mainland Southeast Asia around the 1st century A.D.*

³⁷ Miller, Terry E. *Dance in Cambodia*, Review. 3rd ed. Vol. 57. N.p.12: Kent State University, March 2001. Print.

³⁸ Descutner, Janet W. *World of Dance: Asian Dance*. 2nd ed. New York: Infobase, 2010. Print.



or nymphs, and celestial dancers who were sent on earth to act as messengers between the mortals and the gods.³⁹

This traditional Khmer dance is also known as ‘dance drama’ as it is not just about graceful and beautiful movements but is also supposed to convey different messages, in this case between the kings and the gods. This tradition also draws influences from the cultures of Thailand and Java in the form of its music and movement patterns.⁴⁰

Originally known as the royal dance in the courts of the kings of Cambodia, the dance today is a medium of entertainment for the commoners and tourists. The soft, precise movements that we see today in form of the Apsara dance went through a revival period through its history.

To begin with the origin of this art form, it is considered that this art form drew upon inspiration from the sculptures of the Apsaras on the walls of the Angkorian and pre-Angkorian temples. A visit to the Angkor Wat temple gave us an idea about the legacy of this art form and provided us with valid evidence about India’s influence on Cambodian folk art – Apsara dance (scholars have found more than 1860 carved Apsaras on the temple walls of the 12th century monument).⁴¹ This statement is justified by the fact that the magnificent Angkor Wat temple (the biggest Hindu temple in the world built as a form of offering to Lord Shiva by the king) was built by Indian ruler Suryavarnam II in 12 century AD.⁴²

³⁹ Interviews with artists, museum guides

⁴⁰ Cravath, Paul. *Earth in Flower, The Divine Mystery of the Cambodian Dance Drama*. First Edition ed. N.p.: Data ASIA, 2008. Print.

⁴¹ Descutner, Janet W. *World of Dance: Asian Dance*. 2nd ed. New York: Infobase, 2010. Print.

⁴² Chandler, David P., and Leonard C. Overton. "Cambodia". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 2013. Web. 14 Feb. 2013

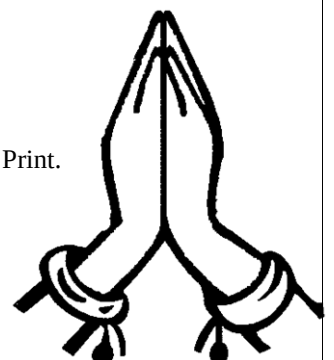




Figure 15 –Relief from Angkor Wat temple depicting Apsara dancers

Along with the similarity in the name itself, even the role of the Apsara dancers is similar to that of the Apsaras mentioned in Indian mythology. We have illustrations of Apsaras like Menaka and Urvashi in Indian mythology who have a similar nature and role played by the Apsara dancers in Cambodia.⁴³

This art form has gone through a series of ruptures in the traditions over centuries, which also makes it impossible to trace the actual source of the tradition. The statement that Apsara dance drew its inspiration from the Angkor Wat temple is a speculation and one of the many theories put forth by the experts.⁴⁴

Though it seems to have been inspired from Angkorian art and themes, we cannot know for sure because this tradition has been broken due to historical and political

⁴³ Aggarwal, Vineet. ""Menaka - the Apsara"" *Indian Mythology*. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.elfwood.com/~vinnie/Menaka-the-Apsara.3341733.html>>.

⁴⁴ Chandler, David P., and Leonard C. Overton. "Cambodia". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 2013. Web. 14 Feb. 2013

disturbances. The traditional Apsara dance that we see today has changed and evolved along the lines of history. The dance that we saw in our few days of stay in Cambodia was developed in the 18th to 20th century; beginning with a mid -19th century revival championed by King Ang Duong (reigned from 1841 to 1869). Subsequently in the mid- 20th century, the kings (at that time) and Khmer royals gave patronage to this art form especially Queen Sisowath Kossamak Nearireach (lovingly called the ‘Father of Cambodia ’King Norodom Sihanouk’s mother).⁴⁵

These kings and royals fostered resurgence in the study and development of Khmer dance but also helped it in becoming an art form of and for the masses. They popularized it amongst the common people and removed the symbol of it being a royal art form. Queen Sisowath Kossamak trained her own granddaughter Princess Bopha Devi in this art form from early on in her childhood who then became the face of Khmer traditional dance in the 1950s and 60s.



Figure 16 - Princess Bopha Devi

⁴⁵ Chandler, David P., and Leonard C. Overton. "Cambodia". *Encyclopedia Britannica*. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 2013. Web. 14 Feb. 2013

Many of the traditional dance performances that we see today were refined between the 1940s and 60s under the patronage of the Queen herself at the Conservatory of Performing Arts and the Royal University of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh. Like all the other traditional art forms and Khmer culture, Apsara dance was almost lost and forgotten during the brutal Khmer Rouge (1975 to 1979) which abolished almost every sign of Cambodian culture and royal authority. The Khmer Rouge targeted the dancers and imposed a ‘massive cultural forgetting’.⁴⁶ Khmer dance suffered a huge blow during the Khmer Rouge regime when thousands of dancers were killed (approximately 90 percent of them) as an act against the aristocratic institution. This tradition was then revived by the extraordinary efforts of Princess Bopha Devi in the late 1990s. They encouraged and do currently encourage the surviving dancers to form ‘dance colonies’ in order to revive their sacred tradition. .⁴⁷ .⁴⁸ .⁴⁹

This dance form is now also known by the name “Royal Ballet of Cambodia” and is listed in the UNESCO’s Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2008.⁵⁰ In the history of Cambodia, the role of the Royal Palace’s dancers had become the symbols of King’s prestige. After the 1863 Protectorate Treaty, the French who controlled the country’s finances took steps to reduce the number of palace dancers with an intention of reducing King’s prestige. But even after such foreign

⁴⁶ Phim, Toni Samantha, and Ashley, Thompson. *Dance in Cambodia*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.

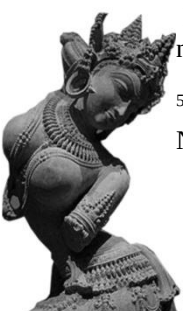
⁴⁷ Phim, Toni Samantha, and Ashley, Thompson. *Dance in Cambodia*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.

Metha, Julie B. *Dance of Life, The Mythology, History and Politics of Cambodian Culture*. Singapore: n.p., 2001. Print.

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Metha, Julie B. *Dance of Life, The Mythology, History and Politics of Cambodian Culture*. Singapore: n.p., 2001. Print.

⁵⁰ Cravath, Paul. *Earth in Flower, The Divine Mystery of the Cambodian Dance Drama*. First Edition ed. N.p.: Dat ASIA, 2008. Print.



influences, the dance could still manage to sustain and remain alive due to relentless efforts of the Queen and Princess Bopha Devi.

After slowly reviving the art form, changes were made to it in order to sustain itself and gain popularity. The length of the dance programs were shortened had pure dance pieces followed by dramatic or comic works and musical interludes. We found that today, only the pure dance aspect of it is presented on stages, the comic and drama parts are omitted as this dance has now become merely a source of entertainment to the tourists and commoners and has lost its traditional and ritualistic role as a source of mediation between the gods and the kings.



Movement and technique:

This classical dance form has a grounded, subtle, restrained yet feather-light, ethereal appearance. Known for its ornate costuming, taut posture, arched back and feet, fingers flexed backwards, codified facial expressions, slow, close, deliberate but flowing movements this classical dance is uniquely Khmer.⁵¹



Figure 17 - An Apsara dancer demonstrating the dance for us.

The central character of the dance, the Apsara Mera, leads her group through a flower garden. They use silent movements and gestures to tell a story and to communicate to the Gods. The dancers do not sing or speak. They dance with a slight smile just like the pictorial representation of the Apsara statues from the Angkor Wat temple. This dance form is compared to Indian classical dances on the basis that it requires years of practice and training from a young age as a persons limbs are the most flexible when they are children.



Figure 18 - Sopha Che institute, Cambodia training small children in Apsara dance

⁵¹ Phim, Toni Samantha, and Ashley, Thompson. Dance in Cambodia. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.

Metha, Julie B. Dance of Life, The Mythology, History and Politics of Cambodian Culture. Singapore: n.p., 2001. Print.

The way the dancers communicate with the audience is very complicated. Different positions of the arm and hand gestures express different meanings. The gestures are specific to their meanings; such that there are codified gestures to indicate actions like laughing or flying. This codified nature of this art form is quite similar to the codified language of the Indian classical dances like Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Odissi and others.



Figure 199 - Apsara statute in a unique dance posture with codified gesture.

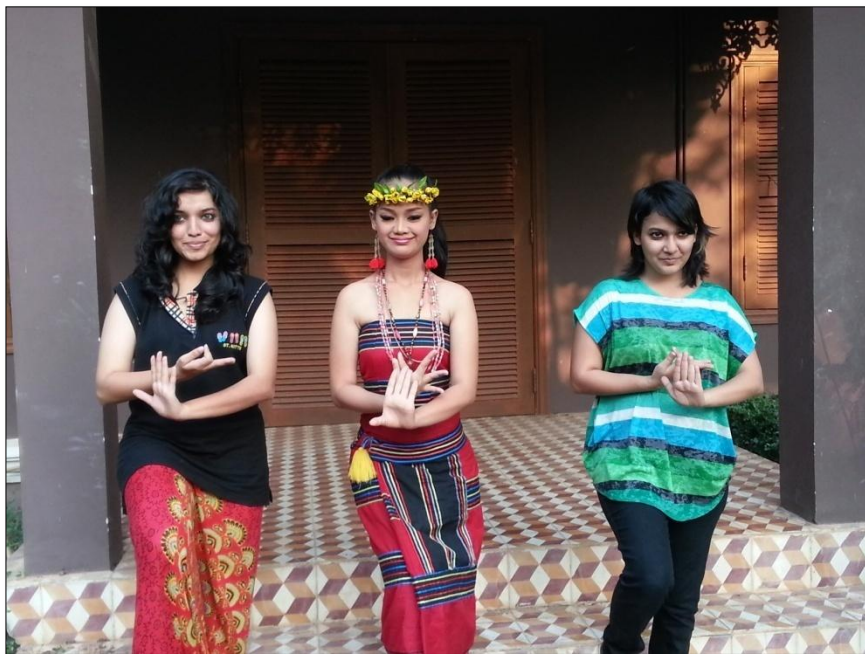


Figure 20- An Apsara dancer demonstrating few dance poses for us.

The central character of the dance, the Apsara Mera, leads her coterie of Apsaras through a flower garden where they enjoy of the beauty of the garden. The dance form has gone through a long history of evolution. The movements of this dance have maintained their distinctly classical form yet have lost their theatrical aspects. It has now become shorter and a bit more relaxed and flowing as compared to the earlier classical dances, making it both, an excellent example of the movements, manner and spirit of Khmer culture and at the same time particularly accessible to a modern audience unaccustomed to the style and stories of Khmer dance-drama.⁵²

Apsara Dance presents themes and stories inspired primarily by the *Reamker* (the Cambodian version of the Indian classic, the *Ramayana*) and the Age of Angkor.⁵³ Performances would traditionally accompany royal ceremonies and observances such as coronations, marriages, funerals or Khmer holidays.

Costume, makeup:



Figure 21 - Elaborate costume, headgear and makeup of the Apsara dancers

⁵² Phim, Toni Samantha, and Ashley, Thompson. *Dance in Cambodia*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.

Metha, Julie B. *Dance of Life, The Mythology, History and Politics of Cambodian Culture*. Singapore: n.p., 2001. Print.

⁵³ Phim, Toni Samantha, and Ashley, Thompson. *Dance in Cambodia*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.

Metha, Julie B. *Dance of Life, The Mythology, History and Politics of Cambodian Culture*. Singapore: n.p., 2001. Print.



Figure 102- Make up, head dressers

A study published in 1927, by Sappho Marchal gave an overall review of the beautiful and decorative make up and dressing of the Apsara dancer.⁵⁴ According to him, these costumes, ornaments and decorative makeup must have been inspired from the statues of the Angkor Wat temple.

The dancers are dressed in brightly coloured costumes with elaborate headgears. Their costumes of the Apsara role are based on the *devatas* as depicted on bas-relief of Angkor Wat.⁵⁵ They wear a *sampot sarabap*, a type of silk brocade that is intricately pleated in the front. The headdress of the lead Apsara have five peaks or tips, with two rows of spherical decorations like the Apsara pictured at Angkor Wat. Headdress worn by the subordinate dancers commonly have three peaks and only one row of spherical decoration. These crowns often include garlands of artificial hair with ornate adornments and Champa flowers. The five-tipped crowns are frequently absent in modern dance routines.

Accessories:

This round decorative collar (red colored) is highly visible; found just below the neck, the collar is embellished with detailed gold-colored copper ornaments and beaded

⁵⁴ Marchal, Sappho. *Khmer Costumes and Ornaments: After the Devata of Angkor Wat*. N.p.: n.p., 2005. Print.

⁵⁵ Marchal, Sappho. *Khmer Costumes and Ornaments: After the Devata of Angkor Wat*. N.p.: n.p., 2005. Print.

designs. The elaborate decorations are usually found gracefully decorated on two separate rows. Additional copper ornaments are found hanging below these rows, in the shape of warped spear tips, the largest of which is centralized.

Dangling earrings, which are bound in bunches, traditionally stretch almost to the shoulder. These dangling earrings are mainly duplicated from the design of the 'krorsang' flower (a large spiny tree with sour fruit) and are preferred to the 'mete' (chili) flowers, which are considered less beautiful.

There are a total of four types of wrist jewelry:

Kong rak - is a truly beautiful diamond-like studded bracelet a fine and elegantly wrist jewel decorated in a tree branch-like fashion,

Partum - is more of a spring-like coiled gold colored thick copper bracelet

Kong ngor - are small round beaded orb/sphere bunches delicately connected to one another (two sets are worn) on the wrist

Sanlek - is an intricate and well-decorated thickly rounded jewel. Additionally an Apsara dancer may be found wearing a garland of jasmine.

Two types of gold ankle jewelry are usually worn by the Apsara dancer, the first being *kong tong chhuk* the second *kong ngor* (*orkong krael*).

The *sangvar* is a loosely decorated band of beads worn crosswise. The golden flower is considered a body-decorating element, either worn on the waist or carried during the performance. It too is gold in color, and made of thin flexible copper.



Musical Instruments:

The slow, graceful movements of the Apsara dancers along with the emphatic dialogues of the puppetry performances are accompanied by Khmer music with a percussive ensemble known as *pinpeat*. This *pinpeat* includes instruments like drums, gongs and bamboo xylophones.



Figure 2311 - A Pinpeat.

Khim is played with two flexible bamboo sticks with soft leather at the tips to produce the soft tone. It is used as both as a solo and ensemble instrument.



Figure 24- Khim



Figure 25 - Roneat Ek

Roneat Ek is a xylophone used in the Khmer classical music of Cambodia.

Tro U is a low-pitched, two-stringed vertical fiddle with a coconut shell body that has one end covered with animal skin.



Figure 26 - Tro U



Figure 27 - Skor

The Skor dwells more steadily on the pulse without pulling or delaying the beat (melody). The player uses soft mallets for indoor performance, hard ones for outdoors.



Figure 12 - Samphor

Samphor is the instrument leads the orchestra, is made up of hardwood.



Figure 29 - Kong Vong Thom

Kong Vong Thom has a circular frame made of bamboo and the round gongs are hung horizontally by cane strings across two bamboo frames on the upper part of the structures.

The Khmer Classical Dance has been closely associated with the Khmer court for over one thousand years. Infused with a sacred and symbolic role, the dance embodies the traditional values of refinement, respect and spirituality. Its repertory perpetuates the legends associated with the origins of the Khmer people. Consequently, Cambodians have long esteemed this tradition as the emblem of Khmer culture.

Comparison of Apsara dance with Indian dance forms:

A comparison with Indian dance forms shows us that the Apsara dance has lot of similarities with Indian classical dances on the basis of gestures. Both the Classical Khmer dance – Apsara dance and Indian classical dances – Bharatnatyam, Odissi, Kathakali and others have a codified language of gestures and movements to communicate and express.

The slow and gentle movements of Apsara dance find some similarities with Indian folk dances like one in Manipur *Khamba Toibi*. *Khamba Toibi* is a duet dance form from Manipur; there are similarities between the movements of the apsara dancers and the female dancers in *Khamba Toibi*.⁵⁶ The movements are slow, delicate and extremely graceful following the *Lasya*⁵⁷ style of Indian dancing. These similarities between the Apsara dance and Indian dances further highlight the influence of Indian culture on Cambodian art forms.

⁵⁶ Chaki-Sircar, Manjusri, Tilottoma Misra, and Malini Bhattacharya. *Feminism in a Traditional Society?, Women of the Manipur Valley*. Vol. 21. N.p.: Economic and Political Weekly, 1986. Print. Ser. 43.

⁵⁷ Lasya is the name given to the delicate and feminine style of dancing in Indian culture.



CONCLUSION

Art forms have a very unique way of teleporting themselves to different parts of the world but they don't just teleport as they are. they change, modify and transform to adapt to their new home. When we got the chance to research on a place with Indian influence internationally, we decided to focus on art forms as they represent a particular culture to the most intricate details in a tangible form. The beliefs, religions, values, rituals and other aspects of the culture are webbed into a beautiful motif in form of an art form.

Keeping this aspect in mind a mere glance at the culture of Cambodia through secondary resources, brought our attention immediately to the beautiful dances of the shadow puppets and *apsaras*. Indian influence was evident right from the first encounter. The stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata, value systems based on religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, the statues of *Apsaras* in architectural grandeurs like Angkor Wat and many other ruins all culminated into these art forms.

And this is when we faced our research question, if so many aspects were similar to Indian culture how were these art forms unique and different? What is so 'Cambodian' about them?

Visit to the shadow puppetry organizations and apsara dance associations and interviews with the artists in Cambodia gave us the answer. Though the stories were similar, though the word 'apsara' was Indian to its core; the difference laid in the representation of these stories. The characters were the same Lord Rama, Sita and *apsara* but their physical manifestations were beyond recognition for us. These characters had grown and adapted to the Cambodian culture. The designs on



shadow puppets were largely Cambodian and so were the costumes and movement patterns of the *apsara* dancers.

It was very interesting to see that the art forms that we expected to be so similar appeared completely different. Only when we got it translated we realized that the stories had an Indian origin. This just showed us that how the same story had completely changed itself that we could not gather heads or tails until the point somebody explained it to us. Before actually witnessing the art form we believed that we would find evident similarities. But this idea changed almost instantly.

This made us realize a very important fact about art forms and cultures. These are not stagnant and permanent entities of human existence. Culture keeps on changing and evolving according to the surroundings and hence the art forms. These art forms are synthesis of different influences may they be religion, customs or value systems. Cambodian culture also known as Khmer culture is a blend of various cultures from India, China, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.⁵⁸

It is this synthesis which makes them unique. It is like adding different flavors to the dish in different quantities to make it taste different. Similarly adding elements from different cultures gives birth to a unique culture.

Like any other country Cambodia has gone through its times of problems like the genocide of 1970s and major political differences. It has had a journey from good, bad and ugly. But a recent visit to Cambodia gave a whole new picture. Though the harsh memories of genocide were still alive in the people living there, they had learnt to

⁵⁸ Murray, Bennett. "The Indianisation of Ancient Cambodia." *South East Asian History*. N.p., 22 Dec. 2010. Web. <<http://suite101.com/article/the-indianization-of-ancient-cambodia-a322347>>.



overlook them and continue with their lives.

Common people from the *tuk-tuk walas* to shopkeepers seemed to be proud of their Khmer identity and though for a short period of 8 days did put in efforts to make us understand and assimilate us in their lifestyle. Language was a barrier but it was never a major hindrance to our excursions as we thought we connected on a more basic level. We spoke with the language of smiles and gestures. A simple namaskar helped us reach our destinations without obstructions.

There are many questions about the origins and development of these art forms. Scholars still debate whether the *apsara* statues on Angkor Wat temple inspired the Classical Khmer dance or whether the dance inspired the statues. As students we still find it difficult to understand this phenomenon of influence as we have realized that it is not a one way process. Culture is an outcome of interactions between different ideologies. Tracing its root is one of the most difficult parts of understanding its development though, in our case the art forms of shadow puppetry and apsara dance helped us understand this process to some extent.

Our journey through this land of shadow puppets and apsaras and a firsthand experience of the evolving nature of these art forms made us realize the significance of Gautam Buddha's quote ' Everything is constantly changing' which is intricately woven in the lives of the Cambodian people.



GLOSSARY

Angkor Wat- the biggest Hindu temple in the world is situated in Cambodia.

Apsara - a female spirit of the clouds and waters in Hindu and Buddhist mythology.

Ayang Thalong – small leather puppets. Another name for Sbaek Touch.

Bharatnatyam- Indian classical dance.

Brahma- is the Hindu god (deva) of creation.

Buddhism- is a religion indigenous to the Indian subcontinent that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and practices largely based on teachings attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, who is commonly known as the Buddha.

Campudia – Khmer name for Cambodia.

Chaaya Natak – Hindi word for Shadow theatre.

Chitra Katha – story narrated through pictures.

Devata- is the Hindu term for deity.

Devaraja- Sanskrit term for god-king.

Hanumana- He is a central character in the Indian epic Ramayana.

Hindusim- is the predominant religion of the Indian subcontinent.

Indra- is the leader of the Devas or gods and the lord of Svargaloka or heaven in the Hindu religion.

Jataka- a voluminous body of literature native to India concerning the previous births of the Bodhisattva.

Kathakali - Indian classical dance.

Kaundinya - a Brahmin who first came to prominence as a youth due to his mastery of the Vedas and who married the daughter of dragon king.

Khamba Toibi- Khamba Toibi is a duet dance form from Manipur; there are similarities between the movements of the apsara dancers and the female dancers in Khamba Toibi.

Khmer- people of Cambodia whose civilization reached its height from the 9th to the 15th century.

Kong ngor- are small round beaded orb/sphere bunches delicately connected to one another.

Kong ngor (orkong krael) - types of gold ankle jewellery are usually worn by the Apsara dancer.

Kong rak -is a truly beautiful diamond-like studded bracelet a fine and elegantly wrist jewel decorated in a tree branch-like fashion.

Kong tong chhuk – types of gold ankle jewellery are usually worn by the Apsara dancer.

Kong Vong Thom – it has a circular frame made of bamboo and the round gongs are hung horizontally by cane strings across.

Krorsang- a large spiny tree with sour fruit.

Lasya- is the name given to the delicate and feminine style of dancing in Indian culture.

Laxmana- the brother and close companion of Rama.

Mahabharata- is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the other being the Ramayana.

Maharashtrian-The people of Maharashtra, India.

Menaka- is considered one of the most beautiful of the heavenly Apsaras.

Nang Sbaek – Large leather puppets. Another name for Sbaek Thom.

Nang Thalong - small leather puppets. Another name for Sbaek Touch.

Odissi- Indian classical dance.

Pagoda- Khmer word for Buddhist monasteries.

Partum- is more of a spring-like coiled gold colored thick copper.

Pinpeat- orchestra or musical ensemble performs the ceremonial music of the royal courts and temples of Cambodia.

Purana- is ancient Hindu Vedic texts eulogizing various deities, primarily the divine Trimurti God in Hinduism through divine stories.

Rama- is the seventh avatar of the god Vishnu in Hinduism, and a king of Ayodhya in Hindu scriptures.

Ramayana- The Ramayana is one of the great epics of Nepal and India.

Ranganath Ramayana- a Telugu version of Ramayana.

Ravana - is the primary antagonist character of the Hindu epic Ramayana.

Ravanachhaya-The Shadow theatre of Orissa.

Reamker- is a Cambodian epic poem, based on the Sanskrit's Ramayana epic.

Robam Tep Apsara- Is a Khmer word, which literally means Dance of the Apsara.

Roneat Ek - is a xylophone used in the Khmer classical music of Cambodia.

Sampeah kru- dance performances are usually preceded by rituals called *sampeah kru*.

Sampot sarabap- a type of silk brocade that is intricately pleated in the front as a Apsara dancer's costume.

Sangvar - is a loosely decorated band of beads worn crosswise by dancers.

Sanlek -is an intricate and well decorated thickly rounded jewel.

Samphor - is the instrument leads the orchestra, is made up of hardwood.

Sanskrit- is a historical Indo-Aryan language.

Sbaek Touch – small leather puppets.

Sbaek Thom – large leather puppets.

Sbaek Por- colourful shadow puppets.

Shiva- a Hindu deity.

Sita- She is the consort of the Hindu god Rama.

Skor - The Skor dwells more steadily on the pulse without pulling or delaying the beat (melody). The player uses soft mallets for indoor performance, hard ones for outdoors.

Sundarakandam- the story of Hanuman flying to Lanka and bringing back the message of Sita's well being.

Suryavarman II- a king of the Khmer Empire from 1113 AD to 1145-1150 AD and the builder of Angkor Wat, which he dedicated to the Supreme God Vishnu..

Tamasha- a traditional Marathi folk art form which includes dance, drama and music, widely performed by local or travelling theatre groups within the state of Maharashtra, India.

Tamil- is a Dravidian language spoken predominantly by Tamil people of South India and North-east Sri Lanka.

Telugu- is a South-Central Dravidian language predominantly spoken in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh where it is an official language.

Tholu Bommalata- shadow theatre from Andhra Pradesh.

Togalu Gombeyatta- The shadow theatre of Karnataka.

Tro U- U is a low-pitched, two-stringed vertical fiddle with a coconut shell body that has one end covered with animal skin.

Tuk-tuk wala- these are autos in south-east Asia.

Urvashi- is an Apsara in Hindu legend.

Vishnu- is a Vedic Supreme God in Hindu religion.

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