



CHHAYAM

COMIC ARTISTS WIELDING HAND cymbals, small hanging gongs, and wooden clackers join with drummers to make up the chhayam ensemble—a humorous, semi-improvised Cambodian call-and-response drumming and dance tradition. Chhayam performers often head ceremonial processions to and through Buddhist temple compounds. A line of men (usually five or seven) set up a rhythmic base on long drums held up with straps across one shoulder. That base is complemented by their own syncopated chanting or singing, and the percussive clatter and clap of the clowns' hand-held instruments. Clowns wear comical face paint or masks with exaggerated features. When leading a parade as part of a Buddhist ceremony, chhayam artists enliven the atmosphere and contribute to a sense of community as other participants freely stride behind or clap alongside the performers. Khmer music scholar and award-winning composer Dr. Chinary Ung has written that a chhayam "ensemble functions as one of the components (along with other ritual preparations, costumes, martial arts, chanting, etc.) of the mind-altering multi-media that is an integral part of [certain] Buddhist ceremonial festivities."¹

Though chhayam is also performed at secular events, including theatrical performances, it mainly serves as a

vital aspect of Bon Phka and Bon Kathin, two Buddhist ceremonies. Bon Phka (literally "Flower Ceremony") can take place at any time of year and involves the presenting of monetary donations by lay people to a temple for a construction or repair project or some other community endeavor. Traditionally, paper money, folded to symbolize flower blossoms, is attached to small wire, plastic, or paper "trees."

Bon Kathin occurs in October or November at the end of the monks' rainy season retreat. Worshippers travel to hometown temples to offer new robes and supplies to the monks. Hundreds of celebrants circle the sanctuary three times as an act of reverence, with the chhayam drummers and dancers in the lead, helping to create a feeling of togetherness and joy.

Chhayam performances (and ensembles) are not formulaic. A community's resources and local people's talents and interests may dictate whether the emphasis is solely on the drumming and chanting or is broadened to include comic and other dancers.

The clowns, with masks or makeup in place, wear white or pastel short-sleeved shirts and dark kben, pantaloons made from three yards of cotton fabric wrapped around the waist and pulled through the legs.

They strike cymbals, tap gongs, or clap pairs of wooden sticks while dancing knock-kneed or pigeon-toed. The drummers, in the same outfits, play instruments that are often decorated with ruffled, brightly colored cloth. A female dancer—with no mask—may join in, performing the graceful steps and gestures of the roam wong, a popular social dance. Wearing a kben and a fancy shirt of lace or other fine material, she invariably attracts the attention of a drummer. A comic interlude transpires as the drummer flirts and tries to impress her by tossing his drum around his body. He may go so far as to pick up the three-foot-long wooden instrument and balance it between his teeth. (If no woman appears, the solo drummer may instead perform a kind of duel with the cymbal-player in which they mock and compete with each other, utilizing martial arts-like movements.) All the while the other drummers continue their spirited, at times nonsensical, singing. A lead drummer starts the chant, and the others repeat or respond to it. For example:

Krovey krovo
Ksae krovat
Lok khae bang chat
Chat bang lok khae

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[alliterative nonsense syllables]
A belt
The moon is covered by an umbrella
An umbrella covers the moon

Chaiyo ma sekot
Chaiyat ma sekii
Prachea mul mi
Douc chea bong p'oun

[alliterative nonsense syllables]
Crowds gather round
Just like family

Kendiokeov
Kramaothawt
Thangyeth Thongyaw
Chhaohoy hkatis
Khatis dong
Damlong sngao
Pot kampao
Si tao heum pos

[A listing of various desserts,
made with coconut milk, gelatin,
bananas, and other ingredients]

During the 1980s, when Cambodia
was officially known as the People's
Republic of Kampuchea, the heavy
hand of communism was felt in
nearly every form of expressive
culture, including chhayam. Lyrics
at that time included these:

Kenhanh chek qaoy
Lot tum mok svay
Srok yaeung sabay
Daoyasa renakse

[Common insect] oh!
Jumps onto a mango tree branch
Our country is happy
Because of the National Front

Aab oor sator!
Aab oor sator!
Tivea aab oor 7 Makara!

Congratulations!
Congratulations!
The celebration of January 7th²

In Philadelphia, where a chhayam
troupe has been based at Bra [Preah]
Buddha Ransi Temple since 2007, the
following verse has been heard on more
than a few ceremonial occasions:

Kendom chhaip
Angkaep chha
Yeiy yeiy Phila
Heu haa mleh tee

[Alliterative lines that translate
as "shocked" and as "stir-fried frog"]
Older women of Philadelphia
So very cool³

Drums are sounded by a number of
techniques, including hitting the drum
head with the outer half of the palm,
with just two fingers of each hand,
or with a closed fist. A particularly
dynamic and flexible drummer might
even strike the drum with his elbows
or knees during a solo routine.

Clown characters appear in a
number of Cambodian performing
arts traditions. In the case of chhayam,
they serve as a vehicle for lighthearted
community celebration. The clown
in chhayam may also be related to
an indigenous (non-Buddhist) child
spirit, Marinh Kongviel. This tiny playful
being is welcomed to homes and
elsewhere through offerings of candies,
fruits, and other items. Cambodian
ethnologist Chan Sambath notes
that the comic dancer in a chhayam
ensemble is often said to represent
Marinh Kongviel,⁴ bringing levity
and humor to the ceremony. Such a
combining of Buddhist and indigenous
beliefs and practices is common,
since Cambodian cultural and artistic
traditions seamlessly mix local animistic,
Buddhist, and even Hindu elements.

Chhayam is taught as part of the
folk dance curriculum at the National
School of Fine Arts. But away from
the formal academy, chhayam is passed
down within a community, centered
at the Buddhist temple. People who
grow up watching and listening to
chhayam performances may make
the transition from observer to
participant by practicing alongside
older relatives and neighbors.

—*Dr. Toni Shapiro-Phim*
Former Associate Director at PFP,
Toni is now on staff at the Khmer
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Notes

¹ *Liner notes for Cambodia: Traditional Music, vol. 1 (Folkways Records, 1978). Available as Smithsonian Folkways FWO4081 <http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=669>*

² *On January 7, 1979, the leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime, under whose rule the country was officially known as Democratic Kampuchea, were overthrown, paving the way for the establishment of the People's Republic of Kampuchea.*

³ *A Cambodian audience would find this couplet amusing, since older women are generally assumed not to put much stock in being "cool" or "hip," whereas the implication here is that they are indeed cool, and not afraid to flaunt it.*

⁴ *Personal interview, Kandal Province, Cambodia, May 2009.*