

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Heartfelt Narratives: Nostalgic Memories, Music Transmission, and Cultural  
Sustainability in the Cambodian Diaspora

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Music

by

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September 2021

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The Thesis of Allan Zheng is approved:

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## **Acknowledgments**

First, I want to give a huge thank you to everyone at the Khmer Arts Academy for welcoming me into their community. I fondly remember being in the studio, interacting during breaks, and experiencing Khmer arts together. This thesis could not have happened without the help of Bee Chhim, Mea Lath, Serey Tep, and Tanaka Nhong who all shared their valuable and incredible insight with me. I also extend a special thanks to Ngeek Chum and Joanna Pecore for sharing their experience and knowledge with me. You all inspire me to continue learning more about Khmer arts and culture.

Thank you to my committee for challenging me, asking crucial questions, and providing additional resources and insights that deepened my analysis. Thank you, Deborah Wong, Liz Przybylski, Emily Hue, and Jonathan Ritter, for all our insightful discussions, mentorship, and support throughout the past two years.

My thesis would not have been possible without the support of my scholarly and personal community. I owe a lot to my colleagues, mentors, and close friends for their words of encouragement and support throughout my first two years of graduate school. Thank you, Chun Chia Tai, Mark Hsiang-Yu Feng, Nattapol (Pup) Wisuttipat, Victoria Romano, Hannah Snively, and Mariangela Nobre, for all the thought-provoking conversations both in the classroom and beyond while at UCR. Thank you to Ally Fripp, Changzhe Xu, Molly Rose Merkert Rioth, Katie Thompson, and Melissa Taing for keeping me company from afar. Most importantly, thank you to my parents and sister for everything.

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

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University of California, Riverside, September 2021  
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The Khmer Rouge genocide (1975-1979) led to the death of 80 to 90 percent of Cambodian artists and scholars and the broader displacement of Cambodians. Many Cambodians resettled in Long Beach, California and formed one of the largest Cambodian communities outside of Cambodia. During resettlement, diasporic Cambodians began to transmit the Cambodian arts to future generations by institutionalizing the arts. My master's thesis explores music classes at the Khmer Arts Academy (KAA) and highlights how the younger generation continues to lead efforts to sustain Khmer arts in diaspora. I examine how personal anecdotes and stories as a part of instruction shape music transmission in the Cambodian American diaspora. I employ hybrid ethnographic methods and explore the Khmer arts both online and offline in addition to my personal, somatic experiences as a second generation Cambodian Chinese American studying *pinpeat* music, the court music of Cambodia, in Long Beach, California for critical inquiry. These personal accounts facilitate the re/imagining of Cambodia that incorporates experiences beyond the Khmer Rouge genocide and images

of Angkor Wat. I suggest these extramusical and heartfelt narratives are intertwined with emotional ties bound up within extended histories of displacement that facilitate the production of postmemory and nostalgia. Using music sustainability and infrastructure as a framework, I also interrogate cultural transmission in the Cambodian diaspora and the factors which inhibited the sustainability of the Khmer arts. By attending to the material, social, economic, and systematic aspects of cultural transmission and performance, my research indicates that endeavors to sustain cultural practices in diaspora necessitates close attention to the multiple situated loyalties within the Cambodian diasporic community and to its surrounding systems and infrastructures to understand barriers and impediments to cultural sustainability.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iv
List of Figures .....	viii
Note on Transliteration .....	ix
My First Day of School.....	1
The Cambodian Diaspora .....	11
Remembering through the Arts.....	14
The Khmer Arts Academy .....	19
Studying <i>Pinpeat</i> at the Khmer Arts Academy.....	24
Adaptations to COVID-19 .....	38
Anecdotes and Stories: Remembering and Feeling Cambodia.....	40
Feeling: Stories and Memories .....	47
Sustainability at the Khmer Arts Academy .....	59
Material Sustainability .....	63
Social and Economic Sustainability.....	67
Sustainabilities and Systems .....	74
Closing .....	78
Glossary .....	83
Bibliography .....	87

## List of Figures

Figure 1 Altar adorned with masks, photos, and food offerings for the passing of H.R.H. Samdech Reach Botrei Preah Ream Norodom Buppha Devi.....	2
Figure 2 Mea Lath placing incense in front of the altar at the Khmer Arts Academy.....	20
Figure 3 Bee Chhim playing <i>roneat ek</i> in his living room.....	22
Figure 4 The Khmer Arts Academy studio space.....	28
Figure 5 Instrument storage room at Khmer Arts Academy.....	64



## **Note on Transliteration**

I use the Documentation Center of Cambodia's (DC-CAM) transliteration table throughout my thesis to transliterate Khmer into English. While DC-CAM's table is meant for transliterating places and personal names, I find it a useful tool for generally transliterating Khmer language because of its lack of diacritic markings and the delineation between the two dependent vowel series. The DC-Cam system distinguishes between the two vowel systems while other transliteration systems do not make the dependent vowel series clear. All personal names are spelled according to the way the person spells it, and all geographical places are spelled according to their commonly accepted spellings. I make one adaptation to the voiced inherent vowel which is to spell the inherent vowel with 'o' rather than 'or' when followed by another consonant. I find that this change improves readability while maintaining the integrity of the initial Khmer word.

## My First Day of School

It was my first quarter of graduate school at the University of California, Riverside and I finally got into contact with the Khmer Arts Academy (KAA). I arranged to visit KAA for a shadowing assignment for one of my graduate seminars on Public Sector Ethnomusicology, and I was excited to finally take a class and play Khmer traditional music.<sup>1</sup> I had spent much of the quarter compiling articles and books on Khmer traditional music and now I could see and learn about Khmer traditional music in context. On November 9th, 2019, I drove from Riverside, CA to KAA in Long Beach, CA and arrived around 10:15am in front of a large whitish building with a short, pink concrete wall in front of it.

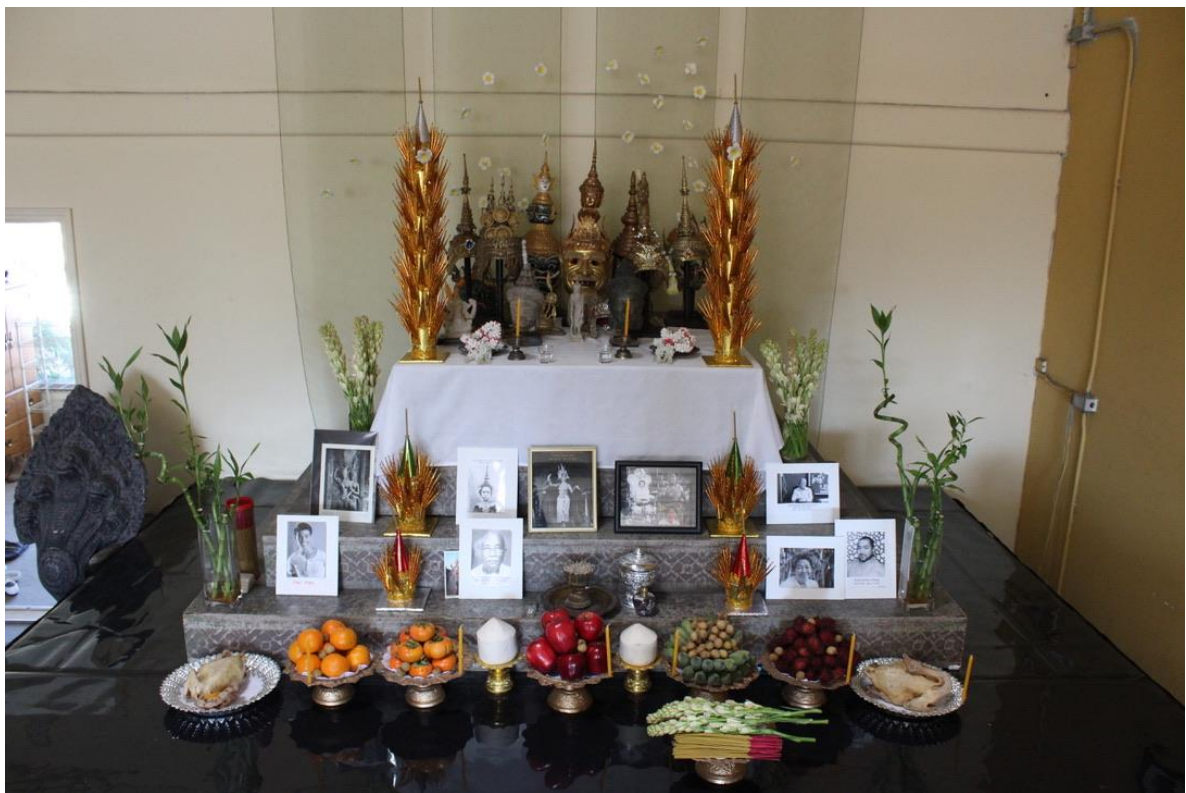
After parking, I made my way towards the street entrance of KAA. I took a moment and looked at the wooden sign out front before walking towards the gated door and cautiously entered the academy. Immediately upon entering, I was greeted by a group of young kids dressed up in Khmer traditional dance outfits in a dimly lit vestibule crowded with *pinpeat* instruments stacked on top of each other.<sup>2</sup> Seeing no adult in sight, I asked where the teacher was, and the students pointed me towards the larger room and main dance hall. I walked into the dance studio and immediately to my left was a large stage with an altar. The altar was adorned with an array of photographs of people, ranging from elders to some younger folks, masks, crowns, and instruments. Looking

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<sup>1</sup> I use Khmer and Cambodian interchangeably throughout the thesis. I do place a caveat that there are ongoing conversations about the terms Khmer and Cambodian as an ethnic and national identity respectively.

<sup>2</sup> *Pinpeat* is the court music of Cambodia that is performed for different ritual occasions, court functions, and community blessings and accompanies traditional dance, dance-dramas, and shadow puppet performances.

further, one wall was covered with mirrors, presumably for the dancers, with a stereo set up in the corner. Along the far wall, there was a garage door and in front of it was a dining table and some chairs arranged around the table. As I looked at the space, Mea Lath, the managing director and dance instructor at the Khmer Arts Academy, brought me over to the table and introduced me to the facilities at KAA while the students warmed up for dance class. For about 45 minutes, Mea described how KAA aims to emulate the training found in Cambodia through its hands-on approach to learning and instruction and highlighted the continued growth and interest from the local community.



**Figure 1. Altar adorned with masks, photos, and food offerings for the passing of H.R.H. Samdech Reach Botrei Preah Ream Norodom Buppha Devi. Photo taken by ethnographer on November 24, 2019.**

Following my conversation with Mea, she went on to instruct the students and have them formally warm up together as a class with various stretches. As the students stretched together, I sat at the table by myself looking around the room. Behind me was a large mural painting depicting one of the stone faces located in one of the temples in Cambodia. Beneath the mural, there was a replica of some wing walls that could be found within the Angkor Wat archeological park. For about thirty minutes, the students did some slow stretching guided by some of the older, more advanced students. Both the older students and Mea went person by person to make micro-adjustments to the students while they were stretching. Afterwards, the students launched into rehearsing two dances while being accompanied by audio recordings. During these rehearsals, the students were constantly monitored and corrected by the older students and Mea. From 11:00am to 1:00pm, the students and Mea focused on correcting posture, lining up dance movements, cleaning up the angular movements and positioning, and clarifying details of the dance. Mea and the student teachers gave instructions in a mix of both Khmer and English while physically adjusting each of the students. These two hours was filled with heavy concentration by both students and instructors and absolutely no distraction.<sup>3</sup>

At 1:00pm, the students finally went on their first official break. Immediately, they all pulled out mats, unrolled them over the carpet, and started to chat amongst themselves. During this time, parents began to enter the building to drop off food. Suddenly, the dance studio became a potluck party. Within minutes, the table I was

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<sup>3</sup> As I continued to return to KAA in the following weeks, the classes remained at this level of intensity and with minimal distractions.

seated at was filled with takeout, trays of home-cooked food, fruit, and various drinks including homemade Thai iced tea and water bottles. The students gathered on the floor in two large circles on top of the mats and began to eat. The air was filled with the scent of egg rolls, fried chicken, stir-fried noodles, and lively conversation. Seamlessly, in a span of ten minutes, the studio, recently filled with intense concentration, was now a party with instructors and students interacting casually with parents looking on and chatting amongst themselves. A wide variety of topics were discussed. Students spoke with each other about dance, Korean popular music, school gossip, and schoolwork. Mea intermingled with the students to check in with the students and their parents. During this time, Mea introduced me to a few of the parents and other folks at KAA. I met Malene Sam, daughter of Sam-Ang Sam, and volunteer instructor at KAA, as well as Serey Tep, the former managing director of KAA. The older students who helped Mea with instruction met together and discussed things going on in their lives, dance techniques, and plans for later in the day.

As everyone finished up their meals, the students began to roam around the studio casually interacting with each other, practicing more of the dances on their own, and cleaning up the space to prepare for the final hour of class. The parents cleared out of the studio while the students gathered to stretch again. From 2:00pm to 3:00pm, the students were grouped up to perform with and for each other all the dances they had been rehearsing since the morning. Finally, the long dance rehearsal came to an end and students began packing up, vacuuming the floor, wiping the mirrors, emptying the trash, cleaning up the restrooms, and changing out of their rehearsal outfits into their street

clothes. During this time, Bee Chhim, the music instructor of KAA, entered the studio from the large garage door. As many of the students began to leave with their parents, I met with Bee Chhim, the music instructor of KAA, and helped move some of the instruments off the stage and out of the vestibule/dressing room space to the main floor.

The following two hours moved rather quickly. First, Bee and I chatted about our respective musical backgrounds, and he gave me a brief introduction to the *pinpeat* ensemble. Once the rehearsal started and we all gathered on the floor, there was little room for talking as students started to warm up together and then proceeded to jump into the repertoire. Initially, I only observed the rehearsal since there was not really a place for me to join in. All of the music students in class were also dancers and quite skilled at both. As the students rehearsed, Bee decided to have me start with playing the *chhing*, a small pair of hand cymbals, so he could start playing drums and since no one was playing it. We moved from piece to piece rather quickly and I was left with very little time to figure out what piece we were playing. I could recognize that much of the music was the same music used in some of the dance repertoire but didn't yet know the names of the repertoire.<sup>4</sup> As I struggled to play the *chhing*,<sup>5</sup> I took notice of how Bee went around from student to student helping them remember the music. Occasionally, a student would forget one note, or a section of the music, and Bee would help guide them back to the rest of the group. In between each piece, Bee would also give additional clarification to each student while they practiced, memorizing sections of the music individually and together.

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<sup>4</sup> I later learn the names of all the pieces the students had learned up to that point, but I cannot remember the specific pieces played at this rehearsal.

<sup>5</sup> I am horrendous at keeping a consistent metronomic pulse.

However, in contrast to the earlier hyper focus of the dance class, occasionally students in between each piece would have side conversations or check their social media. This seemed to slightly irritate Bee but since he was moving around from student to student giving additional instruction, the students could easily move around, take breaks, look at their phones, and chat with each other.

It was during one of these lulls in instruction where Bee allowed me to try out the *roneat ek*, a twenty-one key xylophone. While I did not learn any of the pieces they rehearsed, Bee taught me half of the warmup scale which I practiced repeatedly. As a non-xylophone player, my eyes were easily overwhelmed by the twenty-two keys, and I struggled to keep track of where I was on the instrument. At about 4:30pm, some of the parents came to pick up their children and class slowly drew to a close. I spoke with Bee about attending classes in the future and he informed me that the class schedule was Saturdays from 3:00pm to 5:00pm and Sundays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. At about 5:15pm, after cleaning up the space together, Bee closed the studio and I began the drive back to Riverside.

I share this first trip to KAA because my project signifies a personal journey into the Khmer arts. For me, this particular day remains a crucial moment in my journey into Khmer arts as my first foray into playing *pinpeat*, the royal court music of Cambodia. Despite growing up as a Cambodian Chinese American, my experiences with the Khmer arts were practically nonexistent due my family's disconnect from the broader Cambodian community. Throughout my thesis, I will narrate my experiences entering into the Cambodian American arts community. There is neither an ending nor bold

conclusion to my experiences. My narrative arc only brings me into the thick of the issues and solely from my perspective as a student of Cambodian *pinpeat* and scholar. Effectively, my ethnography about KAA is “inherently partial—committed and incomplete” (Clifford 1986, 7). I root my ethnographic accounts in my personal experiences and visceral reactions to learning *pinpeat* and hearing the accounts of my instructors and peers. I also view my work within the broader narrative of the Cambodian American experience. I conducted my research starting in November 2019 when I first connected with KAA for a job shadow as a part of my graduate coursework. I continued attending and observing classes at KAA weekly up until the COVID-19 shutdown in March 2020. Despite the global shutdown, I followed and remained in contact with KAA remotely over Facebook and group chats in order to follow their plans for adapting to COVID-19. My project explores music transmission pre-COVID-19 and during the pandemic in order to interrogate how Khmer music is taught in the Cambodian diaspora. Because of the shift to remote research due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my research employs a hybrid ethnographic approach which draws on ethnomusicologist Liz Przybylski’s (2020) hybrid ethnography which considers the conceptual and constant shifts between online and offline research. My hybrid approach integrates both in-person interactions at KAA as well as online, technologically mediated communications over text messages, Facebook, Instagram, and Zoom.

While I write, I negotiate my shifting and co-existing positions of student, scholar, and second generation Cambodian Chinese American which blur the reality of being an insider and outsider because of the “variety of personal, social, and political



constraints” in my own work and relationship to the community (Burnim 1985, 445). I move along the continuum of insider/outsider as a researcher and scholar, which connotes some power and privilege, and navigate my identity as a Cambodian Chinese American music student. These shifting relationships with the field expedites my ability to build rapport through shared cultural understandings and also limit and constrain how interlocutors perceive me as a member of the community. Through my self-reflexive accounts, I aim to produce what Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) describes as an ethnography of the particular which focuses on subjectivity in scholarly writing and disrupts notions of self and Other or insider/outsider through my positionality. I include this discussion of my positionality to articulate my relationship to KAA and engage in the work of critical, reflexive ethnography by emphasizing and acknowledging my own power, privilege, bias, and subjectivity and how these factors do shape my interactions in the field and reading of events (Madison 2005).

My thesis engages with four major areas of scholarship: diaspora, sustainability studies, memory, and nostalgia. I link these scholarly dimensions together and consider how Cambodian music and culture are shaped by all these frameworks. First, I ask what do Khmer music classes reveal about the emotional and embodied relations embedded within music transmission? Methodologically, I frame my work using ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong’s (2008) notion of performative ethnography to both convey and reflect on my embodied experiences as a student and articulate what it means for me to study Cambodian *pinpeat*. I am also informed by American Studies scholar Crystal Mun-hye Baik’s (2020) attentiveness to silences as a critical listening approach to oral/aural history

interviews. Then, I dive deeper into the micro-interactions and moments that took place during my study of *pinpeat*, some of which were remote over video call and over during in person sessions. Using music class as an entry point, I argue that the micro-interactions where instructors share anecdotes constitute important moments of critical remembering. The experiences of music transmission invite listeners to recall and imagine the Cambodian diasporic experience through the nostalgia embedded within these stories. Bound up within loss, displacement, longing, and time (Boym 2007, 7-8), I use nostalgia throughout my thesis to illustrate how cultural heritage connections are remembered and affirmed through the Khmer arts because of the destructive Khmer Rouge genocide and loss of 80 to 90% of scholars and artists.

I reflect on the impact of these stories and what people around me choose to share about these stories. Scholars writing about the Cambodian diaspora situate their work within the stories, anecdotes, and art of their interlocutors and indicate storytelling as a crucial part of remembering the Khmer Rouge genocide and its subsequent impact (Chea 2009; Pecore 2004; Schlund-Vials 2008, 2012b). Of course, listeners and witnesses to these stories are impacted by the retelling of these experiences and I ground my discussion through their nostalgic impressions created through encountering personal stories and how these impressions are bound up within connections and conceptions of Cambodia. I interrogate my own somatic responses to learning instrumental techniques and while hearing these stories to depict my own visceral experience. I show how these corporal experiences are inherently tied to the nostalgia embedded in Cambodian music transmission. By attending to the silences in my autoethnographic experiences and

interviews, I read into some of the silences during storytelling and interviews opens possibilities for new connections which deepen the experience of studying Cambodian *pinpeat*. I suggest that the deep, emotional encounters involved with storytelling engender, highlight, and remember everyday narratives and lived experience beyond the Khmer Rouge genocide.

My next guiding question explores how do situated loyalties and diasporic connections interact with the infrastructures of cultural sustainability in the Cambodian diaspora? I first argue that the status of music class at the Khmer Arts Academy suggests underlying socioeconomic and ecological challenges that negatively impact the transmission of Cambodian *pinpeat* in the United States. While I explore my experiences in music class at KAA, I also challenge the previously held conceptions that the disengagement Cambodian American youth from Khmer arts in favor of assimilation is the primary challenge to sustaining Cambodian culture. Then, I formulate the notion of the Khmer heart based on ideas about refugee love and diasporic love in order to indicate how the emotional ties in diaspora reveal structural or infrastructural issues within the broader goals of cultural sustainability. The Khmer heart, which I will discuss in greater detail later, builds on Parreñas and Siu's (2007) concept of situated loyalties to the homeland and diaspora as well as Aihwa Ong's (2002) discussion of refugee love. Afterwards, I consider how the infrastructures of and perceived responsibilities to the homeland and diasporic place become hypervisible during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, through my discussion of cultural infrastructure, I extend Klisala Harrison's

(2012) idea of epistemic community to address the broader socio-economic and ecological challenges impacting the infrastructure of Cambodian music transmission.

My final main question builds on my previous question. I ask what does the impact of COVID-19 reveal about the nostalgic ties and infrastructures bound up within Khmer music transmission and sustainability? While I primarily show how KAA responded the extended moment of COVID-19, KAA's experience also further indicates the extreme funding challenges which create deeper conditions of precarity for the arts. At the same time, throughout my research, I found moments of resilience through the Khmer heart, refugee's love as well as echoes of tough love which reveal how emotional connections resist forgetting and the failing infrastructure. Thus, I show how exploring nostalgia and emotional chains can contribute to cultural sustainability studies through noting the relationship between social and infrastructural loyalties. As I will re-narrate, explore, and interrogate, these heartfelt narratives frame my experiences as a scholar-student as well as my encounters with my peers and instructors in the following pages.

## **The Cambodian Diaspora**

Cambodia underwent destructive political changes during the 1970s beginning with a political coup in 1970 and subsequent civil war led by Lon Nol's political faction and supported by the United States. The authoritarian Democratic Kampuchea regime, also known as the Khmer Rouge, laid siege to the capital Phnom Penh in 1975. From April 17th, 1975, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge enacted their vision for Cambodia to construct a supposedly egalitarian society. However, during this time, many Cambodians

died because of the labor camps and antirevolutionary militaristic forces employed to maintain the fascist regime. From January 7th, 1979, Vietnamese forces ousted and destabilized the Khmer Rouge.

Following the political turmoil in Southeast Asia and large-scale genocide in Cambodia due to the events of the Khmer Rouge, a mass exodus of Cambodians occurred with many fleeing Cambodia to refugee camps in Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia and most eventually resettling in Australia, France, Canada, and the United States. Nancy Smith-Hefner (1999) indicates three major waves of migration out of Southeast Asia. The first two waves in 1975 and 1978 had very few Khmer people and were largely Vietnamese people. In contrast, the third wave from 1980 to 1982 had the largest influx of Khmer people of around 50,000. In addition to the difference in the number of Cambodian refugees, the initial two waves consisted of wealthier, well-educated Cambodians whereas the third was comprised of rural and less-educated Cambodians. As a result of this mass exodus and displacement, Cambodian diasporic settlements formed across the United States for people seeking refuge from the Khmer Rouge genocide and political instability. While Vietnamese people from the first wave were resettled together creating an enclave (Reyes 1999), the later wave of refugees were dispersed to encourage assimilation (Smith-Hefner 1999). Furthermore, as Aihwa Ong (2003, 277) indicates, Cambodian refugees faced compassion fatigue which harmed their access to resources by creating negative stigmas surrounding welfare. Thus, there was an unequal distribution of resources which favored pre-1980 refugees in the United States

and allowed earlier refugees to establish their presence and belonging easier than their post-1980 counterparts.

In their greater desire to survive in the new land, diasporic Cambodians sought to establish “a new home place [evoking] the nostalgia and cultural characteristics of the *there* but take on a new character or new attributes of the *here*” the face of displacement (Anderson and Lee 2005, 12). As James Clifford (1995) discusses, diasporas are focused on the idea of displacement from and connection to a homeland and the possibility of return. However, for diasporic Cambodians, the possibility of return is hindered due to facing “new situations and [coping] with new contingencies” in displacement (Anderson and Lee 2005, 15). Asian diasporas, as discussed by Parreñas and Siu (2007), in particular, are fragmented and impacted by state-sponsored narratives as well as labor practices. These fragmentations are easily observed through how the United States government sought to assimilate Cambodian refugees into the United States by disseminating the newly immigrated refugees across the United States in order “to avoid creating large, ‘unassailable’ enclaves” (Smith-Hefner 1999, 9). Despite these attempts by the United States government, the refugee population migrated within the United States to form large enclaves in places like Lowell and Long Beach in order to establish places like Cambodia Town.

While seeking to establish place in the United States, diasporic Cambodians faced additional problems with adapting to a new social and economic environment and state expectations. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2003) discusses how the welfare state and social workers, while well-intentioned, both served as a disciplinary tool of the state and

failed to support Cambodian Americans in the Bay Area by perpetuating conditions of social and economic struggle. Furthermore, Ong highlights the racial struggles of diasporic Cambodians by showing how the community was racialized towards stereotypical notions of Blackness for their inability to produce the labor necessary for attaining United States citizenship. In this thesis, I draw on Ong's concept of cultural citizenship which considers the role of norms, morals, and state power in determining and defining subjecthood in a post-genocide, unsettled context. These challenges are further expounded upon by Eric Tang (2015) who argues that refuge is never found. Tang revisits Ong's discussion of citizenship and shows that the hyperghetto conditions found in New York City following two decades of resettlement ensnares Cambodian Americans with poverty and discrimination while also perpetuating colonialism, imperialism, and the carceral state. Thus, citizenship becomes more than just resettling and assimilating but about inequity in the face of unequal access and distribution of resources, knowledge, power, and infrastructures.

### *Remembering through the Arts*

Beyond the arduous conditions of the United States, diasporic Cambodians also faced particular challenges with maintaining religious and cultural practices in the United States. Anthropologist Nancy Smith-Hefner (1999) reveals how Cambodian American children resisted adopting Cambodian cultural practices and religious beliefs in the face of their American social and technological environments by resisting long-standing, traditional Cambodian ideas of social status and relations. By challenging these beliefs, a

generational divide formed between Cambodian Americans. Additionally, through multiple contradictions in educational approach, notions of achievement, gender ideologies, and language barriers, tensions between the migrant generation and their children became further exasperated and led to a deeper generational divide persisting to present day where Cambodian American youth are believed to have disengaged with their cultural heritage and background entirely (Sam 2001; Smith Hefner 1999).

In addition to the generational divide, the larger diasporic Cambodian community faces the harrowing memories of the Khmer Rouge genocide and escape from Cambodia. As Asian American Studies scholars Cathy Schlund-Vials (2012a) and Khatharya Um (2015) discuss, survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide are haunted by their memories and experiences and must negotiate traumatic histories of survival and loss. As Um (2015) discusses, these experiences of trauma are carried over by the refugee generation as trauma traces and impact their children in the diaspora and lead to intergenerational trauma. Yet while negotiating trauma, Um shows how arts, writings, and stories become projects that Cambodian Americans use to invoke nostalgia and prevent the rupture and forgetting of the Cambodian arts. Literary theorist Svetlana Boym (2007, 7-8) frames nostalgia as bound up within loss, displacement, longing, and time. Boym draws additional attention to how diasporic intimacy, the “precarious affection” held towards the homeland, shapes how the homeland is reconstructed, and thus remembered, by immigrant and exiled artists while being co-constructed in relation to the new place (Boym 2007, 16-18). Similarly in her work on Chinese Cultural Revolution songs, Ouyang Bryant (2005) links nostalgia and memory to indicate how nostalgic formations



reflect a desire to connect through imagined community. I further link nostalgia, storytelling, and memory to interrogate how the imagined homeland in diaspora is reconstructed and remembered while also adapting in a new place.

For example, Jolie Chea (2009) engages with the practice of remembering and remembering through her play reflecting on her childhood. Chea recalls the traumatic experiences she had with her grandmother and articulates some of the silences surrounding the Cambodian American narratives. By addressing the silences arising from deeply felt trauma, Chea uses storytelling to remember the experiences of genocide and displacement and works towards unpacking trauma. In addition to recalling experiences of trauma, identity construction and cultural performances serve as alternative methods to unpacking the diasporic Cambodian experience. As Asian American Studies scholar Cathy Schlund-Vials discusses in her book *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (2012b), the arts and media are testimonials for Cambodian Americans to articulate their experiences, memorialize the trauma of genocide and displacement, and engage in “rememory” which remembers the forgetting that was imposed by the Khmer Rouge regime.

Furthermore, Ollier (2006) notes how praCh Ly’s music is an attempt to articulate a Cambodian identity in the diaspora, and a tool to educate younger Cambodians about the genocide. Cathy Schlund-Vials has worked closely with praCh Ly and discussed the role and impact of Ly’s music in reviving Khmer traditional music, resisting trauma, reclaiming the narrative of the Khmer Rouge, and reaching a transnational audience (Schlund-Vials 2008, 2012b; Schlund-Vials and Ly 2011). Specifically, she notes how

“praCh’s response lays bare the global migrations, politics, and poetics at work in Cambodian American cultural production” (Schlund-Vials 2012, 180). Building on the work done on Cambodian American hip hop, processes of rememory through popular music are similarly observed through the performance and covering of popular music from before the genocide (Chambers-Letson 2011; DeMatteo 2019; Seng 2016). These cover performances are political acts of remembering which recall the genocide and life before the genocide. Furthermore, these performances celebrate and memorialize artists who died during the genocide while also processing the trauma of fleeing an oppressive regime.

In his master’s thesis on the first Cambodia Town Parade and Cultural Festival, Colin Pearson (2006) explores how a Cambodian American identity is negotiated and constructed in Long Beach, California. He shows how organizing the first Cambodia Town Parade and Cultural Festival and performances at festival demonstrate the community’s efforts to shape the narratives and stereotypes surrounding Cambodian Americans as unproductive citizens. Pearson also shows how the community has survived and adapted to tumultuous conditions in the United States. By invoking feelings of nostalgia in cultural performance, they engage in the act of rememory and invoke the experiences of the genocide, without overtly stating it, and facilitate the construction of a Cambodian American identity. At the same time, these feelings of nostalgia also facilitated a return to the diasporic homeland and simultaneous establishment of Cambodia Town, a distinct Cambodian American space.

Through the creation of Cambodia Town in 2005 and its official designation in 2007, we can observe how, despite the challenges facing diasporic Cambodians in the United States, the Cambodian American community establishes a sense of place. However, this sense of place is complicated due to how diasporic persons have situated loyalties. Situated loyalties consider “how migrants express a greater sense of affinity and loyalty to the place from which they are geographically displaced, and which provides the imaginary space of an idealized home. Yet, this imaginary space is always in flux and changing, and it can represent more than one place” (Parreñas and Siu 2007, 15). The imagined homeland for diasporic Cambodians is ascribed multiple meanings arising from experiences with genocide and political turmoil in addition to the legacy of Angkor and the long-standing and beautiful artistic practices that can be traced back to Angkorian civilization. These two tensions create contradictions with imagining the homeland as both an idealized utopia and site of destruction which complicate diasporic return.

The relationship between the homeland and new place are further complicated by the social and economic conditions that diasporic Cambodians faced in the United States. Um complicates diasporic notions of return by recognizing how the Cambodian diaspora is situated within “two simultaneous contexts of exile – exile *from* the ancestral home and the memory source, and exile *within* the new place of refuge” (Um 2015, 233). The larger notion of return becomes increasingly complicated by an unstable place of refuge and traumatic but beautiful homeland. Because of these complications, the Cambodian diasporic identity is both contingent on an imaginary return and invocations of memories and images of the homeland and integration into the new place (Ignacio 2004). In the

following sections, I discuss how the Cambodian American community continues to negotiate these conflicting constructs filled with tensions and trauma.

## **The Khmer Arts Academy**

My project at KAA continues the work of critical remembering and considers how the diasporic experience continues to impact the transmission of Khmer arts. The Khmer Arts Academy was founded and run by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro in 2002. The studio started in *neak krou*, meaning female teacher, Sophiline Cheam Shapiro's house. Then, the studio moved into its current settlement at 1364 Obispo Ave in Long Beach, California after gaining 501c3 status. During the early years of KAA, the studio would perform at spaces like the Walt Disney Concert Hall as one of few Cambodian performing arts groups in the United States.

In 2006, *neak krou* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro moved to Cambodia and Serey Tep took on the role of managing director for the following years. Because Serey was not a dancer, she primarily handled organizational affairs while student teachers taught dance classes. She applied for funding to support and acquire guest artists-in-residence for the studio, including Prumsodun Ok and Charya Burt, and housed some of them in her own home while they taught classes. Up until 2010, Serey maintained her role as managing director. Afterwards, she worked on and off with Julie Nooth for about five years. Later in 2015, Mea Lath and Khannia Ok became the managing directors of the studio and dance instructors and ran the studio together. While they ran the studio, Bee Chhim was recruited to run the music program in 2017 and replaced the previous music instructor.

Mea and Khannia ran the studio until 2019 when Khannia left the organization. Mea became the sole managing director and dance instructor at KAA with Bee overseeing the music program and Serey volunteering her knowledge and time to help run KAA.

I arrived at KAA in Fall 2019 seeking to study *pinpeat* alongside with my coursework at University of California, Riverside. As a Cambodian Chinese American studying *pinpeat* for the first time, being at KAA and one of the hearts of Khmer arts in the United States continues to be an exciting and eye-opening experience for me. Even though at times I was observing sessions for an assignment, I found myself invested in and getting to know the core community leaders, Mea and Bee, before and during classes as well as during any breaks or lulls in instruction. Now I spotlight Mea and Bee, whose voices are key to my thesis research, and remain important role models for me.



**Figure 2. Mea Lath placing incense in front of the altar at the Khmer Arts Academy. Photo shared with the ethnographer by Mea Lath.**

Mea, born in the refugee camps, is a Cambodian American from the 1.5 generation who started learning Cambodian classical dance in 2002 in her pre-teen years. She studied under *neak krou* Sophiline at the Arts of Apsara program. Shortly afterwards, she followed *neak krou* Sophiline when KAA was established in 2002, continued studying with guest artists, and later took on a student teaching position. Later, Mea went on to study with *neak krou* Charya Burt. While attending college, she would commute back and forth from San Diego to KAA to study and teach Khmer classical dance. Mea has performed in various venues including the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the USC Asian Art Museum, Long Beach Art Museum, and the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art. Through Khmer classical dance, Mea finds that she can maintain and assert connections to Cambodian history and culture. Nowadays, after training for over fifteen years, she now oversees the day-to-day operations at KAA and serves as the managing director, dance instructor, administrator, janitor, and mentor to KAA students on top of working as an insurance agent. In the future, she aims to start her own professional dance company in order to share Cambodian culture as well as support efforts to sustain it in order to foster interest in Khmer arts with future generations of Cambodian Americans.

Born in the United States in the mid-1980s, Bee is a second generation Cambodian American who started studying Khmer traditional music in the early 2000s as a teenager under his uncle Ho Chan Chhim. He began studying the instruments of the *pinpeat* ensemble under his uncle during a weekend visit in order to spend time with his uncle and get closer to his Khmer cultural roots. Through learning *pinpeat*, Bee became

more exposed to the Khmer culture and religion through music. While Bee plays all of the instruments in the ensemble, his primary instrument is the *sralai*, a quadruple reed aerophone. Bee continued his music training until he graduated high school. While he no longer was taking regular music lessons, he continued to study Khmer music through watching YouTube videos and consulting with his uncle while occasionally performing at community events. Bee has performed in numerous places including the San Francisco Palace of Fine Arts, the Getty Museum, SF Opera House, and multiple temples throughout the country from Portland, OR to Lowell, MA as a part of different cultural festivals. Additionally, he has given workshops and demonstrations at UCSD, CalArts, and Chapman University. He works full time while also teaching the music class at KAA on weekends.



**Figure 3. Photo of Bee Chhim playing *roneat ek* in his living room. Photo shared with ethnographer by Bee Chhim.**

While I took music classes and conducted observations at KAA from November 2019 to March 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, I closely connected with Mea, Bee, and Serey during breaks and rehearsals at the studio. Following the US shutdown, I remained connected with them and the rest of KAA through social media. Effectively, I conducted parts of my research in person at KAA and other parts remotely over video call. While in lockdown, I pivoted slightly and connect with *lok krou* Ngek Chum and ethnomusicologist Joanna Pecore for additional insight on music transmission. *Lok krou* Ngek Chum is a Cambodian refugee originally from Battambang province. Having acquired mastery over numerous Khmer traditional music and instruments, he became recognized as a master artist of Khmer music and now resides in the Washington D.C. area teaching Khmer traditional music to the local Cambodian community.<sup>6</sup> I connected with Ngek Chum and Joanna Pecore following *lok krou* Ngek Chum's online performance with the American Folklife Center during September 2020. I draw on my experiences with KAA and communications with *lok krou* Ngek Chum and Joanna Pecore to explore how Khmer traditional music is transmitted in the Cambodian diaspora.

First, I discuss my experiences as a music student at KAA to reveal the status of Cambodian *pinpeat* and Khmer arts more broadly in diaspora. I walk through a typical music class at KAA to illustrate my experiences as a student during in-person sessions. Then, I briefly discuss how the COVID-19 moment completely disrupted music and dance transmission at KAA. Despite the challenges to sustaining the Khmer arts, I push

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<sup>6</sup> For a closer exploration of *lok krou* Ngek Chum's background and the Cambodian diasporic community in the DC and Maryland area, I recommend Joanna Pecore's dissertation *Sounding the Spirit of Cambodia: The Living Tradition of Khmer Music and Dance-Drama in a Washington, DC Community* (2004) for the depth in which she discusses the refugee community experience.



back against earlier narratives which implicate a lack of interest among younger Cambodian Americans. Instead, I show there is burgeoning interest among Cambodian American youth. Afterwards, I delve into the personal stories embedded in my music classes through conversations and interviews and consider the postmemory work involved with shaping the overall experience of studying Khmer arts. I indicate how shared anecdotes construct imagined connections across the Cambodian diaspora which comprise memory work and remember beyond the genocide. I suggest how these anecdotes evoke a remembering of musical experiences that inform students about aspects of Cambodian cultural values rather than solely centering trauma. Lastly, I consider the material and social aspects which shape cultural sustainability of Cambodian *pinpeat*. Rather than situating the actual transmission of Khmer arts in precarity, I indicate how the surrounding infrastructure meant to support the Khmer arts fails to support community efforts to sustain Cambodian American cultural production. Now I will delve deeper into my experiences while actively studying *pinpeat*.

### **Studying *Pinpeat* at the Khmer Arts Academy**

It was 3:00pm and dance class had concluded for the day. Now, it was time for music class. By January 18, 2020, I had become accustomed to Saturday's dense routine of rehearsal, lunch, rehearsal, clean up, and more rehearsal. The students began to change out of their dance practice attire and into their day-to-day clothes. While some students were changing, others helped clean the studio by wiping down the mirrors, emptying the trash, or vacuuming the floor. While this took place, I began to move the instruments out

from the back room and out to the studio floor. Once each student finished their cleaning task, they helped move instruments and gather the floor cushions for rehearsal. After arranging the instruments in an oval formation, one by one the students went to their instruments and picked up their mallets. Some students offered a *sampeah* in front of their instruments before warming up while others started playing immediately only to stop and offer a *sampeah* after seeing another classmate *sampeah*.<sup>78</sup> A few students started to noodle around on their instruments and rehearse tunes from previous weeks of instruction. Others were still chatting with each other since all the students had just finished four hours of dance practice. Once everyone was in order, everyone quieted down and waited for *lok krou* Bee's instructions.

They began with a warmup scale. Warming up for music class involved a series of stepwise motion descending and ascending with occasional leaps over a key which the students continuously looped as a class until Bee provided further instruction. Later, I learned that Bee used the warmup scale for students both get them used to playing and to have them acclimate to the different playing styles on each instrument. Since I was learning the *roneat ek*, he placed additional emphasis on maintaining the octave spacing

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<sup>7</sup> The *sampeah* is a greeting, farewell, and apologizing gesture where two individuals bring their hands together in front of their body and slightly bow their heads to each other to demonstrate respect to each other. The placement of the hands varies depending on the relationship between the two people and there are five different relational levels that based on social status and context. The first level is between same age friends and palms are placed together at the chest. The second level is for bosses, higher ranked people, and older people and palms are placed at the mouth. The third level is for parents, grandparents, and teachers and palms are placed at the nose. The fourth level is for kings and monks and palms are placed at the eyebrows. The fifth level is for praying to the gods or sacred statues and palms are placed together at the forehead.

<sup>8</sup> I also want to note that the *sampeah* is considered a Khmer practice. My parents repeated note that this we, Cambodian Chinese people, do not *sampeah* unless we are interacting with Khmer people.

between two mallets using the warmup scale.<sup>9</sup> After incessantly repeating the warmup exercise, Bee eventually signaled to the students that everyone would play the warmup scale one by one after collectively playing the scale one more time. One by one, each student played the scale until everyone had completed the scale exercise. Afterwards, Bee began to work with the students on the *pinpeat* repertoire and cycled through various pieces. I noticed there was no sheet music or notation in the room, so the students were playing straight from memory. While the keys on one of the *roneat thung*, the lower-pitched sixteen key xylophone, was labelled with Khmer consonants, no notation was available. As the rehearsal continued, each piece continued to increase in length and difficulty. While the class rehearsed each piece, he went from student to student and corrected each error or momentary lapse in memory. In these instances, Bee would stand behind each student using a pair of soft-headed mallets and guide them through certain passages.

Early in my time at the Khmer Arts Academy, no other instruments were available for me, and I had not learned any of the class repertoire since I was a complete novice at *pinpeat* music. I was eventually handed the *chhing* to play during class. Logically, I could at least play the role of timekeeper rather than solely sitting and observing class and picking up an instrument during the break or when a student went to the restroom. Often during my first few weeks at the Khmer Arts Academy, I would

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<sup>9</sup> Often times, there is a string tied between the two mallets that help inexperienced students maintain that octave space until they can do it without the string. In my case, Bee saw that I could hear the octave and decided I did not need the string to my dismay.

move between playing the *chhing*, *samphor*,<sup>10</sup> and *skor thum*<sup>11</sup> since these had more set, rhythmic parts and there were no instruments available for me to practice. At any rate, assigning me these roles allowed Bee to easily move between each student and provide them with individualized assistance while they worked through the repertoire. At certain points, not everyone knew or remembered the entirety of a piece or movement and so some students would drop out and reenter once the piece looped back to a more familiar passage. Occasionally, I would find opportunities to try the *roneat ek* when students were absent or offered me their seat while they went to the restroom or to get a drink of water. During these moments when I could take on a more melodic role in the ensemble, I naturally became lost while trying to follow the students next to me or attempting to keep up with the warmup scale.

After rehearsing the repertoire together, the students typically requested a water, restroom, and stretch break after sitting at their instruments for an extended period of time. Then, class transitioned over to individualized practice sessions as each student returned to their instruments. Bee continued to move around the oval interacting with each student. During these individual meetings, Bee would teach additional material to help complete the passage they were learning or fill in the gaps that appeared after one week of no rehearsal. While Bee worked with a student, everyone else in the class would run-through sections on their own or work in pairs and rehearse entire movements together. These pairs would expand to include their other classmates because other

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<sup>10</sup> A small double-headed barrel drum.

<sup>11</sup> A large pair of barrel drums set on a drum stand next to the *samphor*.

students would overhear the pair and join in. During the more individualized sessions, students took opportunities learn from each other and fill in the sections of the music they had forgotten from the previous week's rehearsal. As class continued into the afternoon, these spontaneous groups would eventually facilitate a return to playing the repertoire together as a class as their sound took over the room. When we approached 5:00pm, parents would enter the studio and one by one the students would leave. Some offered a *sampeah* to *lok krou Bee*, others simply said their farewells. After a long day of dance and music class, rehearsal ended.



**Figure 4. The Khmer Arts Academy studio space. Photo shared with the ethnographer by Bee Chhim.**

I provide this ethnographic snippet to describe a typical music class at the Khmer Arts Academy in Long Beach, California. Music class usually runs from 3:00pm to 5:00pm on Saturdays and two hours on Sunday. All the students in the music class are also a part of the dance class and spend long hours – the bulk of their weekend – at the academy studying Khmer traditional arts. While the academy features a robust dance program with multiple performances throughout the year, the current music program is only a few years old. Starting in 2000, the music program was housed under the United Cambodian Community and taught by one of the master artists in the area. With almost monthly live performances in various cities and at different festivals, the music program thrived from 2000 to 2006. Over time, however, the program declined.<sup>12</sup> In approximately 2017, the Khmer Arts Academy sought out Bee Chhim because of his skill and knowledge of *pinpeat* music. After Bee purchased a set of *kong*,<sup>13</sup> a set of sixteen horizontal suspended knobbed gongs, in the Bay Area, the Khmer Arts Academy reached out to Bee and recruited him to teach at the academy. The previous music instructor solely taught *roneat ek* and *roneat thung* at the academy so students did not learn to play *kong*, *samphor*, *skor thum*, and *sralai* despite having these instruments. Because of these limitations, the academy only had four music students at the time. Fortunately, when Bee began to teach at the Khmer Arts Academy in 2017, his knowledge of all the instruments

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<sup>12</sup> Bee left the music program in 2006 after graduating from high school and needing to attend to personal responsibilities. While my knowledge of the time between the United Cambodian Community era and the present is partially speculative, the decline of the music program was likely a result of multiple factors including *neak krou* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro's departure to Cambodia, community politics and conflicts, as well as a decline in students.

<sup>13</sup> There are two types of *kong*: *kong tauch* and *kong thum* which are higher and lower pitched respectively.

in the *pinpeat* ensemble allowed him to teach more students and increase the number of students enrolled in the music program.

Bee's music class typically follows the same agenda: group warmup, group rehearsal, individualized practice, and group rehearsal. The class fluidly transitions between group exercises and individual practice sessions based on student engagement. By allocating time for individual practice, Bee can focus his individual attention on students and either challenge them with more complicated elaborations or work on retaining the piece depending on their performance in the class. Additionally, Bee used these one-on-one sessions to also physically mold and shape students from adjusting how the students held their mallets as well as their posture. These shifts from individual practice and specialized instruction to group rehearsal also allows students to consolidate and apply their individual practice in a group setting to further reinforce their developing skills. The structure of Bee's class also reflects his projected curriculum which begins with emphasis on technique and basics through the warmup, transition to the performance simpler pieces from the dance repertoire, refinement of skills and technique, and eventual study of more advanced pieces from the dance repertoire. All students were learning to play by rote memorization through oral, aural, and visual transmission. During this process, the students and I would intentionally watch, listen, sing, hum, or mime the motions to encode the melodies into our memory while he provided his notes, observations, and anecdotes to each student. As I observed Bee's instruction in the music class, I noticed that the skills of each student were not uniform, and some students were clearly more advanced and picked up the repertoire faster than some of their peers.

Initially, Bee did not separate the novice students from their more advanced peers. However, in February 2020, a few months after my arrival at the academy in November 2019, two new students arrived at the academy. With the arrival of these two new students and my weekly presence, Bee opened a beginner class to focus more attention on us. Given the smaller class size and dedicated time for new students, these sessions operated more like the individual practice sessions in the intermediate class where Bee allowed us to learn at our own pace. While the new students spent time focused on warmup scale, Bee introduced me to the piece *Robam Bopha Lokay* roughly meaning Dance of the Flowers of World and the introductory movement, “Chong Khim,” to *Robam Chun Por*. Our classes were unfortunately halted by COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. At the time of this writing, music and dance classes have yet to resume at the Khmer Arts Academy.

Despite Cambodian ethnomusicologist Sam-Ang Sam’s assertion that the “temptations to give in to the popular culture of North America are overwhelming” for the younger generation (Sam 2001, 71), my trips to the Khmer Arts Academy and resultant interviews during COVID-19 reveal a different reality. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bee created a group chat to share video recordings of the music so students could continue listening and memorizing the music. While it is unclear to what extent the students have listened to these recordings, the speed at which the group chat formed and incorporated all the students, including myself and the new students in the music class, indicated an eager readiness to learn. Mea Lath, the managing director and dance instructor, told me about the high degree of focus students displayed over Zoom



meetings together. She mentioned how she would create time for all the students to chat with each other while stretching and rehearsing because social distancing made it more challenging for everyone to meet with each other regularly. Instead of chatting like they might during a break in dance class, the students would quietly stretch and maintain the same level of concentration expected during face-to-face instruction. Students at Khmer Arts Academy, all of whom are second, third, and fourth generation Cambodian Americans, demonstrate a commitment to studying Cambodian *pinpeat* and classical dance that directly challenge Sam's (1988, 2001) assertions of youthful disengagement in favor of assimilating into American society and acquiring citizenship and belonging and reveal that this push is more driven by younger Cambodian Americans rather than community elders.

Both Mea and Bee are also a part of this younger generation. Mea and Bee studied dance and music respectively in the Long Beach community starting in the early 2000s as a part of the 1.5 and second generation of Cambodian Americans respectively. Nancy Smith-Hefner (1999, xiii) states that "Southeast Asian refugees tend to be extremely busy—or, to be more exact, socially overextended—in their struggle to adjust to life in the United States and make ends meet." Their overextension continues from the refugee generation into the current generation of students who navigate extracultural influences that complicate their engagement with Cambodian arts. While in Cambodia, younger culture-bearers face socioeconomic challenges with acquiring employment in the arts (Grant 2014, 2016b, 2017a). In the United States, Cambodian Americans continue to negotiate citizenship and belonging in addition to socioeconomic challenges.

Because of how Southeast Asian refugees fleeing war and instability complicated and contradicted the model minority construct, Aihwa Ong (2002, 86) indicates that “the negative associations of the term refugee (welfare dependent or welfare cheat) have become so strong that some Hmong and Cambodian Americans have taken to denying their national origins in casual encounters with mainstream Americans, claiming some other ancestry, such as Thai.” Because Cambodian refugees sought to assimilate into the United States, their priority became taking on qualities of being American to avoid being marginalized due to their refugee status and racialization against other Asian communities. This complicated history of pursuing citizenship in the refugee generation continues in the present generation through the need to participate in activities to perform an American identity and demonstrate assimilation by refusing otherness or the Cambodian arts in favor of supposedly more American practices.

These pressures reveal a hierarchy of value in the Cambodian diaspora which contrasts with how the arts are valued in Cambodia. Catherine Grant (2014) uses the dimension of value to indicate how sustaining Khmer arts is significant for maintaining Cambodian national identity. However, Mea recounted that people kept devaluing Cambodian classical dance through questioning what she was going to do as a dancer or how she was going to make a living. Cambodian Americans see participation in the arts as an extracurricular activity because of the lack of employment opportunities available to performers and low wages. While Mea and Bee advocate for and teach their students about the importance of their cultural practices for continuing their cultural heritage, value is ascribed in the diaspora through economic prospects that reflect continued

desires for citizenship and inhibit other goals of cultural sustainability and Cambodian identity formation.

At the Khmer Arts Academy, cultural sustainability appears in the form of the retention of musical knowledge. Music classes at the Khmer Arts Academy especially emphasize the retention of music through rote memorization and oral transmission. In class, Bee focuses on having students remember melodies and passages of each piece from the repertoire and engages in repetition to facilitate memorization. Indeed, it is valuable for students to learn the melodic content of the repertoire to create musical variations. The emphasis on memorization and repetition can be complicated by Dard Neuman's discussion of the modern and traditional student. Neuman (2012, 437) says that "the modern student...practiced toward perfection but merely mimicked that thing which they perfected" whereas the traditional student "traveled toward innovation through independent explorations of their body-instruments." While oral transmission is effective for long-term recall and flexibility for incorporating ornaments and variations (Neuman 2012, Dyer 2018), the efficacy of traditional oral transmission is not entirely clear at the Khmer Arts Academy. As it stands currently, the practice of rote memorization at the Khmer Arts Academy primarily attends to memorization though there are plans to work on improvisation. While they have knowledge of some of the core repertoire, the students in the music class are still developing the ability to create variations and decorate the melody with *pambhlai*, meaning to embellish, embroider, or alter the truth, in order to contribute to the heterophonic texture of *pinpeat* music (Giuriati 1995).

As a scholar-student, I became curious about the music theory behind *pinpeat* music and came to find that much of the theory becomes a part of intuition and not explicitly taught to the class. I find Ric Trimillos' (1983) distinction between formalized transmission and informal transmission a helpful tool here. Trimillos uses these terms to refer to the overt and subtle modes of acquisition during music transmission respectively. In my experience, the extent I had read about *pinpeat* music informed the rate I absorbed and picked up on the technical aspects of *pinpeat* music and refined my understanding of *pinpeat* music. After observing the class for a few weeks and playing *roneat ek*, I decided to try *kong* for the first time during break. I had only heard the students in the class or Bee play *kong* and I had internalized the warmup scale on the *roneat ek*. However, during the class warmup, I came to discover that the warmup scale maps to the *kong* differently compared to the *roneat ek*. While the *roneat* often play in octaves, the horizontal knobbed gongs are arranged on the *kong* in a way so that the *kong* are rarely played in octaves. In tandem with passively listening to the *kong* during class and capitalizing my knowledge of the warmup scale, it did not take long to figure out the warmup scale for both *roneat* and *kong* instruments during the break. In another class in February, along with two other students, we swapped instruments and activated our informal, passive observations of each other's instruments and successfully ran through the warmup scale. While not an instance of creating variations, the traditional method of studying together as a class rather than individually opens opportunities to internalize more than simply the requisite skills and idiomatic variation for one instrument.

Bee's warmup scale suggests a recent innovation in *pinpeat* transmission. Tanaka, one of the new students at the Khmer Arts Academy, reflected on Bee's methods and said, "for him to create his own scale, I felt like it was more structured and it was easy to learn the way even though I messed up ten to fifteen times." Tanaka contrasts this with his experience studying *bokator*<sup>14</sup> and said,

"I know this sounds crazy but he pulled my ear to make it crack and that was his start up thing. And he would try to, wake me up, I don't know, it hurt as hell but you know, whatever. So his way of method of teaching was very very old school, very harsh, very like I'm gonna tell you once, I'm not gonna show you twice."

Through his anecdote, Tanaka indicates a shift between the old school, traditional approach to teaching Khmer arts with Bee's patient approach. Bee's classroom also contrasts with his difficult experiences while studying under his uncle. With his uncle, Bee notes that there was no warmup, and that the primary method of transmission was repeating fragments over and over. Given how the Khmer Rouge genocide devastated the transmission of Cambodian *pinpeat*, Bee sought a more systematic and favorable approach and found it in Thai music communities. Bee derived a more technical approach from Thai musicians that featured a more gradual introduction into the ensemble repertoire and emphasis on technique rather than repetition.

In his new curriculum, Bee reorganized his class structure. While classes before the pandemic follow the structure I outlined earlier, he intends to develop the separation

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<sup>14</sup> *Bokator* is a Cambodian martial art form literally meaning to pound a lion. I choose to romanize the word using its common transliteration of *bokator* rather than *Lbokkato* for simplicity and it is casually pronounced *bokator*.

between beginner and intermediate levels. Bee's pedagogy for the beginner class recenters the fundamentals by attending to instrument technique, proper musician etiquette, and a basic understanding of rhythm and tempo while only working on the 32-note warmup scale rather than any of the *pinpeat* repertoire. Using the 32-note warmup scale, Bee instills tempo and rhythm through repetition and adding triplet figure variations to decorate the scale. After these goals are met, students learn one of the basic dance pieces with only one movement, identify dance cues, and learn to change tempos to gain the requisite skills for accompanying dancers in the future. Once these skills are acquired, Bee plans to move students to the next class for additional repertoire and skill refinement. At the intermediate/advanced level, Bee intends to work on improvisation, faster tempo changes, cleaner posture, and more refined playing. Additionally, he wants to prepare students to accompany dancers in the future and work with vocalists by teaching them how to match the pitch of their instrument to vocalists and identify cues in dance gestures to transition between movements of the repertoire.

Bee's curriculum shares similarities with the Thai American practices outlined in ethnomusicologist Nattapol Wisuttiapat's (2020) ethnography of the Thai Cultural and Fine Arts Institute of Chicago. Wisuttiapat (2020) identifies how classes are organized into two tiers: rhythm class and *khim* or *piiphaat* class. Rhythm class emphasized the perception of rhythm and basic cultural practices like demonstrating respect to the teacher and instruments much like the purpose of Bee's warmup scale and introductory lessons. In contrast, the *khim* and *piiphaat* classes reinforced proper etiquette further while developing their abilities to play piiphaat repertoire which serve a similar role to Bee's

advanced class. By opting to draw on Thai music pedagogy as he encountered it, Bee uses parallels between both musical traditions to attend to crucial musical elements like tempo and ensemble arrangement, which are not as heavily emphasized in Khmer music instruction.

### *Adaptations to COVID-19*

Classes came to a halt in March 2020. The Khmer Arts Academy closed its doors temporarily because of the COVID-19 shutdowns. Earlier, I mentioned how Bee shared videos of the *pinpeat* repertoire to all the music students. While during COVID-19, music students cannot readily access the instruments for practicing. All we can do is internalize the recordings Bee shared with us all and learn asynchronously.

While the situation seems rather bleak, COVID-19 presents an opportunity to rethink the online media in terms of the advantages it offers in terms of access. In their discussion of online methodologies, Cooley, Meizel, and Syed (2008, 105) indicate how “the Internet allows us to link up with other artists, students, teachers, and fans in an attempt to stay connected to this web of talent.” Kiri Miller (2012, 17) further expands this by considering how YouTube can serve as “a platform for countless virtual communities, many of which are focused on transmitting knowledge in users’ areas of interest and expertise. Some of these learning communities are gradually transforming the face-to-face, body-to-body transmission contexts that have always played a crucial role in music pedagogy.” In addition to his previous studies under his uncle, Bee uses YouTube to learn *pinpeat* repertoire. However, by studying *pinpeat* online, cultural values and

practices disappear from the curriculum. For instance, one of the key important pieces in the *pinpeat* repertoire and part of the homrong suite, “Sathukar,” should only be taught directly, by a teacher, and not through recordings because it is a sacred part of the repertoire. Yet, online learning presents an opportunity to learn variations from more artists.

In my pursuit of more knowledge about *pinpeat*, I connected with Ngek Chum in Maryland in September following his online concert livestreamed over Facebook by the American Folklife Center. While I did not learn any new repertoire, we dialogued together about *pinpeat* music and playing techniques. For instance, Ngek Chum, Joanna Pecore, and I discussed the concept of *phlouv*, literally meaning road or path, and how different *phlouv* in music indicate instrumental and regional playing styles as well as the lineage of teachers.<sup>15</sup> Ngek Chum also shared a handful of stories about studying and teaching *pinpeat* which I will closely discuss in the following section.

My case study of the Khmer Arts Academy explores one site of music transmission in the Cambodian diaspora. Throughout this and the following section, I describe my musical *phlouv* and pathway to portray my own experience and my attempts to adapt both my studies and research during COVID-19. I deliberate over one of the challenges impacting cultural transmission at the Khmer Arts Academy and how citizenship remains a major issue in Cambodian American. I discuss current methods of

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<sup>15</sup> The metaphorical concept of *phlouv* also appears in Thai and Lao music as *thaang* and *taeng* respectively. I borrow Deborah Wong’s (2001, 2004) romanization here. While I have discussed *phlouv* in terms of path, playing styles, and lineages, *phlouv* is also connected to improvisational elements. As Wong (2001, 79-80, 267) notes about Thai classical music, *thaang* encapsulates a bigger journey metaphor which crucial to Thai music pedagogy. She later notes how *taeng* in Lao music metaphorically explains the internal creative and improvisatory elements in Lao music (Wong 2004, 26-27).



music transmission at the Khmer Arts Academy as well as the trajectory of its music program overall. Bee and Tanaka reveal a shift away from the punishing traditional methods towards patience and restraint which suggests how instructors have renegotiated music transmission in the diaspora.<sup>16</sup> When face-to-face classes came to a halt in March 2020 due the pandemic, Mea's online meetings over Zoom and Bee's attempt to continue music through a video-sharing group indicates a continued engagement from the younger generation of Cambodian Americans in sustaining Khmer arts that pushes back against previously held conceptions that Cambodian American youths have chosen to disconnect from their heritage. On the contrary, I see strong indications that the younger generation is paving a new *phlouv* while sustaining important cultural practices and connectivities in the community, diaspora, and homeland.

### **Anecdotes and Stories: Remembering and Feeling Cambodia**

Students learned more than how to play and perform music and dance at the Khmer Arts Academy: we also learned about Cambodian history and culture. During music and dance class and formal transmission, Mea and Bee embedded Cambodian history and culture informally to educate younger students about the impact of the genocide. On my first visit, when entering the main studio space, one of the first details I noticed was the large altar on the stage decorated with various masks of characters from *lkhon*, or Cambodian dance-dramas, and photos of different performers. The shrine was

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<sup>16</sup> I minimally discuss the transition to the online in this section to acknowledge that one took place for dance class late in the pandemic while music class did not make a transition online beyond the creation of a group chat.

also striking for Tanaka, a newer student. Tanaka said, “I was surprised about the spiritual practices. As soon as I walked in, I saw the huge shrine thing and how people pay respect to ancestors.” Indeed, the shrine functioned as a ritual space of remembrance. Photos of important teachers, deceased artists, and the late Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, who was instrumental in the protection of Khmer classical dance, adorned the shrine. In effect, the altar maintained a lineage of key figures to the Cambodian arts.

I noticed how students offered a *sampeah* to their teachers upon arriving at the academy and to their instruments at the start of music class. Because I had never played *pinpeat* music before, it was on that day I learned to *sampeah* my instrument before and after playing. These observations indicate the importance of spirituality at the Khmer Arts Academy. Specifically, the students and instructors at the academy demonstrated and articulated the value and significance of recognizing and honoring teachers in accordance with Khmer Buddhist beliefs which emphasize the role of the teacher in molding the student (Smith-Hefner 1999). The *sampeah* also serves as a way of demonstrating respect and honor to people and deities as well as the instrument. Demonstrating respect to your teachers through the *sampeah* is crucial for both maintaining professional relationships and recognizing the importance of lineage in instruction. By performing the *sampeah*, teacher spirits can reside with students and grant blessings to create music and perform dance. Through the *sampeah*, students become a vessel for a lineage of teachers by participating in music and dance transmission.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Similar to the *sampeah*, Thai people have a gesture known as the *wai* which is also related to Buddhist practices. In addition to how the *sampeah* is used, the *wai* is also used as a gesture of exchange, recognition, and empowerment between people that signifies the power relations between individuals and the importance of respect (Wong 2001, 74-75).

I frame classes at the Khmer Arts Academy as a place where students acquire historical and cultural narratives through extramusical practices and narratives. Teachers and students at the Khmer Arts Academy not only remember the mythic image of Angkor Wat but also recall pre-genocide life while resonating with the aftermath of genocide. Beyond the *sampeah* and ritual altar, students become more familiar with Cambodian history and culture through personal storytelling. Storytelling is an important practice in the Cambodian American diaspora for articulating and remembering Cambodian history and culture. I am guided by ethnomusicologist Joanna Pecore (2004) concept of sound-spheres which roots her research in the stories of her interlocutors and demonstrate how stories impart Cambodian values, morals, and knowledge. Through scholarly literature on the body, I consider how these stories are reflective of how “the body is capable of being scripted, of being written” (Foster 1995, xiii). As scholars Diana Taylor (2003) and Priya Srinivasan (2011) also indicate, the body is a place for archiving, activating, and transmitting experiences through performance and construct collective memory. I tie this with how American Studies scholar Jolie Chea (2009, 41) articulates the silences in the archive through critical remembering and frames the body “as a site in which the past meets the present and continues to live on through the present, thereby making possible a future.” Because storytelling and the body are crucial elements for remembering, I suggest the physicality of transmission, practice, and rehearsal present opportunities for embedding and activating memories and stories in the body. While these scholars attend closely to the body, I also attend to the feelings and emotions intertwined with bodily experience and crucial to building connections and critical remembering.

Storytelling and sharing anecdotes accomplish the work of critical remembering and postmemory production through activating nostalgia and empathy. Nostalgia, as Svetlana Boym (2007) articulates, is linked to experiences and feelings of loss, diaspora, displacement, longing, and time. I find nostalgia deeply a part of the relationships between stories, bodily experience, and remembering. In this section, I tie the physical and emotional aspects of studying *pinpeat* with these nostalgic elements embedded within shared anecdotes and stories shared as a part of oral/aural transmission. In doing so, I aim to consider what stories and anecdotes reveal about the how and why Cambodian *pinpeat* is sustained at the Khmer Arts Academy through feeling. Feeling stories, or the idea of feeling touched by someone's story, serves as my main entry point into how I characterize my intertwined somatic experience and emotional responses while studying *pinpeat* at KAA. Resonating with Tomie Hahn's (2008) ethnography of *nihon buyo* and sensual orientations, the practice of *sampeah* at the Khmer Arts Academy realizes and frames a sensory orientation towards the physical, embodied aspects of studying music. I attend closely to my sensory experiences and describe my personal reactions in order to share how these stories impacted my experience studying *pinpeat* online and offline.

Pain provides another productive mode of entry into considering how my physical and emotional feelings respond to the broader spatial and temporal aspects of nostalgia. As Sara Ahmed (2014, 31) describes, "pain involves the sociality of bodily surfaces (including the surfaces of objects) that 'surface' in relationship to each other. Some of these encounters involve moments of collision. Here, the surface comes to be felt as an

intense ‘impression’ of objects and others.” Metaphorically speaking, I use pain as a framework for thinking about encountering these personal stories and experiences and how these instances of collision invite listeners to respond, recall, and imagine experience. Ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong (2019, 171-172) suggests the performative role of pain and anger in taiko allows Japanese American taiko players to revisit the trauma and history of the Japanese American incarceration by rearticulating history through the physicality of taiko. Critical dance studies scholar Anusha Kedhar writes about how British South Asian dancers draw upon their pain to construct their own bodily archives carrying forward the memories of their dance career (Kedhar 2020). I link these encounters with the physicality of studying *pinpeat* to consider the emotional connectivity and empathy between students, the repertoire, teachers, and the broader Cambodian American experience.

As Sherene Razack (2007) notes, feeling empathy can amount to “stealing the pain of others” and further distancing from the Other. Willis (2014) also suggests about theatrical performance that the self drifts and becomes distanced with the performance and rather than creating further action, the performance is seen as the action. Through their analyses of performance art, Razack (2007) and Willis (2014) suggest how empathy is divisive, performative, and unproductive in terms of invoking action and change. Yet, Emily Roxworthy (2014, 101) provides a productive intervention through her discussion of critical empathy which indicates how objects and the objectification of people, rather than the embodiment of people. As a result of constructing objects and seemingly distancing oneself from a person, she argues that this results in a critical empathy that

recognizes the struggles of the Other as opposed to creating distance and supporting inaction.

Productive empathy necessitates additional connections while maintaining certain divisions. In contrast to Razack (2007) and Willis (2014), Angela Impey (2007, 43) suggests that through the physicality of music-making, songs containing oral histories carry an affective character that shape experience and memory through creating awareness of proximity and connectivity. Furthermore, Rahaim (2017) both implicates how empathy can collapse the self and Other into unity and notes how in music transmission this collapse into sameness is impossible in master-disciple relationships. Impey (2007) and Rahaim (2017) implicate how the participation in arts shifts the relational proximity between self and Other by heightening difference while connecting people which contrast with instances of spectatorship.

Through participatory involvement, I suggest that music, as well as dance, class promote a sense of feeling tied to empathy and nostalgia resulting from the physical and emotional experience of studying the Khmer arts. In the following ethnographic excerpts, I retell stories from my interlocutors and indicate how these stories operate as objects of nostalgia that promote connectedness between people and experience. I describe my personal reactions through to illustrate how I feel and engage with the nostalgia held towards imagined homeland while in diaspora. Then I reflect on what their previous experiences invite me to imagine and learn about the Khmer arts. I consider these anecdotes as important emotional encounters that enhance connections with the broader Cambodian American experience.

I find myself feeling connected, in part due to my positionality as a second generation Cambodian Chinese American, but also as an invested student-scholar studying the Khmer arts. I personally found new connections with my teachers and Cambodian history while studying *pinpeat* which shape my following discussion. I suggest that the following narratives generate postmemory. Drawing from Marianne Hirsch (2008, 111), “postmemorial work, [as she suggests,] strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. Thus less-directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone.” The stories that I encountered during class and interviews leave impressions and traces while also building towards Hirsch’s concept of postmemory. As a part of postmemory work, classes at KAA and these stories help articulate extramusical narratives that are often sidelined because of the shadow of the Khmer Rouge by remembering the distant homeland and recontextualizing it with the younger generation.

I investigate the role of personal storytelling in the musical transmission of Cambodian *pinpeat* and show how personal stories are remembered in music transmission. I do not argue that these stories deliberately forget the Khmer Rouge. Instead, I argue that these stories invoke feelings of nostalgia and connectedness that expand the diasporic imaginings of Cambodia to incorporate memories of ordinary Cambodian life in addition to larger narratives of trauma from the genocide through the transmission of Cambodian *pinpeat*. I prioritize these seemingly mundane memories

because these stories have been left out of scholarly narratives. Also, the following anecdotes reveal how these stories are bound up within the broader emotional experience of music transmission. I suggest how the physical aspects of music transmission reflect the sociality of collisions and impressions which invite myself and listeners to imagine Cambodian American histories through feeling their narrations of events and commentary. In the next section, I begin with my primary instructor Bee Chhim from KAA and then discuss the role of Ngeek Chum in my study of *pinpeat* music.

### *Feeling: Stories and Memories*

I worked with Bee Chhim and *lok krou* Ngeek Chum during my fieldwork to grasp music transmission in the Cambodian diaspora. I share their stories and my physical reactions learning from them to contextualize my embodied experience of learning *pinpeat* music. Their stories highlight how repetition and physiological experience are both central to the study of *pinpeat* music and playing technique. During a conversation with *lok krou* Ngeek Chum, he asked me to imagine experiencing his stories to improve my playing. By imagining these all these experiences, I consider how these anecdotes link postmemory and music transmission within nostalgia, haunting, and feeling.

While speaking with Bee one day, he shared with me a short story about studying under his uncle, Ho Chhim Chan, a master of the *sralai*. I asked him about his experience studying under his uncle and he immediately described that the experience was “very emotional.” He described a time when he was working on memorizing a particular section of a difficult piece through repetition and remarked,



“...if I mess up that one section [...] I remember one time, I messed up one section, and he [his uncle] took his mallet and literally hit me in the back” [...] “and then just walked away, and he walked away for like a couple hours and I just cried my ass off just trying to figure out that one section [...] so it was \*chuckles\* it was very tough [...] learning when I was younger [...] I get very scared when I play with my uncle. If I do mess up, like I always have to look at his face and say [...] hey~ sorry~”

Bee’s anecdote shows how this experience impacted his relationship with his uncle and with playing *pinpeat* music. His momentary pauses throughout both indicate a hesitancy to overtly recall these experiences and then voice them to me, his student. I looked down at my hands and wrung them in discomfort as I mapped the sequence of events to my body; thus, imagining the experience for myself and how I also respond when making mistakes in class. Underlying this stress are the pressures of mastering the *pinpeat* repertoire post-genocide. Conveyed through his own desire to master a particular section of music, Bee demonstrates a high level of engagement with *pinpeat* music and a knowledge of the stakes in a post-genocide setting. During class, I found myself reprimanding myself. While I do not strike myself with a mallet, I experience a similar stress and irritation stemming from a similar feeling and drive to learn the repertoire coming from my awareness of the significance in sustaining the Khmer arts.

Despite his own frustration with repetition, Bee emphasizes the importance of repetition for ingraining the music into muscle memory in order to maintain Cambodian traditional music in the diaspora. Thus, during practice and class, his story is actively

recalled to reinforce the importance of repetition, memorization, and accuracy. However, while he emphasizes repetition, Bee's intentional departure from strict Khmer traditional methods reflects his experiences while studying under his uncle. In contrast to the demanding nature of his uncle's music classes, Bee does not want his students to feel pressured by the need to learn the dance repertoire or to perform because of how mistakes can impact their self-esteem.

I share this anecdote to contextualize Bee's experience with studying *pinpeat*. Repetition continues to be a mainstay in music transmission at the Khmer Arts Academy; however, the broader experience shifted away from a more disciplinary usage of repetition towards a less stress-inducing learning environment as well as a greater technical emphasis. Additionally, Bee's usage of repetition is driven by a desire for students to feel more comfortable learning *pinpeat* music and grounded in an understanding of the ever-present stakes. In this way, sharing stories like this allows Bee to build a closer connection with his students through learning about personal experiences shape the classroom while also not replicating his learning experience. After hearing about traditional pedagogical methods in Bee's story, I became more interested in teaching practices across the Cambodian diaspora. While I later learned more from master artist *lok krou* Ngek Chum and ethnomusicologist Joanna Pecore who relayed to me some of Ngek Chum's memories of studying *pinpeat* music in Cambodia, I found myself drawn closely towards some of his personal stories and experiences and their role in my music training and understanding of *pinpeat*. During his narration, he invited me to imagine and reflect on these experiences to better my own abilities on the *roneat ek*. Yet,

at the same time, these anecdotes offer more than just technical advice but also invite further connections between the diaspora and homeland.

While studying *roneat ek* in Cambodia as a child, *lok krou* Ngek Chum recalled how, no matter whether it was a performance, rehearsal, or individual practice session, and even if his teachers were not in the room, his teachers would suddenly appear and strike him with one of the mallets or a hardened bamboo stick if he began to slouch while playing. *Lok krou* paused for a moment while telling this story. During this pause, Joanna and I both reacted as we imagined the scenario play out. I grimaced as a SMACK echoed in my mind as we silently processed this part of the story. After a few moments, he went on to ask me about the importance of proper posture in playing *pinpeat* music. I was not new to corporeal punishment given my own homelife and Bee's previous experience. However, I never spent an extended amount of time thinking about the purpose behind what this means for learning music. I responded that maybe the music would sound different. *Lok krou* latched on to this and added that this was how his teachers would notice changes in his posture even while not in the room or looking at him. Because of these memories and experiences, he always is reminded to sit upright while playing Cambodian traditional music. Here, *lok krou* uses his experience to articulate the importance of not instilling bad habits during practice and performance through the repetitive reinforcement from his *krou* through emphasizing that sound quality drops when slouching. Through these stories, Bee and *lok krou* show how repetition and punishment create imagined scenarios of embodiment where musical knowledge

becomes retained in the bodily archive and passed onwards through physical and imagined pain and frustration.

Later, during a break in our conversation, I spoke about my personal challenges with executing tremolo rolls and how I could not get a sustained sound during my own self-study. *Lok krou* Ngek Chum then offered another story. Early in his study of *roneat ek*, *lok krou* met his teacher early in the morning and they went over to a nearby river in the village he lived in. Then, *lok krou* Ngek Chum was pushed into the river by his teacher. The sensory experience of pain, shock, and surprise from the cold water resulted in his torso tensing up and caused his hands to shiver. He could then effectively describe the type of embodied feeling necessary to execute the technique that I was struggling with at the time. By sharing this experience, *lok krou* recommended that I try to imagine and recreate the scenario while practicing on my own. By using his story and envisioning myself falling into a stream of cold water, I could find the physiological feeling to improve my own technique on the *roneat ek*. While that experience might have been jarring for *lok krou*, it was helpful for acquiring that physical, embodied feeling and explaining it to my peers later.

I provide these paraphrased stories as instances of transmission from one bodily archive to another through repetitive practice and the imagined emotional encounters resulting from the anecdotes shared during music transmission. Bee's and *lok krou*'s stories implicate a difficult experience because of methods that reinforce the value of repetition and posture in learning *pinpeat* but also carry important lessons for technique and life experience. They provide a stark contrast with current pedagogical practices for

students in the diaspora. On the one hand, we students were invited to feel the technique through attempting to embody the experience and on the other hand, we could also feel the personal, lived reality in relation to our own livelihood. Furthermore, as Serey Tep shared with me, these anecdotes demonstrate how teachers care for their students. She remarks how teachers in Cambodia would only subject their music and dance students to these types of challenges because they cared for their success. They sought to impart lessons onto their students and further their skills and abilities. While instructional, these stories develop imagined connections between the diaspora and homeland. By recounting these experiences during the process of learning instrumental (and dance) techniques, my instructors enact how technique is “a technology of subjectivity, a template organizing activity, and an archive that links subjectivities and socialities to history” (Hamera 2002, 65). For example, *lok krou*’s experience of being pushed into a river in the early morning provides a distinct bodily experience that not only aids in learning the bodily feeling of executing a tremolo roll, but also invites the listener to envision life and history in pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. His narration describing the cold, small stream near the rice fields invites me and other listeners to imagine being in a rural village in Cambodia to actualize that story and decenter the haunting Khmer Rouge genocide.

For most Cambodian Americans, the genocide is the dominant narrative that informs our relationship to the homeland. For instance, in a conversation with me, Mea, the managing director and dance instructor at the Khmer Arts Academy always tries to direct this message to her students,

“It’s really special that we’re able to learn this artform that almost was extinct in the 70s and due to the remaining 10% of survivors that we’re able to do this and showcase this to the community and represent our culture to non-Cambodians and don’t ever forget the value and importance of what you do because no one else has this special gift. This is something that our ancestors have been doing for thousands of years and now we get to do it today. And just reminding them [the students] that they are special and what they do is special so they don’t feel that they need to pursue something else that will give them more value.”

As Mea suggests, while studying Cambodia classical music and dance, we as students are always reminded about the stakes in not preserving Cambodian culture. Mea reminds us that these artforms almost disappeared entirely as a result of the Khmer Rouge, that these practices can be traced back to Angkorian times, and that it is our duty to preserve Cambodian traditional arts as a part of our heritage and culture. On the one hand, references to Angkorian civilization remain prominent in the construction of contemporary Cambodian culture and identity in diaspora. On the other hand, the Khmer Rouge genocide is an unavoidable narrative that represents the contradictory destruction of Cambodian arts in favor of simulating Angkorian times. The genocide haunts Cambodian Americans. As Andre Lepecki writes, it is the “inconclusiveness in endings, that fact that matters are always unsettled and, moreover, demand objectivity when unleashing their afterlife” (Lepecki 2010, 41). While Lepecki discusses haunting in the case of re-enacting dances, studying music engenders a similar sense of haunting that is political in nature because it resists the devastating goals of the genocide while activating

the bodily archive which contains lineages of music and dance leading back in time to the genocide and beyond to Angkor.

Stories like Mea's, Bee's, and *lok krou* Ngek Chum offer a different image of Cambodia. Mea places an emphasis on the legacy of Angkor and the devastating impact of the Khmer Rouge. Thus, inviting students to imagine, feel, and think about what Cambodia looked like during those starkly different times. At the same time, Bee and *lok krou* focus primarily on how music was taught in specifically in the village of Battambang, where both their musical lineage trace back to. *Lok krou*'s story offers an image of the Cambodian countryside and rural village life that contrasts with the overwhelming vestiges of genocide. These alternative narratives contain nostalgic longing as a result of displacement and loss and promote feelings of curiosity towards Cambodian village life. It fosters greater interest in what life was like pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia and how our families lived during those times. As a part of music transmission and the ritual aspects of studying Khmer music, the embodied experience of studying *pinpeat* ingrains these narratives invites us towards a nostalgic remembering of the past and imagined timelines. For example, when Bee recounted his experience studying *pinpeat*, he also wondered what would have happened if there was not a genocide and how Cambodian arts would have flourished.

These haunted and nostalgic scenarios reflect the processes of postmemory production by facilitating approximations. While it is impossible to inhabit and live through these experiences as a second generation Cambodian American, I approximate these anecdotes through attempting to feel these narrations while studying *pinpeat* music.

In doing so, I activate and reactivate these narratives in their remediated forms as nostalgic traces embedded in playing techniques and classroom experiences. This postmemory nostalgic formation resonates with feelings and desires to connect through an imagined community and shared cultural background. While nostalgia makes it known through the genocide (Um 2015), Cambodian Australian scholar Maria Hach (2020) describes how second generation Cambodian Australians' nostalgic longing to return to Cambodia is also wrapped up with imaginings of the homeland and a longing to discover their histories. These nostalgic longings take on multiple forms during musical transmission through imagining stories and experiences as well as the very physicality of learning. Through these emotionally salient memories, instead of imagining a homeland based on Angkor Wat or traumatic experiences of the genocide, students might develop a nostalgia for quotidian village life through feeling these narratives.

I have laid out how feeling and nostalgia from these stories inform transmission of *pinpeat* music and how three narratives have been archived into the body. What does it mean to hold these three traces of Cambodia (Angkor, Khmer Rouge, and village life)? When Mea discussed the importance of teaching the value of Cambodian classical music and dance, I find that these stories of the everyday go on to create additional value and provide relatable and engaging content for both myself and younger students. During the study of Cambodian traditional arts, the stakes are clearly articulated. However, discussing the genocide is often too jarring and traumatic because of the violence that took place and the discomfort and difficulty of retelling those experiences. While the genocide is integral to Cambodian diasporic identity formation and present during



transmission, it's a topic often skirted around. As a part of studying music and dance, we learn about Angkor Wat and how it connects to Cambodian performing arts because of the bas-reliefs depicting classical music and dance. However, there is a large historical distance that makes it difficult for students to connect with, especially for those who have never been to Angkor Wat.

Complicated by the development of an American identity, experiences of displacement, and the images of the homeland, Cambodian Americans have a fraught relationship with the homeland. Khatharya Um (2015, 231) writes that the core of Cambodian diasporic identity is the insertion of and claiming of Cambodian history that resist invisibility and create a sense of belonging in the United States. Yet by claiming these histories, the emotional ties attached to these extramusical narratives open new possibilities. Sara Ahmed (2014, 39) writes about how pain and empathy create a “call to action” that learns to “live with the impossibility of reconciliation.” While she refers to the oppression of Australian aborigines, Ahmed’s framing provides a useful consideration because of the impossibility of resolution in diaspora in the aftermath of genocide. These personal stories shared during music transmission engage with the closer proximity to Cambodian arts and culture which contrast with the distance of genocide and temporal expanse of Angkor.

At the same time, these narratives are grounded in the experiences of people we know and create moments for connecting through storytelling during class. Linked to the haunting experiences of genocide and displacement, these brief stories shift the emotional links to Cambodia. Their casual commentaries become more salient during class and help

their students to form an emotional investment in the tradition and also in their instructors by inviting possibilities for change through continued engagement in the Khmer arts. These emotional and nostalgic connections deepen engagement with Cambodian classical music and dance in ways that the jarring and traumatic narrative of the genocide and historically distant image of Angkor may not. I am not dismissing the importance of narratives about Angkor Wat or the genocide; they are incredibly important for understanding the value of Cambodian arts and culture but also become obstacles towards connecting with Cambodia due to the imagined distance with these sites of memory like the killing fields and Angkor Archeological Park (Nora 1989). I am instead attending to vital narratives beyond utopia and disaster.

New stories are being written every day. As I document my *phlouv* and experience studying *pinpeat* at the Khmer Arts Academy, I am writing a narrative about music transmission in the Cambodian American diaspora. As Michelle Caswell (2014, 161) writes, “narratives are not just the retrieval of facts latent in the archives but the shaping of those facts and, often, the media through which the very definition of fact is constructed.” I only provide my narration of events and develop it within scholarly discourses about Cambodian Americans, though any and all errors are my responsibility as a ethnographer. *Lok krou* Ngek Chum, Bee, Mea, and Tanaka are key protagonists in the broader ongoing narrative of sustaining the Cambodian arts in the United States amidst various constraints. Bee’s story reflects transmission completely in the United States from someone from the 1.5 generation whereas Tanaka and I might be considered third generation music students under Bee’s tutelage at the Khmer Arts Academy.

Within the process of storytelling, students find deeper meaning in music and dance through their teachers. Along with some of my peers, I became further engaged with our teachers and their *phlouv* and how their *phlouv* shaped their experiences. For Tanaka, he felt blessed to have a teacher like Bee who was patient, structured, and less abusive compared to his prior experience with a *bokator* teacher who favored old-fashioned methods. Additionally, when Tanaka reflected on his experience in Ohio, he said, “even if they are lecturing you, they still love you,” which resonates with what Serey noted about these stories about tough love. Tanaka recalls how the broader community in Columbus, Ohio both praised and lectured the student performers and that these comments reflected the value and consideration held towards the performing arts by the wider community. While these moments of tough love were frustrating, the efforts of their instructors left physical and emotional impressions which continue to shape how Bee, Tanaka, *lok krou* Ngek Chum, Serey, and Mea engage with the Khmer arts. These anecdotes are crucial to the experience of studying Cambodian *pinpeat* and inform the overall collective experience of learning Khmer traditional arts in ways that are haunting but also nostalgic for more of these stories.

It is the combination of all these narratives and experiences that pique my interest in Cambodian music both as a Cambodian American interested in my own culture and as a scholar invested in the broader community and the sustainability of these cultural practices. As Catherine Grant (2014) notes about *smout* and *phleng kar boran*, one of the major values of Khmer music is that it articulates a Cambodian national identity in the face of the genocide. Beyond simply articulating a Cambodian American identity, it

increases the value of Khmer arts in diaspora among Cambodian Americans and the larger Cambodian community. These experiences, conveyed through extramusical narratives, are carried across generations of students and rearticulated during transmission, repetition, and rehearsal. Additionally, the personal feelings and responses from these stories facilitates a continued engagement with Cambodian music and dance that is further demonstrated by rise of the second, third, and fourth generation of Cambodian American performers. Furthermore, these narratives also reflect the cultural significance of teachers in the Cambodian diaspora. Beyond simply imparting information and cultural values, Cambodian American teachers and students are living archives who, while creating their own stories and narratives, recontextualize archival knowledge in the diaspora during the process of transmission, in resistance to the genocide, and amidst the shifting diasporic terrain.

### **Sustainability at the Khmer Arts Academy**

Music instruction in the diaspora required some necessary changes. While *lok krou* Ngek Chum and Bee described instances of punishment and pain in their musical upbringing, these methods are no longer acceptable in the diaspora or tolerated by students, as evident in Tanaka's contrasting reflections about studying *pinpeat* with Bee and learning *bokator* with an old-fashioned instructor. At the same time, these methods constructed and revealed the physical and emotional dimensions embedded in the Cambodian arts. The roles have shifted in the diaspora towards the teacher as solely the instructor rather than operating as the second parent of the student who manages the lives

of students (e.g., controlling who they marry). Still, the cultural values held towards instructors are upheld through actions like the *sampeah*, the emphasis on repetition and correction in the classroom, and the importance of teacher lineages.

However, while students usually study and rehearse as a group, as would be expected in Cambodia, music students are singled out from time to time during the warmup at the Khmer Arts Academy to perform the scale warmup unaccompanied and in front of their peers. At the Khmer Arts Academy, there are ongoing social and cultural negotiations between the Cambodian and American classroom that fluctuate between the old-fashioned techniques from Cambodia, the dominant modes of transmission in the United States, and Bee's own adaptations from observing Thai musicians. Bee's classroom management represents how his experiences as a Cambodian American shaped his own instructional values by focusing on and borrowing aspects of pedagogical practices that avoided disciplinary measures while systematically reinforcing technique and quality. Despite these efforts, since classes only meet once a week and students do not have an instrument at home to practice the repertoire, retention is a challenge. Yet by borrowing from Thai music pedagogy, Bee creates his own structure in place of an uncomfortable teaching praxis. As Christina Schwenkel (2017, 417) discusses about ruins in Vinh City, Vietnam, haunted infrastructures are "overlapping arrangements of dynamic networks and institutions that are once social, technical, political, and, at times, mystical." Here, this uncomfortable teaching praxis remains as a haunting infrastructure which shapes how Bee approaches teaching *pinpeat* to students at KAA by considering his personal experience alongside the social norms and beliefs in diaspora.

While one of Bee's goals is to provide instruments for students at the Khmer Arts Academy, there are a handful of challenges and barriers. Despite KAA possessing multiple instruments, only one set of *pinpeat* instruments is playable. The rest of the instruments need repairs to form a full ensemble for student use. Bee also remarked that parents do not want to get instruments for their kids. Yet, even if parents wanted instruments, Bee noted how challenging it can be to acquire them. When he purchased a set of *kong* in 2017, he found the seller on the internet and purchased the set during a convenient performance in the Bay Area. Prior to his purchase, KAA did not have a working set of *kong* so students could not study *kong* until he was recruited by Mea. Had Bee not found those *kong* on the internet, KAA might not have acquired a complete *pinpeat* ensemble. There are clear infrastructural limitations impacting the transmission of *pinpeat* due to the lack of instruments for students.

In search of more instruments, Bee attempted to reach out the local Thai community to purchase Thai musical instruments because the music of Cambodia and Thailand share significant similarities, from instrumentation to repertoire (Miller and Sam 1995). However, the Thai community turned Bee away because he is Cambodian. Jeffrey Dyer (2017, 41) notes how the emphasis on remembering lineage in the teacher's ritual in both nations advance cultural divisions and reinforce nationalist animosities. These nationalist and cultural tensions between Cambodia and Thailand persist in the face of larger similarities and manifest in Bee's interaction with the Thai music community. Bee's experiences indicate the challenges of finding and purchasing

instruments in the United States as well as the nationalist tensions and divides which impact Cambodian diasporic cultural transmission.

Purchasing instruments from abroad present more difficulties. During an interview with Bee, he was frustrated with purchasing instruments from abroad because he said that “if you’re Cambodian, they’ll rip you off!” *Lok krou* Ngek Chum also remarked that it would be easier to travel to Cambodia and bring instruments as carry-on luggage. In fact, both Bee and *lok krou* Ngek Chum noted how despite preferring Cambodian instruments, it was easier to purchase instruments from Thailand. *Lok krou* adds that ordering instruments from Thailand is more reliable because of shipping insurance. Both Bee and *lok krou* noted that even though the tuning was different between Cambodian and Thai instruments, the higher quality of Thai instruments’ sound compared to Cambodian instruments outweighed the work of retuning them.

In his discussion of Gibson guitars, José Martínez-Reyes (2021) shows how the political economy of mahogany wood is inextricably part of capitalist logics. The challenges with acquiring instruments reveal a similar issue with the infrastructure surrounding *pinpeat* instruments and performance outfits which are intertwined with modes of exchange and labor. Infrastructure, beyond simply physical structures, involves the anatomy, organizations, systems, and standards which carry hidden meanings and reflect constructs (Devine and Boudreault-Fournier 2021, 4-5). The various issues concerning Gibson guitars or Cambodian *pinpeat* instruments in this case reflect the political economy and emotional relations surrounding arts infrastructure. The difficulties with acquiring instruments due to ethno-nationalist tensions and instrument scarcity

indicate additional level of precarity that inhibits music transmission in the Cambodian diaspora. Students can only practice at KAA unless they have an instrument of their own at home and acquiring instruments is challenging without any reliable connections. Despite having an entire *pinpeat* ensemble at KAA, students cannot practice on their own time since there are not staff available to let students in for individual study. Furthermore, *pinpeat* is typically studied as a group rather than individually. However, the music class is only held twice a week at KAA, and each level only meets once a week. In short, there is limited practice time for music students because KAA is otherwise closed.

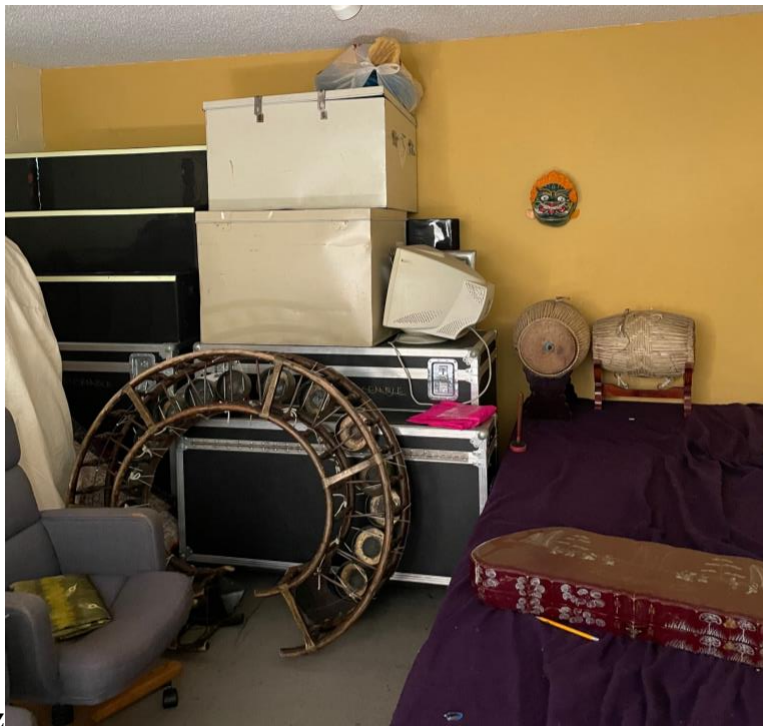
### *Material Sustainability*

One day, I was moving instruments from the instrument storage room to the main studio floor space. The instrument storage room, also a vestibule, is a dimly lit room strewn with *roneat*, *kong*, and *skor* stacked on top of each other, several large boxes, and a narrow aisle for students to change in and out of their rehearsal uniforms. As I was moving one of the *roneat*, a gray chunk fell off it. It rolled away and disappeared behind one of the instruments beneath it. Believing that I broke a *roneat*, I searched for the odd gray chunk but was unsuccessful and resolved to come back and locate it during break.

During class, another gray lump fell off one of the *roneat ek* so I said to Bee that one disappeared in the storage room. He described it as a paste made from a mixture of beeswax and metal shavings used to tune all the instruments. In an interview with Bee, he elaborated more about the tuning paste and how his uncle would make the paste every once in a while and share it with him to retune his instruments and the instruments at



KAA. I present my misadventure to think about the materials and resources surrounding music class which is tied to my earlier discussion and concerns for sustaining the Khmer arts. Material resources, musical instruments, and their component pieces like trough resonators and rattan are not easily acquired so instruments are imported from Cambodia or Thailand. This engages with a hierarchy of values as José Martínez-Reyes (2021) shows in his discussion about the qualitative value assigned to guitars based on whether they are made of Fijian mahogany. At KAA, one of the “*roneat*” is a Thai instrument and seen as a better instrument. When considering the fallen gray chunks, it indicates the lack of infrastructure for maintaining and acquiring instruments.



**Figure 5. Instrument storage room at the Khmer Arts Academy. Photo shared with the ethnographer by Bee Chhim.**

In addition to acquiring instruments, KAA faces challenges with maintaining clothing for dance classes and performances. When I spoke with Serey, she spoke about maintaining all the outfits, folding, and storage, Serey mentioned that, due to careful maintenance, some of the outfits have been used by students for over fifteen years and are older than many of students currently attending KAA. During my observations of dance classes at KAA, Mea and Serey also would discuss refitting and adapting clothing as students outgrew their clothing. Clothing seams would become undone over time or shirts needed to be hemmed nearly every week to accommodate students as they entered puberty. Even though some of these outfits have lasted more than fifteen years, over time they need to be replaced and KAA teachers often rely on purchasing outfits from sellers in Long Beach or importing outfits from Cambodia.

While cultural sustainability is largely concerned with the sustaining of expressive cultures and focuses on the environmental, socioeconomic, material, and institutional conditions impacting expressive cultures (Grant 2014, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; Harrison 2019, 2020; Titon 2009, 2015), sustainability in diaspora necessitates further reframing. As I have discussed, the material realities suggest further challenges towards maintaining cultural practices. Furthermore, these challenges are augmented by the conditions in which Cambodian refugees arrived in the United States. Their arrival is marked by the comparative lack of welfare support from the state, insufficient forms of trauma-informed care, racialization processes against the Black-white racial continuum, cultural differences between the refugees and white mainstream, impossibility of the model minority construct, and broader resettlement processes that further displaced

refugees across the United States (Ong 2003; Smith-Hefner 1999; Tang 2015). These conditions created an unstable foundation for the Cambodian diaspora. The broader community exists within ongoing conditions of precarity that continue to impact the broader Cambodian American community through socioeconomic inequality, racial discrimination, and deportation threats (Kwon 2012). As Tanaka put it in an interview, these conditions generated a survival mentality amongst the Cambodian American diasporic community. Furthermore, this survival mentality is bound up with processes of citizenship and resettling in the United States. Thus, music sustainability in diaspora is embedded in multiple, competing systems of power including the state, local community, the larger diasporic community, and the homeland.

Ecological and material sustainability concerns are part of those systems. In her discussion of Haitian drums, ethnomusicologist Rebecca Dirksen (2019, 72) articulates how precarity through factors such as desertification, deforestation, and foreign interventions impacted the production of tanbou drums which are important for spiritual practices and cultural practices for the Vodou community. One noticeable issue in the Cambodian diaspora is the ability to craft *pinpeat* instruments and maintain them in the United States. The necessary materials are not easily acquired. In the diaspora, Cambodian Americans rely on imported instruments from either Cambodia or Thailand because of the lack of material resources and available time to produce trough resonators, keys, knobbed gongs, or rattan frames while addressing social and economic necessities. For example, during my interactions with Bee, he noted that even making the tuning paste used on all the instruments is both a challenge in terms of acquiring all the materials

and the time-consuming and labor intensive process that involves finding all the resources and available time to create and attach the tuning paste on the xylophone keys.

The logistics of importing highlight a few concerns. As noted in E. San Juan Jr.'s discussion of the movement of Filipino balikbayan, informal networks of exchange allow for diasporic communities to assert agency while also revealing the uneven distribution of power, labor, and resources in the Filipino diaspora (San Juan Jr. 2009, 114-115).

Timothy Taylor (2020, 266) similarly notes that cultural goods, tangible or intangible, exist within regimes of value and thus, carry meaning and value to the social actors, consumers, producers, and distributors who are bound up within the systems of circulation. Here, these networks of exchange indicate the disjunct infrastructures underlying Cambodian musical instruments and music transmission in diaspora. Thus, both the ecological and environmental dimensions of cultural sustainability must contend with the material and socio-economic aspects of sustainability to address how cultural exchange and performance exist within regimes or infrastructures of value that inhibit sustainability efforts.

### *Social and Economic Sustainability*

I must also address the economics of sustainability and its surrounding infrastructure. One of the ongoing challenges raised by Mea and Serey was their ongoing and unending need for grants and funding to maintain the organization. Up until when Mea and Khannia ran KAA, students were not charged tuition and fees. However, in order to maintain the organization, Mea and Khannia started to charge a modest tuition of

fifteen dollars which then deterred some families over time and reduced the student body to about half its previous size (about thirty).<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the organization benefits from contributions and fundraisers from the broader Cambodian American community. This leaves KAA in a bind because the organization operates with minimal funding to run classes.

Despite these funding challenges, as Mea remarks, KAA is the face of the Cambodian arts in the diaspora. Across the Cambodian American diaspora and in the homeland, people turn towards KAA because of its reputation for high quality performances and exceptional students as well as the organization's ties to founder *neak krou* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro. In her statement, Mea indicates how the name of KAA creates additional pressure to meet community expectations while also representing the legacy and beauty of Khmer arts. Mea, in selecting students for performances, negotiates these demands based on both which students are ready to perform and the broader image of KAA. Through being the face of Cambodian arts in diaspora, KAA reveals its own situated loyalties. Situated loyalties, as stated by Parreñas and Siu (2007, 15), consider "how migrants express a greater sense of affinity and loyalty to the place from which they are geographically displaced, and which provides the imaginary space of an idealized home. Yet, this imaginary space is always in flux and changing, and it can represent more than one place." Due to these layered expectations, the position of KAA as the face of Khmer arts in the United States involves maintaining ties across multiple

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<sup>18</sup> Now the tuition for KAA is USD\$60.

local communities and the homeland in order to meet community expectations and acquire the necessary funding to continue operating and holding classes.

The operations at KAA use minimal funding to pay the rent and instructors as well as acquire supplies to maintain the space, instruments, and performance garments. However, this funding is not always enough. For instance, former managing director Serey recalled to me how she would spend her own money and time to take care of the organization and programs. Even with funding, Serey also mentioned how funding often came with strings attached. Rather than allocating grant money freely, KAA must comply with the expectations of the funders, thus limiting the ability to expend funds as necessary. Additionally, Mea dedicates much of her time attending to the needs of the KAA and broader Cambodian community without expecting much in terms of compensation. These acts of selflessness constitute what I consider the Khmer heart.<sup>19</sup> Grounded in selflessness, kindness, and concern for others, I introduce the idea of the Khmer heart as an additional concept that I argue is bound up with the idea of refugee love.

In her analysis of refugee resettlement practices, Aihwa Ong (2003) introduces the concept of refugee love in order to level a critique of humanitarian aid practices for aiming to regulate, civilize, and assimilate Cambodian refugees as well as indicate how Cambodian women used refugee love to assert economic power in their homes. Emily Hue (2019) asserts how Ong's concept of refugee love serves as a theoretical framing for

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<sup>19</sup> The concept of the Khmer heart comes from conversations and interactions with my own family, my language teachers in Cambodia, and various people in the Cambodian diaspora. From my understanding, it is wrapped up with qualities of Khmer Buddhist beliefs of doing good in the world. I also find elements of *phlouv* within the Khmer heart because it is accompanied by having or following the feeling to good.

nonnormative refugee subjectivities and lived realities. Additionally, Bianca Williams (2018) formulates what she terms as the diasporic heart which considers the significance of imagined, affective relations between diasporic kin in “giving back” to the broader diasporic community. To expand on these scholars, I consider the ideas of diasporic love and refugee love in the context of the Cambodian American diaspora and the Khmer heart. While refugee love focuses on assimilation through state-sponsored aid, I attend to the notion of refugee’s love which reorients the directionality of the love from initially coming from the state towards the refugee to instead love coming from the refugee towards various bodies and structures that can also include the state. Refugee’s love can appear in many forms that encompass deep ties of appreciation to the state for state-sanctioned support post-genocide that manifest through ironic anti-immigration sentiments or performance for the state. These two formations, the Khmer heart and refugee’s love, point towards chains that bind cultural performance within the values and expectations from both the state and community.

Through their commitment to the Khmer arts and KAA, Serey and Mea, among many other community volunteers including former students, embody the ideal of the Khmer heart in their selfless for the organization for accepting minimal or no compensation. Their overall volunteer work perpetuates labor exploitation and reinforces the devaluing of cultural and artistic work. For instance, the decline in the student body following tuition requirements implicitly revealed how running an organization that teaches Khmer traditional music and dance does not constitute paid labor. At the same time, their volunteer labor opens space to carry forward the values expressed through the

Khmer heart. The mission for citizenship also involves engagement with the economy of performance. For instance, Khmer dancers offered dances to the United States treasury of dance (Ong 2003, 88). In presenting Khmer dance to the government of the new place, the state adopts refugee arts into national folklore and serve state-making processes while continuing to defund refugee-serving structures. In 2020, these processes look a little different.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia Town hosted a virtual parade and cultural festival in September 2020 to make up for the cancelled festivities as a result of COVID-19. Intended for Cambodian Americans, the festival presented a wide range of recorded videos from popular music artists, visual artists, local advertisements, as well as traditional music and dance from both across the diaspora and from Cambodia. One of the organizations showcased at the festival in 2020 was KAA. The academy featured two high level student performances of *robam choun por* and *robam boung soung* and one larger community performance for the festival theme of the Spirit of Apsara.<sup>20</sup>

Surrounded by a wide range of videos, I found KAA's presence swallowed up during the festival by the multitude of other performances. The minimal presence of KAA at the virtual parade and cultural festival reflects both the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and minimal presence of KAA at the festival.

First, the COVID-19 pandemic limited the number of performers who could dance at the festival because classes were cancelled so students could not rehearse together at the academy. Despite preparing the dance *robam apsara* for the festival

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<sup>20</sup> A closer look at the festivities is both necessary and beyond the scope of this thesis.



months before the pandemic shutdown, Mea noted that the festival organizers wanted the full set of seven dancers. However, many of the students at KAA are under the age of eighteen and performance at the virtual parade and cultural festival required permissions in a short period of time and so KAA could not provide a performance of *robam apsara*. While KAA did not provide a performance of *robam apsara*, another organization from Cambodia performed *robam apsara* for the festival in addition to performances of *pinpeat* music. This seemingly replacement performance of *robam apsara* suggests how their inclusion at the festival could be read as conditional in an online context despite how much time Mea and her students put in to be completely prepared to showcase *robam apsara* at the festival.

Second, despite their long-standing presence in Long Beach, KAA constituted about thirty minutes of the four-hour festival. While their presence might constitute a noticeable amount of time, it contrasts with what would be expected from an in-person, offline festival where the performers would be marching throughout parts of Long Beach and be hypervisible for festival onlookers. As Deborah Wong (2004, 64-65) notes about Cambodians in the Philadelphia Mummers Parade, marching through the streets becomes an act of claiming space and performing culture while also being invisibilized by the media. At the virtual festival, KAA claims a considerable amount of time but becomes lost within the variety of performers who might draw more attention away from traditional arts like popular song.

These performances by KAA at the festival and other various events would not have happened without hours of preparation. However, proper compensation remains an

issue for the organization. While Mea and KAA lovingly and happily puts together these cultural performances for the Cambodian American community, the academy receives lower compensation overall for its services to the community. As I spoke with Mea, the academy often must name its price in order for event organizers to realize cost of labor for dancers to prepare for performances. Yet, despite providing a price tag, the volunteers, including dancers, end up overworked because of unexpected time and labor added to the preparations including costuming, make up, rehearsal, travel, and performance time. Mea notes that she does not ask for much for performances because she sees it as something for the community. Through her selflessness, sacrifice, and desire to serve the community, Mea enacts the Khmer heart and render her community ties to the diaspora and Cambodian arts visible through organizing and preparing for all the student performances in Southern California.

In serving organizations in Long Beach and the broader Cambodian American community, KAA enacts the politics of refugee's love and the Khmer heart through their acceptance of minimal compensation as well as conditional inclusion and limited presence at the festival. The selflessness and kindness exhibited by Mea and KAA replicate the desired qualities of the Khmer heart and Buddhist merit-making. Yet, by performing for the city of Long Beach and Cambodia Town district and not requesting greater compensation, they remain entangled within refugee love by perpetuating labor exploitation and refugee's love through performing for governing bodies that could easily replace the organization.

### *Sustainabilities and Systems*

Multiple competing systems that constitute different situated loyalties operate while aiming to sustain the Khmer arts. I have hopefully shown how the material, social, economic, and cultural dimensions shape the sustainability of the Cambodian music and dance at KAA. These dynamics manifest through the needs to meet the demands of event organizers and expectations of quality from the community while sustaining the organization fiscally and addressing a long-standing survival mentality rooted in recovering from genocide and resettlement. Placed together, the situation at KAA raises questions about sustainability as a framework. Cultural sustainability scholarship has more recently turned towards the reality of climate change and what it means for cultural production but still need to deeply situate climate change within the socioeconomic conditions facing the cultural practitioners. Without addressing both aspects of sustainability, only a cursory read into sustainability is possible.

Building on Daniel Sheehy's (1992) strategies of applied ethnomusicology, ethnomusicologist Klisala Harrison (2012) develops the idea of epistemic community to bridge across multiple groups, including scholars in academic spaces and the public sector, with vested interest in cultural production and how these groups can work together to address and advocate for communities. Drawing from ecological systems, Jeff Todd Titon (2015) integrates resilience and adaptive management with the project of sustainability to identify vulnerabilities within communities and frame the cultural worker as a manager that aims to strengthen the cultural practice. Building on these scholars, I suggest thinking about sustainability through infrastructures in addition to

epistemic community and adaptive management to broaden the scope of sustainability and read into systems.

Kyle Devine and Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier (2021, 4-5) describe infrastructures as “systems of knowledge and classification, measures and standards, storage and retrieval” that are “inscribed with certain values and principles” and allow “individuals and groups to leverage power.” Through infrastructures, I suggest that scholars can consider the relationships between social actors, objects, and bodies that shape cultural production within the broader goals of cultural sustainability. With an infrastructural approach, I extend Harrison’s (2012) concept of epistemic community to think about the chains of labor involved with cultural production. As I have shown through my discussion of material, social, and economic sustainability, the fraught infrastructure within and surrounding KAA reveals the fragility of arts in diaspora. While the academy continues to strengthen its foundations for transmission and local performance, it precariously negotiates multiple demanding systems that impose and realize additional challenges towards the project of transmitting Khmer arts to future generations of students. These challenges include the material needs, social ties, and economic barriers to sustainability. Because of these barriers, approaches to sustaining cultural practices are limited due to these multiple, competing dynamics and obligations that impact how cultural workers, folklorists, and public sector scholars can productively intervene in support of practitioners.

These two foci in sustainability studies, the ecological and socio-economic, often sit apart from each other. Ecological sustainability, at times, subsumes the social and

economic aspects of sustainability without deeply addressing the importance of social and economic conditions to the cultural community in favor of protecting the environment. At the same time, scholarly approaches grounded in social and economic conditions seldom address how the ecological and environmental impact cultural sustainability. Rendering infrastructure audible supports the work of sustainability by articulating world systems overseeing sustainability. One crucial element to focus on is materiality and the condition of material objects. For instance, in his exploration of Fijian mahogany wood, José Martínez-Reyes (2021) identifies the qualitative value assigned to instruments based on their material and maker in addition to tracing the economics of the material resources necessary for reproducing the instrument. While I do not provide an equally thorough read into the material resources necessary for making any of the *pinpeat* instruments, I identify similar constructs of value in the acquisition of Cambodian instruments and discuss the condition of instruments and clothing used at KAA to nod towards how material objects reflect the state of the arts.

Devine and Boudreault-Fournier (2021) primarily situate their discussion of infrastructure within the area of materiality; however, reading into institutional infrastructure can be productive for understanding the systematization and distribution of labor, people, and funding for the arts. For instance, the labor in preparation for the virtual parade and cultural festival is bound up within refugee's love and the Khmer heart as well as reveals how the exploitation of artistry for conditional inclusion and visibility. Furthermore, by looking at materiality, I indicate the fraught nature of transmission in the Cambodian diaspora. Through infrastructure, I suggest that we interrogate the

components of labor that constitute cultural performances before, during, and after the performance to enact productive interventions that directly address the various needs of diasporic artforms. Furthermore, I suggest the importance of exploring how relationships like refugee's love impact cultural sustainability. By focusing on these crucial links, sustainable interventions can be tailored towards the specific conditions and challenges facing cultural communities such as diaspora, poverty, and infrastructural issues.

Support for KAA and as well as other Cambodian arts organizations across the diaspora necessitate more institutional infrastructure that bolster the strong community presence and provide additional funding networks. Recently I attended the Long Beach City Council meeting on September 7, 2021. On the agenda was a recommendation to create a Cambodian American Cultural Center in the city. Nineteen heartfelt and impactful statements were given during public opinion section from the Cambodian American community and its allies. Each beautifully crafted statement, mostly in English and two in Khmer, spoke to the significance in knowing and understanding Cambodian history and culture. Afterwards, each councilmember acknowledged the presence of the community and their support for the cultural center. Following the speech by Cambodian American councilwoman Dr. Suely Saro, tension filled the hall in anticipation of the vote. The city council voted and unanimously approved the recommendation. This successful step forward for Cambodian Americans will work towards institutionalizing Khmer culture in Southern California and an opportunity to strengthen the support systems and infrastructure surrounding the Cambodian arts.

## Closing

Sustaining cultural practices is an ongoing process involving many bodies and systems; in diaspora, these approaches are entangled across the state and among several communities including the local diasporic community and the broader homeland. In a post-genocide and seemingly resettled context, I focused primarily on KAA and its challenges with teaching Khmer arts, specifically *pinpeat*,<sup>21</sup> to the next generation. I also indicated a generational shift within the Cambodian American community in which younger Cambodian Americans teach Khmer arts to the next generation and lead efforts towards sustainability. Notably, Mea and Bee, 1.5 and second generation instructors and both in their thirties, indicate a generational shift where younger leaders are taking charge of teaching the Khmer arts while cultivating more leaders among their students.<sup>22</sup> For instance, in a few conversations with Mea, she shared her goal of training leaders at KAA. She recounted how only one or two people every ten years continues with Khmer arts but notes a stark change amongst the current students that suggests more will stick with music and dance and come back to teach at KAA.

I underscored the role of physicality, emotions, nostalgia, and memory in music transmission and sustainability. Grounded in my personal, somatic experience as a

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<sup>21</sup> *Pinpeat* remains prominent throughout the Cambodian diaspora due to its role in accompanying court classical dance and general ability to perform music from other ensembles. Other Cambodian musical practices do not receive the same attention, in part, due to the utility of *pinpeat* and also inadvertently reinforces the court, classical distinction ascribed to *pinpeat* that marginalizes different Cambodian musical practices.

<sup>22</sup> While I mention Mea and Bee here, I want to note that there are more Cambodian Americans involved in this work. Beyond KAA, as I continued interacting with Cambodian Americans studying Khmer language, I met more second generation Cambodian Americans who sustain the Khmer arts through their activism, scholarship, and participation in the arts. However, further exploration here requires additional ethnographic work.

second generation Cambodian Chinese American studying *pinpeat* music in Long Beach, California and remotely online, these personal accounts shared with me as a part of music class facilitate the re/imagining of Cambodia that incorporates experiences from pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia and life in diaspora that are separate from the Khmer Rouge genocide and images of Angkor Wat. I suggest these extramusical narratives are intertwined with nostalgia that are linked to as well as remember extended histories of displacement. These experiences of displacement facilitate the after-effects of postmemory and result in movement towards studying Khmer arts and culture and engagement in the project of rememory (Schlund-Vials 2012). Focusing on KAA as a case study, I attended to the material, social, economic, and systematic aspects of cultural transmission and performance to think across the varying structures impacting efforts to sustain the Khmer arts. My research up to this point indicates that endeavors to sustain cultural practices in diaspora necessitates close attention to the multiple situated loyalties and ties of the diasporic community as well as its surrounding systems and infrastructures in order to understand its impediments. I articulate these loyalties and ties through how the Khmer heart and refugee's love complicate infrastructures that are inextricably linked together through chains of labor and the conditional nature of citizenship and belonging.

As I have indicated through my case study with KAA, solely relying on the cultural community to sustain its own cultural practice perpetuates an already untenable situation. Building on the experiences with acclimating the United States and the limited forms of support available for the community, Cambodian American cultural production cannot be expected to sustain itself amidst overlapping ties. These heartfelt



responsibilities to the state, community, and cultural values reveal constraints placed on cultural production. The heartfelt narratives embedded within the study and performance of Khmer arts also indicate how the imagining of the homeland and refugee experience shape the overall experience of the Khmer arts. Through deepening relationships with history and teachers, these anecdotes reveal and intensify inherent pressures to maintain *pinpeat* and Khmer classical dance in diaspora. For me, I actively long for classes to resume at KAA so that I can continue learning *pinpeat* and I know the instructors and students at KAA also feel this desire. As Mea, Bee, and I have discussed with each other, participating in Khmer arts allows us to deepen our relationship and knowledge of Cambodian history and culture and bring us closer to our roots. Yet, as the COVID-19 moment has helped illuminate, the ability for students like me to build deeper connections with the Khmer arts is challenged by precarity by revealing the limited support beams available for the arts in the United States.

Refugee cultural production necessitates greater support from its surrounding infrastructures. This involves institutional support and funding to support performers, event organizers, and cultural institutions. KAA maintains itself through its instructors and community volunteers. All these contributors give their time and labor while also occupying other positions beyond KAA; thus, they have many more obligations beyond sustaining Khmer culture. Sustaining cultural practices requires people dedicated to the community and the funds to support these people. In the case of KAA, it might necessitate hiring staff in order for all the everyday organizational tasks to be relegated specific staff members rather than having the instructors primarily running the

organization on top of teaching. While running parts of the organization with the support of Serey, both Mea and Bee work full time jobs on top of teaching classes at KAA in order to financially support themselves. In short, no one is being paid to work full time to run and build up the foundation for KAA or sustain the organization and staff. While their dedication to Khmer arts, as well as myself and others, is crucial for maintaining Khmer arts, the surrounding state, national, community, organizational, and labor institutions and infrastructure fail to demonstrate the same level of commitment and reciprocity towards its laborers. Otherwise, the epistemic community surrounding KAA including its cultural workers, artists, performers, activists, and chains of labor cannot function, especially in the midst of displacement or disruption. The upcoming Cambodian American Cultural Center presents an opportunity to transform the surrounding infrastructure, though we still need to see how it will play out.

The devastating reality of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the precarity of cultural production. Without any opportunities to perform or a safe space to teach without the risks of contracting COVID-19, all operations at KAA were halted during the pandemic. Of course, KAA was not alone since numerous performing arts communities also needed to close. These multiple loyalties and chains of labor manifest and shape cultural production within various refugee communities through their ties with funding organizations, local communities, state institutions, and labor connectivity. While some of these struggles are not surprising to cultural workers, the devastating impact of COVID-19 helped reveal the infrastructural challenges facing arts communities and

organizations as well as the close proximity of refugee cultural production to potential disaster and disappearance in a place believed to be a site of refuge.

At the time of this writing, it has been over a year and a half since I last played the *roneat ek* with the other students at KAA, last interacted with folks at KAA in person, or drove an hour on the 91 to Long Beach. Every now and again, I hum the few pieces I learned in class to remember the tunes or mime playing the *roneat ek* by myself. As in-person activities start to resume and additional variants of COVID-19 emerge, I am left to wonder how else the Khmer arts will adapt. Dance students have occasionally met remotely but music students can only practice if they have their own personal instruments. While in-person classes may resume in October 2021, we are still uncertain how these classes will be run with some students unable to be vaccinated because of age restrictions.

I conclude my thesis with more questions and concerns than answers. Certainly, many challenges emerged during COVID-19 with sustaining the Khmer arts with music and dance instruction being heavily limited. COVID-19 also helped reveal the insecure infrastructures which unsettles all modes of cultural production including basic funding, material resources, and social systems. With the ongoing attempts to find a sense of normalcy in a supposedly post-pandemic world, now is the time to adapt, reestablish, and also create new networks of support which address continuing problems and barriers in the arts.

## Glossary

Bamphley (បំផ្លែ): To embellish, embroider, and alter the truth of. Also, the embellishing and semi-improvisatory element in Khmer music that facilitates the production of the heterophonic texture of Cambodian traditional music.

Bokator (or Lbokkato) (ល្បិកត្រៃតា): One of the oldest Khmer martial arts traditions and has been traced back to Cambodian armies during the time of Angkor. The term literally translates to “pounding a lion” and draws from animal movement styles.

Chhing (ឡឺង): A small pair of cymbals with a string attaching the two. This instrument is used to mark the metric structure and tempo of the music through the open and closed ringing sound of the instrument.

Chong Khim (ចុងឃឹម): I mention this piece as the introductory movement to *robam choun por*. This movement is also used across the *pinpeat* repertoire as a part of *robam apsara* among other core pieces.

Homrong (ហ្វែងរង): A suite of twelve sacred pieces from the *pinpeat* repertoire which includes the core *pinpeat* repertoire performed as a part of court music and dance.

Kong tauch (កងត្នោត): A circle of sixteen higher-pitched horizontal-knobbed gongs suspended in a rattan frame.

Kong thum (កងធំ): A circle of sixteen lower-pitched horizontal-knobbed gongs suspended in a rattan frame.

Lkhon (ល្ខោន): A broad term encompassing Cambodian theatrical traditions including dances and dance-dramas.

Lok krou (លោកគ្រូ): A male teacher.

Neak krou (អ្នកគ្រូ): A female teacher.

Phleng kar boran (ភ្លេងកាបុរាណ): The name of the ensemble and repertoire for Cambodian traditional wedding music.

Phlouv (ផ្លូវ): Literally means road or path. A concept including different ornamental styles, regional variations, and specific teacher lineages which facilitate the heterophonic texture of Cambodian traditional music and indicates musical genealogies.

Pinpeat (ពិណពាទ្យ): The royal court music of Cambodia. The name derives from an instrument known as the *pin* (ព័ណ), Khmer harp, which has recently been revived and *peat*, which referred to instruments of a circular form. There are multiple regional practices across Cambodia which vary in their *phlouv*.

Robam apsara (របាំអប្សរា): One of the Cambodian traditional dances created and dedicated to the late Princess Norodom Buppha Devi by Queen Sisowath Kossomak Nearirath Serey Vathana. The dance represents the motifs on the bas-reliefs of the Angkorian temples in Cambodia. It is typically performed with seven dancers with a lead *apsara mera* who generally occupies the center position on stage.

Robam buong suong (របាំប្លង់ស្ងួត): One of the Cambodian traditional dances which specifically is a prayer dance to communicate with the gods and spirits in the hopes that they will provide blessings and prosperity for all.

Robam choun por (របាំជូនពរ): One of the Cambodian traditional dances which is often referred to as the blessing dance. It is often performed at the beginning of events and ceremonies in order to greet and bless the audience. Dancers toss flower petals during the performance to symbolize the blessings of the gods.

Roneat ek (រ៉ូនាតិឯក): The lead xylophone and instrument of the *pinpeat* ensemble. It is a higher-pitched xylophone with twenty-one keys.

Roneat thung (រ៉ូនាតិធ្មង់): A lower-pitched xylophone with sixteen keys.

Sampeah (សំព័ះ): A Cambodian greeting, farewell, and apologizing gesture. Performing this gesture is also method of showing respect. There are five levels of the *sampeah*. The first level is between same age friends and palms are placed together at the chest. The second level is for bosses, higher ranked people, and older people and palms are placed at the mouth. The third level is for parents, grandparents, and teachers and palms are placed at the nose. The fourth level is for kings and monks and palms are placed at the eyebrows. The fifth level is for praying to the gods or sacred statues and palms are placed together at the forehead. People will say *chom reab suor* (ជ័ម្រាបស្ងួរ) or *chom reab lea* (ជ័ម្រាបលា) upon greeting or saying farewell respectively while performing the gesture.

Samphor (សំប៊ុរ): A small double-headed barrel drum struck with both hands and one head larger than the other.

Sathukar (សាត្រុកាវ): The most sacred piece of the *pinpeat* repertoire and the opening piece to the *homrong* overture.

Skor thum (ស្ករធ្មង់): A large pair barrel drums set on a drum stand which, in tandem with the *samphor*, nuances and emphasizes the actions of the dancers and heightens the overall performance.

Smout (ស្មូត): A highly melismatic Cambodian chanting practice rooted in a mixture of Hindu, Buddhist, and animist traditions performed most often in religious, ritualistic contexts.

Sralai (ရှလဲခါး): A quadruple-reed oboe that plays close to the core, inner melody and serves as the tuning basis for the ensemble.

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