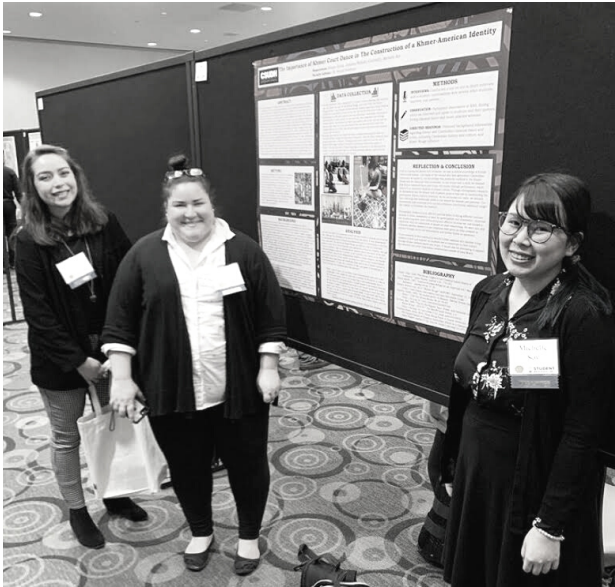


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# The Role of Khmer Court Dance and Music in the Construction of a Cambodian American Identity

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## Introduction

Cambodia gained national attention in the mid-1970's due to the mass genocide perpetrated during the Khmer Rouge regime. For many Cambodians born and raised in the United States, the primary cultural awareness passed down from their parents and elders revolves around experiences surrounding the Khmer Rouge. This paper explores the construction of cultural identity among second generation Cambodian youth and adults participating in Khmer classical dance and music classes at Khmer Arts Academy in Long Beach, California. It is important to note the difference between our use of the terms "Khmer" and "Cambodia" in this paper. Khmer people are an ethnic group native to Cambodia, while Cambodia is the name of the country. Due to the fact that other ethnic groups also reside in Cambodia, we will use "Cambodian" to refer to people living in Cambodia (or are descended from people who lived in Cambodia), who may not necessarily identify as Khmer. "Khmer" also refers to the language family spoken by the Khmer people.

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## Setting

The Khmer Arts Academy (KAA), founded by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro in 1999, is a Cambodian dance and music studio centered around the importance of maintaining and passing on the knowledge and traditions of classical Khmer cultural arts. The KAA building is located at 1364 Obispo Avenue, on a bustling city street in the Zaferia neighborhood of Long Beach, California. The academy is open Thursdays through Sundays for classical Khmer dance and music lessons.

When moving through the studio, one sees culturally relevant artifacts, renderings, depictions, and spaces. Before classes begin, anyone who enters the space will smell incense burning on the altar and see the instructor and dancers preparing their attire for practice. On the south wall is a large towering painting of Buddha sitting atop a lotus. Along the west wall is an elevated stage with musical instruments displayed, upon which an altar laden with crowns, masks, bamboo, flower garlands, *baisay*, and framed photos also sit. Appropriately, the space where the arts come to life is in the center of the room, in front of the altar. Khmer classical dance originated as a ritualistic prayer and story form, which includes deeply symbolic gestures and personification of deities and celestial beings. The *Pin Peat* is a traditional Khmer music ensemble which primarily played music specifically for royal palace dancers. Modernly, and in the case of KAA, Khmer classical dance has taken on another

culturally distinct application. It serves as a reminder of enduring culture, lasting ties, and the stories of survivors of cultural genocide through both interpretive and choreographed dance routines.

## Methods

The methods employed in our research at KAA include observations and an interview with a key informant. During the first visit, the space was mapped to set reference points for fieldnotes and ethnographic purposes. Census reports were conducted during each visit to obtain a sense of attendance and generate ideas for the established hierarchy exhibited during practices. During visits to KAA, we observed, took notes of those observations, and asked questions of the participants during their breaks. Short, informal interviews were conducted with instructors, students, and their family members. We conducted an in-depth interview with one of the advanced students, Yaya (pseudonym), as she would provide a great perspective as a second-generation Khmer student learning about Khmer arts in America.

## Analysis

Before presenting our findings, background on the Khmer Rouge is necessary to understand the current predicament that Cambodian Americans face in developing their cultural identity. The Khmer Rouge was a Communist-fueled political movement and party in Cambodia led by Pol Pot during the

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mid-1970's that sought to create a supreme race and utilized violent tactics. The regime's goal was to annihilate the Buddhist era in Cambodia by forcing people to abandon and forget about their culture or die if they neglected to do so. Ben Kiernan wrote in his book, *The Pol Pot Regime*, that "the Khmer Rouge hoped to use children as a basis of a new society without memory" (Kiernan 1996). The Khmer Rouge spurred a civil war that lasted from 1975-1979 (History.com 2017), which resulted in the deaths of millions of people. Cambodian people were forced into concentration camps where they were starved, worked to death, and even executed.

Historians dubbed this the "Cambodian Genocide," a tragic event that killed 1.7-2.2 million people and caused others to flee their home out of fear of persecution of their culture and ethnicity. In our research at the Khmer Arts Academy (KAA), we found that the Khmer Rouge still has a major impact on the present generation.

The refugees that escaped Cambodia and emigrated to the United States made some attempts to keep the Khmer culture alive, but it is also apparent that much was suppressed due to the traumatic experience of the genocide. First generation refugees usually do not speak much about their experiences in Cambodia during the war. As a result, many of the first generation also tend not to share much about the positive aspects of their culture and experiences in Cambodia. Those who left Cambodia as children have either forgotten or

refuse to talk about experiences they had, leaving their children without that knowledge. In Judith Hamera's article, "An Answerability of Memory," an interviewee named Sandy says, "I like to learn it [the dance] because it's important to know my culture. I know. But it's different for me than for them [her parents]. For them, it means more. I wasn't there. It's hard to relate" (Hamera 2002, 79). Sandy is referring to her parents' view of Khmer culture following the Khmer Rouge. While she takes part in learning Khmer dance to better connect with her culture, she states that it is different for her parents, who survived the Khmer Rouge. It is apparent, that the trauma experienced, due to the ruthless nature of the Khmer Rouge and the genocide of Cambodian peoples, makes it difficult for the first generation to talk about Khmer culture. Unfortunately, information about the Khmer Rouge and its impact on their parents is often the only information that gets passed down to the following generations. This results in a dynamic in which second and later generation Cambodians born and raised in American know very little about their own culture besides the Khmer Rouge. Even then, children of refugees often know little about the Khmer Rouge because their parents do not like to speak of their experiences. Not only was knowledge suppressed, but material culture was also. In her article titled "America Provides Refuge for an Imperiled Art," author Karen Deans writes, "The only instrument found in traditional orchestras that the group

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still lacks is a ‘srlai’ (*Sralai*), for which money has not been available” (Deans 1983, 38), showing that even material culture important for sustaining the art form was suppressed. For *Pin peat* music, in particular, the *sralai* is an important part of Khmer classical dance. Without it, the traditional orchestra and the music it produces is incomplete.

During the main formal interview, the key informant, Yaya, stated that “[...] before I started dancing, like everyone else, all I knew was like ‘oh’ the Khmer Rouge, and, other than the Khmer Rouge, is food.” She also mentions that some of the elders in her family, including her grandparents, are opposed to her participating and learning traditional Khmer classical dance or music, as they feel that it is a waste of her time. They prefer that she turn her efforts elsewhere so that she can be successful in America. She says that “coming from the Khmer Rouge and coming from that mindset of how am I going to survive, what am I gonna do to get food to eat or get more food to eat. And like I guess from that experience they kind of, they kind of stayed in their mind and like it's-it became like a part of how they think and how they do things so it's always been that survival mindset.” This is common, especially with first-generation Cambodian refugees, because they would rather their children and grandchildren forget these aspects of their culture and focus on assimilating and being financially successful. Unlike Sandy in Judith Hamera’s article, Yaya chooses to learn Khmer classical dance and

music because it gives her a connection to her culture that she did not have prior to that.

The interview with Yaya presented an opportunity to analyze and conclude that, although the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge was severe, it was unsuccessful in accomplishing its goal of eliminating Khmer culture. It is interesting to note that, forty years after the end of the Khmer Rouge, the effects it had on Cambodian culture is still felt by the second and later generations in America. However, through cultural activities, such as learning Khmer classical dance and music at the KAA, cultural traditions continue to persist. In fact, the KAA was created in an effort to prevent Khmer culture from disappearing. Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, the founder and artistic director of KAA, started the studio as a way to keep classical Khmer arts alive and to pass down the traditional dance and music of Khmer culture to future generations. On why she continues to teach and grow the knowledge of Khmer cultural arts, Sophiline gave this anecdote:

*When I was 16 years old, my fellow dance students and I were sent to the countryside in the middle of a civil war to perform for the public in order to help the government prove to the people that it was authentically Khmer. The morning after one performance a noodle vendor in the market informed us that Khmer Rouge guerillas had come to our concert armed with rocket launchers in order to kill us. But they liked the dancing so much that...*

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*... they stayed until the end, clapped and returned home. It's not every day that art will save your life, but this story is a reminder of the power art has to bring out the humanity in even the coldest of hearts. That is why I dance, and that is why I teach.*

*-- Sophiline Cheam Shapiro (Artistic Director, Khmer Arts Academy)*

In her article, Hamera also states that classical dance is “as much sign language [...] it functions as a narrative technology to embody and reproduce both sacred classical and secular folk texts and images” (Hamera 2002, 77). Hand gestures and placement, posture, and affect are extremely important in this dance form. Khmer classical dance and music are taught as forms of storytelling and are mediums that are used to share culture. Traditionally, Khmer classical dance and music were performed only in the royal court. During the reign and terror of the Khmer Rouge, in an attempt to survive many artists and artistic troupes hid in the jungles. After the Khmer Rouge tried to destroy all traces of Khmer classical arts, it became important that the art of Khmer court dance and music be preserved by as many people as possible. Thus, it was no longer restricted to royal persons.

Participation at KAA also helps second and later generation Khmer or Cambodian-Americans connect with their culture by exposing students to the art forms and beauty of Khmer culture. Yaya mentioned to us that

“[...] coming to dance, it kinda helped me see that there's more than the Khmer Rouge.” KAA presents students the opportunity to learn about the beautiful traditional court dancing and music from Khmer culture. In our interview, Yaya indicates that through classical dance, she learned that there is another side to her culture that she had not been aware of. Yaya also believes that she learns about more than dancing and music at KAA; she is also learning about the social and material culture, and its history. As she had only been aware of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge prior to KAA, she is glad to learn that there is more than death and torture in her cultural history. Her association with KAA has given her a positive outlook on her identity as a second generation Khmer American, and it makes her proud of her heritage.

Khmer Arts Academy is not only a space for the arts, but it is also a space utilized for community building. Community plays a huge role in maintaining cultural heritage, language, and cultural practices. As concluded from the observations, there is a need for sustained cultural identity. The dance instructor, *Neak Kru Mea* (Lath), stated, “I grew up not knowing family histories as a child. In my twenties I began questioning, I wanted to love myself fully, but you can't do that if you are rejecting or neglecting one part!” Stories like this are all too familiar among Cambodian-Americans. Within the academy itself, students are discovering their own cultural identity together, almost as a kinship unit.

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Students spend several days a week together in class and take on a type of familial role in each other's lives. Participants, including instructors, students, family members, board members, and volunteers address each other using kinship terms. In our interview with Yaya, she stated that an important part of their culture is based on kinship, and that:

*... the way like everyone interacts, like everyone's a family, everyone's a whole community, like it doesn't matter. Let's say I go to a party, I don't say- I don't call them by their name. I call them ming or pou or om... so like aunt, uncle, and like bong is just how you call someone who is older than you out of respect.*

Using honorary terms that indicate familial closeness helps to create an environment of family and community. There are formal titles to indicate an instructor's status such as "*Neak Kru*" for female instructors, and "*Lok Kru*" for male instructors. Although this is the case, the music instructor *Lok Kru* Bee prefers his students call him "*Pou*" Bee, meaning "uncle" Bee. *Pou* Bee says that although he is an instructor, the formality of being called "*Lok Kru*" is too formal for him. Having his students call him *Pou* may also foster a closer, more familial relationship between him and his students.

An additional layer of community building is the presence of family at KAA. At every practice, there are parents, aunts, uncles, siblings, relatives, biological or even chosen kin, sitting, eating, waiting, watching, talking,

knitting, helping, and perhaps even learning from the activities conducted in the confines of KAA. These individuals support the students that they bring to KAA. In the case of Yaya, her aunt was the one who originally brought her to a lesson. Yaya's aunt also brought her daughter and another niece to the studio to learn Khmer classical arts. Yaya's father, Steve, is a music student at KAA and has been learning how to play the *Sralai* for the past year. The dance and music student, Sav (pseudonym), is taught music by her uncle, *Pou* Bee, who was taught how to play all the Khmer instruments by his uncle, Ho Chan. When looking back at the devastation wrought by the Khmer Rouge onto the Khmer people of Cambodia, it only makes sense that the surviving practitioners of the arts would pass their knowledge on to their kin to keep the culture alive. Culture survives when it is supported and practiced. When you treat students and their families as a part of your own, a greater sense of community and belonging is created, which instills a greater passion for sustaining that culture. KAA is not only an arts studio, it is a family.

Through observations, it is evident that many of the students attending KAA are not all fluent in Khmer. Many of them barely understand Khmer when it is spoken, and yet are able to recognize terminology used for dance or music instruction. The lead dance instructor, *Neak Kru* Mea, primarily gives posing instruction in Khmer. Although the students may not be fluent in Khmer, through

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practice and repetition and use of Khmer terminology, they learn to understand instructions given in Khmer. Khmer is a very difficult language to learn but even giving simple instructions for dance and music helps the students learn the language. This introduction to Khmer language is important in the reviving of its culture, as more second-generation Khmer Americans are unable to speak their family's native tongue.

In addition to learning about culture, Yaya asserts that she is also learning much about herself as a participant of the KAA. In Khmer classical dance, dancers are extremely careful and precise with their movements because, as mentioned earlier, they are not just performing, they are also telling a story. The stories they tell through dance are ancient stories that have been passed down for thousands of years. Due to the symbolism and significance of the art form, the intricate and exquisite poses must be intentionally and methodically enacted. Hamera writes, "These positions and poses are highly stylized, demanding a level of precision and artifice that makes ballet seem naturalistic by comparison" (Hamera 2002). To effectively tell the sacred stories, Khmer classical dance places great importance in proper body positioning and poses. From the moment students begin their journey learning Khmer classical dance they go through a bone and joint shaping process. Khmer classical dance students are required to do stretches of every joint to promote what is medically termed as

"hyper-extension" as well as core strength to be able to have the proper flow and body movement necessary for this dance form. The arts require a lot of commitment and motivation, which are some of the things that students like Yaya learn at KAA. Yaya says that she learned discipline through her instruction and that she learned to push herself to continue to improve her composure and skill in the arts.

In addition, Yaya is learning to be more confident in herself, not only at KAA, but also in her day to day life outside of the academy. She emphasized the level of comfort that KAA creates and how it has helped her come out of her shell. Yaya confessed to us that at the prior to attending KAA, she was extremely shy and did not converse with anybody. After slowly letting her guard down, she "learned to talk to everybody." KAA is like a second home to her, and she says:

*I'm not sure if you've noticed, but like, even after class is over, people will still be dancing. People will still like hang around for a little bit cause it's just like we're all just one big family. And then it's like, it's really- it's a really comforting place.*

Yaya believes that KAA taught her to step out of her comfort zone at the studio, on stage, and in her life outside of KAA. Part of this might also stem from her larger confidence in her identity as a Khmer American. Prior to her attendance, Yaya felt that there was little in her culture that she felt she could be proud of. After joining KAA, she developed a

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connection to her culture and her roots, which allowed her to blossom into a more confident and poised young adult.

### **Reflection and Conclusion**

Prior to visiting the Khmer Arts Academy, we had a limited knowledge of Khmer culture and history. Like many of the second and later generation Cambodian Americans, our knowledge was limited to the Khmer Rouge and the atrocities they committed. In the initial visit to KAA, we learned that Khmer classical dance and music tell stories through performance, which makes it an important medium to impart culture. Through ethnographic research, we determined that the Khmer Arts Academy plays a vital role in constructing the participants' Khmer cultural identities. As we continued our visits, we learned that collecting data holistically aided in our search for themes and patterns. Our observations and interviews with our key informant contributed additional insight that helped us formulate our research. Ethnographic fieldwork is an effective method when studying different cultures because it allows researchers to learn by participation and observation. Interview and questioning were more forthcoming and effective because we had formed a connection with the community of people we were researching. We were also able to discern whether answers to our questions were given as ideal answers or genuine through continued observations and further follow up questions. Future research in

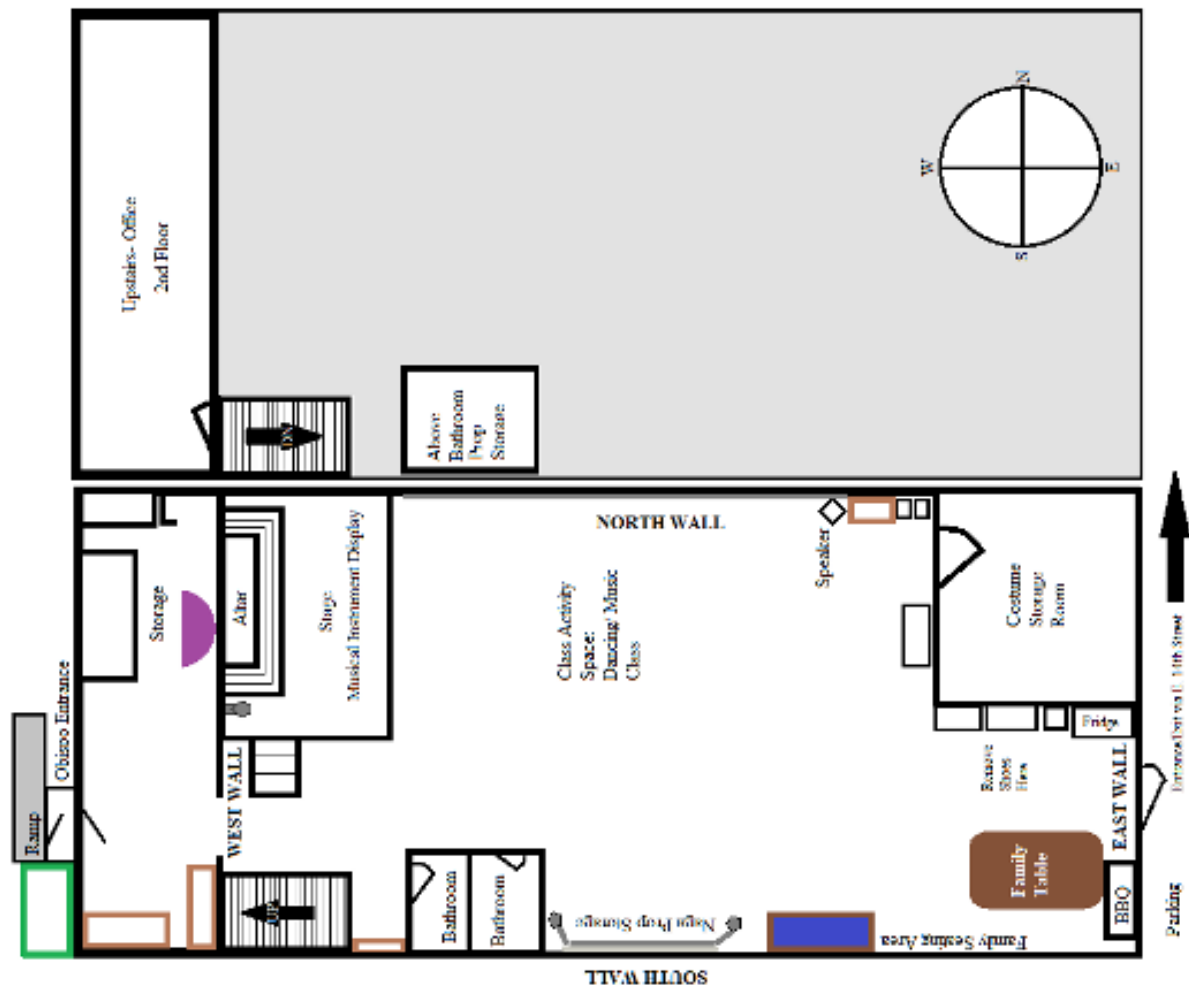
this community should further examine why families bring students to KAA, and whether all students feel a connection to their culture through Khmer classical dance and music. It would also be interesting to expand this research into other Cambodian communities outside of Long Beach.

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# Appendix



Map of Khmer Arts Academy (KAA) in Long Beach, California

## Glossary

**Bong:** way to address an individual older than oneself, like an older brother or sister

**Lok Kru:** Male instructor

**Ming:** Aunt

**Neak Kru:** Female instructor

**Om:** Aunt or uncle or individual older than your parents

**Pin peat:** Percussive ensemble with a sralai, played in the royal courts and palaces to accompany dancers

**Pou:** Uncle

**Sralai:** Quadruple reed wind instrument