

# antropologia e teatro

Performing arts e dialogo interculturale | A venti anni dalla Convenzione UNESCO per la Salvaguardia del Patrimonio Culturale Immateriale

ARTICOLO

## Cambodian Performing Arts in the Era of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage

di Fabio Morotti

### Abstract – ITA

La tutela del Patrimonio culturale immateriale (Intangible Cultural Heritage – ICH) promossa dall'UNESCO sta alimentando un vivace dibattito nel settore delle arti performative cambogiane. Il riconoscimento di ICH conferito dall'UNESCO si traduce in una maggiore attenzione internazionale e in nuove opportunità economiche per la tradizione selezionata, il che contribuisce a preservare pratiche culturali che rischiano di scomparire. In Cambogia, soltanto un numero esiguo di insegnanti e interpreti è riuscito a sopravvivere alle brutalità perpetrate dal regime di Pol Pot (1975-79), e l'inserimento di tali tradizioni artistiche in uno scenario globale, anche in ragione della strategia culturale portata avanti dall'UNESCO, ha favorito la rivitalizzazione e ricostruzione di repertori vecchi e nuovi. Questo è certamente il caso della tradizione musicale del Chapei Dang Veng e del teatro-danza Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet, generi che sono stati iscritti nella List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, rispettivamente nel 2016 e nel 2018. Tuttavia, considerando l'effetto di branding, il quale è strettamente correlato al processo di patrimonializzazione e alle liste UNESCO, il concetto di ICH sembra aver favorito il turismo di massa e, più in generale, un'eccessiva commercializzazione e folklorizzazione delle pratiche culturali. Tradizioni che, come conseguenza, vedono eroso il loro significato religioso.

### Abstract – ENG

UNESCO's protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has been a topic of ongoing debate in the field of Cambodian performing arts. UNESCO's recognition as ICH means that international attention and renewed economic opportunities arise for the selected performing arts and thus can help to preserve cultural practices that are at risk of being lost. In Cambodia, only a handful of teachers and performers survived the brutalities of Pol Pot's regime (1975-79), and the incorporation of the artistic traditions into a global scenario, also thanks to the UNESCO cultural strategy, has led to the possibility of revitalizing and rebuilding both old and new repertoires. This is certainly the case regarding the musical tradition of Chapei Dang Veng and the dance-drama Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet, registered in the "List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding" in 2016 and 2018 respectively. However, considering the "branding" effect of listing and heritage-making, ICH seems to open the doors to mass tourism and in general favors over-commercialization and folklorization of cultural practices, leading to the erosion of their religious significance.

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ARTICOLO

## Cambodian Performing Arts in the Era of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage

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*“Cause before I was like a rag, but now I am silk.  
I mix the ancient with the modern seamlessly,  
creating the best flavor and turning it into profit.”  
(VannDa, featuring Kong Nay – Time to rise<sup>1</sup>)*

Since the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO has listed and given recognition to four different forms of Cambodian performing arts. And this paper will focus mainly on the two most recent forms registered: the musical tradition of *Chapei Dang Veng*<sup>2</sup> (2016), by analyzing the hit song *Time to Rise* by rapper VannDa and master Kong Nay, and the *Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet* (2018), a dance-drama which is performed annually in a pagoda ten kilometers from the capital Phnom Penh. In general, UNESCO's cultural policy has certainly helped to preserve and revitalize Cambodian traditional genres, such as the *Lkhon Khol* performed in Wat Svay Andet, which was at risk of being lost forever due to neglect and lack of resources. However, the concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), with the consequent increased visibility and prestige, has opened the doors to mass tourism and favored a process of over-commercialization. Based on different periods of field study and on several interviews conducted during the last twenty years, this paper aims to offer a critical analysis of the mechanisms that characterize UNESCO's heritage-making. A process which seems to be following a trajectory traced by Neoliberalism.

Released in 2021, by renowned Cambodian rapper VannDa, *Time to Rise* is the song that has achieved the most views – 112 million to date – on YouTube (VannDa Official 2021) in the history of Cambodian music. The song is a true rap tribute to master Kong Nay, a living legend of *Chapei Dang Veng*. The name of this musical genre is

<sup>1</sup> All the lyrics found and translated in this article are taken from the same source (VannDa 2021).

<sup>2</sup> For the Cambodian performing arts mentioned in this paper, I have decided to adopt the Khmer-English transliteration chosen by UNESCO in their publications and website, despite not being very commonly used. A choice made in order to simplify the writing for the reader. However, this transliteration system is not rigorous and the reader could detect discrepancies in the transcriptions of the terms proposed with that of other authors cited in this paper.

commonly abbreviated as just *Chapey*, which is a two-string long-necked “lute”, used to accompany this improvised style of singing<sup>3</sup>. Its repertoire includes Buddhist legends and related folktales, as well as stories of everyday life enriched with humorous elements. *Chapei Dang Veng*, due to the potential risk of disappearing, was listed by UNESCO on its List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding as recently as 2016.

Kong Nay, known as the Ray Charles of Cambodia<sup>4</sup>, who lost his sight early due to smallpox, is a Living Human Treasure (UNESCO 2009: 23). He is one of the few masters of *Chapei*, who survived the Regime of Pol Pot (1975-1979), a tragic period in the history of Cambodia in which an estimated ninety percent of the dancers, musicians and performers perished (De Nike *et al.* 2020).

The videoclip of *Time to Rise* is staged inside the National Museum of the capital Phnom Penh, an iconic place of Cambodian culture and art. The song mixes “ancient with the modern seamlessly”, namely the Khmer language and English. The images of the museum’s halls, masterpieces and statues, along with the black-and-white footage from the 1960s, including Cambodian Royal Ballet<sup>5</sup> masks and female dancers, combined with the editing and visual codes of rap and the peculiar singing that accompanies the *Chapei*, connect the present with the Angkorian past, considered by Cambodians to be the glorious starting point of art and culture (Mar 2001). UNESCO’s website describes *Chapei Dang Veng* as a “Cambodian musical tradition closely associated with the life, customs and beliefs of the Cambodian people”. It includes “traditional rituals, cultural and religious knowledge and values” with multiple uses, “from the educational to satire”, which are all elements that show a potential “ability to easily adapt to modern society” (UNESCO 2016b). Within *Time to Rise*, *Chapei Dang Veng* embodies the recent transformations happening in Cambodian society and culture, such as the revitalization<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> When the *chapei* lute is used in other traditional Cambodian genres, such as the *phleng kar boran* (classical wedding music) and *areak* (spirit possession) ensembles, this instrument retains its name, but the genre is no longer called *Chapei Dang Veng*. See Grant-Sarin (2016: 41)

<sup>4</sup> See Ros (2008).

<sup>5</sup> The Royal Ballet of Cambodia refers to a dance and dance-drama tradition which is known by several names in both English and Khmer languages: Khmer court dances, *Lkhon Kbach Boran* and *Lkhon Preah Reach Trop* or “Dance of Royal Wealth”.

<sup>6</sup> According to the art. 2.3. of the 2003 Convention: “Safeguarding’ means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage” (UNESCO 2003a: Chap. I, Art. 2.3).

of heritage<sup>7</sup>, the social media outreach and the adoption of a neoliberal economic model (“create the best flavor and turn it into profit”, says VannDa). All these give voice to the spirit of the young population, the desire to revive the country’s image through music and performing arts and to leave behind an image of death and terror associated with the genocide.

In such a dynamic scenario, where various forces come into play, VannDa sings: “Modern music of the youth, a generation over the age of twenty. They wanna fly like the birds.” He is followed by Kong Nay in elegant Khmer clothing: “They are flexible with the sounds of modernity. And evolve it with our tradition”, while being greeted by those attending, as is traditionally done to the *kru*, or master. With this song and international success, *Chapei Dang Veng* seems to have left behind the difficult years when its transmission, relying almost exclusively on oral tradition, seemed compromised. It has “evolved” into a new social and cultural dimension, making it perhaps to question the need for an urgent safeguarding anymore<sup>8</sup>.

Since World War II, UNESCO has supported a series of world heritage initiatives that have resulted in a significant global impact and a new way of considering, dealing and preserving cultural diversity. At the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which represented a distinct turning point in heritage management, UNESCO adopted the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) concept, expressed as follows:

the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO 2003a: Chap. I, Art. 2.1).

The concept of ICH aims to protect and promote cultural traditions, customs, and practices, including traditional music<sup>9</sup>, dance, oral traditions and festivals. In terms of cultural strategy and in comparison with the other concept of Tangible Heritage implemented by UNESCO, ICH can be considered a corrective or rebalancing

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<sup>7</sup> Regarding the Cambodian music revival and reconstruction, see Billeri (2017) and the brilliant *Finding new ground: Maintaining and transforming traditional music* by ethnomusicologist Catherine Grant (2017).

<sup>8</sup> According to Grant C. and Sarin C., whose study was conducted while the listing application was under assessment, the state of *Chapei Dang Veng* appeared relatively “healthy” already in 2016 (Grant - Sarin 2016: 42).

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the relations between ICH and music in the preservation of East Asian traditions, see Howard 2012.

measure thought to address the criticism from those countries complaining that the World Heritage List reflects a type of culture eminently non-oral, “an established vision of heritage residing solely in *materiality* of the past” (Hassard 2008: 284).

UNESCO was trying to give space to a non-western centered perspective, and at the same time to answer those concerns related to the cultural impact of globalization which has marked the most recent decades. A process that often, as argued by Lenzerini (2011: 102), has been translated into cultural prevarication and the imposition of certain cultural models over others, putting “under threat the capacity of the oldest generations to transmit their knowledge and knowhow to the youngest”.

Despite the different objectives, UNESCO’s ICH Representative and Safeguarding lists<sup>10</sup> can be considered a non-physical space for cataloging and presenting various cultures and traditions, “that fuse aesthetic, ethical, and administrative concerns” (Hafstein 2008: 93). This process leaves it up to individual State Parties to choose, determine and safeguard the ICH (Kearney 2008: 216) before being recognized by UNESCO after evaluation.

The anthropologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has defined such heritage-making as a new form of “cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past” (1995: 369). In order to highlight the “metacultural” nature of such an active process, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2014) has labeled conventions, lists, and the heritage enterprise itself, “metacultural artifacts” (2006). “What is produced includes not only an altered relation of practitioners to their art but also distinctive artifacts such as the list” (2006: 171).

Regardless of the fact that the UNESCO’s 2003 Convention and approach is certainly fueled by good intentions, the concept of ICH and its lists have attracted several criticisms and reflections, particularly regarding the inherently political nature of the selection (Lowenthal 1998), which decontextualizes its object (Hafstein 2004). Also problematic are the structural limitations of the tangible and intangible categories themselves (Smith 2006; Kearney 2008), something which seems known to UNESCO’s top management<sup>11</sup>, and the Neoliberal idea that cultural heritage is open and part of a public cultural commons (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006). The process of heritage-making attracts international tourism, generating cultural consumerism (Salazar 2010, 2015), commodification and reification of traditional practices for outside audiences, leading to a distortion between

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<sup>10</sup> The 2003 Convention established a Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, which in 2008 incorporated the ninety previously proclaimed Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, which included the Royal Ballet of Cambodia and the Khmer shadow theatre (*Sbek Thom*), respectively registered in 2003 and 2006. The 2003 Convention introduced also the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, which included *Chapei Dang Veng* (2016) e *Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet* (2018). To which, a third element would later be added, the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices.

<sup>11</sup>Jean-Louis Luxen, former Secretary-General of International Council on Monuments and Sites, stated that “the distinction between physical heritage and intangible heritage is ...artificial” (UNESCO 2000: 4).

the heritage and the locality that gave birth to it (Deacon *et al.* 2004; Arantes 2007, 2014; Smith 2004). Furthermore, the idea of the need for a “rescuing mission”, which is laying behind listing and safeguarding actions echoes “the sentiment behind the nineteenth-century ‘salvage ethnography’” (Krep 2008: 203). A story which requires a “white knight” and that typically leads “to political solutions that aim to ‘protect and promote’ or to ‘safeguard’” cultural heritage (Grant 2014a). All these controversial aspects bring up the complex discussion about custodianship and ownership of ICH and, consequently, the key and unresolved issue of whether there is a need for a global organization that deals with world heritage.

*Time to Rise* represents the most striking example of how public and media recognition can occur through the revitalization and promotion of traditional cultural genres that, in recent years, UNESCO has been able to trigger. Along with *Chapei Dang Veng*, other genres and masters have recently received recognition, even posthumously as in the case of Yith Sarin<sup>12</sup> (1922-2017), dancer and master of *Lkhon Khol*, a dance-drama form which resembles the more blazoned Cambodian Royal Ballet, but that, unlike the latter, is performed exclusively by men (Phim - Thompson 1999: 54). This recognition occurred, not accidentally, when the *Lkhon Khol* performed in Wat Svay Andet<sup>13</sup> was inscribed in the List of the ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2018.

*Lkhon Khol* is a combination of dance, mimed gestures and chanted narration by a *pol* (narrator) accompanied by a *pien peat* ensemble<sup>14</sup>. Its repertoire is composed of dance-dramas representing the epic saga of *Reamker* (the Khmer version of *Rāmāyaṇa*) and other shorter dances which serve ceremonial purposes. As in the tradition of the Cambodian Royal Ballet, the interpretive technique and particular stage presence of the *Lkhon Khol* performers correspond to the four role-types: *Neang* (female role), *Neay rong* (male role), *Yeak* (giant role) and *Sva* (monkey role). Combined with the costumes, make-up and masks worn, each role-type is instantly identified by audience.

The history of *Lkhon Khol* is largely unclear. It was first mentioned at the end of the 19th century when a connection with the king's court was attested (Phim - Thompson 1999: 54). *Lkhon Khol* groups were composed

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<sup>12</sup>For an in-depth discussion on Yith Sarin's role in the *Lkhon Khol*, see Morotti (2010: 139, 242). The recently placed statue in the Phnom Penh's Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) is a due sign for a long over-looked recognition.

<sup>13</sup>The ceremonies, performances and music that characterize the *Lkhon Khol* at Wat Svay Andet have been studied by Sem (1967), Morotti (2010) and more systematically by Khoury (2012, 2014 and 2017).

<sup>14</sup>On the traditional *pien peat* ensemble, see the works of Giuriati (2003) and Sam (1998, 2002).

of male villagers, ordinary fisherman and farmers, who occasionally performed for the king<sup>15</sup>. Only in 1965, this dance-drama form began to be taught and transmitted more formally within the newly established Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA). However, a similar form of theatrical performance using masked actors was likely practiced in the Angkorian period (802-1431), narrating and performing, as today, the saga of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, denoting a religious context of use of the performances<sup>16</sup>.

Like most of the traditional Cambodian performing arts, the three-day cycle of *Lkhon Khol* performances, held annually at the pagoda (*Wat*) of Svay Andet, about ten kilometers from Phnom Penh, comes with the Khmer New Year (around mid-April) and can be seen as a propitiatory or rite of passage to celebrate the transition from the dry to the rainy season (Sem 1967; Khoury 2014). Its spiritual and ritual purpose is “mostly linked to the cycle of rice farming and the needs of farming communities” (UNESCO – *Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet*, UNESCO 2018b). Here, Buddhism and the worship of local tutelary spirits, the *neak ta*<sup>17</sup>, with phenomena of possession by the spirits themselves, are still the focus of a complex ritual. It represents an example of religiosity, involving the community of the villages near the pagoda, in which the theatrical element can neither be separated from the ceremonies that precede and conclude the performances, nor from the observance of traditional rules or the need to ensure the well-being of the community.

*Lkhon Khol*'s troupe at Wat Svay Andet was the only one of eight in *Kandal* province to succeed in rebuilding itself after the Pol Pot years (Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts of Cambodia - UNESCO 2004: 58). Albeit, losing much of the quality that had distinguished it in the past, and experiencing a period of severe economic hardship, which long cast doubt on its continuation and transmission (Morotti 2010: 244). With the 2018 UNESCO's recognition and subsequent inclusion of a training program, renewed interest by national media and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Art, which brought increased financial resources, the troupe can now rely on an entirely new and young generation of performers and a marked improvement in the quality of the performance itself. Furthermore, a managerial change that, as the ethnomusicologist Stéphanie Khoury argues, combined with a new lighting-equipped venue for the theater, the dynamism of the troupe increasingly involved in

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<sup>15</sup>*Lkhon Khol* was not only related to the capital and surrounding countryside in Lvea Em district. In the late 19th century, the governor of Battambang province, which was then still part of Siam, also owned a group. See Tauch 1994: 84.

<sup>16</sup>Discussing the origins of Thai *khon*, George Cœdés argued that male dance-theater troupes were active in the context of villages, because they were thought “to possess magical powers, which justified their presence at the occasion of various ceremonies” (1963: 501, my translation).

<sup>17</sup>*Neak ta* spirits play a fundamental role in the daily lives of Cambodians. See Forest A. 1992 and Chouléan 1986.



performances with a secular character, has fostered the transition to a performance now perceived as a traditional artistic practice, representative of local cultural identity, and not just a religious ritual (Khoury 2017). In consideration of an accelerated movement towards urbanization<sup>18</sup> and altered ways of life of rural communities, and an audience that is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, the ritualistic functions and values associated to this performance are appearing to show signs of erosion. In 2020 the COVID-19 epidemic resulted in the suspension of the performance cycle. Consequently, a cultural paradox emerged considering the fact that *Lkhon Khol* was once performed to ask the spirits to heal villagers and spare them from epidemics and illnesses, as attested to during several interviews<sup>19</sup> and highlighted by UNESCO also<sup>20</sup>. In 2023, the *Lkhon Khol* resumed regularly, but the opening ceremony slipped to the second Saturday after the Khmer New Year in order to allow some of the performers to participate in a birthday party, a delay that, in the past, would certainly have triggered the reactions of *neak ta* spirits (Mou Toi, personal communication 2023). In fact, traditions are enforced by *neak ta*, ensuring the continuity of the inherited values. An improperly performed ceremony or staging, or behavior that is not in accordance with the etiquette by performers, musicians, and the other participants, could lead to dramatic consequences for the community, such as drought, floods, disease, or even the death of the offender (Yith Sarin, personal communication 2005; Mou Toi, personal communication 2023).

Another element of reflection is the diminishing number of *rūp* (“shape”)<sup>21</sup>, namely the villagers chosen and possessed by tutelary spirits themselves<sup>22</sup>. A circumstance suggesting that in the near future, the fundamental presence of these intermediaries<sup>23</sup>, especially during the second day of performances, may gradually come to an end. This would potentially undermine the spiritual meaning of the cycle of performances.

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<sup>18</sup>The long-announced construction of the bridge connecting Phnom Penh to the other bank of the Mekong river is planned to start in 2024. The bridge will be followed by the construction of “Lvea Em City” (Sirivadh 2022), which will essentially turn the villages around Wat Svay Andet into a booming suburb of the capital.

<sup>19</sup>I refer to the interviews with masters Yith Sarin (personal communication, March 12, 2005) and Eim Saroun (personal communication, April 2, 2005).

<sup>20</sup>According to UNESCO, *Lkhon Khol Wat Svay Andet* is considered to be “a powerful tool to ward off calamities and diseases” (UNESCO 2018a: 13.COM 10.a.3).

<sup>21</sup>*Rūp* is a Khmer word from the Sanskrit *rupa* and can refer to both female and male intermediaries. See Billeri 2021: 18.

<sup>22</sup>During the research survey of April 2023, I encountered only 4 elderly *rūp*: Mang Paet, Yong Yiat, Sam Ati and Mou Toi. In the survey led in 2005 the number of *rūp* was higher.

<sup>23</sup>The *coul rūp* (“entering the medium”) is a ritual of possession quite widespread in Cambodia. Its relation to *phleng arak* music has been recently investigated by Billeri 2021.



Moreover, at the 2023 opening ceremony, high ranking *Cambodian People's Party* (CCP)<sup>24</sup> politicians attended and paid homage to the local spirits and Buddhist clergy, giving a speech of a quasi-election nature<sup>25</sup>. Indeed, the “symbolic capital inherent” (Bendix 2008: 259) in the cultural heritage of Wat Svay Andet appears to be prompting a reconfiguration at the local and national levels between the community and the government<sup>26</sup>. A government that has chosen *Lkhon Khol* to represent the cultural face of the entire nation, gives rise to a “hyper-nationalization of the art”, as Lowthorp (2015: 167) referred to the *Kutiyattam* dance in India's Kerala province. This ongoing shift from a level of local interest towards a national symbol and resource, has been studied in the case of the Cambodian Royal Ballet (see Eggert 2011; Falser 2014; Geisler 2020), which was the first Cambodian ICH to enter one of the UNESCO lists in 2003. However, regarding the *Lkhon Khol* in Wat Svay Andet, the most recent to be registered among the Cambodian performing arts, it is still in an embryonic phase and therefore needs to be studied and comprehended further.

Although increasing tourism is not one of UNESCO's official objectives, once its lists have been made and available for circulation, as pointed out by Hafstein (2008: 93), “they tend to take on a life of their own, with tourism gradually taking precedence over preservation as it is driving concern and principal context of use”<sup>27</sup>. According to Urry's book, *The Tourist Gaze*, the gaze has the leading role in organizing tourism expectations and is sustained by culturally specific notions of what is extraordinary and therefore worth viewing (1990: 66). “The more globalization, of which tourism is a main agent, homogenizes habits and landscape all around the world, the more whatever is available of the past tends to be iconicized as a symbol for national identification and, in touristic terms, as a unique sight” (Peleggi 1996: 445). That's why, paradoxically, as highlighted by Salazar (2007), tour operators seem to rely on fashionable global tourism tales to interpret and sell their cultural heritage as authentically “local”, generating a kind of “authentic illusion” that would lay at the basis of the process of heritage-making (Skounti 2008: 74).

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<sup>24</sup>*Cambodian People's Party* (CCP) has ruled Cambodia since 1979.

<sup>25</sup>To some degree, as shown by Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), a tradition is always a phenomenon of invention which requires actors and interests.

<sup>26</sup>The UNESCO 2003 Convention had the effect of “empowering the State” (Brown 2005: 44), giving them the fundamental role of administrating ICHs, by identifying, protecting and managing cultural heritage.

<sup>27</sup>In this context, it is interesting to note that in 2024 the first organized groups of tourists will likely begin to travel to Wat Svay Andet and attend the annual cycle of *Lkhon Khol*, an occurrence not entirely new, but certainly indicative of what implies to be listed by UNESCO.

In a neo-liberal “total market thinking” (Christodoulidis 2013), where there is a tendency for everything, culture and heritage included, to be *sellable*, the UNESCO ICH becomes “The New Frontier of Destination Branding” (Ryan 2015), a brand that globally certifies the value and importance of a certain tradition. Thereby, UNESCO lists become an easy element of appeal for tour operators, an economic resource that might result in a “touristification”, which is a “territorial transformation brought about by tourism on a determined geographical space” (Ojeda - Kieffer 2020: 145). A process that, in a cultural interest perspective, also affects individual or community cultural practices, art forms and expressions, which have to meet and adjust to the demand of tourists<sup>28</sup>.

In this sense, Cambodian classical dance, which is one of the most appealing images of Khmer culture, provides a unique product. Fascination with Cambodian dances originated in the colonial period (1865-1953) and had among its most distinguished admirers Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). The famous French sculptor recognized an albeit unknown sacred nature in the Cambodian female dancers, who have for centuries symbolically identified with the energies and fertility of the earth (Cravath 2008). An association which can be found in the very nature of the postures and movements of the classical dance itself (Cravath 2008: 340-347), and especially during royal ceremonies where the dancers are considered true messengers of blessings from the gods at the behest of the monarch<sup>29</sup>.

During the colonial period, such ritual and sacred interpretations of the Cambodian classical dance were coupled with the Angkorian past, using the many carvings of dancers on the ancient temples of Angkor as evidence. This association with romantic overtones served the French authorities and intellectuals to “reinvent” the tradition of Cambodian dances (Thierry 1963; Groslier - Gravelle 2010). A rhetoric that, as Falser points out, paradoxically will be revived in the post colonial period to feed “the anti-colonial cultural nationalism” (2014: 712) and constitutes today a strong narrative and draw for international tourists and national identity.

Cambodia’s reliance on tourism, mostly related to the famous *Angkor Archeological Park*, has increased drastically. In just 25 years, Cambodia has witnessed a steady and exponential annual increase in international tourist flows, halted only by the COVID-19 pandemic. From about 220,000 visitors in 1995, to a record 6,610,592 in pre-pandemic 2019, with \$ 4.9 million in revenue, almost 20 percent of its GDP (World Bank Open Data 1995-2020).

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<sup>28</sup>A process well-known to scholars of Asian performing arts, and one that is not necessarily related to UNESCO recognition. See, for example, the case of the Burmese marionettes *yokthe thay* (Foley 2001).

<sup>29</sup>In particular, looking at the style and content of dances, one of the oldest and most ritualistic court ceremonies is probably the *Buong Suong Tevoda*. See Cravath (2008: 417-418).

Tourism becomes an important factor in the revitalization of many Cambodian performing arts, considering the rising number of festivals or performances on offer and troupes. But the dependency on tourism-related revenues seems to be problematic for several reasons. In 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a “big lesson” (S. Song, personal communication 2023), considering the drastic setback to the tourism industry, with tremendous consequences in terms of job opportunities for dancers. Furthermore, as highlighted by Delimata (2020: 21), the “dependence on the Western taste and ‘touristic’ audience might be entering into a blind alley”, with the consequence being the loss of artistic independence, originality and of “petrifying forms”. In her study *From Ritual Form to Tourist Attraction: Negotiating the Transformation of Classical Cambodian Dance in a Changing World*, Celia Tuchman-Rosta (2014: 530) provides a rare and precise “insight into the tensions between sacred movement practices, economic realities, and tourism in Cambodia”. In Siem Reap, the country’s main tourist hub, the massive pressure has fueled a proliferation of theatrical and dance activities linked to the dozens of hotels and restaurants. These shows rely on a large number of troupes and individuals, often with little experience and certainly not with the training that characterizes the Royal School of Fine Arts, where the traditional genres are taught.

In order to better respond to the tastes of international tourism, the shows mostly display a diversified selection of classical (*boran*), popular (*pracheaprei*) and folk (*prapeini*) dances, once practiced by communities in the countryside or by minority ethnic groups. This formula in Siem Reap often combines the show with a lavish evening buffet. Spectators absentmindedly follow the *folkloric*-flavored performances, alternating between taking photos, eating, and going back and forth to the buffet to fill their plates. As pointed out by Seng Song of Cambodian Living Arts (CLA), an NGO that, since 1998, has been committed to reviving the most endangered performance traditions and in recent years has concentrated on stimulating creativity among a new generation of artists, “Eating and talking are part of dining, thus audiences end up losing interest in watching the performance” (Seng Song, personal communication 2023). This calls into question not only the rather thorny problem of authenticity (see Delimata 2010), a concept that has been deconstructed in cultural and heritage studies (Bendix 1997), but also that of desacralization of classical dances. Mass tourism and the resulting dinner-dance shows raise the question posed by the great master and iconic dancer, Princess Norodom Buppha Devi (1943-2019), in the heartfelt preface to Loviny's book: “In our society, art is threatened by materialism and cultural globalization. When priority is given to the tourist appreciation of Angkor temples, can sacred dances avoid becoming an exotic spectacle, overblown to be just a caricature of itself?” (Loviny 2002, my translation).

UNESCO is aware of the potential risk of diminishing or threatening the “social functions and cultural meaning” of the ICH and encourages the State Parties to “guide the interventions of those involved in the tourism industry

and the behaviour of those who participate in it as tourists” (UNESCO 2003a: 187.b.III). However, in this regard, no real action has been undertaken so far by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts.

### *Conclusion*

In the era of Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO's policy begins with the indisputable assumption of the need for a global framework for culture. This approach of a total “open access” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 185), as an integrated expression of the neoliberal attitude to the free circulation of any commodity, including culture, represents the main force of globalization. At the same time, UNESCO tries to give space to ICH by considering it a “cultural capital”, “a powerful driver for development”, and “vital for maintaining cultural diversity in the face of globalization” (UNESCO 2003b: 11), which is an ambiguous perspective on promoting and revitalizing non-Western-centric cultures.

UNESCO'S Representative List of ICH has proven to be effective in bringing “visibility” to the Cambodian Royal Ballet and the Khmer shadow theatre (*Sbek Thom*), respectively registered in 2003 and 2006, now perceived as symbols of a national identity. Though, considering tourism's impact, that comes at the cost of “folklorization” (Hafstein 2004), and the intermediation of governments with which the list interacts, UNESCO ends up, perhaps unintentionally, accelerating and supporting transformations already underway and typical of the globalization landscape. Namely, the passage from a local to a global stage, and from a ritual-religious to a more entertainment-style performance<sup>30</sup>.

Such transformation of ICH steers meaning and contexts in the direction of cultural consumption and UNESCO seems to be aware of it: “it is important to prioritize the safeguarding of their social functions and cultural meanings and to clearly distinguish these from the branding or labelling of a product, and welcomes safeguarding measures that address the risk of the potential decontextualization and jeopardization of an element as a result of over-commercialization” (UNESCO 2019: 14.COM 10.13).

“Safeguarding” remains as the only strong and potential argument that can justify UNESCO's role in the global cultural sphere. In fact, as shown previously in this paper, the List of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding has resulted in being decisive and particularly “urgent” in terms of transmission and revitalization of forms like *Lkhon Khol* in Wat Svay Andet, which was close to disappearing altogether. However, once safeguarding becomes non-urgent or unnecessary, as is now probably the case of *Chapei Dang Veng*, the meaning of the listing appears unclear.

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<sup>30</sup>On this topic, see Giuriati 2021.

UNESCO's recent reflection on the listing mechanism introduces the possibility of transferring an element from the Urgent Safeguarding List to the Representative List (and vice versa), following the request of the State Parties or communities involved (UNESCO 2003a: artt. 38-39). Nevertheless, if UNESCO truly wishes to address and avoid the "branding" consequences of listing, perhaps it would be beneficial to systematically propose a temporary placement on the List of the ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, which would be removed when, upon assessment, the transmission and thus the viability of the tradition seems assured. This would provide a better contribution to the future of the ICH itself.

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