

Embodying the Pain and Cruelty of Others

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ABSTRACT

A ground-breaking performing arts-centered reparations project of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia – also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal – is entitled *Phka Sla*. The *Phka Sla* initiative was proposed by survivors of the practice of forced marriage under the Khmer Rouge. While organizations collaborating on *Phka Sla* are assessing the impact of its innovative dance drama, exhibition and other activities on audiences and survivors, this article offers initial observations regarding the impact of embodying survivor testimony on the artists themselves.

KEYWORDS: forced marriage, genocide, dance, Cambodia

In January 2017, a Cambodian woman, just emerging from Chaktomuk Hall in Phnom Penh, posted a comment on Facebook (in English) about her experience at the premiere of *Phka Sla*, a dance drama depicting stories from her own country's years of genocide under the Khmer Rouge. The drama was inspired by the testimony of survivors of indignities, pain and fear, including, notably, a government practice of 'forced marriage.'

'Phka Sla' is too beautiful to put into words. It's way beyond what we call 'the performing art,' not to mention about using the foundation of classical dance to tell the story. . . Classical dance is a sacred performing. They danced for the god. . . and for a belief. However, this time is different. There is no god, king or any belief, but an important story. They dance for the people. They dance for something matter. . . Every dialogue in this dance tells it all, from different perspectives. . . 'Forced marriage' . . . [is] . . . more than just arranged marriage. I hope we all know one thing for sure that we need to look at it, understand it and learn from it for the future of Cambodia. . . I hope everyone could have a chance to witness this. . . and feel what I'm trying to say.

Phka Sla, the dance drama, did indeed go on to tour provincial Cambodia. Audiences diverse in age, and thus in relation to the upheaval and cruelty of the Khmer Rouge regime, participated in performance events that were often

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accompanied by related activities, including facilitated dialogues and interactive exhibitions. While honoring the invaluable care taken to abate risks of traumatization or retraumatization of audience members (see below), this article is a preliminary exploration of the need for attention to the well-being of the artists in *Phka Sla* as well – the choreographer and dancers who take responsibility to tell and indeed embody other people's stories, especially of violations, loss and indignities.¹

REPARATIONS AND HISTORY

Both the production and performance of *Phka Sla* are part of a 'moral and collective reparations' project associated with the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. The Tribunal, operational since 2007, is tasked with trying those most responsible for crimes against humanity and genocide in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979.²

The people of Cambodia suffered horrendously during a civil war in the early 1970s. Relief at the cessation of violence in 1975, however, was short-lived. The communist Khmer Rouge, under the leadership of Pol Pot, had won. Their victory ushered in what would become a reign of terror: in just under four years, an estimated one-quarter to one-third of the population perished from starvation, disease, torture and execution. Parents were separated from children; religious practices were banned and houses of worship desecrated; most formal schooling was stopped and access to modern medicine almost nonexistent. Urban residents were exiled to the countryside where they labored, alongside their rural compatriots, as part of mass agricultural schemes that, ultimately, never fed the population. Millions were malnourished, for years.

Among the most insidious practices of the Khmer Rouge project of refashioning society into one in which loyalty would be shown only to the regime, and not to family, friends or faith communities, was 'forced marriage.' It served as a strategy to boost the population, so as to raise a large army of youth controlled by the authorities. It also continued the government's assault on intimate bonds, and rewarded cadres. Officials paired individuals and forced them, under threat of torture or death, to marry. Punishment awaited those who did not consummate the marriage. Spies would follow the new couples home to confirm that they had.

This article reports on the *Phka Sla* dance drama as a form of reparation, an initiative that aims to recognize hurt and injury suffered and also bring a degree of redress. Collective and moral reparations 'are measures that: a) *acknowledge the harm suffered*

1 This article is part of my ongoing ethnographic research about dance in Cambodia, and its relationship to war, other kinds of violence, gender issues and migration.

2 The Tribunal's structure, mandate, functioning and results have both champions and detractors. For nuanced takes on the court, see, Eric Prenowitz and Ashley Thompson, 'Cambodia's Trials: Theatre, Justice and History Unfinished,' in *Contemporary Southeast Asian Performance: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Laura Noszlopy and Matthew Isaac Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010); Alexander Laban Hinton, *The Justice Façade: Trials of Transition in Cambodia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

by Civil Parties as a result of the commission of the crimes for which an Accused is convicted and b) provide benefits to the Civil Parties which address this harm.³ An unprecedented component of the Tribunal is its inclusion of ‘civil parties’ in the proceedings. ‘For the first time in an international criminal trial, victims of mass atrocity were included as civil parties, rather than as mere witnesses.’⁴ Civil parties are ‘those who have suffered harm as a direct consequence of the crimes investigated by the court and [who] apply to participate in the proceedings...and...seek “moral and collective” reparations.’⁵

The full *Phka Sla* reparations initiative, associated with ECCC Case 002/02 in which senior Khmer Rouge leaders were convicted of crimes against humanity, including the forced marriage practice, and genocide against ethnic Cham and Vietnamese, incorporated a mobile exhibition, oral history interviews, psychological support, a documentary video and facilitated intergenerational dialogues to deepen understandings of history and address contemporary gender violence.⁶ In a country with high levels of sexual violence, there is an urgency to address attitudes, impunity and behavior.⁷

Once the Khmer Rouge regime was ousted in 1979, some couples forced to marry separated; others stayed together, for a variety of reasons. In either circumstance, many chose not to share their personal history of what amounts to institutionalized rape, even with loved ones.⁸ Whether people speak about it or not, ‘the past is alive’ in the bodies of those who have experienced trauma in physiological, psychological, emotional and somatic symptoms that may interfere with the ability to live fulfilling lives of dignity.⁹ Our physical beings often hold the evidence for years, or decades. The survivors’ collective request for reparations was, in part, an acknowledgment of this.

3 Lars Olsen, ‘The Purpose of Hearing Victims’ Suffering,’ Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, 6 July 2013, <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/blog/2013/06/07/purpose-hearing-victims-suffering> (accessed 1 July 2019) (emphasis in original).

4 Eric Stover, Mychelle Balthazard and K. Alexa Koenig, ‘Confronting *Duch*: Civil Party Participation in Case 001 at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia,’ *International Review of the Red Cross* 93(882) (2011): 506.

5 ECCC, ‘At a Glance,’ January 2018, <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/sites/default/files/eccc%20at%20a%20glance%20-%20january%202018.pdf> (accessed 1 July 2019), 3.

6 *Phka Sla* is part of a project whose full title is ‘Phka Sla Krom Angkar’ (Areca Flowers under Angkar, the ruling body of the Khmer Rouge), originally proposed by scholar Theresa de Langis, and undertaken collectively by the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO), Kdei Karuna, a nongovernmental peace-building and reconciliation agency, the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, and Khmer Arts (where the *Phka Sla* dancers, members of the Sophiline Arts Ensemble, are based). TPO, Kdei Karuna and Bophana have long, distinct histories of engagement with Khmer Rouge survivors and documentation of their experiences.

7 See, E. Fulu, *National Survey on Women’s Health and Life Experiences in Cambodia: Report* (Phnom Penh: WHO, UN Women Cambodia and Royal Government of Cambodia, 2015).

8 Theresa de Langis, ‘Cambodian Women’s Oral History Project: Life Stories of Survival under the Khmer Rouge Regime,’ 2013, <http://cambodianwomensoralhistory.com/#/prak-sinan-59-kampot/> (accessed 1 July 2019).

9 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 96.

PHKA SLA

Phka Sla was crafted in the classical dance idiom as a form of ‘moral and collective’ reparations¹⁰ for the unfathomable treatment of people whom the Khmer Rouge forced to marry, people from a culture with an origin story positing that a celestial dancer partnered with a human to give birth to the Khmer people,¹¹ and from a nation whose royalty blesses the land and its denizens through the hosting of sacred dance and music ceremonies.

Phka Sla’s choreographer, Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, has been creating new dance dramas based squarely in Cambodian classical dance tradition for the past two decades.¹² Sophiline lost her father and all her brothers to the Khmer Rouge. She survived starvation, disease and overwork to become part of the first post-genocide generation to recreate the mythohistorical tales of the past through performance.

Her newer pieces, though, include innovations in movement, music and costuming, and in story origin. *Phka Sla* incorporates the testimonies of survivors of violence that, according to a study on forced marriage during the Khmer Rouge regime by Theresa de Langis, was part of ‘a culture of rape and abuse.’¹³ As represented through performance, experiences that had in some instances triggered shame and whose suppression had kept people feeling isolated, now generate empathy and a sense of dignity and connection, along with contributions to the historical record.¹⁴

- 10 In one study, people shared disappointment that reparations to individuals were not part of the Tribunal’s mandate, while some voiced wishes for public memorials and health (including psychological) and education initiatives for whole communities, if not the whole country. Timothy Williams, Julie Bernath, Boravin Tann and Somaly Kum, *Justice and Reconciliation for the Victims of the Khmer Rouge? Victim Participation in Cambodia’s Transitional Justice Process* (Marburg: Centre for Conflict Studies, Phnom Penh: Centre for the Study of Humanitarian Law, and Bern: swisspeace, 2018). Reparations options and opinions about them are outlined in Christoph Sperfeldt, ‘Reparations for Victims of the Khmer Rouge,’ Oxford Transitional Justice Research Working Paper Series (2009).
- 11 ‘Khmer’ is the name of the majority ethnic group of Cambodia, and used as an adjective to describe the local cuisine, the national language and more. In English, ‘Khmer’ and ‘Cambodian’ are usually interchangeable.
- 12 Sophiline Cheam Shapiro is my sister-in-law. She and I worked closely together in Cambodia in 1990/91 as I was first starting my doctoral research there and she was beginning her work as a teacher while continuing to be a featured dancer in the School of Fine Arts ensemble. She and my brother fell in love when he visited me in Phnom Penh. Over the decades, I have come to recognize Sophiline as a truly exceptional choreographer and educator, making her way as an innovator and nurturer of creative, independent women artists in circumstances of government constraint (and intimidation) and gender oppression. I have also witnessed the tension and mutual admiration between Sophiline, who spent more than a decade in the US starting in the early 1990s, and artists based in Cambodia the entire time. In 2008 and 2009 I oversaw the establishment of a classical dance archive housed in her studio, and taught interview and documentation techniques to the performers in her ensemble.
- 13 Theresa de Langis, Judith Strasser, Thida Kim and Sopheap Taing, *Like Ghost Changes Body: A Study on the Impact of Forced Marriage under the Khmer Rouge Regime* (Phnom Penh: Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, 2014), 9.
- 14 Referring to the roles of survivors in transitional justice processes, Juan E. Méndez writes that ‘victim participation in the construction and preservation of memory is achieving a central place in determining what must be remembered, by whom and how. . . Active and engaged participation by victims and survivors ensures that the memory is not incomplete or biased.’ Juan E. Méndez, ‘Editorial Note: Victims as Protagonists in Transitional Justice,’ *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 10(1) (2016): 1–5.

In Cambodia, dance and music are integral components of spiritual life and rites of passage, and popular forms of entertainment for people of all generations. Inscriptions from as early as the seventh century reveal that dancers were important in temple life. For centuries since, it was through the medium of the dancers that the monarch would communicate with the heavens, thereby fostering the fertility of the land and the well-being of the people in the king's domain. In Cambodia today, such a ceremony involving sacred dance and music is still held under royal auspices at least once a year. Dancers themselves embody what is hallowed: they speak of recreating the curves of a sacred serpent that inhabits the land and water through their gestures and postures, and tracing the serpent's movement through figure-eight-like choreographic patterns. Classical dance has also been featured on the theatrical stage for decades, presenting stories that explore themes of loyalty, jealousy, social and familial responsibility, violence, greed and heroism.

Khmer Rouge leaders officially forbade the performance of classical dance, and forced a formulaic revolutionary dance and music repertoire on the populace. They did this because the classical tradition connected people to a history, community and mythology with which the Khmer Rouge did not want to compete for loyalty. Had this form of dance and its layers of cultural and historical significance not posed a threat, it might have been ignored rather than banned.

ON STAGE

A couple, Kesar and Mony, serve as *Phka Sla*'s narrators. Both roles are performed by women – one trained to perform female roles and the other, broader boned and taller, a specialist in male characters. As they move across the stage, vocalists recite their narration, and musicians of the *pin peat* ensemble, an orchestra of xylophones, gong circles, drums, cymbals and an oboe-like instrument, accompany them. Kesar and Mony guide us not only through their own harrowing memories of being forced to wed, but also the tales of several other couples.

Throughout the danced stories, reference is made to the beauty and potency of the traditional Cambodian wedding ceremony, which can last for days, involving complex rituals with discrete musical pieces, myriad offerings and numerous changes of elaborate dress for both bride and groom. These all were absent in the Khmer Rouge-era weddings, as were friends, family and invoked spirits. Only some officials and other couples, also partnered without choice, were present. The narrators and individual characters in *Phka Sla* lament the stark lack of ritual in their ceremonies, and grieve over having gone through something so profound without the comfort of having their loved ones, especially their parents, nearby.

In one scene of *Phka Sla*, a new wife, Chivy, recoiling at the sight and touch of her mate, a wounded Khmer Rouge soldier, ends up killing him, and is haunted by his spirit. She realizes, eventually, that he had dreams of a liberated land that never materialized, and that he was not to blame for the leadership's crimes.

In a separate scene, a woman puts up a fight, refusing to marry under such circumstances. She had already been married: her husband, it turns out, was led away, only to be massacred by the very man who later wanted to claim her as his new bride. She is dragged to a prison:

Women prisoners: Oh Comrade Brothers! We don't want to get married!
 Please don't force us! Please let us go! Please let us go!
 Cadres: What?! Ungrateful! Angkar [ruling body] has sacrificed everything to
 liberate you all, to give you freedom. And here you resist us instead!
 [The four cadres sing the national anthem of Democratic Kampuchea]:
 Glistening red blood,
 Watering cities and fields of the motherland, Kampuchea.
 The blood of great laborers and farmers,
 Blood of revolutionary male and female soldiers.
 Blood transforms into vicious force and brave resistance. . .

Thirteen dancers play the roles of victims and survivors and of Khmer Rouge soldiers, the latter inflicting devastating pain through brutality and heartlessness. There are no spiked golden crowns and glistening headdresses as there are in most classical dances. Nobody appears in colorful pleated silk skirts or shiny pantaloons. There are no embroidered sashes resting across one shoulder. Instead, the performers, both those portraying Khmer Rouge cadres and those playing the role of ordinary folk, wear tight-fitting short-sleeved tops and unadorned pantaloons. Everyone is in black, as the populace had to dye all their clothes black for the duration of the Khmer Rouge era. Solid red scarves around their necks add symbolic heaviness related to the blood referenced in the national anthem.

The artists move with the same fluidity and energy through the extremities that are essential to this aesthetic. Weight is held centered and low, knees are mostly bent, toes curve upward, the back is arched, and fingers curl back into a half-moon. Yet they are thrown and tortured, wrapped in sacks and left for dead.¹⁵ The innovation adds another dimension of relevancy and resonance to the form. It can convey myths and stories of celestial beings and royalty; classical dance can also share the real-life plights of Cambodians themselves.

CREATING THE DANCE

Phka Sla was developed in concert with survivors of the forced marriage policy. Fifty survivors visited the theater where the Sophiline Arts Ensemble rehearses, watched a performance staged just for them and then engaged in discussions about what a dance drama about their histories might look like, and what it might bring to them and their communities. The drama was ultimately based on three discrete survivor testimonies documented previously, plus a story Sophiline heard from a survivor the day they first met. One hundred additional survivors visited throughout the process of creation, to give feedback.

Sophiline and her dancers were, in a sense, conducting additional research through movement. Not just representing stories, they were also reimagining them through an intimate embodiment, with implications for understandings of aspects of the nation's past. For the choreographer this creative inquiry was fraught. Unlike most classical dances, this one would not be based on a folktale or mythology, or

15 I observed a full rehearsal of the dance in Phnom Penh in November 2016, and have since watched a recording of the performance numerous times.

even a story that she had made up (as she had in the past). ‘It’s not that I thought classical dance wasn’t capable of expressing this kind of darkness,’ Sophiline explains. ‘It’s the suffering of people right in front of me. That’s what made me nervous. The representation of that can’t be taken lightly.’¹⁶ She, too, is Cambodian; she, too, lived through the Khmer Rouge era – but she was not forced to marry. ‘I jumped at the opportunity to create this dance because it was about my people, and the Khmer Rouge. But I worried that the civil parties might reject it, might say I got it wrong. And that would dishonor them and their lives.’¹⁷

She was attending to these individuals as well as to the stories themselves. Hers was to be a symbolic interpretation combining centuries-old aesthetic elements, visual and sonic references to the Khmer Rouge, and expressions of anguish (on the part of most of those forced to marry), solidarity (between the wife and husband who chose to stay together and grew fond of one another) and cruelty (on the part of the Khmer Rouge cadres). Instead of relying solely on music of the *pin peat* ensemble – that which accompanies classical dance – and sung poetry, as is the norm, she added narration of the storyline. She commissioned Cambodian composer Him Sophy to create a new *pin peat* score into which he added a *tro*, the traditional fiddle from the Cambodian wedding music ensemble, and explored ways to incorporate Khmer Rouge songs into the production. ‘I was nervous [about using those songs]. I’m sure everyone might be upset. . . . Because by singing them we keep them alive. But I wanted the younger generation to hear what those songs say.’¹⁸ In the scene in which Chivy kills her blind husband and is then visited by his spirit, the song *17 Mesa Kampuchea Rumdoah* (Cambodia was liberated on 17 April) is sung. While Sophiline was researching Khmer Rouge-era songs for this dance drama, she came across this one and ‘burst out crying in front of the computer. It really hit me emotionally and brought me back to that period. That’s why I gave Chivy and the soldier the chance to talk based on that song’s lyrics’:¹⁹

On the 17th of April, Cambodia was liberated,
 Cheers of victory shook the sky.
 The black clouds have disappeared;
 Sunrays brighten the skies;
 Honor is shining through.
 We’ve turned the page on enslavement forever;
 Everybody is master of himself.

Another challenge involved guiding the dancers to embody the privations that the characters they were portraying had endured; some that their own parents had experienced, too. As Sophiline explains:

16 Personal interview, Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 8 July 2019. All interviews with Sophiline were conducted in English.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

To help them [the dancers] imagine that they are suffering, I had them just focus on one feeling: hunger. What if you need something to eat and you can't get anything anywhere? What if you're hungry for a day, then a week, then a month, then a year, and then more than three years? How might the build-up of that hunger feel? You're hungry and you get weaker and weaker over three years. When the dancers perform, they have to feel weak and sad and hopeless way before they come out to the stage. Imagine what it's like to be sad for more than three years. To feel discouraged and hopeless. Even though the sun is rising and setting every day, you don't want the sun to set, because when it has set the danger comes. When you're sleeping, you can be taken away to be killed. You don't want the sun to set if you've been forced to marry because when night falls you go into the house with a spouse you might not like. The dancers have to build this up inside them. Because I was narrating, it was traumatizing for me, too. The dancers do things gracefully, but with an inner sense of exhaustion. Even the musicians have to engage with these emotions. The sounds of the instruments have to be drilling into the pain.²⁰

EXPERIENCING THE DANCE

Phka Sla draws crowds of hundreds at each performance, in both urban and rural settings. There is always a special space in the front for survivors of forced marriage. They sit together, with Cambodian counselors among them, to offer a hand to hold or a shoulder to cry on.

Many survivors reported to Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) researchers that they felt honored by having their stories presented in these particular art forms, as both classical dance and *pin peat* music carry enormous cultural prestige.²¹ They told Sophiline, repeatedly, that what was presented on stage resonated profoundly with their personal experience and that the narration put into words what they had long wanted to say.²²

'It's been an honor to work on this. It gave me another chance to...examine things in my own past and say things I hadn't said before,' in particular through Chivy's speech to the spirit of her deceased husband as she decries the revolutionary fervor that ignores the reality for most of the populace.²³ Indeed, to this day, when Sophiline hears the chanted refrain in the song *17 Mesa Kampuchea Rumdoah* – 'Chaiyo! Chaiyo! Chaiyo!' ([Long Live Our] Victory!) – she is reminded of the howling of wild animals that discovered and uncovered her relatives in their shallow graves. During the Khmer Rouge years, those who perished were buried just below the surface as people were too weak to dig far into the earth. The musicians fashioned a sort of whistle out of clay in order to recreate a sound similar to that which those beasts would make. Sophiline used this song to question those who were

20 Ibid.

21 Taing Sopheap of TPO and Sylvia Johnson, a consultant on the initiative, shared some of the post-performance surveys with me during the project's initial evaluation phase.

22 Personal interview, Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 7 March 2017.

23 Personal interview, Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 8 July 2019.

composing and singing it at the same time that the animals were devouring her family's flesh.

Sot Sovanndy, a dancer in Sophiline's ensemble, shares that she often wants to cry while dancing in *Phka Sla*, feeling her heart break as she becomes one with her character. 'If I hurt that much,' she says, 'imagine the depth of suffering of those who were actual victims' of forced marriage.²⁴ Her colleague, Rin Srey Leak, says that once she 'throws my true self away' and becomes a vicious Khmer Rouge cadre on stage, she sees actual tears on the face of the dancer portraying the one she is abusing.²⁵ After a performance, she allows herself to grieve for her, and for her country, though, one time, 'this feeling that I was that man stayed with me for a month.'²⁶ It was so demanding to take on his character that she held him right under the surface so that she would be ready for the next performance, and the next. 'I couldn't be fully myself.'²⁷

The stories in *Phka Sla* give a public forum to survivors, and also, as mentioned above, have the potential to inspire dialogue about gender violence in general, and its relationship to the legacies of the Khmer Rouge. Cultures of violence and impunity that have continued since that time can only be countered once they are acknowledged and understood. Almost two-thirds of Cambodia's population is under 30. Education about the past contributes to new thinking about possibilities for the future for both survivors and members of younger generations.²⁸ Peacebuilding scholar and practitioner John Paul Lederach writes that

The plague of forgetfulness resides in the presence of intentional deletion, choosing not to see what is visible or focus on what is known. We are told that selective memory represents a psychological defense mechanism that makes survival possible. . . However, the cost of such defensive and collective protection is the cheapening of hope, for the rightful antonym of forgetfulness is not memory. It is hard-won, collective, and sustained hope, the belief that things can be different.²⁹

Lim Chanboramy, another performer, focuses on the value of this dance for young people who, she says, 'learn from it about our history and the worthlessness of violence.'³⁰ Nonetheless, when performing her role on stage, resisting the Khmer Rouge and suffering for it, she is pulled back into her own family's story each time.

I remember my father being horribly violent to my mother. Those scenes come alive in front of me as I dance. I wasn't the recipient of the torture, but the suffering impacted me. It now helps me infuse my performance with that

24 Personal interview, Sot Sovanndy, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 8 March 2017. All interviews with dancers were conducted in Khmer.

25 Personal interview, Rin Srey Leak, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 13 July 2019.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Forthcoming assessments by TPO will shed light on the reach and limits of such project impact.

29 John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 52.

30 Personal interview, Lim Chanboramy, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 8 March 2017.

emotion. I feel sadness each time. Even though I try to remove myself a bit from the story, sometimes I can't sleep afterwards. I can't escape the character's anguish.³¹

Sovanndy shared with me that she has come to realize that she, too, is a victim and a survivor. Her parents were forced to marry against their will by the Khmer Rouge. It was as a dancer/researcher (all the artists looked at video clips and read relevant written materials about this particular history at the direction of Sophiline as part of their preparation) that Sovanndy became aware of the 'legacies of this kind of trauma in my family,' and was able to talk about them with her mother.³² 'I'm still angry about it,' she continued through tears. 'And confused. Should I be thanking the Khmer Rouge for putting [my mother and father] together? Otherwise I wouldn't be here. Or, is that selfish? What does this mean about who I am?'³³

Embodying the pain and cruelty of others through *Phka Sla* demands and extracts a great deal from the artists while also fulfilling them creatively and enriching understandings of relatively recent history. Sovanndy, Srey Leak and Chanboramy each spoke of their enormous satisfaction at being able to play a part in getting these survivors' stories to broad audiences.

When survivors told us how meaningful the performance was for them, plus how they had long wanted their stories [to] be honored as true, and how their families and others have started talking to them openly about their experiences since seeing the show, we felt so good.³⁴

Sophiline and the performers were able to add nuance to the historical record: it was their creativity, for example, that brought the spirits of Chivy (whom the Khmer Rouge had killed) and her deceased blind husband (whom she had murdered) back to meet each other and truly hear each other's perspectives on the possibilities and consequences of the regime's policies and actions.

Ethnomusicologist Angela Impey, in speaking about transitional justice in South Sudan, notes that 'pain and conciliation seek acknowledgement in very different ways' in diverse cultural and historical contexts.³⁵ Danced stories are still appreciated by many in Cambodia as a means to educate and communicate about how best to be with others as a citizen of the world. Although an assessment of the limits and

31 Ibid.

32 Personal interview, Sot Sovanndy, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 17 July 2019.

33 Ibid. Research has traced the effects of genocide on children of survivors with unresolved trauma. Nigel P. Field, 'Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma Stemming from the Khmer Rouge Regime: An Attachment Perspective,' in *Cambodia's Hidden Scars: Trauma Psychology and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia*, 2nd edition, ed. Beth Van Schaack and Daryn Reicherter (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2016).

34 Personal interview, Rin Srey Leak, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 13 July 2019.

35 Angela Impey, 'The Arts of Transitional Justice: Song as Truth-Telling and Memory in South Sudan' (paper presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology–International Council for Traditional Music annual conference, Limerick, Ireland, 13–16 September 2015).

achievements of the full *Phka Sla* initiative is beyond the scope of this article, we do know some of the effects of project participation on the artists.

The choreographer and dancers carry a tenacious burden that each has found challenging to shake. They have bad dreams; they find themselves often pondering humanity's potential for cruelty; some are angry.

The highlighting of these dancers' multilayered involvement with *Phka Sla* is critical as we ask what precautions or follow-up or self-care might be undertaken when engaging deeply with such material, and with such lives. Tasked with an embodied channeling of experiences of trauma, loss and injustice, including horrific violence, the artists risk an internalization or recreation of violations of self even while they employ the highest level of technical and interpretive skill to this project. In order that their critical work can continue, it behooves us to ensure that official transitional justice processes are conducted as constructively and ethically as possible for all involved.³⁶

36 The experience of translators and others working with testimony about war, genocide and specific instances of gruesome violence is garnering attention, too. A research project at the University of Southern California examines the effects of engaging with disturbing testimony for interviewers, videographers, memory workers and others. Beth E. Meyerowitz, 'Engaging with Testimony: Placing the People Who Do the Work in the Picture' (paper presented at the 14th Biennial Conference of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 14–19 July 2019). A study about paid moderators for Facebook who scour the site for hateful, violent content that they then delete offers another example of the impact of close, ongoing encounters with such subject matter. The moderators suffer post-traumatic stress syndrome in high numbers. Fresh Air, National Public Radio, 'From Nightmares to PTSD, the Toll on Facebook Moderators,' 1 July 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/01/737671615/from-nightmares-to-ptsd-the-toll-on-facebook-moderators> (accessed 1 July 2019).