

Socialization in a Cambodian-American Dance Class



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This paper explores the organization of teaching and learning in a Cambodian dance class in Long Beach, California. It focuses on the social hierarchies and processes through which new students are transformed into full members of the class. Lave and Wenger's theory of "Situated Learning" states that knowledge is gained through interaction with knowledgeable others in a social context of activity, or a "community of practice." What is critical to the success of such a process is that novices have a "legitimate peripheral position" relative to the activity which affords them opportunities to receive instruction, observe, practice, and display their knowledge (1991). Responsibility for welcoming and socializing newcomers to the Cambodian classes we have observed is not centralized but dispersed throughout the class in varying degrees to all legitimate members. This results in a hierarchy of student roles with those who are more knowledgeable becoming models and in some instances teachers as they interact with newcomers. Focusing on one case in particular, this paper presents an analysis of the internal hierarchy of participants and the seemingly "fluid" role of students in this community of practice. As will be shown, the classes reflect Cambodian ideals about social relationships and how these are performed in a Cambodian context.

Our interest in this topic was the result of student fieldwork in the community during an ethnographic field methods class in the Fall 2003 semester. As we began work on this paper, we returned to the dance classes with specific follow-up questions. Data was drawn from participant observation of dance classes, and formal and informal interviews with instructors, students, parents, and others associated with the classes.

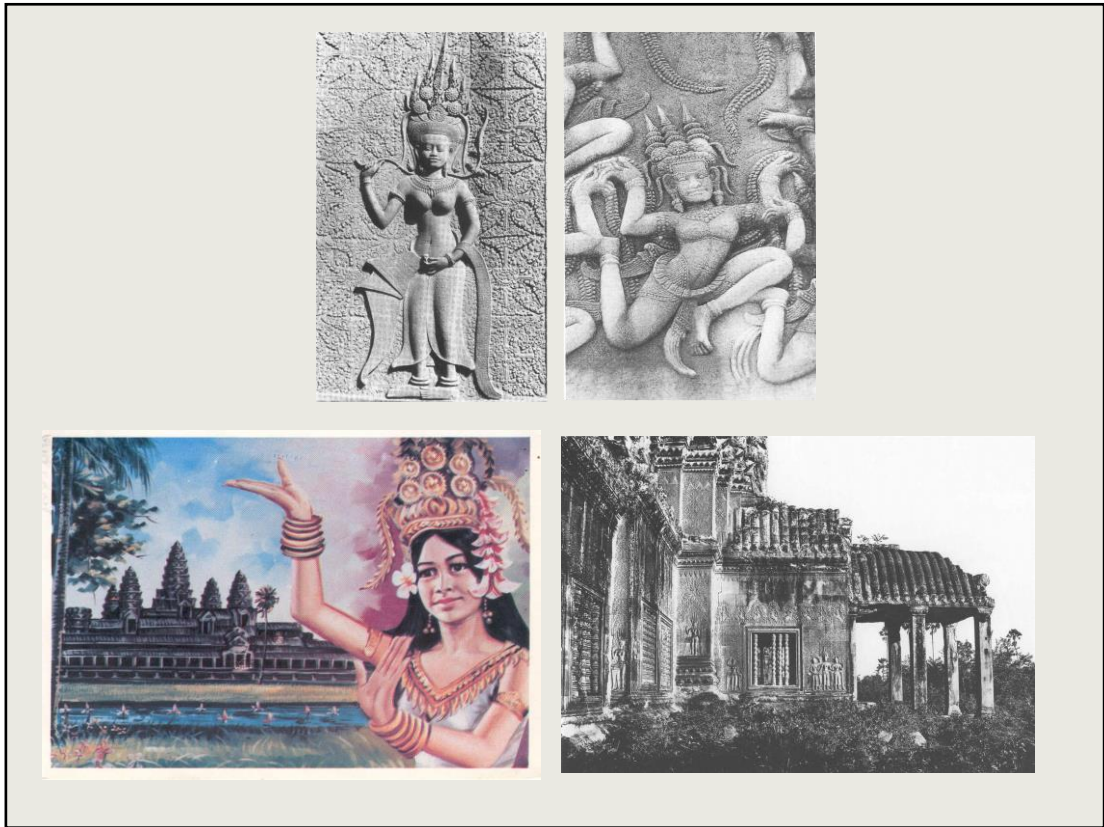
**This paper was presented at the 2004 annual meetings of the Southwestern Anthropological Association. It was based on research conducted by her students during Fall 2003 in partial fulfillment of requirements in the Ethnographic Field Methods course, taught by Dr. Needham.*

Dance in Cambodia



Historical and Cultural Background

Classical dance is at the heart of Cambodia's culture and national identity. Dance is considered a sacred offering to the deities and has historically been linked to Buddhism and the monarchy.



Thousands of images of celestial dancers known as apsara grace the stone walls of many of Cambodia's ancient temples, especially Angkor Wat, the largest of the temples.



Modern dancers are seen by Cambodians as “the precious repositories of Cambodia’s past and ... guarantors of her future” (Phim & Thompson 2001). The dancers are thought to create a spiritual and divine experience shared with the audience to create positive attitudes and happiness (Fieldnote: Sophiline Shapiro)



In Cambodia, the dance instructor is the ultimate authority on the dance and its primary means of transmission. Instructional methods include 1) **modeling** – where she provides a model for the students, showing them the movements until the student remembers it; 2) **molding** – where the teacher physically molds the body, correcting and moving the body parts; and 3) **story telling** – in which she “tells stories [about the characters] or describes how other dancers performed the role” (cf. Alter 2000:30-1).

Learning the dance is an exacting and sometimes painful procedure. It is highly disciplined, and instructors can be strict and severe with students (Alter 200: 30). When molding a student, the teacher may dig her fingernails into the student’s skin because the “pain helps them to remember” (Fieldnote: Sophiline Shapiro). Teachers may also pinch or slap the student if they do not respond quickly enough (Personal Observation - Cambodia). As students progress in their study, they are assigned to work with those who are less advanced themselves, thus reproducing the methods they themselves have learned by.

A master dancer also selects promising apprentices to whom they will pass their legacy. This master/apprentice relationship is a lifelong bond that is as close as a mother and child. Because the court dance is so important in Cambodian culture, instructors and students feel a responsibility to their culture, country, and art form to transmit, receive, and protect this heritage.

The relationship between instructor and student, like much of Cambodian society, is based on a concept of *neak toic ning neak thom* - little person and big person. Cambodians believe that society is ideally composed of dichotomous interdependent relationships between people of lower and higher status - for example, child and parent, king and peasant, student and teacher. The idea is summed up in this didactic poem taught to every child in school:

The small must depend upon the big
The big depend on the small and so are secure
To go alone, isolated, is not possible
[One] cannot have tranquility/stability at all without dependence.

Big people then, have the responsibility of helping those who are younger, or have fewer resources or skills. This relationship is also an important feature of families and especially sibling relationships. Older siblings are expected to care for their younger brothers and sisters and the younger children are taught to respect and obey their older siblings in all things. Modeling and molding are also common features of the way older siblings and adults instruct younger children and less skillful others.

Cambodian Dance in the United States



Classical dance has particular significance for Cambodian refugees. In April of 1975, as the U.S. left Southeast Asia, the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia. In the next four years an estimated 2 million Cambodians died as a result of murder, starvation, and disease. Among those killed were the elites and educated. Only a handful of dancers and musicians survived this period. When their ancient enemies, the Vietnamese, entered the country in 1979, those fleeing as refugees believed that their culture was destroyed forever. Cambodians all over the world felt a tremendous urgency to preserve what culture was left. Teaching the dance to the next generation was a priority and seeing these young people learning and performing the court dance was like seeing their ancestors rise from the ashes.



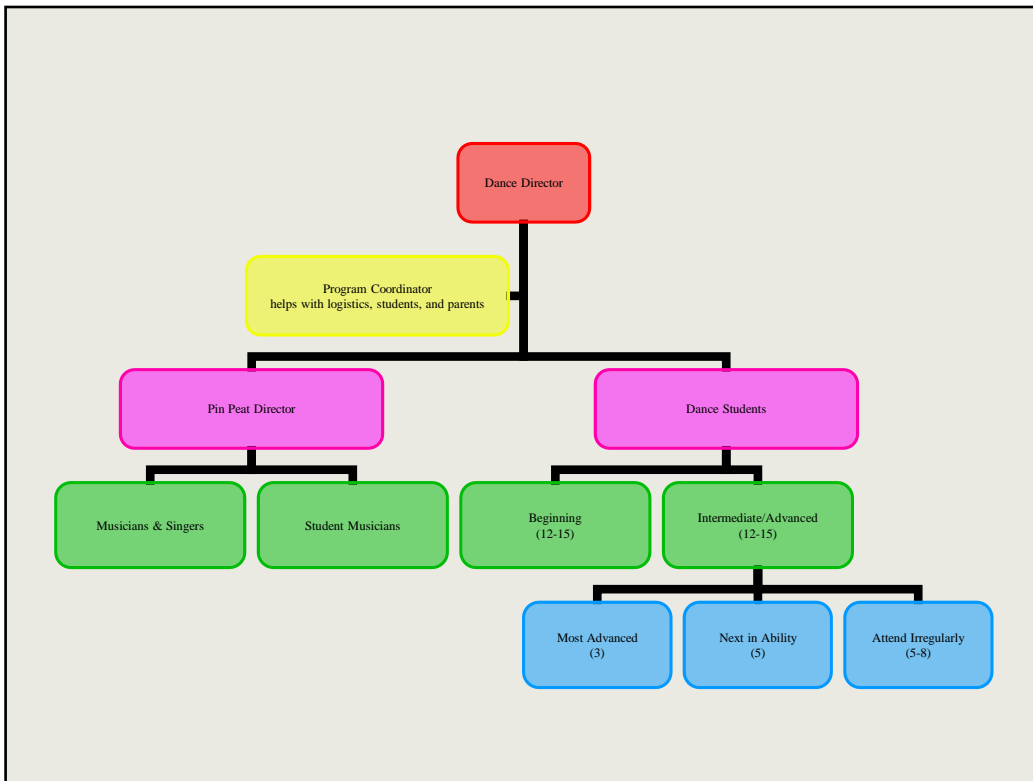
Dance classes have been organized and taught by various groups in Cambodian communities throughout the United States. The first dance class in Long Beach started in 1984. At the time this paper was written, in 2004, there were at least three and perhaps two more dance classes in Long Beach. The class discussed here met every Saturday, from 10 to 1 in the community room at the St. Mary Medical Center.



The director, Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, was trained in dance at the Royal University of Fine Art in Phnom Penh. She was part of the first generation of dancers to be trained following the Khmer Rouge. In 1991 she married an American and came to the U.S. This was a very difficult move for her to make given the need for dancers in Cambodia and the nature of the teacher/student relationship there. She believed, however, that the children in Long Beach also needed to learn about their culture.



The group was unusual among dance troupes in Long Beach for having a live band, or Pin Peat, with them. The Pin Peat is traditionally composed of percussion, wind and string instruments and male and female vocalists. The Director of this group, Master Ho Chan, was trained in Cambodia. The group is comprised of adults who have varying degrees of musical training and some young people who are learning to play.



This is an organizational chart of the class. Participants include the director, a program coordinator, the musicians and dance students. The dance students were formally organized into two groups: Beginning and a combined Intermediate/Advanced.

Students were assigned to one of the two classes based on a complex assessment of skill, age, and height. This was a performing troupe, so classes were set up with performance in mind, which also affected student placement within the class. Generally, the girls in the beginning class are younger and less skillful than those in the intermediate/advanced class. However, taller girls were selected to play the male roles, which meant that some girls were moved into the advanced section based on height rather than skill. Skill then, while an important feature of the class, was balanced with aesthetics of the form.



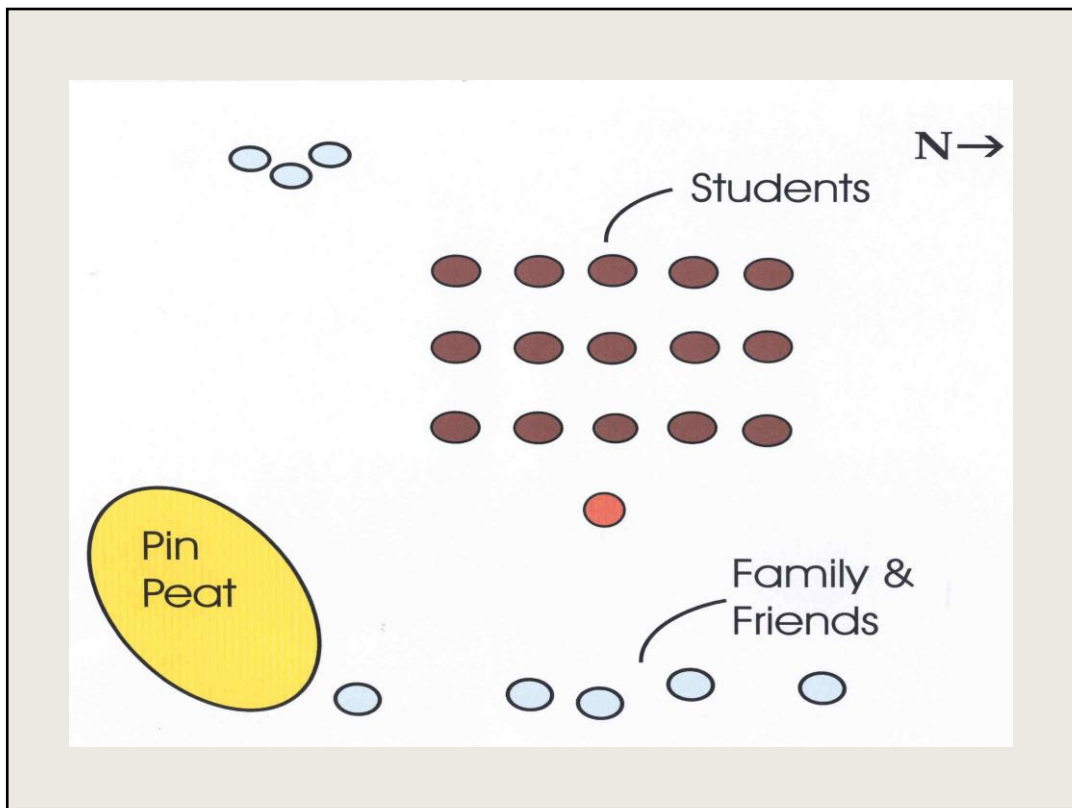
What the chart does not show are the kin relations which are an important feature of this class. For example, the man in white, playing a xylophone-like instrument, is the brother of the program coordinator, who is married to the director of the Pin Peat. The woman in front and the man in blue at the back, playing the gongs, are the parents of one of the advanced dancers. Extended family relations provide a significant basis for interactions in this “community of practice.”

Additional Participants

- Extended family members and friends of students or other participants
- Members of Girl Scout troupe
- Anthropologist and anthropology students



In addition to those participants who are directly involved in the music and dance are extended family members, friends, a Girl Scout troop that meets nearby, and occasionally, Dr. Needham and her students.



Classes are roughly organized in the manner shown in this slide, with students occupying the center of the space; musicians set up in one corner; and family and friends sitting in chairs along the edges. Younger, less skilled students are at the back where they can observe the more advanced students.

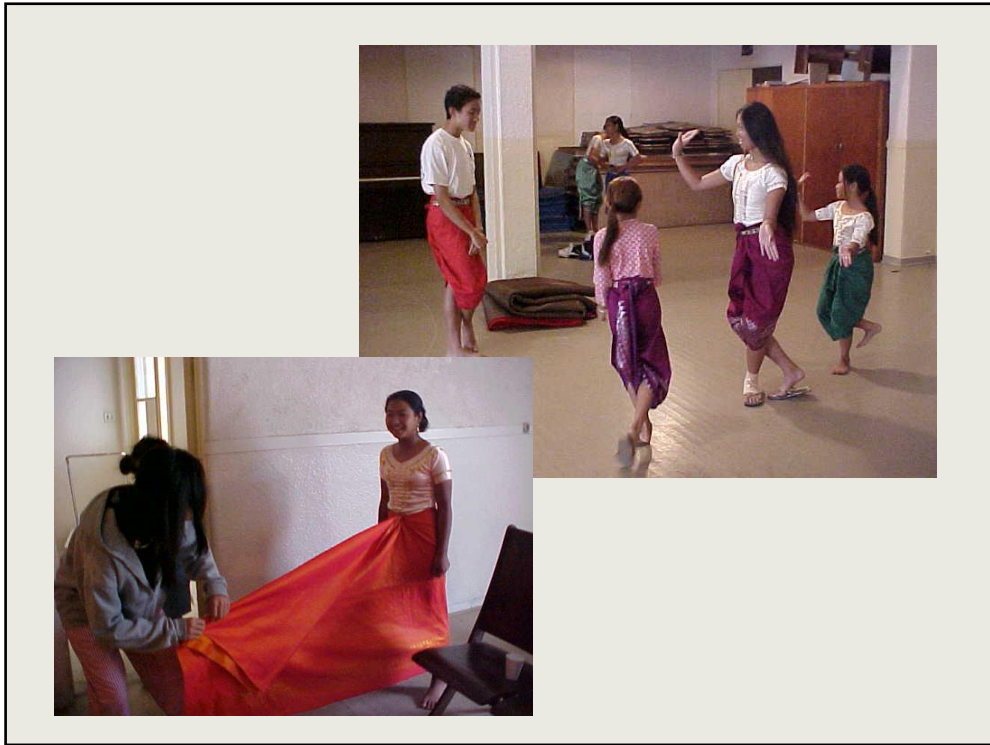


Students range in age from approximately 6 years old to early twenties. All but the young man pictured here are female. All students in the Pin Peat are male. Reasons why these young people want to learn the dance vary, but most have to do with learning something about themselves as Cambodians through their culture. A few students come because their parents bring them, not necessarily because they themselves feel an interest. Many come because a member of their family or their best friend attends and they want to be with them. For the most part though, students participate in these classes as a way to connect with and learn about their own cultural heritage (cf. Alter 2000:31)

A major difference between these students and those in Cambodia then, are their goals. These students are not professional and have limited time to devote to lessons and practice. The director thus has modified her teaching method to accommodate the students. She does not severely discipline them or use physical force with them. She may encourage those students who show promise, but it is entirely up to the student how much effort and time they will put into their learning and the closeness of the teacher/student relationship.



As in Cambodia, the teacher models and molds students as well as tells stories. And as in Cambodia, students help each other, but it is not as formally organized.



Before class and during breaks students will form smaller groups and work on movements. Newer and less skillful students often watch and mimic the older, more advanced students. More experienced students will also help each other and those not as advanced as themselves with movements and other aspects of the classes, for example, dressing in their rehearsal clothing.



Here are two of the most advanced students practicing during a break.



Socialization Process

The focus now turns to Alex (left above), a 9-year-old Cambodian-American girl whose parents wanted to maintain their culture. Her mother, father, and younger brother all went to the dance class with her. Alex's mother told us she wanted her children to know real Cambodian culture and the two things she wants to keep alive are Angkor Wat and the dance. The family first came to this class on October 12, 2003, one of the days when my students and I were also there. Alex's mother says she was impressed with how helpful and friendly the older students were.



October 12, 2003

This example of molding shows Alex (in grey and black) and another girl on their first day of class. As in Cambodia, students who are seen to have reached a certain level of skill will be selected to help newcomers learn the dance. The postures are difficult and challenging to a beginner. Having someone mold your body helps. The helpers appear to draw from personal experience and use their own best judgment as to when and how to assist the beginning student.



October 12, 2003

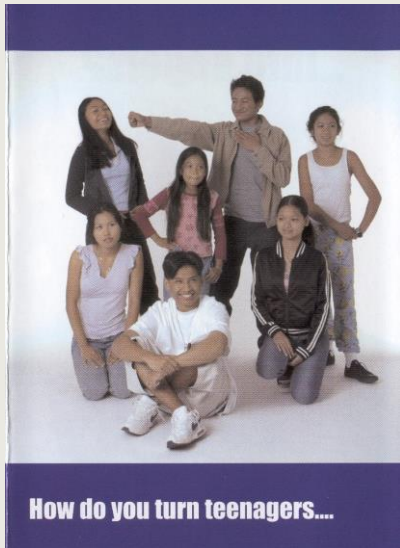
Modeling



Two weeks later we see Alex (in red and pink on the right) has been incorporated into the class and her form has improved significantly. Among the reasons for her improvement is that she practices every day, she has a private tutor, and while the Intermediate/Advanced group is practicing, she and her friend observed and practiced at the back of the space.



All of that hard work pays off - here's a portrait of Alex taken just 5 months after she started.



How do you turn teenagers....

...into angels?

Photo: Michael Bar

THE KHMER ARTS ACADEMY TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CLASSICAL DANCE AND MUSIC
 • Saturday Open Workshops • Conservatory Program

As a way to offer young members of the community an opportunity to develop a high level of achievement, the Khmer Arts Academy conducts after-school and weekend training courses in classical dance and music, as well as developmental workshops, leadership training and field trips in partnership with the Girl Scout Council of Greater Long Beach. Participants can use their new skills to perform, teach, choreograph, or they can apply the discipline and sense of accomplishment they learned through the programs to other fields of interest.

The Khmer Arts Academy sees itself as a nexus of arts and culture in a community that is endowed with wonderful traditions and that is looking for ways to use those traditions to improve its quality of life.

The director was aware of the benefits this experience provided to her students and highlighted this in their brochure. This is also echoed in the words of the male dancer: *“Classical dance is very disciplined, so you have to change your attitude and listen. My teacher has taught me how to associate myself with others, how to be compassionate and caring and supportive. Before I started dancing, I felt like an American kid. Now I’m both American and Cambodian.”*

Works Cited

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