

Dance and Theatre Organizations in Indonesia and the Management of Space for the Performing Arts

Suon Bun Rith

Introduction

The aim of this research is to gain a better understanding of how the various types of dance and theatre organizations have developed within Indonesia to create a more open civil society. This study focuses on formal and informal strategies used in the development of performing art troupes in Indonesia. I observed different ethnic groups in diverse geographical areas, both urban and rural. The questions that directed my research are as follows:

- What key successes in arts management in Indonesia can be applied to Cambodia?
- How do Indonesian artists access and organize performance space?
- How do Indonesian artists survive and live as artists? How does this create freedom of expression within their society?

Like Indonesia, Cambodia has a wide range of performing arts. But in contrast to Indonesia, there is little arts infrastructure, although there is much interest and enthusiasm for the arts. Within Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, there is a high concentration of artists. Informal performance spaces can be found in Cambodia's 19 provinces, generally in the major cities, but they are infrequently used. These informal spaces can be stages set up in rice fields or temples, or mobile stages built for a one-time performance. Such performances have no formal management. Without formal management training, few Cambodian arts organizations try to encourage ways of developing skills related to marketing, creating programs and posters, ticket sales and general advertising for performances. There should be further effort to develop audience appreciation for the performing arts.

Indonesia provides useful models and knowledge that can be used to give a different perspective on the arts. An important focus of the study was collecting and documenting ideas on organizational structures, the formalization of institutions, and government recognition of theatre and the performing arts groups as well as arts spaces. In Cambodia, civil society is much weaker than in Indonesia. With little infrastructure to support the arts, Cambodian arts and culture depend on a centralized system that has little money to spare beyond that of government salaries. The government gives a small amount of funding for the arts, and overseas donors are

often the largest supporters of local performances. Local communities facilitate teaching, training, and performance on a small scale. Arts management and performance practices are often at an amateur level and the number of formal performance spaces is limited.

My research provides insights about a neighboring Southeast Asian country and a valuable opportunity to study similarities and differences between these nations. Both Cambodia and Indonesian artists face similar challenges in preserving their performing heritage. The research and exchange provides connections for a potential network within Southeast Asia for future collaborative projects in dance and theatre production. Researchers claim that King Jayavarman VII, the Khmer King of the 12th century, traveled to and spent time in Sumatra and Java. These ancient connections between Indonesia and Cambodia can be seen in the similarities and roots of performance, culture, and the arts. These influences from the past can help further our understanding of the present and potentially, the future.

Methodology, Scope and Limitations

The methodology used in this research includes conducting individual interviews, attending meetings, participating in workshops and observing artists' interactions. The main focus is on the general issues of management within smaller, independent, and community-based troupes. To achieve my goal, I observed local artist groups, documented their current performance repertoires, and had informal conversations with key figures in the performing arts. I talked with artists in the friendly environment of cultural exchange. Many artists felt that formal interviews with pen and paper or tape recorder were intrusive. It made them feel uncomfortable and reluctant to speak freely about the issues and problems they face in organizing and managing their space and performances. I watched closely how artists prepared for rehearsal, set up performances at different locations and spaces, and coordinated the schedules of performers.

In the process of trying to learn about arts management, I discovered that I needed to learn more about watching performances, and to comprehend the vast diversity of genres in Indonesia. Traveling to five regions of Indonesia, including Jogjakarta, Solo, Jakarta, Surabaya and Bali, I watched a total of 125 contemporary and traditional performances. I watched the performances of 80 different troupes, but spent more in-depth time with about 20 troupes throughout Java and Bali. As for performance spaces, I visited 16 government-run centers, eight tourist-driven private spaces, and 11 studios run by independent artists in their villages or communities. Performance spaces for tourists, coffeehouses, and hotels I visited numbered about eight. Within nearly 15 villages, I watched performances on makeshift stages for ceremonies or community events.

My participation in national and international conferences and dance festivals—the Workshop on Management of Cultural Organization, Art Summit Indonesia, and the Indonesian Dance Festival—helped me see the bigger picture on how Indonesia’s artists work both individually and as a community on regional, national, and international levels. I interpreted the diversity of these events as proof that Indonesia’s arts scene is in an advanced phase, that it has moved beyond preservation of arts into creating new forms within its many communities. I was so inspired by the energy of these artists that I wanted to become a member of these troupes to see intimately the problems and concerns they face. What were the factors that led to the mounting of performances? Was it money? I volunteered my time to help organize performances, so that I was not just an outside observer. I wanted to be active in making performances happen, to see how decisions were made on a day-to-day basis, and thus make some comparison to my work in Cambodia.

I faced language barriers and it took time to build trust with the artists. It was hard for them to give me any practical work. I shared my personal experience in Cambodia so they will understand where I was coming from, especially in my line of questioning, but this did not always win their trust. I tried to open discussions about bringing arts communities in Cambodia and Indonesia closer through open exchange of problems, concerns, and ideas. My personal exchanges with artists resulted in cross-cultural exchanges. I helped implement an idea to bring puppeteers from Cambodia, Bali, and Java together in a technical and cultural-intensive workshop. Another initiative was to introduce Khmer dance in Bali, Surabaya, and Jakarta as part of the Indonesian Dance Festival. I also conducted seminars on Cambodian classical and folkloric dance at the Sanata Dharma University in Jogjakarta and gave a talk in a forum on arts management experiences in Cambodia. Hopefully, more will be gained from this initial exchange.

The Arts as a Living Pulse or as Preservation

With every taxi ride, I tried to make conversation with the driver to improve my Bahasa Indonesia. We talked about where he lived and how much money he earns to support his family. I asked one, “Do you know the *gamelan*?” He smiled and said he had played the *saron* (gong) all his life.” Other drivers said they played *kandang* (drums) when they were “small, small.” Almost everyone I asked knew how to play at least one or two instruments of their traditional gamelan ensemble. They were very modest about their knowledge, but I could tell that it was a country full of energy and love for their traditional arts. All these conversations with average Javanese and Balinese people overwhelmed me. It made me want to do the same for my people. It made me think about the state of Cambodia’s arts and the average citizen’s knowledge of our own traditions. Why is it that in Cambodia—where the richness of art and culture is as deep and historic as the Javanese or Balinese traditions—our people now less aware and knowledgeable

about our culture? What limits Cambodians from practicing their culture and arts? If Indonesians can live their arts, why cannot Cambodians do the same?

Arts Management

I first arrived in Solo at Slamet Gundono's studio. As a *Dalang* (puppeteer), he started a community studio in his home village. I asked him about how he manages his studio; he just laughed and said, "Yes, I use traditional management." I did not understand what he meant. He said: "I have a few people who come to help me when we get a show going, and to us management is to make the event happen (Slamet Gundono, interview). In speaking with many artist groups like Slamet's, I discovered that arts management in Indonesia is also a new concept. Here is how the process works for them. An artist comes up with an idea for a performance or expression s/he wants to show an audience. S/he finds a performance space with few restrictions, or goes to a government-funded cultural center, or an open air theatre somewhere. Then s/he goes into the community of artists and uses their social networks to get performers, and also to fill seats. Most of it is through word of mouth. Some performers will make simple photocopies of posters to announce their show. To produce a performance, an artist might find private funding from colleagues, businesses, local arts foundations, or NGOs. A small portion is funded through cultural centers that get their money from the government. Each governor's office gives small grants to support festivals and cultural events. An artist does not make a big profit through ticket sales, but this is a good model which can also be used to educate Cambodian audiences.

Most management is informal and done in the grass-roots. Individual artists share leadership roles depending on who is running the project. Troupes work in collaboration with one another. Sometimes a leader of one troupe will be a performer of another troupe. These roles change on a project-by-project basis. With people playing different roles in mounting a performance, more people develop a variety of skills. Some may develop leadership skills. Some may develop artistic skills. Some may develop network and marketing skills. And still others may develop skills in finding funding and sponsorship. It is a group effort based on each member wanting to contribute to a successful performance. While living at *Taman Budaya Surakarta* (Cultural Centre), I saw how a group of artists spontaneously create a production within a matter of three days. The idea started with one *Dalang* (puppeteer) singing while playing his guitar. He was drinking coffee with another friend who joined him in playing, by beating on a drum. When another friend heard this music, he brought in a string instrument and started to improvise. They had come for each other's company and conversation. There was no plan to put up a performance but one was initiated on the spot. Later in the afternoon, they collected a small amount of money to create posters announcing a public performance. That night, about 100 people came to hear them play. What was first an informal gathering of artists turned into a public performance followed by a discussion of the role of artists in public expression and how to live as an artist. This atmosphere of trust, open discussion and

community recharges artistic expression, so that more and more ideas turn into real performances.

In Cambodia, this type of atmosphere and trust is lacking. The process is not as smooth and free-flowing. Most artists have ideas, but they seldom discuss these ideas with other artists. Either a performance is initiated by arts organizers (such as the Amrita Performing Arts, a nonprofit organization) or a donor, or sometimes, an artist will go to the arts organization for consultation on how to find money. Cambodian artists also initiate a performance by first exploring an idea like the Javanese. However, the artist goes to an outside source for financial support to organize rehearsals and mount the performance. Most Cambodian artists lack skills in finding funding on their own. They do not see themselves as arts managers or promoters, and this is linked to their self-identity as artistic creators. What I have observed in Indonesia is that artists show strong initiative and work independently. They tap into social networks within their artistic community and have an attitude that they can support and sustain themselves. This attitude allows the community to maintain their freedom of artistic expression.

In the Cambodian context, self-initiative and social networks are weaker. Many artists are government employees. They are paid very little, but to be associated with the government is safer than to be an independent artist. They have to receive recognition as the best artists in the country. The Ministry of Culture does not sponsor just any artist. These artists wait for the rare opportunity to tour overseas. These gigs allow them to earn enough money to raise their living standards, an alternative to struggling month-to-month on a low government salary, or relying on additional work. This creates a lot of competition among artists. There is little networking or information sharing. If Cambodians relied less on an intermediate organizer to accomplish their goals, they would feel more independent and self-sufficient. The challenge is left to the artists and arts organizers to strengthen networking. Artists need to see that self-initiative can result in more performances. They need to develop independent financial skills and develop leadership capacity. This can only happen if the community supports each other and dares to try something new.

Currently in Cambodia, there is hope for growth in these areas. Small arts groups such as independently-run Sovanna Phum have become workshops where dance creations and collaborations with visiting artists and community artists inspire new works. The Apsara Arts Association, another community arts group, works to educate and train at-risk young people to have skills in and appreciation of traditional arts. Because there is so little access in Cambodia to performances, programs for young people work effectively in bringing young people to value traditional art forms. International organizations such as the Amrita Performing Arts work as bridges to link artists within the Ministry of Culture to international donors. These links bring about opportunities for artists to learn about management, development of new works, and open the artists to new possibilities. Maybe this advocacy will help Cambodian artists see their work as the Javanese and Balinese artists do. Maybe they can move into an understanding that art creations and ideas are processes rather than finished products. With this mindset, they will see

that what is most important is the expression of ideas, creativity, and cultural appreciation. Like the Javanese and Balinese, Cambodian artists are well aware that their traditions are embedded in the daily life of the community and country.

Performance Spaces

When I arrived in Surakarta (Solo), I stayed at the *Wisma Seni* (artist guesthouse) of the *Taman Budaya Surakarta* (Surakarta Cultural Centre). This is a government-run centre designated for artists. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Indonesian officials wanted to create a national policy to promote regional cultures. Young artists who wanted to find work in the city were trained as dancers, then returned to the villages to keep their art forms alive and imbedded in their community. I personally saw this policy at work. It seemed like everyone I met in Bali knew how to dance. Anyone I met in Java knew how to sing. It was the Director General of Culture and Governor of Bali, Ida Bagus Mantra (2004) who said: “Tourism should be for Bali instead of Bali for tourism.” To me it means that the benefit of arts and tourism are for the people of that region, not for the tourists who come to see them. The arts in Cambodia also should be for the sake of the Cambodian people and not done for tourists only. If everyone in Cambodia understood how art and culture are essential to their daily life, then they would value it, appreciate it, enjoy it and preserve it. Ultimately, this will also help them economically.

The *Taman Budaya* is the focal point of art and cultural activities. In allowing artists to gather in one space, they create networks and friendship between artists and dance troupes. One time, four friends, all traditional dancers, were experimenting with contemporary dance. They were dancing at the outside pavilion. There was no music, just movement. I asked, “What are you dancing?” They said, “We don’t know, we are in the process (of creating something).” These spaces allow artists to be always in the process of creation. They are always seeking for some means of expression. Having a regular space means having a regular performance agenda. Their activities impact on the artistic community and civil society so that the appreciation of art and culture in Indonesia is enhanced. Without a similar space, Cambodian artists lose this opportunity to create and develop their art skills in an environment that is open and accepting of different ideas and forms. We also lose out on the chance for audiences to appreciate and experience the richness of our heritage.

There is no such place as *Taman Budaya* in Cambodia, where a space is made available only for artists. It is hard to imagine that the government would provide for it. Such a centre is a very good example for the Cambodian government to learn how the Indonesian government relates and responds to the art communities throughout Indonesia. If this infrastructure can be placed in Cambodia, the arts scene there would create a golden age.

Mr. Murtidjono, the head of the *Taman Budaya Surakarta* since 1991, told me that this centre focuses on arts living not for cultural living (interview). What is arts living? What is cultural living? Does it mean that it is art that lives in this centre, that it is not a museum, where people preserve and put objects in a case? But if the centre is a living place, then those who walk in bring life to the community. They are owners and creators. They are the blood or lifeline and have a hand in shaping the life of the art in this space. People who come here become energized and become a part of the spirit of community, creativity and life. This is a very beautiful way of understanding art and its connection to a place or space. I dream of having a space like this in Cambodia. Even if provided with cultural centres, Indonesian artists still feel that more should be invested in the arts. Mr. Murtidjono says funding for the arts in Indonesia is still not enough. He believes most governments in the world place the arts last when allocating national funds. When people talk of Indonesia they describe the arts and it has held Indonesia together despite differences in faith, traditions and culture. Art brings harmony, gives meaning and beauty to society.

Society and Freedom of Expression

In Indonesia, artists show their strong commitment to the arts by using all means to express themselves. They do not really wait for government support. They are more than happy if donors support them, but they take initiative within their community and make use of all available local resources. Essentially, they want to express their ideas on a daily basis, on the issues that affect their society. Everything in their lives finds a place, a belonging, in a performance piece. I saw a contemporary drama by *Studio Taksu* entitled “*My Country Kantrang-Kantring Country*.” The word *Kantrang-Kantring* has no real meaning, but it makes a chaotic sound. Set in a simple stage with very few props, the actors play prisoners whose crimes are never explained to the audience. They are commanded to stay quiet and are banned from expressing their inner desires and dreams. There is very little dialogue, it is mostly harsh sounds and grunting. The prisoners danced to express the living conditions in this unhealthy environment. Their play demonstrates how life under an oppressive political situation is. I did not understand everything that I was watching, but in the performers’ actions and further discussions with artists after the performance, it was clear to me that they wanted to expose oppression. The country referred to on stage was not necessarily Indonesia, but the message of injustice in banning human expression is clear and important for any country.

A play like *Kantrang-Kantring* would rarely be shown in Cambodia. For Indonesians, art can serve as a mirror and medium to express their opinions about current events, political ideas that are different from those of the ruling government, and social issues that affect their modern lives. Indonesians use their art as a way to express their freedom. This freedom feeds back into the richness and diversity of their arts community, and eventually results in a society that is not afraid to say something different, critical or challenging. In Cambodia, because of more than two

decades of prolonged civil war and suppression, this freedom to use art as a medium and mirror to society is limited. People are afraid to speak up on most issues. They see corruption, but do not speak of it in public. They see poverty, but artists have difficulty addressing the issues in public through their artwork. They see injustice, but will feel it is safer not to interfere with other people's problems.

A typical activity of Cambodian artists is to do a rendition of socially accepted tales from the past, mostly stories written before regimes of recent history. Artists very much want to recreate the *Reamker*, a Khmer version of the Indian Epic, *Ramayana*. They will perform versions of post-colonial stories such as *Tum Teav* or *Kolap Pailin*. These stories all contain valuable moral lessons, but are politically safe and do not point directly to any current issue. In the past, Cambodian audiences used to come to a performance already knowing the stories. They learn the moral lessons in the temples. They read the stories in school. They can remember all the different plots and characters of most of these stories, so when they come to a live performance of an episode of the *Reamker*, for example, there is no need for them to learn a new story or to interact with the art in a way that makes them think differently. Unlike in Indonesia where a new form may open a new way of thinking, Cambodian audiences interact with the art form in a more rigid way. With years of war, audiences have even less knowledge of traditional performance. Society's memory of literature, Buddhist texts and folktales was nearly destroyed. The average person no longer knows the whole story of the *Reamker*. The average student has not read all the works of literature or Buddhist texts. So when they watch a performance, most of the time they are just seeing something but cannot grasp the full meaning of a performance or story.

Cambodia is in a critical phase of preservation and revitalization. Most people, such as leaders in government and elder masters, feel they must preserve and revive national cultural heritages. For this reason, there is more emphasis on classical dance, and even within these treasured traditions, preservation work faces enormous challenge. Many people believe that modern performances take away the limited resources and attention of arts organizations from traditional art forms. Then, the expression of freedom through the arts is significantly limited. Holding the idea that preservation is art, Cambodia has little openness or tolerance towards creative ideas. In general, people do talk freely about politics. The strongest political party has its own set of performers or troupes. These troupes sing in praise of their political patrons, but will only perform traditional stories or comedies that have no disturbing political effects.

There are exceptions. In 2001, a performance written, directed and produced by three Cambodian playwrights presented the story of a farmer's daughter who is sold to become a sex worker. This play, called "Wounded Life" (2001), was performed several times, drawing more than 1,000 people to the show. Several NGOs working against sex trafficking, such as Cambodian Women's Crisis Center and Women's Media Center of Cambodia, were involved in the promotion and advertising of the show. Such collaboration among NGOs, artists and

organizations are rare in Cambodia. Another Khmer play written in the 1970s called *Thao Kè Chet Chao* (Merchant with an Evil Heart) portrays the owner of a bus driving company who instructs his drivers to create accidents to make money. One of his drivers faces a moral challenge to do the right thing. Such tales begin to talk about corruption, but often dramas in Cambodia show complicated life situations, and do not necessarily provide a way to think differently.

In Indonesia, the strong spirit of art within the performers makes for a more open civil society. People feel they must say or make some comment on issues in their community or country. This freedom of expression is part of their duty as citizens and artists. They do not wait for other people to fund or support them economically. Instead, all art should belong to the community. It springs from within the community and flourishes there. They work in their art to have their independence of spirit and mind. It is for this reason that art cannot be taken away or taken out of their daily lives.

Conclusion

An Emeritus Master of arts and culture and former Minister of Culture in Cambodia, Chheng Ponn once said: “In times of war, soldiers rise in value. In times of chaos, policemen rise in value. In times of peace, artists rise in value.” Cambodia has seen war and chaos since the decline of the Angkor period. Each succession of war, colonialism, independence, and genocide, has had a powerful affect on the arts, forcing it to re-invent itself under new social, political and economic situations. The same can be said of Indonesia, with all of its political and social strife. However, the lessons learned from Javanese and Balinese artists are valuable for every artist, because they show that if communities invest in the arts, live in the arts, and die in the arts, their lives are richer and more meaningful. Cambodians have this same love and passion for their traditional art forms, but with years of war and trauma, and a limiting political and social climate, they are less likely to experiment with new ideas. Steady effort put into training artists to manage themselves and into providing creative and performance space can help artists overcome the negative conditioning that they have had, believing that they are not owners or creators of the art forms which they work to preserve. The Indonesian model can help the artists and the Cambodian government realize how the arts can revitalize a country arising from a wounded national history. The arts, in its healing and harmonizing, can bring a new culture of expression to Cambodia.

Further studies generated by this research would be to examine how an exchange program can be created for arts managers throughout Southeast Asia. This would benefit artists and arts managers, and encourage cross-disciplinary exchange between practicing artists and management thinkers. For example, Indonesia has already explored the creation of management manuals for the performing arts which were written by experts in a management institution in

Jakarta. The creation of such tools for artists in different regions can help those seeking such integration of management and creative experimentation. Such exchanges could increase information sharing and management models available to artists and arts organizations. These discussions can create a forum for practical seminars and could result in publications that give artists more resources and skills in leadership, organizational structures, marketing, audience development and arts influence on government policies.

Artistic workshops and exchange programs can also bring both creative and managerial experience to countries that have few opportunities for the type of organization and planning needed to bring people together. This could further efforts of collaboration, both in art forms and genres, and result in understanding how people of different cultural backgrounds approach common concerns related to logistics, organization and facilitation for such events or conferences. If we could build the capacity to engage both artists and managers in this exchange forum, then natural friendships are strengthened. Networking within artistic communities can build bridges across borders.

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