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# Cultural Diplomacy: A Night of Art, Dance, and Children <sup>[1]</sup>


**APDS Blogger: Helen Tol Dosta**

It's been over 30 years since the horrors of Pol Pot's terrorizing reign and while there are many remnants of the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime remaining, the country is rebuilding. Since the influx of NGOs and IGOs in the mid 1990s, Cambodia has seen all types of organizations enter and leave, providing much needed assistance in health care, educational and cultural programs.

Among them is Kenro Izu, a world-renowned photographer who founded the NGO, Friends Without A Border in 1995 after encountering maimed and malnourished children dying from preventable diseases during his 1993 visit to Cambodia. Returning to the States with a mission, Kenro raised the very first seed dollars that built the Angkor Hospital for Children via a photo auction, where he invited his friends and colleagues to partake. Since its humble beginning in 1997, the photo auction has grown annually and has raised almost \$2 million, including over \$175,000 in 2010 alone. In nearly 15 years, more than 1,500 artworks by 682 artists have been auctioned, including donations made by 33 galleries.

Today, Tuesday, October 25th, FWAB is presenting A Passage to Angkor, its 2nd annual gala at the historic Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, featuring performances by the Khmer Arts Ensemble as well as a photography auction, a unique catalog which serves as the vehicle in providing seed money to support the healthcare infrastructure and various programs at the Angkor Hospital for Children. Notable participating artists include Richard Avedon, Adam Fuss, Eikoh Hosoe, André Kertész, Daido Moriyama, Irving Penn, Herb Ritts, Sebastião Salgado, and Hiroshi Sugimoto. An exclusive print by Alfred Wertheimer, *The Kiss*, recently featured in Vanity Fair's August issue, will also be on display. In addition to its fundraising endeavors, the auction catalog happens to also contribute seamlessly and rather picturesquely in promoting cultural diplomacy, and effectively killing two birds with one stone.

Intriguingly, in developing a cultural diplomacy program, a debate among scholars arises from the question of who the true target audience shall be: the foreign masses or the locals? Successfully engaging the people is key to any public diplomacy initiative and convincing the locals of participating and furthering their own culture can be more challenging than persuading foreign audiences.

In his speech, *The Limits of Cultural Diplomacy, and a Way Forward*, former Under Secretary of State James Glassman stated that a successful initiative for cultural diplomacy "promotes, enhances, and enriches the culture of critical nations."  An alternative view to the way forward is to rather to promote the understanding of foreigners to their own culture, which was either "denied them by their rulers or is difficult, because of limitations imposed by poverty or geography, to access." Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, the Artistic Director of the Khmer

Arts Ensemble agrees. In a candid conversation, over Cambodian noodle soup (ka-theew) at the Phnom Penh Noodle restaurant in Long Beach, Shapiro expressed concerns over the challenges that dance as an art form faces today in Cambodia. “[The Khmer people] don’t take it seriously. They view us as being silly, parading our fancy costumes on stage, showing off how far our fingers can bend backwards.”

In the 1970s, under Pol Pol’s rule, performing arts was completely banned, including artists, writers, dancers, craftsmen, and musicians; as it was deemed a tool of the elite in corrupting a society. Artifacts, books, instruments were burned and destroyed. The fear that Khmer culture was lost forever was imminent, possibly explaining the apathy of the Cambodian populace towards its culture. Nevertheless, hope was renewed with the revival of traditional arts in the late 1980s to 1990s, bringing back home some artists who luckily escaped the country, and inspiring a new generation of musicians, dancers and artisans.

Globally, cultural diplomacy was also experiencing a resurgence in the early to mid 2000s; most notably since the Cold War. In 2003, following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. State Department sent choreographers to densely Muslim-populated nations in response to polls that reported global displeasure with American attitudes toward Muslims in the U.S. and abroad.

Art and dance are reflections and representations of the complexities of humanity, which is designed to captivate us visually and audibly, invoking a deep emotional connection that transcends through time and boundaries, proving their importance as the essential tools of cultural diplomacy.

Today, Sophiline Shapiro reinterprets the horrors of the Cambodian genocide by channeling it through her aesthetically captivating adaptation of culture performed by her professional dance troupe, touring internationally and exposing the world to classical Khmer dance. Shapiro and her dancers are on the front line of a cultural diplomatic swell, representing the country as cultural ambassadors.

This evening, they will be performing two 10-minute excerpts, one called *Neang Neak*, which is the second act of a four-part dance from “Seasons of Migration.” In this dance, Neang Neak is a female serpent wrestling with her own tail, expressing the perplexing and onerous process of how immigrants wrestle with their transforming identity. The other performance is taken from the piece, *Shir Ha-Shirim*”>*Shir Ha-Shirim*, a display of eloquent eroticism and entrancing spirituality, infusing the vocals of Jewish folk music and classical Cambodian dance. It will an incredible experience to witness these artistic displays of Sophiline’s courage in not only smashing down but also transforming the creative boundaries and elevating it to new levels of originality and imagination concurrently interweaving Cambodia’s heritage.

The gala comes with a celebrity filled audience, who will no doubt enjoy the evening, intoxicated with the aroma of Khmer-inspired cuisine, and mesmerized by the plethora of visually stimulating exhibits of art and dance. They will soak up the distinctive richness of Cambodian culture, whilst emptying their pockets for a good cause.

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