

*Out of the Shadows of Angkor: Cambodian Poetry, Prose, and Performance Through the Ages* guest edited by Sharon May, Christopher Macquet, Trent Walker, Phina So and Riniith Taing. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022). ISBN: 978-0-8248-9454-2 (paperback). US\$25.00.



*Out of the Shadows of Angkor: Cambodian Poetry, Prose, and Performance Through the Ages* is a treasure. It contains eighty-nine pieces of Khmer literature in the form of folk tales, Buddhist chants and songs, fiction, nonfiction, performance pieces, and a chapter from the graphic novel, *Year of the Rabbit*. The collection provides a glimpse into Cambodian history and culture from 7th century Angkorean Sanskrit and Old Khmer inscriptions through the French Protectorate, the “Golden Age” of Sihanouk and Independence, to post-Khmer Rouge authors writing in the homeland and the diaspora. This double volume from *Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing* is a revelation and long-awaited contribution not only to Khmer studies but also to world literature.

Khmer literature’s absence from world recognition is the result of the destruction of the country and its cultural heritage by the Communist Khmer Rouge, who controlled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. The regime closed Cambodia to the outside world, abolished all institutions, including hospitals and schools, and moved all the people from the cities into the countryside. Families were divided into work groups by age and gender, and everyone’s activities were closely monitored and controlled. Anyone thought to have been part of the middle and upper classes was killed, monks were made to disrobe, and artists and writers were silenced either through execution or the threat of death. Libraries were destroyed and print and palm leaf books were left to rot in the humid climate. These activities had a devastating impact on Cambodia’s cultural heritage and soul. Because of the losses during the Khmer Rouge few Westerners are aware of the extent and depth of Cambodian literary genres.

Following the re-opening of Cambodia in the 1990s Sharon May and Christophe Macquet, two of the five special editors on this volume, were among those who went to Cambodia to find, restore, and translate whatever survived of Cambodia’s writings. At the same time a new generation of Khmer and international scholars and authors began once again to translate extant ancient inscriptions and manuscripts, record Buddhist and folk literature from surviving masters, and promote Khmer writers and literature. But so far, very little has reached a Western audience. It is this historical context that makes *Out of the Shadows* such an important contribution.

The book begins with four essays which provide background for the contents that follow. The Foreword, by Vaddey Ratner, a Cambodian American author, describes the significance of the arts, particularly language, for Khmer identity in Cambodia and the diaspora. As Vaddey explains, spoken and written Khmer literature provides not only “records of our history but also touchstones to guide us in navigating the troubled present and uncertain future.” Sokunthary Svay introduces Cambodian American writers. Her words affirm other Cambodian Americans who express feelings of separation, emptiness, and loss for a way of being and cultural heritage they cannot know. She writes of a whole generation searching for Cambodian culture and history in literature and performance arts, but the loss of their mother tongue which was rich in tone, nuance, and expression, prevents the intergenerational exchange of stories that would have nurtured and grounded their Khmer identity in an earlier time.

In her essay, Sharon May takes us on “A Personal and Literary Journey through Cambodian Literature.” She describes how difficult it was in 1990s Cambodia to find texts in the aftermath of the destruction. She also describes the process of translation with guest editor Christophe Macquet. May provides a brief outline of Khmer literature beginning with 13th century inscriptions in Sanskrit and Old Khmer and describes the “musicality” of spoken Khmer that is highly valued among its speakers, especially poets and performers. Trent Walker, who translated the Sanskrit and Old Khmer entries from Cambodia’s Classical period (600-1400) for this volume, presents an overview of Khmer language and literature, covering its origins, phonological features, linguistic structure, and lexical borrowings from Pali, Sanskrit, and neighboring languages. This rich linguistic environment contributes to the complexity and beauty of spoken and written Khmer literature. Words convey levels of meanings that, coupled with the lyrical quality of the language make translation of Khmer poetry particularly challenging.

The book is divided into six sections: Classical (600 CE to 1930), Poetry (1930-2020), Fiction (1940-2020), Nonfiction (1970-2022), Performance (1960-2020), and a chapter from Tian Veasna’s graphic novel *Year of the Rabbit* (2020). The cover image is a reproduction of Theanly Chov’s painting, “Touch” from the series *Surviving*. Black and white reproductions from Chov’s series mark the beginning of each section. Most chapters include a note by the translators or editors about the piece and author, if known. There is also a section at the end of the book which provides biographical information on each of the contributors.

The Classical section includes a wide selection from Old and Middle Khmer inscriptions and Buddhist chants. Among the earliest writings is a hymn to the *Tree of Awakening*, which, as Trent Walker tells us, “is a rare example of a Sanskrit inscription followed by a precise translation into Old Khmer.” Such examples help the reader appreciate how the extensive borrowing from Sanskrit did not eclipse, but rather contributed to Khmer creative genius. Middle Khmer selections include a segment from the epic, *Reamker* (the Khmer version of the Ramayana), while the section on Modern Khmer includes examples of Buddhist song traditions and folktales including a selection from the *Alev Stories* and Brah Padumather Som’s tragic love story *Tum Teav*.

The rest of the book offers selections of literature created between 1930 and 2022, ranging from recently discovered pre-1975 writings to emerging authors in Cambodia

and the diaspora. Major sections focus on poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and performance. Within the poetry section are selections ranging from the early 20th century French Symbolist style of Prince Areno Yukanthor's "On the Threshold of the Khmer Narthex" to the rap-style of Cambodian American Kosal Kheav's "Rewind." Also included is "The Orphans" by Cambodia's first female writer, Suy Hieng, Khun Srun's hauntingly beautiful, "A Small Request," and Khau Ny Kim's evocative longing for the beauty and abundance of Cambodia, "A Hundred Scents, A Hundred Seasons." These poems reflect Buddhist sensibilities and a poignant acceptance of the inevitability of life and loss while reflecting on Cambodia's beauty and abundance that is the source of the Khmer spirit. Also found in this section are several entries by Cambodian French, Canadian and American authors, who like many of the authors in subsequent fiction, non-fiction, and performance sections, write of Cambodia's natural beauty as well as the pain of being separated from the place and time in which they should have grown up. They write of the permanently damaging experiences of genocide, refugee camps, prejudice, intergenerational disconnects, gangs, deportation, and hyphenated identities.

The sections on Fiction, Nonfiction and Performance offer further insights into and commentaries on Cambodian culture in the homeland after Independence and in the diaspora. Each entry is worth reviewing in detail, but space limits how many can be mentioned here. Within Fiction, there are short stories from Post-Independence to Post-Khmer Rouge from Cambodian and diasporic authors. The role of bad luck or fate is examined in Nou Hach's 1947 "Wilted Flower," a story of young lovers who cannot marry because of a tragic change in fortune. There are three short stories from Soth Polin, a newspaper publisher and author who left Cambodia for France in 1974 before moving to the US. There are also tales of ghosts and the veracity of dreams in Sok Chanphal's entertaining "The Kerosene Lamp Ghost Stories" and "Buried Treasure."

Among the offerings in the Nonfiction section is Boreth Ly's moving and thought-provoking performance piece, "Of Permanence and the Persistent Temporality of Trauma," a selection from "Her Father's Daughter" by Cambodian Australian author Alice Pung, a contemplation on "dismemory" and the miracle that is the ability to love after the Killing Fields. Performance pieces include lyrics from Ma Laupi, Cambodia's famous lyricist who composed for Sinn Sisamouth, Cambodia's legendary pop music singer from the 1950s to the 70s. There are also rare samples from the theatrical forms known as Bassac Folk Opera and the improvisational Ayai Folk Theater.

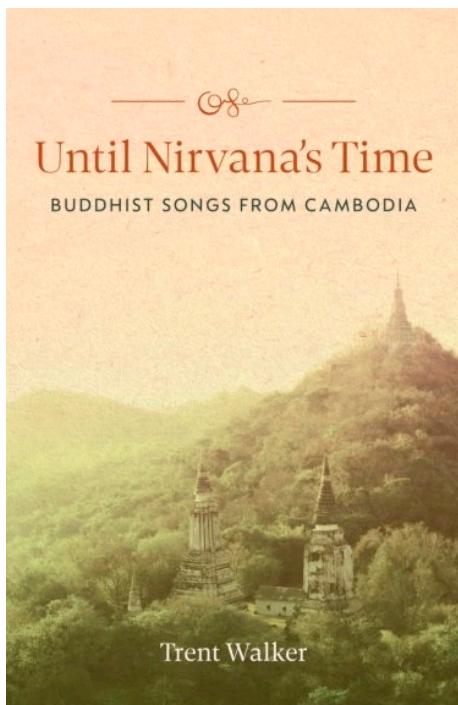
Much of Cambodia's cultural history has been lost, but *Out of the Shadows* stands as a testament to the beauty of Khmer literature in all its forms. This book is clearly an act of dedication and love on the parts of the editors, translators, and Cambodian authors in the homeland and in the diaspora. It provides a window into the remarkable spirit and soul – *pralung* – of the Khmer, which as Vaddey Ratner explains, "describes a quality that is at once individual and collective." *Pralung* is expressed through Cambodian arts and ritual forms that remind and sustain the Khmer as a people. The arts were among the very first traditions the Khmer recreated in the refugee camps and have shared with people throughout the diaspora. As Vaddey's mother explained to her, "Without *pralung*, [the Khmer] will always be hungry" (p. xi).

This book will delight those who have been involved with Cambodians and

Cambodian history over the years and it will entice those who have no knowledge of the country, its history, or people. It is essential reading that provides a significant insight into *pralung* Khmer.

Susan Needham

*Until Nirvana's Time: Buddhist Songs from Cambodia* by Trent Walker (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2022). ISBN: 9781645471349. US\$21.95



Relatively little Southeast Asian poetry has been translated into English or any Western language. Partly, that is because the difference between the source and destination language renders the task difficult, and partly, because the prospective audience is uncertain. In this book, as in his contributions to *Out of the Shadows of Angkor*, also reviewed in this issue, Trent Walker has significantly increased the amount of poetry translated from Khmer to English. He also briefly, but lucidly, explains how he tackled the difficulty of this translation.

The forty-five poems in this collection are “Dharma songs,” meaning prayers, blessings, and acts of homage designed to be delivered out loud as a melodic chant. Walker has been collecting these poems from oral and literary sources in Cambodia since 2005, and in parallel was trained in the traditional art of vocal delivery. He has posted several examples of chants by

himself and his teachers on the Internet, including at [www.stirringandstilling.org](http://www.stirringandstilling.org).

The poems are mostly short. In total, the forty-five occupy 180 pages. Each can be read in a few minutes, but the chanting stretches them out to something much longer, an act of meditation and absorption for both the performer and listener. The songs are recited “traditionally in dusk-to-dawn rites of healing, mourning, dedication, and consecration” (p. xvii).

Walker divides the poems under four headings: Narrating Lives, which are windows on the lives of the Buddha, past and final, and laments for his passing; Repaying Debts, which are mostly declarations of gratitude towards parents and teachers; Befriending Death, which are meditations on impermanence, sometimes very graphic; and Chasing Peace, worship and praise of the Buddha. Most of the poems originate from the 19th and 20th centuries, but a handful stretch back over two earlier centuries. Some come from publications, but others have been collected from teachers, from old manuscripts, and