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Three female palace dancers wearing silk costumes perform in Phnom Penh. The young women dancing in unison have their left feet raised with upward toes, their left arms gesturing forward, and their right hands on their hips. Each one wears a differently-colored, tight silk blouse, wrapped silk leggings, and an assortment of precious metal belts and jewelry. They are dancing on a patterned carpet in a shaded interior courtyard.

The classical Khmer dances of Cambodia, which share similarities with court dances of Thailand and Indonesia, have roots in ancient Hindu and Buddhist court traditions influenced by early historical contacts with India. In these kingdoms, royal palaces were the center of refined arts and architecture. The beauty of these arts suggested to surrounding rural populations that their kings and courts were models of divine perfection and knowledge on earth. Many dances are based on scenes from Hindu epics that teach traditional philosophy and values to the masses.

Court dances and dancers were suppressed and killed during Communist Khmer Rouge rule from mid-1975 to late-1978. Post-Khmer Rouge government and international efforts have been made to train new young dancers and revive Cambodia's classical dance traditions.



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