

Ancient ritual revived through classical dance at Angkor Wat

Michael Sloan

THE highest and most sacred level of Angkor Wat's central temple was closed to visitors last Saturday to enable a private performance of an ancient ritual by five virginal dancers from the Nginn Karet Foundation.

The ritual is called Buong Suong Tiyae and was performed by the dancers who were aged from 10 to 14.

The dancers also performed another dance ritual called the Buong Suong Tep Apso at the four points of the Bakan, Angkor Wat's principal sanctuary at the top of the central tower to re-sanctify the temple.

The founder of the Nginn Karet Foundation, Ravynn Karet-Coxen, says the Buong Suong ceremony is a ritual designed to call on traditional gods to ensure the prosperity of Cambodia in the coming year, with the dancers acting as a physical link between heaven and earth. Karet-Coxen explained that Buong Suong Tiyae is a classical Cambodian dance ritual designed to be performed by virginal dancers, usually of royal descent, wearing white garments, and includes specific prayers to guarantee the territorial integrity of Cambodia and the health of the royal family.

During Saturday's ceremony, the lead dancer wore jewellery dating from the Khmer Empire, similar to pieces worn by figures in stone reliefs around Angkor Wat.

The jewellery included a moon-shaped pendant that Karet-Coxen believed possessed magical powers

according to Khmer folklore, and was loaned to the Nginn Karet Foundation for the occasion by a private collector.

Karet-Coxen said the ritual is one of many aimed at "restoring Angkor Wat to a site of pilgrimage, not archaeological interest".

She chose the date of the performance to coincide with Meak Bochea, a Buddhist observance day celebrated on the full moon, which commemorates a meeting between Buddha and 1250 monks.

Buong Suong ceremony is designed to call on traditional gods to ensure the prosperity of Cambodia

During this meeting Buddha summarised his teachings into the three main principles: Do not do evil, do good, purify your mind.

Karet-Coxen remarked that many tourists visiting Angkor Wat were unaware the temple was still an active religious site important to both Hindus and Buddhists.

Many ceremonies traditionally performed at the site were unable to be staged during the Khmer Rouge period, and many have now almost been forgotten.

The Nginn Karet Foundation was established in 1994 to provide education and health programs to 14 villages in the Banteay Srey district.

The foundation then established a stand-alone dance conservatory under the patronage of Princess Norodom Bopha Devi which trains 178 musicians and dancers.

Karet-Coxen said the conservatory was the first traditional dance school founded in rural Cambodia and "aims to enrich the traditional culture of Cambodia by re-introducing traditional Khmer folk and classical dances which have fallen out of favour".

Training is treated as an academic discipline and students are required to attend normal school classes in addition to their daily dance instruction.

Karet-Coxen says the five dancers who took part in the Buong Suong ritual at Angkor Wat were all required to wear simple cotton costumes and natural fibre adornments, and had their hair arranged in patterns inspired by bas reliefs at the temple to emphasise the "ancient legacy of the dance" and the significance of Angkor Wat as the cradle of Khmer culture.

Karet-Coxen says she was concerned the number of tourists present at historical sites such as Angkor Wat was cheapening the temple's significance.

"Cambodia should consider moving to a tourism model similar to Nepal, which values quality over quantity," she said. "If we limited the number of visitors each year but increased the cost of visiting sites such as Angkor Wat the government would be able to better preserve the site but still retain the same amount of tourism revenue." ■



Dancers from the Nginn Karet Foundation perform an ancient ritual at Angkor Wat.