



Cambodia Culture

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People

The culture of Cambodia has had a rich and varied history dating back many centuries, and has been heavily influenced by India and China. Throughout Cambodia's long history, a major source of inspiration was from religion. For nearly two millennia, Cambodians developed a unique Khmer belief from the syncretism of indigenous animistic beliefs and the Indian religions of Buddhism and Hinduism. Indian culture and civilization, including its language and arts reached mainland Southeast Asia around the 1st century A.D. It is generally believed that seafaring merchants brought Indian customs and culture to ports along the gulf of Thailand and the Pacific while trading with China. The first state to benefit from this was Funan.

The majority of Cambodians (nearly 90%) are of Khmer heritage, and an even greater proportion speak Khmer the official language of Cambodia. Other languages spoken include French, Chinese, Vietnamese and English (which has become increasingly common).

According to the General Population Census of 1998 the total population of Cambodia is 11.4 million, with an annual growth rate of some 2.8 per cent. The population density is approximately 45 people per square kilometre.

An estimated 1.2 million people reside in the capital, Phnom Penh. Other major centres of population include Sihanoukville, Siem Reap, Battambang, Takeo, Kompong Cham and Kompong Thom. Ethnic Khmers make up some 96 per cent of Cambodia's total population.

The largest single minority group is that of the Cham-Malays, who are settled mainly along the Mekong to the north of Phnom Penh. Descended from the inhabitants of the ancient kingdom of Champa in what is now southern coastal Việt Nam, they adopted their faith and script from the Malays who settled in Kampot at the invitation of Muslim Khmer King Chan in 1642.

Partly urbanised, often educated and much involved in trade and commerce, the Cham were severely persecuted during the Pol Pot years and their present population of just over 200,000 compares to a figure of over 800,000 during the 1950s and 1960s.

Numbering around 50,000, the ethnic Chinese constitute another important ethnic group in Cambodia, although, as in neighbouring Thailand, they have been assimilated to a greater degree than in many other parts of South East Asia. As such they may be contrasted with the community of some 95,000 ethnic Vietnamese, which mostly retains its cultural distinctiveness.

Cambodia is also home to some 20 culturally distinct hill tribes, most of which occupy the mountainous districts of the northeast.

The majority of these hill tribes hail from the Mon-Khmer group of the Austro-Asiatic language family and their traditional homeland straddles the border with southern Laos and the central highlands of Việt Nam. Most numerically significant of Cambodia's hill tribe ethnicities are the Kui of Preah Vihear Province; the Pnong (or Mnong) of Monduliri, Ratanakiri, eastern Kratie and south east Stung Treng Provinces; the Brau

with their sub-groups the Kravet and the Krung of Ratanakiri and eastern Stung Treng Provinces; the Tampuan, Jarai and Rhade (or Ede) of Ratanakiri Province; and the Stieng of Kratie Province.

Nearly 85 per cent of the Cambodian people are involved in subsistence farming, living in small villages of stilted huts with exterior and partition walls made of palm mats and floors of woven bamboo strips resting on bamboo joists. Swidden ('slash-and-burn') farming techniques practiced by many of the hill tribes of the north east and illegal logging carried along on the border with Thailand continue to pose a serious threat to the environment, whilst landmines remain a serious hindrance to agricultural development. As in neighbouring Laos, poverty, disease and malnutrition are widespread amongst outlying rural communities, although in recent years the government has been making strenuous efforts to redress this situation.

Non-Verbal Communication

Nonverbal Communication is a language without words, sometimes called body language. It comprises a diversity of culturally derived behavioral displays such as artifacts, chronemics, haptics, kinesics, proxemics, and silence/time.

Artifacts are the result of conscious management of general appearance, dress and physical surroundings.

Cambodian Culture	American Majority Culture
Physical appearance and physical surroundings are important and provide visual cues as to the status and tone of conversations.	Physical appearance and physical surroundings are important and provide visual cues as to status and tone of conversations.
Formality of dress is very important at work and for important occasions. Formal dress is also considered a sign of respect when teaching, or as a guest.	For example, formal as opposed to informal occasions will require different attire and types of venues.
Values dressing to blend in with the group rather than to stand out.	Dress is often used to express individuality.

Chronemics refers to the study of nonverbal communication that relates to attitudes about time management.

Cambodian Culture	American Majority Culture
Relaxed attitude towards time.	Concern over how time is spent. Punctuality is very important. (e.g. time is money)

Silence and time refers to the study of nonverbal communication cues relating to the waiting time people will allow between utterances in speech or conversation.

Cambodian Culture	American Majority Culture
Taking turns to speak is not the rule.	Taking turns to speak is the rule. People will not

	interrupt or speak while others are speaking.
It is acceptable to be silent for longer periods when one or more people are together.	People become uncomfortable when there is a lull in the conversation.
Guests do not speak unless spoken to.	Guests may be considered inconsiderate if they do not talk to the host.
Speaking is not emphasized during meals.	Mealtime is often a time for socializing. Speaking is common and encouraged during meals.

Haptics refers to the study of touching during conversation such as handshakes, embracing, hugging, patting and kissing.

Cambodian Culture	American Majority Culture
Hugging, kissing and shaking hands are not common in Cambodia. Men and women do not show affection in public.	Touching is avoided. Kissing is reserved for family and intimacy.
NOTE: A person's head is considered sacred so it is not appropriate to touch someone's head or face.	
Cambodians bring their hands together, palms facing in a prayer-like motion, to their chest and bow when greeting another person.	A firm handshake is the most common form of greeting.
Hand holding among members of the same sex is considered a sign of friendship.	Hand holding is a public sign of affection among members of the opposite sex.
A smile cannot be assumed to be a sign of happiness or agreement. Some Cambodians may laugh in a situation that may be viewed by majority cultural standards as inappropriate; however, it may be a sign of nervousness.	

Kinesics refers to the study of body language and gestures such as head nodding, hand gestures and signals, and eye-to-eye contact.

Cambodian Culture	American Majority Culture
Eye Contact: Direct eye-to-eye contact is considered disrespectful, particularly between men and women.	Eye Contact: Children show respect through direct eye-to-eye contact.
Greetings: Students will greet their teachers very formally and call them "Teacher" to show respect. Informal	Greetings: Students greet teachers informally by saying, "Hi" or more formally as Mr. or Mrs. _____

greetings are considered disrespectful or rude.	Mr._____.
Body placement and posture: Standing with arms crossed at the waist is considered respectful. When standing with arms at the side of the body indicates a show of strength.	Body placement and posture: Standing with arms at the sides of the body is common and indicates relaxed posture.
Standing with hands on the hips or arms behind the back or across the chest indicates a threatening, condescending or disrespectful manner.	Standing with hands on hips or across the chest may denote anger.
Sitting with legs crossed is considered disrespectful.	Sitting with legs crossed is common.
Putting feet up on a surface or showing the soles of the shoes is considered rude.	Putting feet up on a coffee table or ottoman may be common in one's own home situation. It is, however, considered disrespectful behavior by a guest.
Facial expression: A smile cannot be assumed to be a sign of happiness or agreement. Some Cambodians may laugh in a situation that may be viewed by majority cultural standards as inappropriate; however, it may be a sign of nervousness.	Facial expression: A smile can usually be interpreted as happiness or agreement.

Proxemics refers to the study of personal and physical space. Personal space refers to the distance people allow between themselves and others in order to feel comfortable. Physical space refers to how people will arrange furniture and other artifacts as a way of reinforcing personal space.

Cambodian Culture	American Majority Culture
Personal space and physical space are not emphasized.	Both personal space and physical space are emphasized. (e.g. people stand three feet from each other when conversing.) Americans expect a large personal space 'bubble' and regard infringement of one's personal space as rude or threatening.

Food

Khmer cuisine is similar to that of its Southeast Asian neighbors. It shares many similarities with Thai cuisine, Vietnamese cuisine and Teochew cuisine. Cambodian cuisine also uses fish sauce widely in soups, stir-fried cuisine, and as dippings. Curry dishes known as kari shows its ties with Indian cuisine. Influences from Chinese cuisine can be noted in the use of many variations of rice noodles. Pork broth rice noodle soup known simply as ka tieu is one of Cambodia's popular dish. Also, Banh Chiao is the Khmer version of the Vietnamese Bánh xèo.

Khmer cuisine is noted for the use of prahok, a type of fermented fish paste, in many dishes as a distinctive flavoring. When prahok is not used, it is likely to be kapi instead, a kind of fermented shrimp paste. Coconut milk is the main ingredient of many Khmer curries and desserts. In Cambodia there is regular aromatic rice and glutinous or sticky rice. The latter is used more in dessert dishes with fruits such as durian. Almost every meal is eaten with a bowl of rice.

Typically, Cambodians eat their meals with at least three or four separate dishes. Each individual dish will usually be sweet, sour, salty or bitter. Chili is usually left up to the individual to add. In this way Cambodians ensure that they get a bit of every flavor to satisfy their palates.

Transportation

In 1997, only 8% of the roads in Cambodia were paved out of 35,769 km of roadway. In Phnom Penh, a modern highway links it to Kampong Saom (a deepwater port).

Other improvements in roadways are made possible with donations from other countries, namely Japan. In spite of this, most roadways in Cambodia are not passable for passenger cars.

Transportation by bus around Cambodia has been forbidden, but travel is possible by other methods, such as air travel and by train. There are still many un-detonated mines and other military paraphernalia, so straying from "the beaten path" is not recommended, even in popular areas.

Education System

Education in Cambodia was traditionally offered by the wats (Buddhist temples), thus providing education exclusively for the male population.

The 1917 Law on Education passed by the French colonial government introduced a basic primary and secondary education system modelled loosely on that of France. However, that new system was fundamentally elitist, reaching only a very small per cent of the indigenous population and functioning mainly as a means of training civil servants for colonial service throughout French Indochina.

After independence a universal education system was established, complemented by the development of a network of vocational colleges such as the School of Health (1953), the Royal School of Administration (1956), the College of Education (1959), the National School of Commerce (1958) and the National Institute of Judicial, Political and Economic Studies (1961). However, apart from a Buddhist University established in 1954 to provide education for monks, Cambodia had no public institution of higher education until 1960s when the Khmer Royal University was founded. In 1965 this institution became the Royal University and in the same year six more tertiary training institutions were created – the Royal Technical University, the Royal University of Fine Arts, the Royal University of Kompong Cham, the Royal University of Takeo, the Royal University of Agronomic Sciences and the Popular University. These were followed in 1968 by the Royal University of Battambang.

As soon as they had come to power in 1975 the Khmer Rouge abolished education, systematically destroying teaching materials, textbooks and publishing houses. Schools and universities were closed and their buildings put to other uses. During this period large numbers of qualified teachers, researchers and technicians either fled the country or died.

When the new Cambodian government came to power in 1979 it had to completely reconstruct the entire education system. Pre-school, primary and secondary schools were first to reappear, followed by non-formal education for adults and a network of colleges and universities.

The constitution of Cambodia now promulgates free compulsory education for nine years, guaranteeing the universal right to basic quality education. The Cambodian education system is heavily decentralised, with three levels of government – central, provincial and district – responsible for its management. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports is responsible for establishing national policies and guidelines.

The education system in Cambodia continues to be beset by many difficulties, including an acute shortage of qualified teaching staff, poor morale due to low salary levels and lack of suitable teaching materials.

Attendance at school remains limited in rural areas since children are often expected to stay at home and help their families in the fields. In the 1998 Census adult literacy rates were estimated at 76.25 per cent for men and 45.98 per cent for women.

Cambodia's higher education institutions currently include the Royal University of Fine Arts (reopened 1980), the Institute of Technology of Cambodia (1981, formerly the Higher Technical Institute of Khmer-Soviet Friendship), the Royal University of Agriculture (1984, formerly the Institute of Agricultural Engineering), the Royal University of Phnom Penh (1988-1996, now incorporating Faculties of Pedagogy, Law and Economic Sciences, Medicine, Pharmacy and Dentistry and Business) and the Vedic Maharashi Royal University in Prey Veng Province (1993). In 1995 the Royal School of Administration was re-established under the control of the Council of Ministers.

Cambodia still has a low participation rate in higher education, with just 1.2 per cent of the population enrolled, compared with an average of 20.7 per cent in all the ASEAN countries.

Languages

The official Cambodian language, known in English as Khmer, belongs to the Eastern Mon-Khmer group of the Mon-Khmer language family. Employing a script which (like Thai and Burmese) is believed to have evolved from southern Indian Brahmi, Khmer is one of the few non-tonal languages in South East Asia. Centuries of close contact between Thailand and Cambodia have resulted in a considerable amount of borrowing between the two languages, both at the lexical and syntactical levels.

As in neighboring Việt Nam and Laos, French and Vietnamese are still spoken by members of the older generation, but the use of English is rapidly becoming widespread throughout the country and is expected to increase because it is the language employed within the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Employment and the Economy

At the time of the Paris Peace Accord Cambodia's economy was in ruins. Decades of turmoil had devastated the country's primary industries of agriculture, forestry and fishing and inflation was running rampant. As aid from the former Soviet Union dried up, Cambodia began to replace Soviet-style central economic planning with reformist economic policies embracing the market, foreign investment, incentives and private ownership.

The effects of these reformist economic policies began to be felt in the wake of the UN-supervised general election of 1993, when foreign investment started to flow into the country. Since that time inflation has declined, rice exports have increased and the service sector has developed significantly. However, whilst Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and to a lesser extent Sihanoukville now display many signs of new wealth, this has yet to filter through to the rural areas, where economic activity continues to be very basic.

As it enters the 21st century Cambodia remains one of the world's least developed nations, with limited natural resources and a heavy dependence on foreign aid.

Extensive placement of landmines in arable areas continues to restrict land usage, hindering the government's efforts to develop the agricultural economy. Economic growth also continues to be hampered by basic infrastructural problems such as inadequate roads, inefficient communications, deficiency of power, machine spare parts and raw materials, and most important the acute shortage of trained technicians and skilled workers.

Religion

Approximately 90 per cent of the Cambodian population follows Theravada or Hinayana Buddhism, though this is strongly overlaid with ancestor-worship and animist practices.

Over the centuries Buddhist temples (wats) developed an important role in the preservation of culture and the provision of education, especially in rural areas.

However, during the 1970s Buddhists were severely persecuted by the Khmer Rouge. Monks were forced to do manual labour with the rest of the population and many lost their lives; most of the country's wats were destroyed during this period. Since the 1980s, with the encouragement of the government, Buddhism has undergone a remarkable revival and is now recognised in the Cambodian Constitution as the state religion. The Cambodian Buddhist sangha is divided into two distinct sects. Based at Phnom Penh's Wat Ounalom, the larger Mahanikaya sect accounts for some 90 per cent of the clergy; the head of this order is widely recognised as the leader of the Cambodian Buddhist sangha. The smaller Thammayut (royalist) Buddhist sect was introduced from Thailand in 1864 and gained prestige because of its adoption by royalty and aristocracy; it is based at Phnom Penh's Wat Botum.

The Islamic faith is practiced by the Cham-Muslim communities of the south east. Like the Buddhists, Cambodia's Muslim community also experienced persecution at the hands of the Khmer Rouge and many were killed. There are currently estimated to be around 250 mosques in the country, 90 of which are in Kompong Cham Province.

Christianity accounts for a small but growing community in Phnom Penh and other urban areas. Animism continues to be the dominant faith amongst the hill tribes.

Music

Especially in the 60s and 70s, the 'big two' duet of Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Sereysothea had been a large hit in the country. However after their deaths, new music stars have tried to bring back the music. Cambodian music has undergone heavy westernization.

The Cambodian pinpeat ensemble is traditionally heard on feast days in the pagodas. It is also a court ensemble used to accompany classical dance for ritual occasions or theatrical events. The pinpeat is primarily made up of percussion instruments: the roneat ek (lead xylophone), roneat thung (low bamboo xylophone), kong vong touch and kong vong thom (small and large sets of tuned gongs), sampho (two-sided drum), skor thom (two large drums), and sralai (quadruple-reed instrument).

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