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## Chapter 1 Profile

### Introduction

A relatively flat and densely forested land, Cambodia is a small nation whose size has been whittled down by its more powerful neighbors—a reversal of fortune that is deeply felt by the Khmer people when considering their glorious past. Angkor, in northwestern Cambodia, was the capital of a Khmer empire whose authority extended across much of mainland Southeast Asia from the 9th to the 13th century. After the empire crumbled, the following centuries were marked by foreign invasion and occupation. In the modern era, Cambodia is most known for the atrocities suffered under the Khmer Rouge, a brutal regime whose vision of a socialist utopia resulted in the deaths of over one fifth of the nation's population.<sup>1</sup> Three decades after the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime was removed from power, Cambodia now enjoys relative stability under a democratically elected government. However, as subsistence farming employs 75% of the workforce, many Cambodians continue to live in poverty.



© Frédéric Gloor  
Houseboats on the Mekong, Kampong Cham

### Climate

Cambodia has a tropical climate that is characterized by two distinct monsoons. From mid May to mid September or early October, the southwest monsoon carries humid air from the Indian Ocean into Cambodia. This period corresponds with the rainy season, which brings heavy precipitation and thunderstorms. In the winter, the flow of air reverses as the northeast monsoon dominates the country. Occurring from early November to March, this flow brings drier and cooler air to Cambodia. During this time conditions may vary according to region, as the dry season often lasts twice as long (four months) in the northern two thirds of the country than in the south. The intervening periods between the two monsoon seasons are brief and characterized predominantly by changes in humidity, rather than temperature.<sup>2</sup> In terms of the latter, the weather is generally warm year-round, with temperatures ranging between 20°C (68°F) and 40°C (104°F). January is the coolest month and April is the warmest.<sup>3</sup>

### Topography

Cambodia is dominated by an expansive low-elevation plain consisting of the Tonlé Sap Basin and the Mekong Lowlands. In general, these rolling plains do not exceed elevations of 100 m (328 ft). In the southeast lies the Mekong Delta, which extends into present-day Vietnam. There are several mountainous regions that form both natural and territorial borders. The Cardamom Range, which rises to 1,500 m (4921 ft), parallels the country's

<sup>1</sup> Cambodian Genocide Program, Yale University. "The CGP, 1994-2008." 2008. <http://www.yale.edu/cgp/>

<sup>2</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Cambodia: A Country Study*. Ross, Russell R., ed. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Environment: Climate." 1987. [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+kh0051\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+kh0051))

<sup>3</sup> Asia Web Direct. "Cambodia Climate and Geography: Weather in Cambodia." c.2008. <http://www.visitmekong.com/cambodia/geography.htm>

sole expanse of coastline in the southwest, while the Dangrek range, which has a steep escarpment, separates northern Cambodia from Thailand.<sup>4</sup> The terrain also rises to higher elevations in the east, in the country's borderlands with Laos and Vietnam.

## Rivers and Lakes

### *Mekong River*

The twelfth longest river in the world, the Mekong originates in Tibet.<sup>5</sup> After passing through China, Burma, Thailand, and Laos, it enters northeastern Cambodia, where, for most of its route, it is navigable. As the rainy season approaches, floating villages on the river move inland in order to seek shelter along the banks. This is because the monsoon rains add to the Mekong's size and cause its width to expand. Once the monsoon rains recede in November, the Mekong returns to its normal size. At the southern Cambodian border, the river flows out to the South China Sea through Vietnam.

### *Tonlé Sap River*

The Tonlé Sap River connects Cambodia's Tonlé Sap Lake to the Mekong River. During the monsoon period the Mekong River swells to such an extent that its overflow causes the Tonlé Sap River current to switch direction, thereby sending the overflow upriver into the Tonlé Sap Lake.

### *Tonlé Sap Lake*

Located in northwestern Cambodia, the Tonlé Sap Lake expands over five times in size during the monsoon season. Affected communities view this as desirable because the waters bring fertilizing nutrients to the surrounding land and increased fish stock to the lake.<sup>6</sup> Fishing is exceptional during this period, and nets are used to trap fish as the water recedes.<sup>7</sup>



© jenniferphoon / flickr.com  
Life on the Tonle Sap

The lake's expansion also enables it to supply fresh water to downstream communities throughout the year. Poor drainage near the banks transforms the surrounding area into marshlands, which are unusable for agricultural purposes during the dry season. Protecting these marshlands is now recognized as an environmental priority since they serve as a buffer against catastrophic flooding.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Cambodia: A Country Study*. Ross, Russell R., ed. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Environment: Topography." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/cambodia/36.htm>

<sup>5</sup> ASEAN Regional Centre for Biodiversity Conservation. "Mekong River." c.2006. [http://www.arcbc.org.ph/wetlands/cambodia/khm\\_mekriv.htm](http://www.arcbc.org.ph/wetlands/cambodia/khm_mekriv.htm)

<sup>6</sup> National Public Radio. Sullivan, Michael. "Tonle Sap: The Flowing Heart of Cambodia." 6 December 2005. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5039980>

<sup>7</sup> Hawai'i Geographic Alliance, University of Hawaii. "Tracing the Mekong River." No date. <http://www.hawaii.edu/hga/gaw01/workshop/TracingMekongRiv.html>

<sup>8</sup> Program on Global Security and Sustainability, MacArthur Foundation. "Geographic Priorities: Lower Mekong." March 2007. [http://www.macfound.org/site/c.1kLXJ8MQKrH/b.1013971/k.F121/International\\_Grantmaking\\_\\_Conservation\\_\\_Geographic\\_Priorities\\_\\_Asia\\_8211\\_Lower\\_Mekong.htm](http://www.macfound.org/site/c.1kLXJ8MQKrH/b.1013971/k.F121/International_Grantmaking__Conservation__Geographic_Priorities__Asia_8211_Lower_Mekong.htm)

## Major Cities

### *Phnom Penh*

While the city was designed by the French to include broad boulevards, the capital's low-rise skyline contains many architectural structures that were built in the 1950s and 1960s during a post-independence period known as the era of "new Khmer architecture." These structures represent the legacy of a group of Khmer architects who, rather than mimicking international styles, chose to reinterpret European modernism in accordance with indigenous forms and local conditions, chiefly flooding and high temperatures.<sup>9</sup> However, today, the capital's rich architectural landscape is increasingly overshadowed by high-rise development.<sup>10</sup>



© nolosabias / flickr.com  
Street corner in Phnom Penh

### *Battambang*

Battambang is the capital of the province known as Cambodia's "rice basket." For much of the modern era—from 1794–1904 and 1941–1946—the city fell under the control of Thailand.<sup>11</sup> Noted for its proximity to ancient Khmer ruins, it is also close to the site of a former Khmer Rouge killing field.

### *Sihanoukville*

Sihanoukville was historically a hard-to-reach outpost due to the thickly-forested, mountainous terrain that separates the Cambodian coast from the interior. The coastal city has the country's only deep water port, which was built during the 1960s in order to prevent Cambodia from being reliant on Vietnam's port facilities for the shipment of goods. It is now being developed as a beachfront resort.

### *Kampong Cham*

Having attracted very little foreign investment, Kampong Cham retains a traditional ambience. The city's historic temples and elements of French architecture are a draw for visitors. Located northeast of Phnom Penh on the Mekong River, the city has a significant ethnic Cham population.

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<sup>9</sup> International Herald Tribune. Turnbull, Robert. "Building Phnom Penh: An Angkorian Heritage." 27 March 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/03/27/arts/cambarch.php>

<sup>10</sup> Asia Times Online. Symon, Andrew. "Deconstructing Cambodia's Modernist Heritage." Review of *Building Cambodia: New Khmer Architecture: 1953-1970*, by Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins. 27 October 2007. [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/IJ27Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IJ27Ae01.html)

<sup>11</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica. "Batdambang." 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/55811/Batdambang>

## History

### *Ancient and Colonial History*

While the origin of the Khmer people is a matter of debate, historians believe that they likely migrated into the area from China before the first century C.E. The first great expansion of Cambodian power occurred during the reign of Suryavarman I (1002–1050), whose rule extended over the greater part of present-day Thailand and Laos, as well as the northern half of the Malay Peninsula. This period, during which the temple complex of Angkor Wat was constructed, is considered the crowning achievement of Khmer civilization. The temples of Angkor are replete with detailed stone bas-reliefs of warriors and etchings of fish and fishermen. The latter images attest to the long-standing importance of fish in the Cambodian culture and diet.



© Taiger808 / flickr.com  
Temples at Bayon

In 1434, King Ponhea Yat made present-day Phnom Penh his capital due to the difficulties in defending Angkor from the Siamese, as the Thais were then known. As a result, Angkor was ultimately abandoned to the jungle.<sup>12</sup> In the following centuries, Khmer power waned. From the 17th through the mid 19th century, Khmer kings continued to reign, but in reality, the country functioned as a vassal state to either Vietnam or Siam. Due to repeated Siamese and Vietnamese incursions, the Khmer monarchy ultimately appealed to France for protection, and the small kingdom became a French protectorate in 1863. During the 1880s, Cambodia became part of the French Indochinese Union, which also included southern Vietnam and Laos. In the following decades, France pursued various political and commercial interests in the region.

### *Cambodia Gains Independence*

In 1953, King Norodom Sihanouk successfully negotiated Cambodia's independence from the French. This came at a time when the political influence of communism was growing throughout the region.<sup>13</sup> In order to run for elective office, King Sihanouk abdicated the throne and adopted the title of "Prince." Over the course of his tenure as head of state, he played off domestic adversaries but was unable to keep his country out of the Vietnam conflict. During the war, the North Vietnamese made incursions into Cambodia in order to transport supplies to Viet Cong troops who were operating in South Vietnam. This precipitated a U.S. bombing campaign that was designed to disrupt these

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<sup>12</sup> *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Cœdès, George, et al. "Chapter 16: The End of the Indian Kingdoms [p. 237]." 1968. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>13</sup> "Chapter Six: Transition, Culture, and Language in Cambodia [p. 96]." Clayton, Thomas. In *Language, Culture, Policy, and Identity in Asian Contexts*. Tsui, Amy B. M. and James W. Tollefson, eds. 2007. New York: Routledge.

[http://books.google.com/books?id=0iJD7lZR8WYC&pg=PA96&lpg=PA96&dq=cambodia+ethnic+groups&source=web&ots=v8GS6w0a\\_Z&sig=MadhL2wRM6bWajavcJ4HGiqXxN0&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=4&ct=result](http://books.google.com/books?id=0iJD7lZR8WYC&pg=PA96&lpg=PA96&dq=cambodia+ethnic+groups&source=web&ots=v8GS6w0a_Z&sig=MadhL2wRM6bWajavcJ4HGiqXxN0&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result)

supply routes. In 1970, Prince Sihanouk was deposed in a coup led by General Lon Nol, his Prime Minister, while he was out of the country.

The military-led government pledged to remove foreign communist fighters, an effort that resulted in its own army's sound defeat. The Cambodian government appealed to Washington for aid, which thereafter became its primary source of support.<sup>14</sup> Yet Lon Nol's government never controlled the whole country, and in reality, the state's authority did not extend beyond a few enclaves. He and high-ranking members of his government fled in 1975 as the Khmer Rouge, who they had been fighting for several years, was poised to take Phnom Penh.

### *Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge*

The goal of the Khmer Rouge was to create a communist agrarian utopia. Toward this end, all citizens were required to take up residence on self-contained communes where they were forced to labor in the fields. All vestiges of modern life, such as markets and money, were restricted or eliminated.<sup>15</sup> As part of this program, people were prohibited from practicing religion, singing traditional songs, or discussing their earlier lives in public. Even private statements or references could draw scrutiny and punishment given that informers were everywhere. Those from educated backgrounds were especially desperate to conceal that information since it singled them out for particularly harsh treatment.

As part of the Khmer Rouge program to remake the society along rigidly egalitarian lines, the word comrade (*mitt*) replaced honorific and familial terms, all of which reflect differences in social status.<sup>16</sup> The value of a person's age was also reversed in terms of its indication of status. Because they were considered pure and impressionable, young children were removed from the care of their families to prevent them from being instilled with a respect for seniority. Housed in spartan, dormitory-like conditions, they were denied affection and human warmth as part of their training to become enforcers of the rules set forth by *Angkar*, or the "Organization," as the faceless government was known.<sup>17</sup> This training included clubbing animals to death. By contrast, the



© Andy Morris  
Scraps of clothes in the  
Killing Fields

<sup>14</sup> Time. "Lon Nol and Sihanouk Speak Out." 28 September 1970.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,909625,00.html>

<sup>15</sup> Southeast Asian Blog Collection, Ohio University Libraries. "New Title on the Cambodian Genocide." 31 October 2008. <http://www.library.ohiou.edu/sea/blog/?p=170>

<sup>16</sup> Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University. Ledgerwood, Judy. "Democratic Kampuchea: Hierarchy/Egalitarianism and Pol Pot." No date.

[http://www.seasite.niu.edu/khmer/ledgerwood/Khmer\\_Rouge.htm](http://www.seasite.niu.edu/khmer/ledgerwood/Khmer_Rouge.htm)

<sup>17</sup> *When the War Was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*. Becker, Elizabeth. "Chapter Six: Cambodia's Reign of Terror [p. 257]." 1998. Public Affairs.

[http://books.google.com/books?id=3NHol2HoFiQC&pg=PA257&lpg=PA257&dq=young+children+khmer+rouge&source=web&ots=XMAFHGYhGF&sig=4Bpp1eJtk3LVLoZ05vC2LYVYRK8&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=1&ct=result](http://books.google.com/books?id=3NHol2HoFiQC&pg=PA257&lpg=PA257&dq=young+children+khmer+rouge&source=web&ots=XMAFHGYhGF&sig=4Bpp1eJtk3LVLoZ05vC2LYVYRK8&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result)

elderly, who were traditionally venerated as a source of wisdom, were perceived as worthless and expendable.<sup>18</sup>

### *Vietnamese Occupation*

The Vietnamese launched their invasion of Cambodia in late December 1978 in response to Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnam. By the middle of January 1979 they controlled Phnom Penh. Despite the historic enmity between the two neighbors, Cambodians initially viewed them as liberators, as many were convinced that everyone would have died had the Khmer Rouge regime remained in place. The Vietnamese sentenced Pol Pot, whose siblings were reportedly shocked to discover his identity since the regime's leadership had remained anonymous, to death in absentia. He was deemed responsible for the deaths of nearly two million Cambodians from execution, starvation, exhaustion, and disease over the course of his 44-month rule.

After the Vietnamese took power, the communes were disbanded and family farming was reintroduced. Within six months, markets, hospitals, and schools had reopened. In the following year, the use of money and the practice of Buddhism were reinstated.<sup>19</sup> Hanoi's plans for a long-term occupation were not embraced by the long suffering Khmer people, however. Many Cambodians were disillusioned with communism and were not enthusiastic about Vietnam's intention to set up a Cambodian government similar to its own. The majority of those who were recruited to work within the Vietnamese-administered government were either former Khmer Rouge who had sought refuge in Vietnam, or Cambodian exiles who had previously left the country. Approximately 200,000 Vietnamese soldiers remained in the country to defend the government against various Cambodian insurgent groups, including the Khmer Rouge.



© Simon Watson  
Vietnam-Cambodia Friendship  
Monument

### *The Roadmap to Democracy*

In 1989, the last Vietnamese troops departed. The roadmap for Cambodia's future was laid out two years later in the Paris Peace Agreement, which all of the major Cambodian political factions signed. The agreement provided for an economic development program and competitive elections, with the costs to be underwritten by the international community. The UN-organized elections of 1993 provided the Cambodian people with the opportunity to choose from among a range of political parties.

However, the results were not decisive as no party received the two-thirds majority that was necessary to govern. Moreover, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) was unwilling to admit defeat and

<sup>18</sup> Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University. Ledgerwood, Judy. "The Khmer Rouge Period in Cambodia." No date. [http://www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/ledgerwood/khmer\\_rouge.htm](http://www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/ledgerwood/khmer_rouge.htm)

<sup>19</sup> *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*. Chandler, David P. "Chapter Nine: 'Grandfather 87,' 1979-1988 [p. 158]." 1999. Boulder: Westview Press. [http://books.google.com/books?id=6s1OZI1kTPgC&pg=PA157&lpg=PA157&dq=vietnamese+people's+republic+of+kampuchea&source=web&ots=0kkK-Yd1zP&sig=5mBrgzLxWOxQRTBssmzzVPIGwF8&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=2&ct=result#PPA158,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=6s1OZI1kTPgC&pg=PA157&lpg=PA157&dq=vietnamese+people's+republic+of+kampuchea&source=web&ots=0kkK-Yd1zP&sig=5mBrgzLxWOxQRTBssmzzVPIGwF8&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=2&ct=result#PPA158,M1)

thus refused to turn over control of the government to FUNCINPEC, the winning, royalist party. In the days after the election, the CPP's leader, Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge leader who had been part of the Vietnamese-installed government, alleged fraud in the election process. In protest, he threatened to secede and make the eastern provinces, the CPP's stronghold, into an independent state. Ultimately, a coalition government was formed in which there were two Co-Prime Ministers. Following this power-sharing arrangement, both parties were represented in a similar fashion within each of the government's ministries, a compromise that impeded the government's ability to function efficiently.

In 1997, Hun Sen successfully staged a coup that ousted his coalition partners. As the International Crisis Group observed in 2000, the legitimacy of the CPP and its leader, Hun Sen, was achieved "by marginalising [sic] political opposition, wearing down donors and diplomats, and maintaining a lock on power through the military and local government offices."<sup>20</sup> To some extent, this still holds true, as Hun Sen and the CPP have successfully maintained power through additional, often-flawed elections over the last decade—most recently in 2008.<sup>21</sup> While previous elections (in 2002 and 2003) were marred by violence, including such incidents as acid attacks, the 2008 elections experienced less conflict. However, this drop in violence was less indicative of a peaceful resolution of differences between parties than a result of the CPP's successful attempts to undermine the campaign run by the opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP).<sup>22</sup> In any case, under Hun Sen's leadership the country has achieved stability, which has, in turn, resulted in unprecedented economic growth.

## Government

Under Cambodia's traditional monarchic system, the king was elected to a lifetime appointment by "a group of notables." Elections were held periodically throughout modern Cambodian history, but their purpose was to bolster the legitimacy of the incumbent regime—not to offer citizens a choice of leadership.<sup>23</sup> The UN-brokered peace of 1991 was supposed to represent a break from the past, as, ideally, elections held every five years would serve as a means to select leadership. Once the constitution was approved in 1993, Cambodia officially became a multiparty democracy under a constitutional monarchy.



© Bart Geesink  
Campaign vehicle during the 2008 election

<sup>20</sup> International Crisis Group. Asia Report, No. 8. "Cambodia: The Elusive Peace Dividend." 11 August 2000. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1425&l=1>

<sup>21</sup> The Henry Jackson Society, Project for Democratic Geopolitics. Tylecote, Radimir. "Cambodia's Next (sic) Election: Hun Sen Steals the Show (again)." 16 October 2006. <http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org/stories.asp?id=124>

<sup>22</sup> Asia Times Online. Guthrie, Craig. "Toward Hun Sen's Cambodia." 23 July 2008. [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/JG23Ae01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/JG23Ae01.html)

<sup>23</sup> Library of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Gallup, Jeffrey. "Cambodia's Electoral System: A Window of Opportunity for Reform." 2002. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/01361003.pdf>

Since then, Cambodia's experience with voting has demonstrated that electoral violence can diminish over time, even as the outcome remains the same. In this case, the CPP, the governing party, has been able to maintain and solidify a strong hold on power. There has been no parallel institutionalization of checks and balances within the current single-party administration. Thus, balance of power is nonexistent and the judiciary has been essentially hijacked by the ruling party. Neither the National Assembly, with 123 members, nor the Senate, with 54 members, possesses the authority to overrule an executive who governs by edict.<sup>24</sup>

## Economy

The Cambodian economy is heavily reliant on tourism and manufacturing, with garments comprising the principal product of the latter industry. Foreign investment in other sectors has not been forthcoming. This is primarily due to corruption and the low level of education held by Cambodia's citizenry, which, in turn, translates into limited buying power. Most Cambodians are subsistence farmers who have few prospects for jobs in the formal sector. The problem will only grow more pressing given that 50% of the population is under the age of 20.<sup>25</sup> Oil has been discovered off the Cambodian coast in the Gulf of Thailand, but extraction will create few local jobs. Moreover, an influx of energy revenues could produce a variety of consequences, both good and bad. While on the one hand, increased wealth could be used to develop public infrastructure, it could also fuel further corruption and produce a "get-rich-quick" mentality in the commercial sector. Overall, whether the revenues are used to improve the quality of life for the majority, or simply channeled to a well-connected minority is entirely dependent on the quality and effectiveness of the Cambodian government and its rule of law.<sup>26</sup>

## Media



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Television powered a car battery

Cambodia has a vibrant media, including both public and private outlets and a thriving community of bloggers. Yet private television stations, along with the majority of Cambodia's radio stations, are owned by persons with close ties to the incumbent political party. As a result, providing pro-government coverage is seen as a means to elicit favor with the ruling party.<sup>27</sup>

Journalists who have criticized the government may be subject to legal punishment or violent retribution. In 2006, Prime Minister Hun Sen's government arrested and detained three newspaper reporters who had questioned the border treaty it had negotiated with

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<sup>24</sup> International Herald Tribune. Ear, Sophal and John A. Hall. "Cambodia's Free Press Under Fire." 27 July 2008. <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2008/07/27/opinion/edhall.php>

<sup>25</sup> Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Background Note: Cambodia." November 2008. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2732.htm>

<sup>26</sup> My Tiny World. Philadelphia Inquirer. Graham, Troy. "Oil Discovery Brings Caution for Cambodia." 15 November 2006. <http://tinyworld.wordpress.com/2006/11/15/oil-discovery-brings-caution-for-cambodia/>

<sup>27</sup> Voice of America News. Byrne, Rory. "Report Says Cambodia Media Subject to Political Pressures, Bias." 27 May 2008. <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2008-05/2008-05-27-voa7.cfm?CFID=66986815&CFTOKEN=71218323>

Vietnam. The journalists were later released after they apologized, but in other cases, which are common, the sentence has not been so lenient. Criminal defamation laws remain active and serve to reinforce the need for journalists to self-censor their work.<sup>28</sup> In January 2008, the Cambodian government set up a “quick response team” to counter stories that are critical of some aspect of official policy. Articles or reports disseminated by international groups working within Cambodia often include such material.<sup>29</sup>

## Ethnic Groups

### *Chinese*

Many ethnic Chinese Cambodians are descendents of Chinese who migrated to the kingdom several centuries ago to work as merchants. Many of these migrants were single men, and thus intermarriage rates were high. As a result, many Cambodians, whether they identify themselves as Chinese or Khmer, have mixed ancestry. The Chinese Confucian heritage emphasizes educational achievement. Cambodian Chinese traditionally sent their children to private schools to maintain this heritage.<sup>30</sup>



© remittance girl / flickr.com  
Shrine dedicated to the Chinese wisemen

### *Vietnamese*

The Vietnamese have a long history in Cambodia. Their presence in the country is partly the result of the historical shifting of borders between the two countries, as well as a longstanding trend of Vietnamese immigration, which was encouraged under French colonial rule. While concentrated in the Mekong Delta border area, ethnic Vietnamese have migrated elsewhere in search of opportunity. Khmer are distrustful of Vietnamese at best.<sup>31</sup> Anti-Vietnamese movements have occurred periodically, most notably during the rule of the Khmer Rouge, when huge numbers of Vietnamese were either killed or expelled. In recent years, anti-Vietnamese movements have been orchestrated by politicians running for public office who seek to blame the Vietnamese for current ills.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists. “Cambodia: Hun Sen Drops Criminal Defamation Charges Against Three Journalists.” 24 January 2006. <http://cpj.org/2006/01/cambodia-hun-sen-drops-criminal-defamation-charges.php>

<sup>29</sup> Asian Human Rights Commission. “CAMBODIA: The Cambodian Government Should Address Problems Rather Than Attacking People or Organisations Which Have Identified Them.” 27 February 2008. [http://209.85.173.132/search?q=cache:jj\\_Q8eK1Fc4J:www.ahrchk.net/statements/mainfile.php/2008statements/1396/+cambodia+government&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=51&gl=us](http://209.85.173.132/search?q=cache:jj_Q8eK1Fc4J:www.ahrchk.net/statements/mainfile.php/2008statements/1396/+cambodia+government&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=51&gl=us)

<sup>30</sup> Eng Marady Blog. Marady, Eng. “Education in Cambodia.” 31 October 2008. <http://engmaradypage.wordpress.com/2008/10/31/education-in-cambodia-2/>

<sup>31</sup> BBC News. “Playing the Vietnamese Card.” 25 July 1998. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special\\_report/1998/07/98/cambodia/139315.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1998/07/98/cambodia/139315.stm)

<sup>32</sup> Minorities at Risk Project, UNHCR Refworld. “Assessment for Vietnamese in Cambodia.” 31 December 2003. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,MARP,,KHM,,469f3a64c,0.html>

### *Cham*

The Cham are descendants of the Kingdom of Champa, whose capital was located in central Vietnam for several centuries, before the empire was defeated by the Vietnamese in 1471 C.E. While they engage in the same agrarian livelihood as the Khmer, they remain a separate community. As Muslims, most Cham follow their own interpretation of Islam, which only requires prayer once a week, rather than five times a day.<sup>33</sup> Intermarriage rates between Muslim



© McKay Savage  
Cham girls

Cham and Buddhist Khmer are quite low due to their differences in faith. While most Muslim societies are patrilineal, Cham society is matrilineal; upon marriage men take up residence in the home of their wives, who inherit their parents' property.<sup>34</sup> Many are poor, however, with little property to bequeath their children.

### *Phnong*

Among the numerous Khmer Loeu, or highlander tribes, are the Phnong, a group of hunters and gatherers who have long lived in harmony with nature. As animists, the Phnong consider all things, such as trees and plants, to be embodied by spirits. According to animist belief, these spirits make their feelings known by interfering in the lives of the Phnong. These actions can either bring harm to the Phnong or protect them.<sup>35</sup> To keep the spirits happy, periodic sacrifices, which may involve animals, are offered to appease them.

In recent years, the Phnong's traditional lifestyle has been affected by foreign investment projects in Cambodia. Specifically, the Phnong have protested the impact of commercial forestry operations on or near their lands. These operations have been conducted by a Chinese firm that received land concessions from the Cambodian government.<sup>36</sup> The government did not consult the Phnong when negotiating the agreement, however. The forestry operations have significantly affected the local environment and the Phnong community, particularly through the destruction of farmlands and sacred sites.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Tales of Asia. Graceffo, Antonio. "Cham Muslims: A Look at Cambodia's Muslim Minority." <http://www.talesofasia.com/rs-50-cham.htm>

<sup>34</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Cambodia: A Country Study*. Ross, Russell R., ed. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Social Structure and Organization: Other Ethnic Groups: The Cham." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/cambodia/43.htm>

<sup>35</sup> Elephants Livelihood Initiative Environment. "About the Phnong." No date. <http://elie-cambodia.org/eliophonong.html>

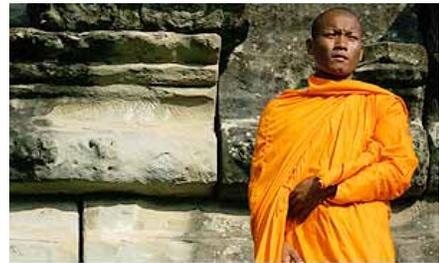
<sup>36</sup> BBC News. "Cambodia Police Ban Phnong March." 7 July 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4659615.stm>

<sup>37</sup> Amnesty International. "Cambodia: Ignoring the Rights of Indigenous People." June 2008. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGASA230082008>

## Chapter 2 Religion

### Introduction

Theravada Buddhism displaced Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism as the dominant belief system in Cambodia in the 13th century.<sup>38</sup> Today, it is the country's official religion. Buddhism has always been much more than a faith, however. It is a philosophy that governs all aspects of life, whether social or metaphysical. The social value of the religion is especially evident at the village level. Historically, Buddhist monks were the only rural residents with an education. Thus, in addition to providing a sacred space for religious practice, Buddhist temples (*wat*) also provided schooling and other social services to the local community. In this way, over time, Buddhism became intricately tied to daily Cambodian life and Khmer identity and custom.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the ancient practice of animistic spirit worship also remained prevalent; today it continues to play an important role in daily life.



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Monk in Angkor

### Theravada Buddhism

All Buddhists accept Buddha as the founder of their religion; the Theravada school practiced by the Khmer emphasizes his humanity. Buddha was a mortal human being who found his way to enlightenment (*nirvana*), and due to his innate kindness and compassion, he shared his insights with others. This knowledge is known as the *dhamma*, or Buddha's teachings, which are embodied in the Eight-Fold Path. Through meditation and the faithful observance of a set of ethical guidelines, the Buddha's path is meant to help individuals transcend their attachments to ego and desire, which, for the Buddha, are at the root of all suffering.

Many Buddhists accept that upon death, a person's soul returns in a different body through the process of rebirth. Accrued during a person's present life, as well as his or her past lives, a person's karma determines what position in the hierarchy of living creatures she or he will occupy in the next incarnation. The only way to be released from the cycle of death and rebirth is to achieve enlightenment. Toward this end, an individual's karma can be improved through certain acts and abstentions. Specifically, by practicing five noble precepts, a Buddhist can improve his or her karma. These precepts prohibit lying, stealing, killing, illicit sexual relations, and intoxication.

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<sup>38</sup> Windows on Asia. Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University. "Religion in Cambodia." No date. <http://asia.msu.edu/seasia/Cambodia/religion.html>

<sup>39</sup> Conciliation Resources. Khemacaro, Yos Hut. "Steering the Middle Path: Buddhism, Non-violence and Political Change in Cambodia." November 1998. <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/cambodia/middle-path.php>

The best way to improve one's karma, however, is by accruing merit. Any act of benevolence or generosity can help a person gain merit. Contributions to the monastic community (*sangha*), which can take the form of money, goods, labor, or monastic-related activities, offer the potential for the greatest return. Children typically tend a temple's vegetable garden and fruit trees. A rite of passage for males is to enter the monastery for some period during youth. In doing so, a young man accrues merit not only for himself but for his parents as well, particularly for his mother. This is seen as a way for young men to demonstrate gratitude for all the sacrifices that their mothers have made on their behalf.<sup>40</sup> Females can become nuns, although their range of responsibilities is more limited and is reflected in a lower social status.



© thaths / flickr.com  
A woman receives blessings for alms given

Contributing food to a *wat*, where meals are taken only in the morning and at midday, is another important method of gaining merit. This can be done by simply presenting prepared food to a senior monk, or by placing offerings in the alms bowls of young monks who silently make their rounds to beg for sustenance every morning.<sup>41</sup>

### **Influence of Religion on Daily Life**

Daily life is deeply influenced by a belief in spirits. These spirits include both guardians and *kmoch* (ghosts), who make their presence felt through inexplicable sounds or events.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, according to ancient animist beliefs, *neak ta* are earth spirits who embody the spiritual connection between the local villagers, the fertility of their lands, and the forebears who farmed the land before them.<sup>43</sup> These spirits are thought to live in objects like trees and mounds of soil. Khmer have developed a patron-client relationship with the *neak ta*. For their part, Khmer give the spirits offerings of food and incense, which are placed in spirit houses or huts. These special sites dot the landscape and may be found inside *wat* as well.<sup>44</sup> In return, the *neak ta*, who are believed to be endowed with supernatural qualities, are said to protect them.<sup>45</sup> Failure to placate the spirits is believed to result in bad fortune.

<sup>40</sup> All Academic. American Sociological Association. Lee, Susan H. "Gender and Prestige in Khmer Buddhism." 11 August 2007.

[http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/1/8/3/2/3/pages183237/p183237-1.php](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/8/3/2/3/pages183237/p183237-1.php)

<sup>41</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Cambodia: A Country Study*. Ross, Russell R., ed. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Religion: Buddhism: Origins of Buddhism on the Indian Subcontinent." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/cambodia/48.htm>

<sup>42</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Cambodia: A Country Study*. Ross, Russell R., ed. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Religion: Buddhism: Role of Buddhism in Cambodian Life." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/cambodia/48.htm>

<sup>43</sup> Andy's Cambodia. Brouwer, Andy. "What is Neak Ta?" 12 April 2008.

<http://www.andybrouwer.co.uk/blog/2008/04/what-is-neak-ta.html>

<sup>44</sup> AsiaRooms.com. "Travel Info Cambodia: Buddhism in Cambodian Life." December 2008.

[http://www.asiarooms.com/cambodia-travel-guide/cambodia\\_buddhism.html](http://www.asiarooms.com/cambodia-travel-guide/cambodia_buddhism.html)

<sup>45</sup> *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*. Hinton, Alexander Laban. "Chapter Two: Power, Patronage, and Suspicion [pp. 106–107]." 2005. Berkeley: University of California Press. <http://books.google.com/books?id=3fTppIDU1A4C&pg=RA1-PA106&lpg=RA1-PA106&dq=neak->

The recuperative power that lay people ascribe to the *dhamma* if they run afoul of the spirit world is reflected by the ability of monks to use magic and incantations to heal an afflicted person or exorcise the spirits that have taken root in his or her body. As a result, monks, who embody the meritorious life, are treated with great respect.

## Religion and Government

In the past, Buddhism conferred legitimacy upon the Cambodian monarch. The king was regarded as “one who has merits” (*neak mean bon*), a notion that reflects the importance of karma. Once enthroned, however, his prerogatives were not easily challenged. In effect, the *sangha* had to accommodate itself to the imperial court.<sup>46</sup> In the absence of an educated class, however, the monastic community was the sole organization in a position



© Frederic Poirot  
Angkor, Cambodia

to rally opposition to the government. For this reason, the French colonial leadership was perceptive enough to realize that cultivating the *sangha* was smarter than alienating it.<sup>47</sup> By contrast, the Khmer Rouge was determined to obliterate the role of Buddhism in Khmer society. Monks, who were viewed as leeches living off the labor of others, were simply defrocked and, most often, executed. The elimination of the village *wat* was part of the Khmer Rouge’s plan to remake peasant society into a rural utopia.

Buddhism’s emphasis on karma, which encourages the acceptance of inequalities and the hierarchical stratification of society, was also objectionable to the Khmer Rouge.<sup>48</sup>

Ironically, it was the radical regime’s inability to stamp out this ingrained philosophy that enabled many Cambodians who survived the regime’s rule to move on without anger. As a survivor and mother of twelve children, nine of whom died along with their father, explained, “I do not hate the Khmer Rouge. Such was our karma.”<sup>49</sup>

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ta&source=bl&ots=HWjIX0gAwY&sig=RiKhU70j6WyImbxiZf9HiqGQ\_m8&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\_result&resnum=5&ct=result

<sup>46</sup> National Thai Studies Centre, Australian National University. Stuart-Fox, Martin. “Buddhism and Politics in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand.” 30 January 2006. <http://www.anu.edu.au/thaionline/BUDDHISM%20AND%20POLITICS%20IN%20SOUTHEAST%20ASIA.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*. Marston, John Amos and Elizabeth Guthrie, eds. Hanson, Anne. “Chapter Two: Khmer Identity and Theravada Buddhism [pp. 48–52].” 2004. Honolulu: University of Hawaii. [http://books.google.com/books?id=o\\_rci-bX5xcC&printsec=frontcover#PPA52,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=o_rci-bX5xcC&printsec=frontcover#PPA52,M1)

<sup>48</sup> *Cambodia Buddhism: History and Practice*. Harris, Ian. “Chapter Seven: Liberation: The Religious-Political Dimension [p. 163].” 2005. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>49</sup> *Cambodia, 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death*. Jackson, Karl D., ed. Ponchaud, Francois. “Chapter Five: Social Change in the Vortex of Revolution [p. 172].” 1992. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [http://books.google.com/books?id=h27D3EYGwzG&pg=PA171&lpg=PA171&dq=karma+cambodia&source=web&ots=Vde-1XNk0E&sig=7FeA9-UzVNykDXnv7YD-cFccmRs&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=1&ct=result](http://books.google.com/books?id=h27D3EYGwzG&pg=PA171&lpg=PA171&dq=karma+cambodia&source=web&ots=Vde-1XNk0E&sig=7FeA9-UzVNykDXnv7YD-cFccmRs&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result)

## Rebuilding Cambodia's Monastic Community

The quality and standards of the Cambodian *sangha* remain low due to the loss of an entire generation of senior monks under the Khmer Rouge; the monastic community was reduced from an estimated 40,000–60,000 to 800–1,000 over a 44-month period.<sup>50</sup> This extensive purge of monks left few experienced teachers to train the next generation. According to one source, “In the 1990s, only some 20% of monks, the bulk of whom [were] under 25 years of age, received formal religious training, mainly from lay teachers whose qualifications tended to be rudimentary.”<sup>51</sup>

The first secondary school for monks re-opened in 1993. In 1997, Preah Sihanouk Raj Buddhist University also re-opened. The university's curriculum emphasizes meditative concentration and intensive study of the Buddhist scriptures (*sutras*) as part of its training program. Yet very few graduates of Buddhist educational institutions opt to pursue a life in the monastery. Instead, they often leave for further study in cutting-edge fields such as information technology, accounting, and English in order to prepare for employment in secular life. The prevalence of recruits for whom the monastic life does not prove to be the path to enlightenment is evident in frequent reports of poor discipline and criminal conduct among the young brotherhood. Newspapers regularly carry stories of monks who have been accused of sexual assault or other crimes.<sup>52</sup>



© Florian Knorn  
Monks

## Behavior in Places of Worship

Buddha felt that it was difficult to avoid desire while leading the life of a lay person. To forsake worldly goods, he took up residence in a monastery, which also serves as a temple. Temples are easy to recognize, as they are characterized by pitched golden roofs with pointed corners. Monks are identifiable by their shaved heads and orange robes. They live in the outer buildings around the temple hall. Lay devotees often wear a white sash or arm band.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Death by Government*. Rummel, R.J. “2,035,000 Murdered: The Hell State: Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge [p. 187].” 1997. New Jersey: Transaction Books.  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=N1j1QdPMockC&pg=PA187&lpg=PA187&dq=60,000+monks+died+khmer+rouge&source=web&ots=0od0xaM5ix&sig=oyvyuTq06zdPVKSdaEehQdl0bA0&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=4&ct=result](http://books.google.com/books?id=N1j1QdPMockC&pg=PA187&lpg=PA187&dq=60,000+monks+died+khmer+rouge&source=web&ots=0od0xaM5ix&sig=oyvyuTq06zdPVKSdaEehQdl0bA0&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result)

<sup>51</sup> Khmer-Buddhist Educational Assistance Project. “Buddhism in Cambodia.” 24 February 2008.  
[http://www.keap-net.org/buddhism\\_cambodia.htm](http://www.keap-net.org/buddhism_cambodia.htm)

<sup>52</sup> Telegraph. Bell, Thomas. “Buddhist Monk ‘Confesses’ to Rape of British Tourist.” 20 November 2008.  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/cambodia/3482682/Buddhist-monk-confesses-to-rape-of-British-tourist.html>

<sup>53</sup> Buddhist Studies. Buddha Dharma Education Association and BuddhaNet. “Buddhism in Cambodia.” c.2008. <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/cambodia-txt.htm>

**Exchange 1: May I enter the temple?**

|          |                         |  |
|----------|-------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | May I enter the temple? | kinyom aach jol preaH wee hee a baan dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                    | baat, baan                                 |

The center of Buddhist life is the temple, and it is treated as a place of reverence by Cambodians. All *wat* are open to visitors, who must remove their shoes before entering the temple hall. Visitors should also avoid wearing dirty clothing, scanty attire, or revealing outfits, as such types of dress are considered profane and disrespectful.



© Taiger808 / flickr.com  
A statue of Buddha in a temple

**Exchange 2: Must I take off my shoes inside the temple?**

|          |   |  |
|----------|---|--|
| Soldier: | Must I take off my shoes inside the temple? | dtaW kinyom dtrov doH sbaay ek jUhg bayl jol pray aH wee hee a dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.  | baat   |

Monks, if not busy with other duties, will serve as tour guides, and they are often eager to practice their English.<sup>54</sup> They are also often amenable to providing visitors with the traditional blessing for safe travel, and it is appropriate to make a donation to the temple in exchange for such a blessing. Donation boxes are evident in prayer areas.

**Exchange 3: When do you pray?**

|          |                   |                          |
|----------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Soldier: | When do you pray? | bayl naa nay uk som sal? |
| Local:   | We pray at noon.  | yUhg som sal ma ona mooy |

Inside the temple, monks sit on a platform or on a pillow or folded blanket to symbolize their status in comparison to lay worshippers. Visitors who sit down in the lotus position should take care that the soles of their feet, which should be tucked in, face away from the monk, not toward him.

**Exchange 4: Do I need to cover my head?**

|          |                             |   |
|----------|-----------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Do I need to cover my head? | taW Khignom trov grorp kbaal kinyom dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                        | baat                                      |

<sup>54</sup> Jaunted. Patterson, Tim. "Embedded Travel Guide Cambodia: Temple Time." 28 August 2008. <http://www.jaunted.com/story/2008/8/28/75852/2816/travel/Embedded+Travel+Guide+Cambodia:+Temple+Time>



© tajai / flickr.com  
Prayers in a temple

In the past, when a member of the *sangha* was seated, it was not uncommon for a lay person to drop to a crouch when passing him so that the monk's head would be at a higher position. For Buddhists, the head is the highest, most sacred part of the body and, thus, it should not be touched. Conversely, as the feet are the lowest part of the body, they should never be pointed toward a Buddhist statue. Furthermore, women are not allowed to touch monks, as to do so would harm their sanctity. If a female wants to make an offering or contribution to a monk, they should place the gift within the monk's reach rather than passing it directly to him.<sup>55</sup> This protocol is so strictly observed that it even applies to the monk's mother.

## Religious Holidays

### *Meak Bochea Day*

This Buddhist ceremony is held on the day of the full moon of the third lunar month, which generally occurs during the last week of February or in early March. The holiday commemorates the historic, spontaneous gathering of 1,250 monks to listen to a speech given by the Buddha. In honor of this event, monks from each Cambodian temple lead hundreds of people in a candlelit procession throughout the compound.

### *Buddha's Birthday (Visaka Bochea)*

Traditionally falling on a full moon in May, Buddha's birthday is a time of festive celebration at every temple. Monks read sermons to commemorate Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death.

### *Buddhist Lent (Chol Vossa)*

Not a publicly observed holiday, *chol vossa* begins in June or July, depending upon the start of the rainy season, with which it corresponds.<sup>56</sup> This day signals the beginning of a period of spiritual reflection during which monks remain sequestered within their *wat*. The *kathen*, usually occurring in September, signals the end of this season. At this time, it is customary for lay people to offer gifts or contributions—especially of new robes—to the monks.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ethnomed.org. Harborview Medical Center, University of Washington. Mony, Keo. "General Etiquette in Cambodian Society." January 2004. <http://ethnomed.org/cultures/cambodian/etiquette.html>

<sup>56</sup> Windows on Asia, Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University. "Religion in Cambodia." No date. <http://asia.msu.edu/seasia/Cambodia/religion.html>

<sup>57</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Ross, Russell R., ed. *Cambodia: A Country Study*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Religion: Buddhism: Role of Buddhism in Cambodian Life." 1987. <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-2136.html>

*Festival of the Ancestors (Phchum Ben)*

This ancient, 15-day commemoration typically occurs in September. The festival begins on the last day of the waning moon. At this time, the spirits of the deceased who have not been reincarnated are allowed out of the netherworld in order to seek help from their living descendants. To respond to their requests, lay people present monks with food and paper money as a means of reducing the bad karma that has obstructed these souls and spirits from being reborn. According to lore, the spirits will look in seven different *wat* for offerings. If they fail to locate offerings made specifically for them, they will curse their descendants since they cannot eat food left for others. Failure to provide assistance would be a sign of extreme disrespect—one that would invite retribution. On the final day, prayer is followed by a great feast.<sup>58</sup>



© Erik Davis  
Food for the souls of ancestors

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<sup>58</sup> Chicago Reader. Sula, Mike. "A Potluck with the Spirits." 25 September 2008. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/features/stories/restaurants/080925/>

## Chapter 3 Traditions

### Introduction

The Khmer are proud descendants of a people who once ruled much of Southeast Asia. Their dominance in the region came at a time when they claimed a technologically advanced civilization. Evidence of this past is found throughout the country, most notably in the form of towering temples and majestic statues—a legacy best represented by the impressive temple complex at Angkor. Today, Cambodia remains a predominantly agrarian society, as it has been for centuries. In general, the rhythm of rural life determines the standards of good social conduct. For example, in accordance with the agrarian lifestyle, one should wake up to start the day before sunrise or risk being viewed as lazy. In addition, as most Khmer are Theravada Buddhists, many of Cambodia’s social values and traditions are dictated by religious belief.



© Beth Kanter / Cambodia4kids.org  
Khmer women working in the fields

### Formulaic Codes of Politeness

Cambodians typically greet each other by pressing their hands together in a prayer position and bowing their heads slightly, a routine known as *som pas*. The person of lower social status customarily initiates the greeting.

#### Exchange 5: Good morning.

|          |               |                  |
|----------|---------------|------------------|
| Soldier: | Good morning. | a'run soo a sday |
| Local:   | Good morning. | a'run soo a sday |

Cambodians demonstrate variations in the *som pas* routine depending upon the social status of the person that they greet. As a general rule, people of higher social status should be greeted with higher hand placement and a lower bow. Specifically, to greet the average person or a person of the same social status, one’s hands should be placed at chest level; when greeting older or more revered people, one’s hands should be placed at nose level.<sup>59</sup>

#### Exchange 6: Good afternoon.

|          |                 |            |
|----------|-----------------|------------|
| Soldier: | Good afternoon. | soo a sday |
| Local:   | Good afternoon. | soo a sday |

As they conduct the *som pas*, Khmer will say *choum reap sur* (Hello). They perform the *som pas* again when departing, at which time they say *choum reap lir* (Goodbye).

<sup>59</sup> Tippiny Blog at Mulipty.com. Review of *Do’s and Don’ts in Cambodia*, by David Hill. 26 February 2008. <http://tippiny.multiply.com/reviews/item/21>

**Exchange 7: Good evening!**

|          |               |                       |
|----------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Soldier: | Good evening! | saa yo un soo a sday! |
| Local:   | Good evening! | saa yo un soo a sday! |

Unless you are a monk, it is inappropriate to not reciprocate a *som pas* gesture, just as it is rude to turn away from an extended hand in the West. Cambodian men may also shake hands when greeting. Women, however, usually adhere to the traditional *som pas* greeting. In general, they do so out of modesty, which also requires them to minimize eye contact. Cambodians are not accustomed to social touching, especially with persons of the opposite sex.<sup>60</sup>

**Exchange 8: Good night!**

|          |             |                         |
|----------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Soldier: | Good night! | ree a dtray soo a sday! |
| Local:   | Good night! | ree a dtray soo a sday! |



© Feng Chung  
A bride greets guests at her wedding

The respective titles of *Lok* (Mr.) and *Lok Srey* (Mrs.) are used when greeting Cambodians in formal situations; they may also be used to demonstrate respect. The title precedes the person's given name, not the family name. Cambodian names are rendered with the surname, or family name, first, followed by the given name. Middle names are not used. If the name is Kim Chenda, for example, Kim is the family name and Chenda is the given name. Therefore, she should be formally addressed as Lok Srey Chenda. Since the surname belongs to an entire family, it is seldom used alone to address an individual.

**Exchange 9: Hi, Mr. Sok.**

|          |                     |                              |
|----------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Hello Mr. Sok.      | jum ree ap soo a lok sok     |
| Local:   | Hello!              | jum ree ap soo a!            |
| Soldier: | Are you doing well? | lok sok sob baay jee a dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                | baat                         |

The Khmer language reflects the culture's highly refined set of social relations based on kinship ties, age, and social status.<sup>61</sup> In informal circumstances, Cambodians use specific terms of address to speak to their elders. For example, the term *Ta* (grandfather) is used by younger generations to address elderly men. Depending upon one's age, the terms *Po*

<sup>60</sup> Ethnomed.org. Harborview Medical Center, University of Washington, Mony, Keo. "General Etiquette in Cambodian Society." January 2004. <http://ethnomed.org/cultures/cambodian/etiquette.html>

<sup>61</sup> *Culture and Development: A Critical Introduction*. Schech, Susanne and Jane Haggis. "Chapter Two: Bringing Culture and Development Together: Third World Models of Development [p. 47]." 2000. New York: Blackwell.  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=jbBJhKMKPagC&dq=Cultural+and+Development:+A+Critical+Introduction&pg=PP1&ots=FdCrowPi\\_p&source=bn&sig=r-VPF7sVNa0\\_t1bTklPwv8ZgRA&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=5&ct=result](http://books.google.com/books?id=jbBJhKMKPagC&dq=Cultural+and+Development:+A+Critical+Introduction&pg=PP1&ots=FdCrowPi_p&source=bn&sig=r-VPF7sVNa0_t1bTklPwv8ZgRA&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=5&ct=result)

(uncle) or *Bang* (brother) are used to address elder men of other generations. Likewise, elderly women are addressed as *Yeay* (grandmother), while the terms *Ming* (aunt) or *Bang Srey* (sister) are used in other circumstances. For example, if Kim Chenda is in her twenties or thirties, a teenage girl may refer to her as *Bang Srey Chenda* or *Ming Chenda*. If Chenda is old, she will be addressed as *Yeay Chenda*. In cases in which a person is unsure of another person's age, these terms are still used in order to respect the possibility that that person may be older.

**Exchange 10: How is your family?**

|          |                                 |                                      |
|----------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | How is your family?             | grou a saa sok sob baay jee a dtay?  |
| Local:   | They are doing fine, thank you. | gay sok sob baay jee a dtay, or goon |

It is considered rude for a younger person to address an elder person without using a title. Given names can only be used alone when addressing someone who is the same age or younger.

**Exchange 11: How are you?**

|          |                  |                               |
|----------|------------------|-------------------------------|
| Soldier: | How are you?     | sok sob baay jee a dtay?      |
| Local:   | Fine, very well. | baat, sok sob baay jee a dtay |

Khmer frequently ask others, “Where have you been?” or “Where are you going?” While such questions may seem overly invasive to Westerners, these queries are intended to demonstrate concern for the other person. One can answer vaguely to avoid embarrassment.

**Dress Codes**

In general, Khmer are a modest people who typically wear cotton-made clothing, except for the wealthy, who can afford silk garments. In any case, the body should be covered down to at least the knees. Men should never go bare-chested in public. Women should not wear tank tops or other tight fitting or skimpy attire that leaves their arms bare.

**Exchange 12: How should I dress?**

|          |   |  |
|----------|---|--|
| Soldier: | How should I dress?                               | kinyom goo a slee uk pay uk yaang mayeh?   |
| Local:   | Wear loose fitting clothes which cover your body. | slee uk pay uk ka o aav dtoo lee ay dtoo lee ay dail group kloo an dtay ung mool |

A Khmer *krama*, a large checked scarf, can be tied around the neck or head as protection from the sun or dust. Cambodians, who use the *krama* for many purposes, will see it as a sign of respect for their culture.

**Exchange 13: Is this acceptable to wear?**

|          |                             |                                    |
|----------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is this acceptable to wear? | aa nih som room neung pee uk dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                        | baan                               |

## Hospitality

Visitors must remove their shoes before entering a Khmer home. Guests are served a drink no matter how brief their visit may be. Conversation should be kept social. Those who arrive during a meal will receive an invitation to join the family.

### Exchange 14: I really appreciate your hospitality.

|          |                                       |  |
|----------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | I really appreciate your hospitality. | kinyom pen jet mairn tairn neung<br>son taa ra' kech ro boh nay uk |
| Local:   | It is nothing.                        | min ay dtay  |

Food is served on a raised table or on a cloth on the floor. Family members, often attired in sarongs, sit with their feet tucked to one side while eating. Visitors should wait to be directed where to sit by the host.<sup>62</sup> According to Khmer custom, the oldest person is seated first and is the first to begin his or her meal. Visitors should use the communal utensils, which usually consist of either a spoon or a fork, to serve themselves. To do otherwise signifies that they do not consider themselves to be part of the group.

A standard meal in Cambodia consists of rice, a fish entree, and a bowl of soup (*samlor*), all of which are served together. Rice is a staple of the Khmer diet. As a matter of longstanding cultural tradition, Cambodians psychologically need to eat rice with every meal, even though the carbohydrates that it provides are available from other sources. In Khmer, the words “to eat” (*nam bai*) literally mean “to eat rice.”



© michelhrv / flickr.com  
A family shares lunch

### Exchange 15: What is the name of this dish?

|          |                                |                             |
|----------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Soldier: | What is the name of this dish? | ma hop niH chmoo aH ay?     |
| Local:   | This is <i>samlor korko</i> .  | niH jee a som lor gor go oo |

Fresh water fish is the primary source of protein in the Cambodian diet. Giant catfish come from the Mekong River, while smaller catch comes from Tonlé Sap Lake. Most Khmer generally eat fish at least once a day.<sup>63</sup> *Amoc*, a signature fish dish, includes coconut, lemongrass, and chili, all of which are wrapped up and steam cooked together in a banana leaf.

<sup>62</sup> Kwinessential Cross Cultural Solutions. “Cambodia: Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette.” No date. <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/cambodia.html>

<sup>63</sup> Sihanoukville, Cambodia. “Traditional Khmer Cuisine.” c.2008. <http://www.sihanoukville-cambodia.com/about-sihanoukville/RestaurantsBars/traditionalkhmer.html>

**Exchange 16:** What ingredients are used to make spiced beef on skewer?

|          |  |   |
|----------|--|---|
| Soldier: | What ingredients are used to make spiced beef on skewer?   | sai go a jung guk duk ay ka laH?  |
| Local:   | Thinly sliced beef, marinated in the mixture of garlic, shallot, kafir leaves, fish sauce and sugar. | sai go han sdaWng sdaWng, pror luk kteum sor, kteum grorhorm, sleuk groach saWch, dteuk dtray, sgor |

Most Cambodian dishes are cooked in a wok (*chhnang khteak*). Preparation is often labor intensive because every ingredient needs to be fresh.<sup>64</sup> As a result, it is important to show appreciation for the family's efforts.



© Andrew Dinh  
Fish amok with rice

**Exchange 17:** The food tastes so good.

|          |                          |                           |
|----------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Soldier: | The food tastes so good. | ma hop chngun mairn tairn |
| Local:   | Thank you.               | or goon                   |

It is rude to refuse food. When finished, visitors should align their chopsticks across their plate or bowl; they should never leave them sticking up out of the dish, as this is reminiscent of the incense placed on ancestral altars to honor the dead.

**Gift Giving**

It is appropriate to bring a gift when invited to someone's home. Objects are extended to the recipient with the right hand. Those presenting a gift in formal situations should offer it with both hands, using the right hand to pass the object and the left to slightly touch it. The recipient will use both hands to receive it.<sup>65</sup>

**Exchange 18:** This gift is for you.

|          |                       |                         |
|----------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Soldier: | This gift is for you. | om na o ee niH joon lok |
| Local:   | I cannot accept this. | o kon                   |

Gifts should not be wrapped in white paper, since white is the color of mourning in Cambodia; colored paper should be used instead. The recipient will not open a gift in the presence of the person who offered it. Gratitude is typically conveyed non-verbally by Cambodians; a smile is considered sufficient.

<sup>64</sup> The Boston Globe. Arnett, Alison. "The Blooming of Cambodian Cuisine." 12 November 2003. [http://www.boston.com/ae/food/articles/2003/11/12/the\\_blooming\\_of\\_cambodian\\_cuisine/](http://www.boston.com/ae/food/articles/2003/11/12/the_blooming_of_cambodian_cuisine/)

<sup>65</sup> Angkor Hospital for Children. "Volunteer > the Culture." 2007. [http://angkorhospital.org/help\\_vol\\_ahcculture.php](http://angkorhospital.org/help_vol_ahcculture.php)

## Weddings

Khmer weddings are generally held during the monsoon seasons, and they traditionally last three days and three nights. Three is a lucky number since it is the sum of the three major elements of Buddhism: the Buddha himself, the *sangha* (monastic community), and the *dhamma* (Buddha's teachings). Over the course of the three days, the bride may change into many different outfits.

The first day includes a private ceremony at a Buddhist temple. Only close family members and friends are present for this event. On the second day, the festivities begin. The groom, clad in traditional attire, walks to the bride's home with a noisy entourage. The group carries several trays of presents, including fruit platters, to give to the bride's family. Wealthy families may deliver as many as 200 trays; poorer ones generally provide no more than ten.

The precise number is counted by the *mai ba*, who represents the bride's family. If found to be sufficient, the *mai ba* and her counterpart, the *ma ha*, the representative of the groom's party, lead the group into the home, where the bride and her parents are waiting to receive them.<sup>66</sup> Everyone then enjoys a breakfast, at which the bride and groom entertain the guests by feeding each other.



© Aida Rahman  
The groom's family goes to the bride's home

### Exchange 19: Congratulations on your wedding!

|          |                                  |   |
|----------|----------------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Congratulations on your wedding! | som orp or neung moo ung goo ul<br>kaa nay uk!          |
| Local:   | We are honored you could attend. | yUhng mee un ket tay yoo uh naH<br>dail nay uk mok baan |

Afterwards, the hair cutting, or cleansing, ceremony takes place; it is accompanied by music. In contrast to the past, the ritual of cutting the hair is now only done symbolically. The couple change into traditional gold and yellow outfits and sit on decorated chairs. Rings are placed in their hair. Members of the families are called upon, usually in order of seniority, to take turns symbolically cutting the hair. In doing so, they retrieve the gold rings, which symbolize prosperity.

Later in the day, the bride, clad in a traditional red dress, washes the feet of the groom. Today, this rite is performed in a symbolic fashion in which she sprays cologne on the feet, rather than washing them with water. Afterwards, in a pairing ceremony, the couple places their hands on a pillow, and a sword is placed across their hands. The parents then tie the couple's left hands with red ribbon and sprinkle water over them. At this point, the union is solemnized. Members of the party wish the couple well, and a monk lights three candles to be passed between the married couples that are seated close to the bride and

<sup>66</sup> Expat Advisory Services. Garnett, Justin. "Khmer Wedding Protocol." c.2007–2008. <http://www.expat-advisory.com/cambodia/phnom-penh/khmer-wedding-protocol.php>

groom. Each couple puts their hands through the flame as those who are seated farther away cheer. This ceremony is concluded with the monk and the wedding guests sprinkling flower petals over the newlyweds.

**Exchange 20:** I wish you both happiness.

|          |                            |  |
|----------|----------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | I wish you both happiness. | kinyom som joon por nay uk dtay<br>ung pee a ee baan sai sak day sok |
| Local:   | We are honored.            | yUhg mee un ket tay yoo uh naH                                       |

After the ceremony, there is a big feast, which continues late into the night. On the third day, the couple puts on their best clothes and has their pictures taken by a photographer.<sup>67</sup>

**Funerals**

Typically, a monk or several monks are called upon to bless persons who are gravely ill or near death. Their prayers are intended to chase away whatever bad spirit has taken root in the body, which would, in turn, enable the ailing person to recover. If recovery is not possible, a monk remains close by in order to ready the dying person for his or her journey into the next life. The monk must be present at the time and place of death, as he needs to address the soul when it exits the body. At this time, Khmer believe that the soul is in a state of agitation and uncertainty. The monk’s presence is thought to help calm the soul before it departs.<sup>68</sup>

**Exchange 21:** I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.

|          |   |   |
|----------|---|---|
| Soldier: | I would like to give my condolences to you and your family. | kinyom som jol roo um mor runna'<br>dtook jee a moo ay nay uk neung<br>kroo a saa porng |
| Local:   | Thank you.  | or goon   |

Afterwards, the corpse is cleaned, dressed, and put into a coffin by family members. Flowers and a photo of the person are placed on top of it. Any dissections of the body, including the removal of organs, are not allowed as such practices are thought to affect the deceased’s rebirth. The body is traditionally kept in the house for seven days prior to cremation, although a period of three days is more common today. During this time, monks visit the home on a nightly basis in order to say additional prayers for the deceased. On the final day of this period, the body is carried to the temple by a funeral procession, which includes monks, members of the family, and other mourners. At the temple, the body is cremated. If the deceased person was well-known or of high social status, the entire community will be in attendance.



© Nice Logo / flickr.com  
Funeral procession in  
Battambang

<sup>67</sup> Things Asian. Cheong, Doreen. “A Cambodian Wedding.” 1 November 2002. <http://www.thingsasian.com/stories-photos/2123>

<sup>68</sup> Ethnomed.org. Harborview Medical Center, University of Washington, Mony, Keo. “Death in Cambodian Buddhist Culture.” 2004. [http://ethnomed.org/cultures/cambodian/camb\\_death.htm](http://ethnomed.org/cultures/cambodian/camb_death.htm)

**Exchange 22:** Please be strong.

|          |                   |                            |
|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| Soldier: | Please be strong. | som nou a ee mow um moo un |
| Local:   | We will try.      | yUhng neung kom preung     |

As part of the mourning process, it is customary for the spouse and the children of the deceased to shave their heads and don white clothing, the color of bones. After the cremation ceremony, the ashes and bone remnants are collected and either stored in the temple or taken home by the family.<sup>69</sup>

**Non-religious Holidays**

Cambodia has approximately 25 yearly national holidays. Among the most important non-religious ones are:

*Khmer New Year*

The Khmer New Year takes place for three days in mid April, near the end of the dry season. The precise date and time of the event is determined by calculating when the new astrological animal protector arrives. This is done in accordance with the same astrological animal cycle that is used in other Asian countries that celebrate the lunar New Year, even though the timing of the holiday is different in Cambodia.

**Exchange 23:** Will you be celebrating New Year?

|          |                                   |  |
|----------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Will you be celebrating New Year? | nay uk neung twUh bon joal chnum mai dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes!                              | baat!                                      |

Cambodians devote the first half of April to preparation for the New Year. This process includes cleaning and decorating their houses and preparing fruit drinks for the angels that will act as guardians for that year. Each of the holiday's three days has specific rituals. On the first day (*moha sangkran*), people visit temples to offer food to the monks. On the second day (*wanabot*), gifts are presented to older family members. Clothes are also donated to the poor as a method of gaining merit. The third day (*leung sakk*) is spent at the temple, asking for forgiveness for sins committed during the previous year. Buddha statues are bathed in the evening with scented water in a ceremony called *Pithi Srang Preah*.<sup>70</sup> Once these rituals have been completed, fun and merriment follows.



© JustChay / flickr.com  
Festival decorations for Khmer New Year

<sup>69</sup> Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University. "Cambodian Culture." 22 June 2007. <http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/southeastasia/outreach/resources/cambodiawebunit/culture.html>

<sup>70</sup> Society for the Confluence of Festivals in India. "New Year in Cambodia." No date. <http://www.newyearfestival.com/new-year-in-cambodia.html>

### *Royal Ploughing Day*

This celebration reflects the deep connection that Khmer have with the earth. The holiday falls in May and marks the start of the rainy season. Although the event was originally officiated by the King or Queen, a representative of the monarchy now conducts the activities. He leads a pair of royal oxen three times around a square near the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. The purpose of this ancient rite is to demonstrate the King's devotion to both his subjects and the source of their livelihood, as well as to predict the size of the coming year's harvest. The latter is determined after the oxen are released from their harnesses and allowed to amble over to seven golden trays. These trays are laden with food and drink items and placed in the center of the square. If the oxen decide to eat a harvested product, it is a sign that the harvest will be good. If their interest is in a beverage product, however, it is an omen that the harvest may be poor.<sup>71</sup>



© willpohsh / flickr.com  
Boat races during the Water Festival

### *Water Festival*

The Water Festival (*Bonn Om Teuk*) is a joyous, three-day celebration that marks the beginning of the dry season. It is held in mid November and always starts on the day of the full moon. It was traditionally organized by the king and held in front of the royal palace.

As part of the festivities, up to several million people line the banks of the Tonlé Sap River in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap to watch dragon boat racing. (It is around this time that the river nears the end of its annual reversal in direction.) Many villages enter these competitions after their participants spend months in preparation; the winning team receives the king's praise.

### *Independence Day*

Cambodian National Day falls on November 9, the day the country received its independence from France in 1953. To celebrate the event, Phnom Penh is widely decorated with flags as a sign of national pride. A parade passes by the Royal Palace, and in the evening there are fireworks.

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<sup>71</sup> Crienglish.com. Lee, Michael. "Royal Ploughing Day." 6 May 2007.  
<http://english.cri.cn/4026/2007/05/06/269@223887.htm>

## **Do's and Don'ts**

Do remove your shoes before entering a temple or home.

Do return a smile with a smile.

Do ask permission before photographing people.

Do avoid touching a monk if you are female.

Do use your chin and not your finger to point.

Don't touch anyone on the head, as Buddhists consider it to be a sacred part of the body.

Don't beckon Cambodians with a "come here" finger gesture; this is considered sexually suggestive.

Don't engage in public displays of affection.

Don't sit in a position in which your feet could inadvertently point at someone.

Don't leave chopsticks sticking out of a bowl; lay them flat instead.

Don't initiate political discussions or bring up the Khmer Rouge.



© Egui\_ / flickr.com  
Traditional dress

## Chapter 4 Urban Life

### Introduction

In recent years, Cambodian cities have undergone a remarkable transformation as the country has opened its doors to tourism and foreign investment.<sup>72</sup> High-rise office buildings and luxury housing units are changing the skyline of Phnom Penh.<sup>73</sup> Yet life remains difficult for the majority of residents who struggle to make a living in the informal economy. Forced evictions in poor communities are increasingly commonplace as the value of real estate has appreciated. This trend is indicative of the flaws in the country's land tenure system, which has failed to address the mass displacement of the population that was brought about through war and the disastrous governmental policies of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>74</sup> Corruption is also a major problem. The legal system has failed to remain a disinterested party in settling land disputes, as it is common for wealthy parties to bribe government officials to pursue their interests.



© Jean-Sien Kin  
Apartment building in  
Phnom Penh

### Housing

The urban poor, many of whom migrated to the city to seek work, are often squatters who hold no title to the land where they have built their homes. As a result, when the land increases in value they are at risk of forcible eviction. This is the plight of approximately 4,000 families who live around Boeung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh. The lake has traditionally served as the capital's catchment for monsoon rains, but there are plans to fill most of it in to make room for an upscale property development. The project would require the current residents to relocate against their will.<sup>75</sup> If the development proceeds, some say it would be the largest displacement of Cambodians since the era of the Khmer Rouge, who forcibly evicted all city residents when they came to power in 1975.<sup>76</sup>

A World Bank-sponsored project to give urban squatters titles to their land failed to enable them to create a stable community where residents could take advantage of opportunities in Phnom Penh's booming economy. Instead, a series of fires and evictions resulted in their mass relocation. In exchange for signing over title to the land, residents were relocated to the outskirts of town. The land that they were forced to vacate quickly ended up in the hands of wealthy developers, while the daily cost of transportation to

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<sup>72</sup> The New York Times. Kinetz, Erika. "36 Hours in Phnom Penh." 21 September 2008. <http://travel.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/travel/21hours.html>

<sup>73</sup> International Herald Tribune. Kolesnikov-Jessop, Sonia. "Openness to Trade is Transforming Cambodia's Capital." 4 September 2008. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/09/04/properties/rephnom.php>

<sup>74</sup> Inter Press Service. Nette, Andrew. "Rights-Cambodia: Property Boom Forces Evictions of Urban Poor." 4 April 2008. <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=41856>

<sup>75</sup> Radio Free Asia. "Lake Families Fear Eviction." 6 November 2008. <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/Cambodia%20Lake%20Residents%20Protest%20Plans-10012008161537.html>

<sup>76</sup> International Herald Tribune. Mydans, Seth. "Progress for Some Means Eviction for Others in Cambodia." 17 July 2008. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/07/17/asia/cambo.php>

Phnom Penh from their new settlement exceeded what the squatters could expect to earn in the informal economy.<sup>77</sup>

### Education

While education is nominally free, parents are expected to contribute to school maintenance costs and pay for supplies, a burden that is too great for many families.

#### Exchange 24: Do your children go to school?

|          |                                |  |
|----------|--------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Do your children go to school? | go an nee uk mee un dtou saa laa dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                           | baat                                   |

For those of high school and college age, temples offer lodging to poor male youths from the countryside who are seeking an education. They are referred to as “pagoda boys.” In order to receive support, the young men simply require a letter from a local monk that describes their needs and their qualifications as students.<sup>78</sup> International NGOs have assisted in providing residential facilities for girls who wish to continue their studies beyond primary school.<sup>79</sup>



© Masaru Goto / World Bank  
Students in a classroom

Higher education in Cambodia has been privatized. This has led to complaints that low-quality instruction and widespread student cheating have made many programs into diploma mills that place few students in good-paying jobs after graduation.<sup>80</sup>

### Health Care

The Khmer Rouge regime killed most medical professionals who had not fled the country. As a result, the health care system had to be completely rebuilt after the regime was toppled in 1979.

#### Exchange 25: Is there a hospital nearby?

|          |                             |   |
|----------|-----------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Is there a hospital nearby? | mee un mun dtee pairt nou jit niH dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes, in the center of town. | baat, nou gon daal grong                |

<sup>77</sup> Slate. Gravois, John. “The De Soto Delusion.” 29 January 2005. <http://www.slate.com/id/2112792/>

<sup>78</sup> The Chronicle of Higher Education. Overland, Martha Ann. “The Pagoda Boys.” 29 June 2007. <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i43/43a04801.htm>

<sup>79</sup> OneWorld.net. Asian Development Bank. “Increasing Poor Girls’ access to Education in Cambodia Using ICTs.” 6 June 2008. <http://us.oneworld.net/places/cambodia/-/article/increasing-poor-girls-access-education-cambodia-using-icts>

<sup>80</sup> Agence France-Presse. “Cambodia’s Higher Education Dreams Confront Reality.” 5 October 2008. <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5httnNxbB029mwaA0vdmzEDUnjgDBA>

Although health care is officially free to all Cambodian citizens, fees are charged for services at all levels of the system, with money required before treatment. State salaries are low, compelling some doctors to moonlight in order to make more money.<sup>81</sup>

**Exchange 26: Is Dr. Inn in, sir?**

|          |                     |                                |
|----------|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is Dr. Inn in, sir? | lok dok dto a in nou dtay lok? |
| Local:   | No.                 | dtay                           |

The public's confidence in the qualifications of medical professionals has been undermined by the perception that they bought their diplomas.<sup>82</sup> Preventive medicine remains largely unpracticed, and Khmer often self-medicate, buying drugs of dubious quality from unlicensed providers.

**Exchange 27: Do you know what is wrong?**

|          |                            |                                  |
|----------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do you know what is wrong? | nee uk deung taa gaa ut ay dtay? |
| Local:   | No.                        | dtay                             |

**Telecommunications**

There are more cell phone subscribers than landline telephone users in Cambodia. Merchants, be they peddlers or taxi drivers, often require cell phones to conduct their business. They will usually allow customers to use them for a small fee.

**Exchange 28: May I use your phone?**

|          |                       |  |
|----------|-----------------------|--|
| Soldier: | May I use your phone? | kinyom pruH dtoo ra' sup nee uk baan dtay? |
| Local:   | Sure.                 | mee un ay                                  |

For those without cell phones, local pay phones can only be operated with phone cards, which are purchased from shops advertising Telstra or Camintel cards.

**Exchange 29: What is your telephone number?**

|          |                                |   |
|----------|--------------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | What is your telephone number? | dtoo ra' sup lok layk pon maan?   |
| Local:   | My phone number is 016 123 456 | dtoo ra' sup kinyom layk so an, moo ay, prum moo ay, moo ay, pee, baay, boo un, prum, prum moo uy |

The internet can be accessed through cell phones. However, internet usage has been hampered by a dearth of infrastructure and information technology (IT) professionals, as well as difficulties in creating a font for Khmer script.<sup>83</sup> Many early internet users

<sup>81</sup> Asian Development Bank. ADB Review. Van Zant, Eric. "Healing Cambodia's Health Care." May–June 2004. [http://www.adb.org/Documents/Periodicals/ADB\\_Review/2004/vol36\\_3/healing.asp](http://www.adb.org/Documents/Periodicals/ADB_Review/2004/vol36_3/healing.asp)

<sup>82</sup> Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University. Ledgerwood, Judy. "Essay 2: Contemporary Cambodian Society." No date. <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/khmer/Ledgerwood/cs1.htm>

<sup>83</sup> Visiting Arts Cultural Profiles Project. "Cambodia Cultural Profile: Development of the Internet in Cambodia." 3 August 2005.

[http://www.culturalprofiles.net/Cambodia/Directories/Cambodia\\_Cultural\\_Profile/-1818.html](http://www.culturalprofiles.net/Cambodia/Directories/Cambodia_Cultural_Profile/-1818.html)

accessed the web in English or French, rather than Khmer. Foreign aid and assistance from international NGOs have been used to expand internet access to Khmer speakers.<sup>84</sup>

### Transportation

Cambodia has no national airline, but a number of private carriers serve domestic routes popular with tourists.<sup>85</sup>

#### Exchange 30: Which road leads to the airport?

|          |                                  |                                       |
|----------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Which road leads to the airport? | plou naa dtou pror lee un yoo un hoH? |
| Local:   | The road heading east.           | plou dtou kang gaWt                   |

International driving licenses and permits are not recognized in Cambodia, so visitors travelling by private vehicle must hire a driver as well.

#### Exchange 31: Where can I rent a car?

|          |                         |   |
|----------|-------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Where can I rent a car? | nou ay naa kinyom aach joo ul laan moo ay baan? |
| Local:   | Downtown.               | nou psaa  |

Driving can be hazardous in Cambodia. Drivers do not always use their headlights after dark, and cattle can stray on to rural roads. Most roadside villages have residents skilled in auto repair.

#### Exchange 32: Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?

|          |                                       |   |
|----------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Is there a good auto mechanic nearby? | mee un jee ang laan poo gai nou jit niH dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                                  | baat mee un                                   |

Gas is readily available, although stations may not advertise prices.



© kernowseb / flickr.com  
Gas station in Phnom Penh

#### Exchange 33: Is there a gas station nearby?

|          |                                |                                     |
|----------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is there a gas station nearby? | mee un haang sung nou jit niH dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                           | baat mee un                         |

<sup>84</sup> The Asia Foundation. "Supporting Development in Cambodia Through Greater Access to Information." April 2005. <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/CBCIC.pdf>

<sup>85</sup> The New York Times. Arnold, Wayne. "Airline Start-up of Princely Origin; Wandering Cambodian Sees Revenue Ahead in Tourism." 18 May 2001. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E07EED9113AF93BA25756C0A9679C8B63>

The U.S. State Department advises visitors to travel in enclosed vehicles rather than on *cyclos* (pedicabs) or *moto-doob* (motorbikes), which heighten passengers' vulnerability to robbery and injury.<sup>86</sup>



© Frédéric Gloor  
An entire family rides a motor bike in Kampong Cham

**Exchange 34: Where can I get a cab?**

|          |                        |                                   |
|----------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Where can I get a cab? | kinyom rork dtuk see ay naa baan? |
| Local:   | Over there.            | nou ay nooH                       |

There are no municipal bus services in cities. Residents either rely on their own motorbikes or hire transportation on a per trip basis.

**Exchange 35: Can you take me there?**

|          |                        |   |
|----------|------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Can you take me there? | nay uk joon kinyom tou ay nooH baan dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes, I can.            | baat, baan                                |

Buses do offer service to outlying areas, however, as well as between cities. The cost of the ticket will be based on the level of comfort.

**Exchange 36: Will the bus be here soon?**

|          |                            |   |
|----------|----------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Will the bus be here soon? | laan chnoo ul mok dol chap chap niH dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                       | baat                                      |

Cambodia has only two train lines, one running from Phnom Penh to Battambang, and the other from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville. Neither train provides passenger service, although it is possible to travel in a cargo car.

**Exchange 37: Is there a train station nearby?**

|          |                                  |   |
|----------|----------------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Is there a train station nearby? | mee an gaa ror dtayH pluHng nou jit niH dtay? |
| Local:   | No.                              | ot dtay                                       |

Boats are a popular form of transport, particularly along the Mekong River and across the Tonlé Sap Lake. Types of ship and class of service vary widely. On older boats, breakdowns are frequent.

<sup>86</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State. "Cambodia: Country Specific Information." 5 June 2008. [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_1080.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1080.html)

## Currency

The Khmer Rouge abolished money when it took over the country; currency was later reintroduced by the Vietnamese in 1980. By the end of the decade, Cambodia was suffering from a high rate of inflation. In such a situation, it is prudent to conduct transactions in a stable currency.<sup>87</sup> As a result, in the early 1990s, U.S. dollars crowded out the Cambodian currency (*riel*), which is named after a type of fish that is a popular part of the Khmer diet.<sup>88</sup>



© Magalie L'Abbé  
Money and lotus, a typical temple offering

### Exchange 38: Do you accept US currency?

|          |                            |                                     |
|----------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do you accept US currency? | nay uk yok dol laa aa may rik dtay? |
| Local:   | No we only accept Riel.    | dtay, yuHng yok dtai ree ul dtay    |

The economy remains heavily “dollarized,” meaning U.S. dollars (USD) are accepted and preferred almost everywhere, including for official transactions. This reliance on USD has been facilitated by the government’s commitment to an open economy. There are virtually no restrictions on capital transactions.

## Restaurants and Dining

The cheapest cuisine is found at food stalls, which often specialize in one or two dishes. In some cases, diners can customize their meal by pointing at the ingredients they want as the dish is being prepared.<sup>89</sup> Hygiene standards are low, so visitors should only consume food that is fully cooked and freshly prepared in their presence.

### Exchange 39: This food is very good.

|          |                         |                       |
|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Soldier: | This food is very good. | ma hop niH chngun naH |
| Local:   | It’s Sah-ra’-mann.      | aa neung saa ra’ mun  |

The dominant flavorings of Khmer cuisine come from a fermented fish sauce known as *prahok*, which is akin to anchovy paste, lemongrass (particularly in soup), coconut milk, and tamarind.<sup>90</sup> Cambodians start the day with steamed rice porridge (*bobor*) with fish and fresh ginger.

<sup>87</sup> Computer Science Undergraduate Association, University of California, Berkeley. The CICP Newsletter, Nos. 15 & 16. Ear, Sopal. “Dollarization, Monetary Independence and Inflation.” June–July 1996. <http://www.csua.berkeley.edu/~sopal/cicp1a.htm>

<sup>88</sup> National Public Radio. Sullivan, Michael. “Tonle Sap: The Flowing Heart of Cambodia.” 6 December 2005. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5039980>

<sup>89</sup> Links2Asia. “Cambodia: Food & Drink.” c. 2004. <http://www.links2asia.com/cambodia/food.htm>

<sup>90</sup> Salon.com. Fishbane, Matthew. “Will Cambodian Food Ever Catch on in America?” 26 June 2007. [http://www.salon.com/mwt/food/eat\\_drink/2007/06/26/khmer\\_food/print.html](http://www.salon.com/mwt/food/eat_drink/2007/06/26/khmer_food/print.html)

**Exchange 40:** Are you still serving breakfast?

|          |                                  |                                      |
|----------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Are you still serving breakfast? | nay uk nou loo uk baa ee preuk dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                             | baat                                 |

Fresh water fish is the primary source of protein in the Cambodian diet. *Trey angh* (grilled fish) is eaten in pieces wrapped in lettuce or spinach leaves and dipped into *teuk Trey*, a fish sauce that includes ground peanuts.

**Exchange 41:** What type of meat is this?

|          |                            |                 |
|----------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Soldier: | What type of meat is this? | sai ich ay niH? |
| Local:   | Lamb.                      | sai jo roo      |



© lecerole / flickr.com  
A bowl of soup

Soups are part of every Khmer meal. They may be eaten as the main course, in which case they are served with rice. Sweet and sour soups are the most common; they can include fish, beef, or pork. *Kuy Tieu* is also popular. This dish is prepared with rice noodles, sliced pork, bean sprouts, and fried garlic; it is garnished with cilantro, salted cabbage, and scallions.

**Exchange 42:** I'd like some hot soup.

|          |                         |                            |
|----------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Soldier: | I'd like some hot soup. | kinyom jong baan soop gdao |
| Local:   | Sure.                   | baat                       |

Dessert often takes the form of fresh fruit, sticky rice cakes, or rice pudding.

**Exchange 43:** Do you have a dessert?

|          |                         |                               |
|----------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do you have a dessert?  | mee un bong aim dtay?         |
| Local:   | Yes, we have Song-khyah | baat yUhg mee un song kee yaa |

Tea (*tai*) is usually provided free of charge in restaurants; a pot will be placed on the table as soon as customers sit down. Coffee (*kaa fey*), iced or hot, is also readily available; it is made with a drip filter set atop the cup or glass. This process produces very strong coffee. The coffee drips onto a layer of sweetened condensed milk, which is stirred before drinking.

**Exchange 44:** I would like coffee or tea.

|          |                             |                                   |
|----------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Soldier: | I would like coffee or tea. | kinyom jong baan gaa fay roe dtai |
| Local:   | Sure.                       | baat                              |

Freshly squeezed sugar-cane juice is a street stall favorite. *Dteuk rolok*, a sweet, milky fruit shake, is also a popular beverage. Khmer often blend an egg into the shake in order

to add to its nutritional value; this gives it a frothy texture.<sup>91</sup> It is only safe to drink bottled water, and ice cubes should be avoided.

**Exchange 45:** May I have a glass of water?

|          |                              |   |
|----------|------------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | May I have a glass of water? | kinyom som dteuk moo ay gai o<br>baan dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes, right away.             | baat, jam moo ay plairt                     |

When dining in a group, it is extremely rare for people to pay for their meals individually. In general, the person who arranged the meal pays for the group, particularly since dishes are communally shared.

**Exchange 46:** Put this all in one bill.

|          |                           |  |
|----------|---------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Put this all in one bill. | geut loo ee bon jol kinee a dtay ung<br>oH naa |
| Local:   | Okay.                     | o kay  |

If the menu does not list prices, visitors should ask before ordering, as some restaurant owners may decide to charge whatever price they think the customer can afford to pay. Having a Cambodian in your party will minimize this risk since the person will likely know the typical price for such items.



© lecerole / flickr.com  
Serving a lunch to go

**Exchange 47:** Can I have my total bill, please?

|          |                                   |                          |
|----------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Soldier: | Can I have my total bill, please? | som geut loo ee sa' rop? |
| Local:   | Yes, of course.                   | baat, mee un ay          |

Only more expensive restaurants have restroom facilities.

**Exchange 48:** Where is your restroom?

|          |                                     |  |
|----------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Where is your restroom?             | bong goo un nou ay naa?                  |
| Local:   | That room to your left, over there. | bon goo un kaang chwayng dai nou<br>nooH |

<sup>91</sup> *Teen Life in Asia*. Slater, Judith J., ed. Perez-Prado, Aixa. "Chapter 1: Cambodia [p. 12]." 2004. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=7Oz5cvi3z3EC&pg=PA12&lpg=PA12&dq=dteuk+rolok&source=bl&ots=ModmyuvRSb&sig=msaT6NRo13PQp8OWO0InNTK4a0A&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=2&ct=result#PPA12,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=7Oz5cvi3z3EC&pg=PA12&lpg=PA12&dq=dteuk+rolok&source=bl&ots=ModmyuvRSb&sig=msaT6NRo13PQp8OWO0InNTK4a0A&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=2&ct=result#PPA12,M1)

## The Marketplace

There are many traditional markets (*psah*) and roadside stalls in Cambodia. A well-known market is the Russian Market (*Psar Tuol Tom Pong*) in Phnom Penh.

### Exchange 49: Is the market nearby?

|          |                               |                              |
|----------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is the market nearby?         | psaa nou jit niH dtay røe?   |
| Local:   | Yes, over there on the right. | baat, nou kaang sdum ay nooH |

Most goods are sold through such venues. Very few of them have marked prices; this enables the merchant to charge what he thinks the customer will pay. This practice is especially directed toward tourists.



© lecerole / flickr.com  
Market scene in Phnom Penh

### Exchange 50: How much longer will you be here?

|          |                                   |  |
|----------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | How much longer will you be here? | yoo bon naa dtee ut baan nay uk mok dol niH? |
| Local:   | Three more hours.                 | bay ee ma ong dtee ut                        |

Visitors should not assume that they will be taken advantage of; instead, they should maintain a friendly demeanor when haggling with merchants.

### Exchange 51: Can you give me change for this?

|          |                                  |                                   |
|----------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Can you give me change for this? | nay uk bom baik aa niH baan dtay? |
| Local:   | No.                              | ot dtay                           |

Bargaining (*tauH tlay*) is the norm, but visitors should not make a counter offer unless they intend to buy the item. Initiating a back and forth dialogue simply to see how far one can negotiate the price down is considered rude and a waste of the merchant's time.

### Exchange 52: Can I buy a carpet with this much money?

|          |  |  |
|----------|--|--|
| Soldier: | Can I buy a carpet with this much money? | loo ee kinyom bon nayH dteun proom moo ay baan dtay? |
| Local:   | No.                                      | ot dtay  |

In general, prices will be lower in market areas where there are large numbers of sellers.<sup>92</sup> Some prior research into what is cheap (*thaok*) and what is expensive (*thlai*) will aid the buyer in reaching a price that both parties will find satisfactory.

<sup>92</sup> Computer Science Undergraduate Association, University of California, Berkeley. The CICP Newsletter, Nos. 15 & 16. Ear, Sophal. "Observation: Competition, Bargaining, Information, and Price Discrimination in Cambodia's Psah." June–July 1996. <http://www.csua.berkeley.edu/~sophal/cicp2.htm>

**Exchange 53: May I examine this close up?**

|          |                              |   |
|----------|------------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | May I examine this close up? | kinyom mUhl aa niH ao ee jit baan dtay? |
| Local:   | Sure.                        | mee un ay                               |

There are some native crafts, but prior to purchase, visitors should ascertain whether certain archeological and ancient relics can be legally taken out of the country. Objects of a certain age may require export permits.<sup>93</sup>



© shinkusano / flickr.com  
Basket weaving

**Exchange 54: Do you sell scarves?**

|          |                      |                                     |
|----------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do you sell scarves? | nay uk mee un gror maa loo uk dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                 | baat mee un                         |

However, many products for sale, including those passed off as locally made, have probably been imported from China. Entertainment items such as movies are likely to be unauthorized or “pirated” versions, also imported from China.<sup>94</sup>

**Exchange 55: Do you have any more of these?**

|          |                                |  |
|----------|--------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Do you have any more of these? | nay uk mee un poo uk niH dtee ut dtay? |
| Local:   | No.                            | ot dtay                                |

**Vendors and Beggars**

Cambodia has a large number of beggars, particularly in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, which is a popular destination due to its proximity to Angkor Wat. As floating villages near Siem Reap have begun to attract tourists, some local residents have abandoned fishing for begging, which can be more lucrative.<sup>95</sup>

**Exchange 56: Give me money**

|          |                   |                      |
|----------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Local:   | Give me money     | som loo ee klaH mok  |
| Soldier: | I don't have any. | kinyom kimee un dtay |

Cambodian officials have made efforts to counteract this trend by collecting beggars from the streets and relocating them. “We need to protect our nation’s honor. It’s shameful for us to see beggars chasing tourists for money,” said a member of the Siem Reap provincial

<sup>93</sup> Voice of America News. “Protecting Cambodia’s Treasures.” 3 October 2008.  
<http://www.voanews.com/uspolicy/2008-10-03-voa9.cfm>

<sup>94</sup> justabackpack.com. “Bazookas, Bones, and Bootleg DVDs.” 6 July 2007.  
<http://www.justabackpack.com/2007/07/bazookas-bones-and-bootleg-dvds.html>

<sup>95</sup> News.com.au. “Beggars in Plastic Buckets, Boats Harass Tourists.” 22 April 2008.  
<http://www.news.com.au/travel/story/0,26058,23579032-5014090,00.html>

government.<sup>96</sup> Yet there are few job prospects for the unskilled and disabled, be they children, or adults handicapped by injuries from landmines. In many cases, these persons may be forced to hawk cheap items in order to survive.

**Exchange 57:** Please, buy something from me.

|          |                                |   |
|----------|--------------------------------|---|
| Local:   | Please, buy something from me. | joo ee dtin ay pee kinyom klaH dtow       |
| Soldier: | Sorry, I have no money left.   | som dtoh, kinyom kimee un sol loo ee dtay |

It is a matter of some debate as to whether people should oblige beggars and young, informal street vendors. Buying small items from street children, or simply giving them money, may encourage their families to keep them on the streets, rather than send them to school. It also creates a profit motive for human traffickers, who garner the vast majority of the proceeds earned by the children under their control.<sup>97</sup>



© flydime / flickr.com  
Young street vendor in Angkor Wat

<sup>96</sup> Yahoo News. “Cambodia to Remove Siem Reap Beggars.” 25 October 2006.  
[http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap\\_travel/20061025/ap\\_tr\\_ge/travel\\_brief\\_cambodia\\_tourism\\_1&printer=1](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap_travel/20061025/ap_tr_ge/travel_brief_cambodia_tourism_1&printer=1)

<sup>97</sup> An MSW in Cambodia. “Giving money to beggars.” 23 April 2007.  
<http://coming2cambodia.wordpress.com/2007/04/23/giving-money-to-beggars/>

## Chapter 5 Rural Life

### Land Allocation and Ownership

Cambodia remains a predominantly agricultural country. Access to land is the most important determinant of economic security for farmers. In the wake of the Vietnamese departure in 1989, the nation's land tenure system shifted from a socialist policy of collective allocation to a privatized form of individual ownership. Titles issued by earlier governments were not recognized; instead, deeds were only issued to cultivators who had worked the land in question for at least one year prior to its distribution.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the amount of distributed land was based on household size.



© A\_E\_P / flickr.com  
A woman works in the fields

#### Exchange 58: How many people live in this house?

|          |                                     |  |
|----------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | How many people live in this house? | mee un mee nooH pon maan nee uk roo uH nou knong pdtay aH niH? |
| Local:   | Ten.                                | dop nee uk   |

While this was theoretically an egalitarian way to divide up land, it did not account for different stages in the generational life cycle. Those with married children received more land than those whose dependents were not married but could be presumed to have families when they came of age. This one-time distribution left younger members in line to receive less than what was needed to support a family.

#### Exchange 59: Do you own this land?

|          |                       |                                |
|----------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do you own this land? | nee uk jee a m jaH day niH rœ? |
| Local:   | Yes.                  | baat                           |

There are many additional causes for landlessness among rural Khmer. Economic insecurity, often resulting from medical issues, has forced many Khmer to make distress sales of their land. Furthermore, when Khmer settle in a village after the local land has already been distributed, they often do not have the financial resources to purchase land from the existing titleholders. Corruption, most notably in the form of land appropriation by local officials, is also a major factor.<sup>99</sup> Households, particularly those headed by members who lack an education, may not have completed the bureaucratic procedures necessary to confer title, thereby making them vulnerable to eviction.

<sup>98</sup> Division for Sustainable Development, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Supreme National Economic Council. "The Report of Land and Human Development in Cambodia [p. 9]." 2007. <http://www.un.org/esa/agenda21/natinfo/countr/cambodia/land.pdf>

<sup>99</sup> Department of Geography, University of Victoria. Henry, Emily Laura. "Rural-urban Migration as a Response to Vulnerability in Rural Cambodia" (master's thesis. University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, 2004). P. 53. [https://dspace.library.uvic.ca:8443/dspace/bitstream/1828/719/1/henry\\_2004.pdf](https://dspace.library.uvic.ca:8443/dspace/bitstream/1828/719/1/henry_2004.pdf)

**Exchange 60:** Did these people threaten you?

|          |                                |   |
|----------|--------------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Did these people threaten you? | poo uk niH mee un baan gum ree um<br>nee uk dtay? |
| Local:   | No.                            | dtay  |

Land confiscation by powerful interests remains a serious issue in rural Cambodia, and community activists, along with journalists reporting on the problem, have been threatened or physically harmed for protesting or investigating such activity.<sup>100</sup>



© IRRI Images  
Rice vendors at a rural market

**Rural Economy**

Rice was a major export during the period of political stability that followed Cambodia's independence from France in 1953. By the mid 1960s, rice exports exceeded 500,000 tons, making the small nation one of Southeast Asia's burgeoning rice producers. This trend reversed when the country came under siege from a communist insurgency, and the Vietnam War extended into Cambodia. As a result of such conflict,

between 1970 and 1975, the nation's rice-growing areas shrunk dramatically, causing overall rice production to decline by 84%. The nation's economic situation remained dire for several years as the country suffered extreme hardships under the Khmer Rouge.<sup>101</sup>

Since the early 1990s, the reconstruction of the Cambodian agricultural sector has relied on market forces. This means that Khmer farmers, in contrast to their counterparts in many other developing countries, enjoy no domestic protection for their produce. Their yields must compete in the local marketplace with imports from Thailand and Vietnam, where farmers enjoy lower costs.

**Exchange 61:** Where do you work, sir?

|          |                         |                              |
|----------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Where do you work, sir? | lok twUh gaa nou aynaa, lok? |
| Local:   | I am a farmer, sir.     | kinyom twUh srai, lok        |

However, various agencies and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) involved in agricultural production have made efforts to help Cambodian farmers improve efficiency.<sup>102</sup> Those unable to afford draught animals, for example, have been assisted in purchasing animals in exchange for a contribution to a rice bank that supplies food to

<sup>100</sup> Human Rights Watch. *World Report, 2005*. "Cambodia: Conflicts over Land and Resource Rights." 12 January 2005. <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/english/docs/2005/01/13/cambod9804.htm>

<sup>101</sup> Foreign Agricultural Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. GAIN Report. Preechajarn, Sakchai. "Cambodia: Grain and Feed: Grain Industry in Cambodia 2006." 29 March 2006. <http://www.fas.usda.gov/gainfiles/200603/146187256.doc>

<sup>102</sup> School of Environmental Science, Murdoch University. Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. *Partners in Research for Development*. "Cambodia's Journey: Research Feeds a Nation's Future." September 2004.

<http://www.environment.murdoch.edu.au/groups/aciar/images/CambodiasJourney.pdf>

those unable to farm.<sup>103</sup> The recent shift to mechanization, a more productive way to till the soil, has rendered farmers vulnerable to increases in the global price of oil and made them leery of giving up their animals.<sup>104</sup>

While they have registered substantial gains, Cambodia's rice yields remain significantly lower than those of its Southeast Asian neighbors. This is in part due to a lack of modern agricultural expertise and infrastructure. With limited understanding of up-to-date farming methods, a dearth of modern tools and quality seed stock, and high energy and transportation costs, Cambodian farmers have faced serious obstacles over the last few decades. Most importantly, limited irrigation capabilities have constrained crop production. For example, while Vietnamese cultivators irrigate approximately 45% of their country's arable land, only 7% of Cambodia's agricultural land receives irrigation waters.<sup>105</sup>



© Masaru Goto / World Bank  
A man ploughs a rice field

As part of its sweeping agrarian program, the Khmer Rouge initiated the construction of an extensive series of canals and dams in order to better regulate the flow of water. Such an effort drew inspiration from the engineering feats that had enabled Angkor Wat to support a large non-farm population. While much of this infrastructure fell into disrepair after the Khmer Rouge regime was toppled, there has been a recent push to rehabilitate these canals as a means to increase the amount of crop land under irrigation.<sup>106</sup> Overall, despite continuing challenges in the agricultural sector, the Cambodian rice industry recently posted a surplus, making the country self-sufficient for the first time in over two decades. The introduction of high-yield rice varieties and farming techniques has played a major role in the industry's resurgence.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Oxfam Australia. "Banking on a Buffalo." No date.

[http://www.oxfam.org.au/world/asia/cambodia/banking\\_on\\_buffalo.html](http://www.oxfam.org.au/world/asia/cambodia/banking_on_buffalo.html)

<sup>104</sup> IRIN News, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "Cambodia: Farmers Turn Back to Oxen as Fuel Price Rises." 7 July 2008. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=79123>

<sup>105</sup> Bridges Across Borders Southeast Asia. "Cambodia Country Profile." No date.

<http://www.babsea.org/programs/ccp/ccprofile.htm>

<sup>106</sup> International Herald Tribune. Fuller, Thomas. "Cambodia Revives Pol Pot's Deadly Canals." 4 December 2008. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/12/04/asia/canal.php>

<sup>107</sup> The Christian Science Monitor. Montero, David. "As World Grasps for Rice, Cambodia's Success Story." 1 May 2008. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0501/p01s02-woap.html?page=1>

## Transportation and Lodging

Years of conflict decimated Cambodia's transportation network. Substantial funds have been allocated for expanding and improving the nation's road network, as it is integral to the corresponding development of the tourist industry and the promotion of regional commerce.<sup>108</sup> Most goods for the domestic market are still transported on aging, overloaded trucks. In isolated regions, motorcycle and animal-drawn carts are the primary means of transport. Such small-scale, antiquated practices limit the role of commerce in developing the local economy.<sup>109</sup>



© Mindy McAdams  
Dirt road with pot holes

Accommodation is not difficult to find in rural Cambodia, where households are free to take in foreign lodgers. In places where there is demand, family-run guesthouses are plentiful.

### Exchange 62: Is there lodging nearby?

|          |                          |   |
|----------|--------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Is there lodging nearby? | mee un pdtay aH som nak nou jit niH dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                     | baat                                      |

Given the possibility of landmines, it is not wise to wander off the beaten track without a local guide.

### Exchange 63: Do you know this area very well?

|          |                                  |  |
|----------|----------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Do you know this area very well? | nee uk sgo a ul dom bon niH jbaH lo a uH dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                             | baat   |

Road accident fatalities are the second highest cause of death in Cambodia after HIV/AIDS. Driving under the influence is a major culprit.<sup>110</sup> Injuries tend to be more severe on rural roads owing to faster driving speeds.

<sup>108</sup> Vietnam News Agency. "Cambodia Invests 2.5 Bln USD in Road Construction. 4 July 2008. <http://www.vnagency.com.vn/Home/EN/tabid/119/itemid/257073/Default.aspx>

<sup>109</sup> World Bank. "Transport in Cambodia." 2008. <http://go.worldbank.org/XUTCC2MWU0>  
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/EXTEAPREGTOPTRANSPORT/0,,contentMDK:20458706~menuPK:2066305~pagePK:34004173~piPK:34003707~theSitePK:574066,00.html>

<sup>110</sup> The Phnom Penh Post. Rith, Sam. "Traffic Accidents, Fatalities up in 2008: NGO." 4 November 2008. <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2008110422465/National-news/Traffic-accidents-fatalities-up-in-2008-NGO.html>

**Exchange 64:** My arm is broken, can you help me?

|          |                                    |  |
|----------|------------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | My arm is broken, can you help me? | day kinyom buk, lok joo ee kinyom porng baan dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes, I can help you.               | baat, kinyom joo ee lok baan                       |

Motor vehicle-related injuries are so prevalent that in some hospitals a majority of patients have been admitted as a result of traffic accidents.<sup>111</sup>

**Health Care in Rural Areas**

Health care in rural Cambodia is generally of poor quality.<sup>112</sup> While primary health care services are supposed to be free of charge, the unregulated fees charged by many providers are prohibitive to poor patients and their families. Various international donors are experimenting with new types of delivery services in an effort to boost access among the poor.<sup>113</sup>

**Exchange 65:** Is there a medical clinic nearby?

|          |                                   |                                    |
|----------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is there a medical clinic nearby? | mee un glee neek nou jit niH dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes, over there.                  | baat nou ay nooH                   |

There is also an emphasis on providing professional care to women during pregnancy and childbirth. In Cambodia, maternal fatalities occur at a rate of one out of every 200 births. These are often preventable deaths, if only a skilled practitioner were present during delivery.<sup>114</sup>



© tajai / flickr.com  
Elementary school children, Prek Toal

**Education in Rural Areas**

While education is nominally free, corruption and administrative shortcomings often result in students paying informal fees. For example, as new teachers typically do not receive their salaries for several months, they often charge students ad hoc fees in order to cover their living expenses in the interim. Many poor families cannot afford to pay such fees.

<sup>111</sup> World Health Organization. Cambodia Road Traffic Accident and Information System. “Annual Report 2004—Executive Summary.” 2004.  
[http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/road\\_traffic/5year\\_strategy/travis\\_annualreport\\_execsum.pdf](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/road_traffic/5year_strategy/travis_annualreport_execsum.pdf)

<sup>112</sup> The Regional Institute. *Rural and Remote Health*. Grundy, J.J. “The Impact of Health System Reform on Remote Health in Cambodia and the Philippines.” 26 March 2001.  
[http://www.regional.org/au/rrh/2001/010326\\_84.htm](http://www.regional.org/au/rrh/2001/010326_84.htm)

<sup>113</sup> BASIS Research Program on Poverty, Inequality and Development, University of Wisconsin. “Micro Health Insurance in Rural Cambodia: An Evaluation of the Impact on the Stabilization of Incomes and Enhancement of Agricultural Productivity and Asset Accumulation.” 31 December 2007.  
[http://www.basis.wisc.edu/documents/Final\\_Evaluation\\_Design\\_Cambodia.pdf](http://www.basis.wisc.edu/documents/Final_Evaluation_Design_Cambodia.pdf)

<sup>114</sup> ActionAid. “ActionAid Builds 30 Clinics in Cambodia for Women.” 2008.  
[http://www.actionaidusa.org/what/emergencies/cambodia\\_healthcare/](http://www.actionaidusa.org/what/emergencies/cambodia_healthcare/)

**Exchange 66: Is there a school nearby?**

|          |                           |   |
|----------|---------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Is there a school nearby? | mee un saa laa ree un nou jit niH dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                      | baat                                    |

A study by a Cambodian non-governmental organization revealed that informal fees for education averaged USD 108 annually, amounting to 9% of each family’s annual income per child.<sup>115</sup> Ad hoc fees are the most commonly cited reason for withdrawing children from school. Another common reason is that the child’s labor is needed to sustain the family.<sup>116</sup> To prevent attrition, some schools have created vegetable gardens, which provide income for the school and food for the students.<sup>117</sup>

**Rural Leadership**

Commune councils, which administer an area equivalent to an American municipality, are the lowest level of public administration in Cambodia. The law stipulates that a woman must serve on each council.<sup>118</sup> Because the positions have been filled by election since 2002—when governmental administration was decentralized—one slot must be reserved for female candidates.



© michelhrv / flickr.com  
Village leaders

**Exchange 67: Does your leader live here?**

|          |                             |   |
|----------|-----------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Does your leader live here? | may poom nee uk roo uH nou dtee niH dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                        | baat                                      |

Commune councilors in turn select village chiefs, the traditional source of authority. In other words, “[t]he people would elect a council, and the council would choose new village chiefs. The village chiefs would owe their positions to the commune council, and the council members would owe their positions to the people.”<sup>119</sup> Despite this framework, corruption and political domineering still operate on a local level, thereby allowing chiefs aligned with the CPP, the country’s dominant party, to establish a firm grasp on power.

<sup>115</sup> IRIN News, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. “Cambodia: Children Miss Out on School because of Corruption.” 5 December 2008. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=81825>

<sup>116</sup> UNICEF. Maloney, Ticiania. “Child-friendly Schools Support Girls’ Education in Cambodia.” 12 April 2007. [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/cambodia\\_39364.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/cambodia_39364.html)

<sup>117</sup> CARE. “It Takes a Village: Community-Based Education in Rural Cambodia.” 2008. [http://www.care.org/getinvolved/girleffect/cambodia\\_story.asp](http://www.care.org/getinvolved/girleffect/cambodia_story.asp)

<sup>118</sup> Southeast Asia Department, Asian Development Bank. *SEAGEN Waves*, Vol. 2, No. 1. “Cambodia: Empowering Female Commune Councilors.” February 2008.

<http://www.adb.org/Documents/Periodicals/SEA-GEN/vol02-01/empowering-female.asp>

<sup>119</sup> Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats. Cambodia Daily. Acosta, Neric. “Ministry’s Broken Promise Makes Mockery of Elections.” 5 May 2003. [http://www.cald.org/website/related\\_op2.htm](http://www.cald.org/website/related_op2.htm)

**Exchange 68:** Can you take me to your leader?

|          |                                 |  |
|----------|---------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Can you take me to your leader? | nee uk joon kinyom dtou joo up may<br>poom nee uk baan dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                            | baat   |

Commune councils are the primary vehicle for dispute resolution and are thus sought out for mediation when the efforts of family elders and the village chief have failed. The most common types of dispute concern acts of youth vandalism and the destruction of property, inheritance issues, and disagreements over boundary demarcation.<sup>120</sup>

**Exchange 69:** Respected leader, we need your help / advice / opinion.

|          |   |   |
|----------|---|---|
| Soldier: | Respected leader, we need your help / advice / opinion. | aa o lok may poom, yUhg dtrov<br>gaa jum noo ee / dom bon mee un /<br>yo a bol ro boH lok |
| Local:   | Yes.  | baat  |

The privatization of resources in Cambodia has given government officials a much greater degree of control over village life than was the case in the past. Villagers must cultivate good relationships with their leaders, particularly the village chief, in order to share in the community's resources, such as development aid.<sup>121</sup>



© Cambodia Trust  
Elder at a community meeting

In instances in which the village chief is perceived to have acted improperly, villagers may take legal action. Specifically, in 2008, nearly 200 villagers sued their chief after he selected his relatives and friends to receive presents that a foreign agency had donated specifically to the poor and infirm members of the community.<sup>122</sup>

### Landmines

Years of conflict have left Cambodia with one of the highest ratios of amputees (*chon pika*) in the world: approximately one out of every 290 Cambodians has experienced the loss of a limb.<sup>123</sup> They are victims of landmines laid by successive governments and opposition groups.

<sup>120</sup> The Asia Foundation. Ninh, Kim and Roger Henke. "Commune Councils in Cambodia: A National Survey on their Functions and Performance, with a Special Focus on Conflict Resolution [p. 12]." May 2005. <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/CBCCSurvey.pdf>

<sup>121</sup> *The Political Economy of Cambodia's Transition, 1991-2001*. Hughes, Caroline. "Chapter Eight: Urban Protest Movements: The Future of Cambodian Democracy? [p. 176]" 2003. New York: Routledge. [http://books.google.com/books?id=iSE3S-nJzMoC&pg=PA176&lpg=PA176&dq=village+life+authority+cambodia&source=web&ots=hqKuQeRxxhG&sig=anSNQUhRDwxvKXNySzXLXtKxdDI&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=2&ct=result](http://books.google.com/books?id=iSE3S-nJzMoC&pg=PA176&lpg=PA176&dq=village+life+authority+cambodia&source=web&ots=hqKuQeRxxhG&sig=anSNQUhRDwxvKXNySzXLXtKxdDI&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=2&ct=result)

<sup>122</sup> KhmerNews.com. "Poor Citizens Sue Their Village Chief." 5 November 2008.

<http://www.khmernews.com/view/poor-citizens-sue-their-village/2382/>

<sup>123</sup> BBC News, International Version. Hughes, Stuart. "Cambodia's Landmine Victims." 11 November 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3259891.stm>

**Exchange 70: Is this area mined?**

|          |                     |   |
|----------|---------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Is this area mined? | dom bon niH mee un bong gob gro a up meen dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                | baat  |

In 1993, the introduction of democratic elections, which ushered in a period of unprecedented stability, prompted many displaced citizens to return home from refugee camps in Thailand.

Unfortunately, this population movement brought another wave of landmine casualties. Many returnees lost limbs trying to farm the land from which they had previously been forced off by the Khmer Rouge, who laid many landmines throughout various areas of the country. The Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, viewed landmines as “the perfect soldier.”<sup>124</sup>



© joannenah / flickr.com  
Many Cambodians have lost limbs to landmines

**Checkpoints**

During the many years of war, checkpoints were common on roads throughout the country. In this era of stability, travelers encounter them less frequently.

**Exchange 71: Where is the nearest checkpoint?**

|          |                                  |   |
|----------|----------------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Where is the nearest checkpoint? | jom noch dtroo ut pee nit jit jee ung gey nou ay naa? |
| Local:   | It's two kilometers.             | nou pee gee lo a mait pee niH                         |

Nonetheless, most Khmer are familiar with the routine involved at checkpoints, including ID verifications. Khmer identity cards are water and fire resistant, and contain a chip for scanning.

**Exchange 72: Is this all the ID you have?**

|          |                              |  |
|----------|------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Is this all the ID you have? | nee uk mee un adta' sanaan dtai pon neung dtay rœ? |
| Local:   | Yes.                         | baat   |

Asking the occupants to step out of the car so that it may be inspected is a common request.

**Exchange 73: Please get out of the car.**

|          |                            |                      |
|----------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Soldier: | Please get out of the car. | som joH jen pee laan |
| Local:   | OK.                        | o kay                |

Vehicle registrations are standardized documents.

<sup>124</sup> AlertNet, Reuters. Sutton, Sean. “Photo Gallery: Cambodian Women Clear Mines.” 19 December 2003. <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/photogallery/KHmag.htm>

**Exchange 74:** Show us the car registration.

|          |                               |                            |
|----------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Soldier: | Show us the car registration. | som bong haan som bot laan |
| Local:   | OK.                           | o kay                      |

Sometimes spot checks are carried out to ascertain whether drivers have paid the road tax and to verify that they are not in possession of illegal firearms.

**Exchange 75:** Are you carrying any guns?

|          |                            |   |
|----------|----------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Are you carrying any guns? | nee uk mee un da' gum plUhg<br>mok jee a moo ee dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                       | baat  |

## Chapter 6 Family Life

### Typical Household

In Cambodia, the family is the primary unit of organization, and three or four generations often live together under one roof.

#### Exchange 76: Is this your entire family?

|          |                             |  |
|----------|-----------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Is this your entire family? | niH jee a groo a saa dtay ung mool ro boH lok? |
| Local:   | Yes.                        | baat   |



© Ben Garrison  
Traditional house

However, family genealogies often extend back only two or three generations, thereby limiting the historical importance of an extended kinship group.<sup>125</sup> In addition, forced relocation from village to commune, expropriation of land, and widespread death under the Khmer Rouge during the 1970s fragmented bonds between more distantly related branches of a family.<sup>126</sup>

#### Exchange 77: Are these people part of your family?

|          |                                       |  |
|----------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Soldier: | Are these people part of your family? | poo uk niH jee a grom groo a saa lok rœ? |
| Local:   | No.                                   | dtay                                     |

As a result, the strongest emotional ties are between those who will reliably respond to a request for assistance in times of trouble.<sup>127</sup>

#### Exchange 78: Do you have any brothers?

|          |                           |                                   |
|----------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Do you have any brothers? | lok mee un borng p'oan proH dtay? |
| Local:   | Yes.                      | baat                              |

<sup>125</sup> *World and Its Peoples, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*. Marshall Cavendish Corporation. "Cambodia: Daily Life [p. 778]." 2007. Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish.  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=kte14XIoOckC&pg=PA778&lpg=PA778&dq=kloeu+brother+cambodia&source=bl&ots=f1h-](http://books.google.com/books?id=kte14XIoOckC&pg=PA778&lpg=PA778&dq=kloeu+brother+cambodia&source=bl&ots=f1h-94LRnF&sig=5QtI8jJg7_UIpxEWF4Gra0Mmb3U&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result)

<sup>126</sup> Office of Population Research, Princeton University. Demont, Floriane and Patrick Heuveline (University of California, Los Angeles). "The Cambodian Family after the Khmer Rouge Genocide: Continuity and Change" (extended abstract of paper presented at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, New Orleans, LA). 17–19 April 2008.  
<http://paa2008.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=81554>

<sup>127</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. Ross, Russell R., ed. *Cambodia: A Country Study*. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Social Structure and Organization: The Khmer: Household and Family Structure." 1987. <http://countrystudies.us/cambodia/42.htm>

## Gender Issues

Both men and women work, but the household division of labor remains pronounced, particularly in rural areas. Males are mainly responsible for activities carried out with draught animals, such as plowing in preparation for planting, as well as collecting sugar palm juice, which involves climbing trees. They may migrate in search of work that requires physical stamina, such as construction.



© Talger808 / flickr.com  
Young family in rural Cambodia

### Exchange 79: Did you grow up here?

|          |                       |                          |
|----------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Soldier: | Did you grow up here? | lok tum nou dtee niH rœ? |
| Local:   | Yes.                  | baat                     |

In addition to cooking and cleaning, women are responsible for pulling and transplanting rice seedlings, tending vegetable plots and small livestock, and managing the household finances. They may also run market stalls and work as traders.<sup>128</sup>

Although traditionally sons have been favored over daughters, the need to support the family has empowered its female members. Many unmarried teenage girls now work in garment factories, a practice that forces them to live far away from their families.<sup>129</sup>

### Exchange 80: Are you the only person in your family who has a job?

|          |   |  |
|----------|---|--|
| Soldier: | Are you the only person in your family who has a job? | lok mee un gaa twUh dtai mnay uk aing knong groo a saa rœ? |
| Local:   | No.   | dtay   |

In any case, Cambodian women remain subject to a patriarchal double standard—one that is reflected in the common Khmer comparison of girls to a piece of white cotton wool and boys to diamonds. The purity of cotton wool, after being dropped into mud, for example, can never be restored, no matter how many times it is washed. By contrast, a diamond that falls in a mud puddle can be retrieved, and after washing, will sparkle with exactly the same luster as it did before it was dirtied.

## Marriage

Marriages were traditionally arranged in Cambodia since they represent a union between two families rather than individuals. A son will have more say in the selection of a spouse than a daughter. He may ask his parents to make overtures to a particular family with a child of marital age who has caught his eye. Daughters, by contrast, are not in a position

<sup>128</sup> Sustainable Development Department, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. "Asia's Women in Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Production: Cambodia." No date. <http://www.fao.org/sd/WPdirect/WPre0106.htm>

<sup>129</sup> Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University. Ledgerwood, Judy. "Women in Cambodian Society." No date. <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/khmer/Ledgerwood/women.htm>

to make such a request. They are responsible for maintaining familial honor by refraining from behavior that would bring shame on the entire household.

**Exchange 81: Is this your wife?**

|          |                    |                               |
|----------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Is this your wife? | niH jee a pror poo un lok rœ? |
| Local:   | Yes.               | baat                          |

Women are expected to adhere to such norms even after marriage. Spousal abuse, sometimes carried out in public, is common and something a wife is expected to endure. In situations where the husband has taken a mistress—a practice that drains money away from the family—wives may respond with acid attacks on the young objects of their husbands’ affections. So common has this act of revenge become that the government has outlawed the sale of acid, and radio shows implore women to cease this type of behavior.<sup>130</sup>

**Divorce**

In terms of legal procedure, divorce in Cambodia has become a complicated, prolonged process in which commune-level administrative mediation is often required. In these situations, the couple is frequently pressured to stay together by governmental authorities. In a well-publicized case, an unhappy husband and wife simply split their house in two to avoid the informal costs associated with the drawn-out divorce process. The husband moved his half elsewhere and they split their land into four parcels, two of which will go to their children upon their own respective marriages. Because they lack a divorce decree, however, future disagreements between the two cannot be taken to court.<sup>131</sup>

**Exchange 82: Are you married?**

|          |                  |                          |
|----------|------------------|--------------------------|
| Soldier: | Are you married? | lok ree up gaa haWee rœ? |
| Local:   | No.              | dtay                     |

**Childbirth**

Childbirth is a female rite of passage known as crossing the river (*claan tonle*) in Khmer. The Cambodian government recently began to heavily promote the expertise of



© Chris Lang

biomedical health personnel (*peet*) who supply drugs that can regulate the birthing process. However, women in labor have historically been attended to by older women who rely on traditional beliefs rather than midwifery training.<sup>132</sup> For example, according to such beliefs, drinking tea is supposed to speed the

Women and infant in Krang Skear Center, University of Washington. Mony, Keo. “Marriage: Loyalty, Divorce, Polygamy.” September 2004. [http://ethnomed.org/cultures/cambodian/camb\\_marriage.html](http://ethnomed.org/cultures/cambodian/camb_marriage.html)

<sup>131</sup> The Phnom Penh Post. Titthara, May. “Arguing Couple Split Up By Sawing Their House in Half.” 7 October 2008. <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2008100722000/National-news/Arguing-couple-split-up-by-sawing-their-house-in-half.html>

<sup>132</sup> “Chapter Six: Celebrating Safe Childbirth [pp. 102–103].” Hoban, Elizabeth. In *Reproduction, Childbearing and Motherhood: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Pranee Liamputtong, ed. 2007. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

delivery process. Other folk practices can have more serious ramifications. In a case in which an expectant mother died from bleeding during delivery, the birthing attendants attempted to stem the flow with unsterilized rag bandages. They also lit incense sticks to chase away evil spirits, which they believed had caused her condition.<sup>133</sup> It is also assumed that women who do not survive the birthing process will become evil spirits endowed with the ability to wreak havoc on their living kin.

After a successful delivery (*claan haey*), Khmer women follow a strict regimen based on cultural taboos. Certain activities, such as eating particular foods, carrying heavy objects, or resuming sexual intercourse too soon could result, it is believed, in illness or untimely death. Should a woman be stricken by post-partum incapacitation, her family will likely conclude that the cause lies in violating these taboos.<sup>134</sup>

### Children

During a child's early years, he or she is lavished with physical affection and indulged by elders. Spankings are not considered an appropriate response to a toddler's misconduct. Around the age of four, children are expected to feed themselves and to be self-sufficient in matters of personal hygiene. By five years of age, they may be expected to help look after younger siblings.<sup>135</sup> As the children grow older, parents will use corporal punishment in response to misbehavior. Khmer believe that complimenting their children and offering positive feedback will go to their heads.<sup>136</sup>



© babeltravel / flickr.com  
Children in Kampong Cham

### Exchange 83: Are these your children?

|          |                          |                                  |
|----------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Soldier: | Are these your children? | dtee ung niH jee a go an lok rœ? |
| Local:   | Yes.                     | baat                             |

The socialization process for Cambodian children includes playing games that emphasize conflict resolution and skill acquisition rather than winning and losing. Children are also taught to avoid extremes as a method of maintaining good health. One should laugh, for example, to moderate sad situations in order to restore emotional balance. Accordingly,

<sup>133</sup> The Boston Globe. Nickerson, Colin. "Lives Lost: Cambodia." 29 May 2003.

[http://www.boston.com/news/specials/lives\\_lost/cambodia/](http://www.boston.com/news/specials/lives_lost/cambodia/)

<sup>134</sup> Tearfund International Learning Zone, Tearfund. Soung, Barbara and Hang Sorya. "Traditional Practices in Childbirth." 6 December 2005. <http://tilz.tearfund.org/Publications/Footsteps+41-50/Footsteps+48/Traditional+practices+in+childbirth.htm>

<sup>135</sup> Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Cambodia: A Country Study*. Ross, Russell R., ed. "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment: Social Structure and Organization: The Khmer: Families." 1987. <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-2124.html>

<sup>136</sup> *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community*. Smith-Hefner, Nancy Joan. "Chapter Five: Schooling in America [p. 131]." 1999. Berkeley: University of California Press.

tales of past sadness are typically punctuated with laughter. For Khmer, this is an appropriate response to an unfortunate outcome or tragic event.<sup>137</sup>

### The Elderly

Elderly Cambodians live with their adult children, who are expected to care and provide for their parents. The elderly are respected by younger members. Before they can walk, children are taught to greet senior members of the family politely.<sup>138</sup> The elderly have traditionally been called upon to resolve conflicts since they have a lifetime of accumulated wisdom upon which to draw. Three decades of conflict reduced their numbers, however, and forced survivors to assume unprecedented responsibilities due to the absence of various family members or even entire generations.

#### Exchange 84: Does your family live here?

|          |                             |   |
|----------|-----------------------------|---|
| Soldier: | Does your family live here? | groo a saa nee uk roo uH nou dtee niH rœ? |
| Local:   | Yes.                        | baat                                      |

### Naming Conventions

Baby girls are named for things of beauty, such as Chantrea (moonlight) or Rasmey (ray of light), while boys are given names of virtues, such as Pheakdei (loyalty) or Rithisak (greatness). The correct way to pronounce Khmer names is to stress the last syllable. Given names are further simplified among friends by using only the last syllable.<sup>139</sup>



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Young man

Surnames have relatively recent origins in Cambodia, where they were introduced under French colonial rule for census purposes. According to Khmer protocol, surnames precede given names. Thus, King Norodom Sihanouk’s surname is Norodom, although he is formally referred to by his given name, making him known as King Sihanouk.

Inheritance of surnames remains somewhat flexible. Children, for example, may take the surname of either parent or use a parent’s given name as their surname. Thus, a family in which the father is named Chan Dara and the mother Heang Thida might have children named Dara Sovan, Chan Serey, and Heang Sokha.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>137</sup> ERICDigests.org. ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education. Anderson, Barbara Frye. “School Health Education in a Multicultural Society.” September 2000. <http://www.ericdigests.org/2001-3/health.htm>

<sup>138</sup> “Chapter Eighteen: Why Did You Kill?: The Cambodian Genocide and the Dark Side of Face and Honor [p. 159].” Hinton, Alexander Laban. In *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*. Scheper-Hughes, Nancy and Philippe I. Bourgois, eds. 2003. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>139</sup> Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions. “Cambodian Names.” No date. <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/articles/article/Cambodia/Cambodian-Names/1672>

<sup>140</sup> Asia Finest Discussion Forum. “Cambodian Surnames.” 2005. <http://www.asiafinest.com/forum/lofiversion/index.php/t44912.html>