

CAMBODIA (*Bratesa Kampouchea*)



Most Cambodians consider themselves to be Khmers, descendants of the Angkor Empire. The country was part of French Indochina and gained independence in 1953. From 1975-1978, the communist Khmer Rouge party ruled the country, resulting in at least 1.5 million deaths from execution, forced hardships, and starvation. The Vietnamese army drove the Khmer Rouge into the countryside in 1978, starting a 10-year occupation, and 13 years of civil war. Elections in 1993 established a coalition government. The remaining elements of the Khmer Rouge surrendered in early 1999.

QUICK FACTS

- Population:** 15.2 million
- Area:** slightly smaller than Oklahoma
- Capitol:** Phnom Penh (2.3 million)
- Languages:** Khmer (official) 95%, French, English

EDUCATION

Many Cambodian scholars and teachers were killed during the reign of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979). Soviet, Cuban, and German aid helped rebuild the education system during the decade of Vietnamese rule (1979-1989). After Vietnamese withdrawal, Cambodia instituted a law that obliges the state to provide nine years of free education to all citizens. The curriculum focuses on "Moral and Citizenship Education," as well as the development of skills that will contribute to the economic development. 80% of children ages 6-14 and 50% of children ages 15-19 are enrolled in school. The adult illiteracy rate is 73%.

RELIGION

Buddhism is the official state religion of Cambodia and has been dominant since the 13th century. Other religions were suppressed under the Khmer Rouge. However, Sunni Islam is practiced among the Cham minority and Confucianism and other folk religions remain popular. Buddhist (official) 96.4%, Muslim 2.1%, other 1.3%, unspecified 0.2 %

ETHNICITY

Cambodia is relatively homogenous; 90% citizens are of Khmer descent. Vietnamese make up 5% of the population and Chinese, who dominate the business world, make up 1%. Other minority groups, such as the Hmong, Pong, and Tai make up another 4%. These groups are known collectively as the Khmer Loue.

FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & CUSTOMS

Certain family dynamics often play out after arrival in America. These dynamics are rooted in the parents' unfamiliarity with education and the American educational system, their impoverished circumstances upon arrival in the United States, and their adherence to traditional Cambodian immigrant values and culture. While there are many conditions and interactions within Cambodian families, several aspects of immigrant daily life are likely to overshadow the others. First, obligations to the family are likely to be held as a strong value by all, especially the older generation in the family. Second, parents are likely to hold especially high expectations for their children's success in school, and may also hold specific expectations about the focus of their offspring's studies.





CONTEMPORARY CAMBODIA

The remnants of the Vietnam War caused a period of deep unrest in Cambodia in late 1970s and 1980s. Many Cambodians fled the country to escape the tyranny of Pol Pot's regime, the Khmer Rouge, which enacted a genocide that is commonly referred to as the 'Killing Fields.' Ultimately, Pol Pot aimed to create a classless agrarian society by placing almost all citizens in concentration camps to work in the fields for at least 14 hours a day with little food or rest.

The Khmer Rouge executed educated Cambodians to rid the country of any signs of Western influences. As a result, over 2 million Cambodians lost their lives. In this period of violence and chaos, education for the general population of Cambodians was out of reach because the Khmer Rouge made sure that "...intellectuals were dishonored as devotees of foreign rule and bourgeois civilization." Since most Cambodians were forced into labor camps, few ever had the chance to be educated until they fled the country. In due course, a huge number of Cambodians immigrated to America as refugees; most of these refugees were peasants and farmers with very little formal education, which plays a crucial role in how their children will do in American schools.



Sunrise at Angkor Wat. Photo by Oxag.

CAMBODIANS IN THE USA

Following the end of the Khmer Rouge genocide, large numbers of surviving Cambodians immigrated to America. By 2009, the Cambodian American population in the US was at approximately 277,000, with the largest populations in Long Beach, California, Lowell, Massachusetts, and Seattle-Tacoma, Washington. As sudden refugees from a war zone, they have faced great challenges and their experiences in America have been unique. According to the 2000 US Census Bureau, 29.3 percent of Cambodians in the US are living below the poverty line. Additionally, Cambodian parents may have little understanding of or ability to negotiate the education system and other social support systems for their children. Cambodian children often serve as linguistic and cultural translators for their parents. It is estimated that 38.5% of Cambodian American adults ages 25 and over did not graduate high school and 65.8% of them have no postsecondary education.



Since around 1850, the Cambodian flag has featured a depiction of Angkor Wat in the center. The current flag was adopted following Cambodia's independence in 1948.



Traditional Cambodian Pidan banner

NAMES

Cambodian names consist of a family name followed by a given name. Generally, women are given names relating to beauty, while men are given names of virtues. However, there are some unisex names. Surnames are taken from the surname *or* the given name of the father. Women keep their maiden names after marriage.

FAMOUS CAMBODIANS

The most famous Cambodians are the past leaders of the Khmer Rouge, including Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Lon Nol. A few famous Cambodian-Americans are: Dith Pran, a photojournalist, Haing S. Ngor, an actor and doctor, and Loung Ung, a human rights activist.

KHMER WORDS

Hi	<i>chomreabsuor</i>
Bye	<i>lea</i>
Good morning	<i>aroun suostei</i>
Yes	<i>bat</i>
No	<i>lekh</i>
Please.....	<i>saum</i>
You're welcome	<i>anak laengvinh 'svakom</i>
Thank you	<i>saum arkoun</i>
How are you?	<i>anakmean daoy rbiebnea?</i>
I do not understand	<i>khnhom min yl</i>
Do you understand?	<i>tae anak yl ?</i>
What is your name?.....	<i>chhmoh robsa anak kучea avei</i>
My name is	<i>chhmoh robsakhnhom ku</i>

USEFUL LINKS

- [CIA World Factbook: Cambodia](#)
- [BBC Country Profile: Cambodia](#)
- [National Geographic: Cambodia](#)
- [Cambodia Daily English News](#)