

## **Cambodia: Cultural Background for ESOL Teachers\***

“Don’t take the straight path or the winding one;  
Take the path your ancestors have taken.”

*Cambodian Proverb*

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### **Overview**

The Kingdom of Cambodia is located in the Indochinese Peninsula of Southeast Asia, covering a total area of 69,900 square miles (181, 040 sq. km.). It is bordered on the west and northwest by Thailand, on the north by Laos, on the east by the southern part of Vietnam, and on the south by the Gulf of Thailand. Cambodia has a population of about 11 million, of which 90% are Khmer and the balance are ethnic Chinese, Chams and Vietnamese. Women constitute 64% of the adult population as a result of high mortality rate of men during recent wars. The Khmers have black hair, dark brown or black epicanthic eyes, and darker complexions than the Thais and the Vietnamese. Khmer (or Cambodian) is the official language and is spoken by the majority of the people although many of older generations also speak French. With the opening up of the country, English is becoming more widely studied and used. Adult literacy rate is only about 50%, with women having a much lower rate than men.

Cambodia is an ancient country with a long history dating from the Kingdom of Funan in the first six centuries AD. It was mainly during this period that Indian culture as reflected in Hinduism and Buddhism began to influence the kingdom. In the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century emerged the Kingdom of *Kambuja* (hence the English name *Cambodia*), whose people were the predecessors of the Khmers. At the peak of that civilization was the mighty Khmer Empire, which from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries reigned over much of Southeast Asia, encompassing present-day Thai, Cambodia, Laos, and southern Vietnam. The magnificent Angkor Wat (‘temple’) was built during this period and has remained the source of Cambodians’ national pride. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Angkorian Era began to decline. Cambodia lost territory to both the Siamese and the Vietnamese. In 1863, the country became a French colony for nearly a century, until it was granted independence in 1953, all credit to King Norodom Shihanouk (1941-1970). The next two decades after independence were not without difficulties, but some Cambodians often refer to Cambodia in the 1960s as a ‘golden age’ of tranquility and progress compared to what followed.

In 1970, a US-backed military coup overthrew Shihanouk and the Khmer Republic was established, only to provoke a five-year civil war, ending with the victorious Communist Khmer Rouge (‘Red Khmer’) regime. This began the most tragic page of Cambodia’s history. Under the rule of Pol Pot from 1975-1978, the Khmer Rouge attempted to radically restructure and reform the Democratic Kampuchea (as it was then renamed) on cooperative lines by evacuating people from urban centers into rural areas, and reorganizing the population into communes. It was their objective to transform Cambodia into a vast self-

sufficient agrarian collective. To return the country to 'Year Zero', schools were closed, currency was abolished, newspapers were banned, the intelligentsia was persecuted, and Buddhism was suppressed. As a result, Cambodia became killing fields of more than two million people: they died from starvation, torture, overwork, illness and executions.

In late 1978, the Vietnamese entered Kampuchea, ousted the Khmer Rouge, and installed a pro-Vietnam government. The intervention stopped the genocide but was condemned by Western nations. In 1989, Vietnam withdrew its troops. Under UN-sponsored elections in 1993 a coalition government was formed, with Shihanouk as constitutional monarch and head of state and a co-presidency between his son Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen. The country was renamed the Kingdom of Cambodia. Political instability and violence, however, continued as a result of conflicts between the government factions. In 1998, Hun Sen won the general election, but compromised a coalition government. Cambodia has been in the process of rebuilding itself – socially, economically, and psychologically – although the scars of the heart-rending past will take years to heal and the problems facing Cambodia are enormous.

For many centuries, Buddhism was inextricably blended into Cambodians' everyday life. However, under the Khmer Rouge all religious activities were forbidden, and monasteries, pagodas, and temples were destroyed. It is assumed that the belief in Buddhism has given Cambodians courage and optimism with which to survive the tragic wars and to rebuild their lives nowadays. Doubtlessly, Buddhism has found its way back into Cambodian society. It was revived in 1979, right after the Khmer Rouge was ousted. It is now the state religion with about 95 % of the population. Many pagodas and shrines have been rebuilt or renovated, and merit-making deeds, Buddhist festivals, temple visiting, etc. are common activities among Cambodian Buddhists. Another splendid element of Khmer culture that survived the Khmer Rouge's persecution is the Cambodian Classical Dance. This art form, which has been associated with the Royal Court of Cambodia for more than a thousand years, has been kept alive by Khmer Rouge's survivors and is returning to stage. Together with traditional dance, traditional music also finds its way back to their daily life.

The family is extremely important to Cambodians – even more so when nearly each of them has lost at least a loved one in the family during the terrible war. Extended families with varying combinations of relatives are very common. Affection and mutual assistance among family members are highly valued. Showing respect or deference to the elder is an integral part of anyone's upbringing, which is extendable to society at large. Because the parent's word is to be accepted by the child without discussion, any expression of contradictory ideas or objections by the child is inappropriate. In Cambodia, men are traditionally the main breadwinners for their families while women take care of children and all domestic tasks. But today women have undertaken a variety of jobs because of the current shortage of males in the adult population.

Influenced by Buddhist teachings, most Cambodians lead a simple life and tend to be self-content. Working to provide enough food for oneself and family is considered an end in itself while being ambitious or envious is not common among Cambodians. For many of them, friendship comes right after family. In general, Cambodians are known to be polite, friendly and easy-going. Getting angry and shouting are considered bad manners; so direct

confrontation between individuals is rare. If they are found to be reserved or cautious, that is because they have suffered tremendously, but not because that is their nature.

Cambodians greet each other by putting the palms together in a pray-like position, with fingers at the chest while bowing slightly to the other person. Hugging, kissing, and shaking hands in greeting are not common in Cambodia. *Sok sabai* 'How are you?' is another way to say hi. Men and women do not show affection in public. Like many other Asians, Cambodians believe that the head is sacred; so touching the head is threatening someone's well-being and thus is avoided.

Cambodian names consist of two parts: a surname followed by a given name, with no middle name. Here are two examples: *Chan Vana*; *Sok Pali*. Overseas Cambodians, however, often reverse this order. By default, married women keep their surnames and children take their fathers' surnames. It is a common practice to address someone by the given name informally. In formal situations, a title (e.g., *Luk* 'Mr.'; *Ne-sray* 'Mrs.'; or *Ca-nha* 'Miss') is put before the surname, as in *Luk Sok* and *Ne-sray Chan*. Depending on family relationships, kinship terms (e.g., *bong* 'older brother/sister; *own* 'younger brother/sister') are also used (with or without the surname) in addressing one another.

Cambodian community is one of the youngest ethnic groups in American society. Cambodian immigration to the U.S. has begun only since 1979. Most Cambodians concentrate in California, Massachusetts, Texas, Pennsylvania, Virginia, New York, and Minnesota. As a rule, they feel more at ease living within their ethnic communities or near other Asian groups. Many Cambodian immigrants have difficulty adjusting to American society due to lack of formal education, language barrier, irrelevant job skills, and poor understanding of western lifestyles. Many others face severe mental and physical problems resulting from the traumatic years of warfare. Virtually all Cambodians have tragic tales to tell about their extreme loss, suffering and terror in the exodus from their homeland as victims of the Khmer Rouge. Unfortunately, they are often stereotyped as passive, pessimistic, or lacking in motivation. Generation gap also arises when older Cambodians are afraid that their children will lose their cultural heritage and mother tongue while younger or U.S.-born generations have no memory of Cambodia and become completely American. Most Asian immigrants share this same universal concern, as expressively depicted in the following poem:

*Their mother barely speaks English.  
One day the child swears at her and she says 'thank you.'  
On that day in front of everyone  
Friends and relatives hear the children curse their mother.  
They feel ill at ease.  
What kind of woman is she not to be ashamed?  
The children have forgotten Khmer because their parents are shortsighted.  
They're afraid their children won't know how to speak English.  
They don't worry that they've already forgotten Khmer.*

Chet Chia

(From *Cambodia's Lament: A Selection of Poetry*  
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## **In the Classroom**

- Cambodians have a very positive attitude toward learning. Teachers, therefore, enjoy a very high status in Cambodian society. Parents entrust teachers with the education of their children. Some even encourage ‘spanking’ if their children misbehave or refuse to study. Out of respect, students in Cambodia are taught to stand up when the teacher enters or leaves the classroom. Students are supposed to create a productive learning atmosphere in class by keeping as quiet as possible. Being talkative, interrupting, eating or drinking in class are considered bad manners.
- Adapting to American classroom has been difficult for many Cambodian adults who come from rural backgrounds and did not have a chance to finish elementary or high school during wartime. In the past, many Cambodian women were bound to domestic tasks; so they did not have a taste of formal education. Many just had the first few English lessons in refugee camps in Thailand or elsewhere; many others have never studied English before.
- In general, Cambodian learners are hard-working, eager to learn and pleasant to teach although they are often shy and reluctant to speak. In class some of them may not look you in the eye. Don’t misinterpret their lack of eye contact as being disrespectful. On the contrary, avoidance of eye contact is a sign of respect in their culture.
- Cambodians’ learning style is mostly memorization at the expense of practical application. Thus, they are keener on grammar and reading than on listening and speaking.

## **Teacher Comments**

- Although in principle it is not necessary for a teacher of English to learn the student’s language or culture in order to teach effectively, some basic understanding of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds can help avoid unnecessary cultural misunderstandings or explain their mistakes.
- Cambodian belongs to a linguistic group known as Mon-Khmer (itself a part of the Austro-Asiatic family) although it is not a tonal language. The Khmer alphabet is phonetic and has 47 letters. The writing system is derived from a Sanskrit script. It is written from left to right across the page with no space between words. Because Khmer is an isolating language, words do not change their forms and grammatical functions are expressed by function words and by word order. For example, the Past Tense is expressed by the use of such words as ‘yesterday’ or ‘already’ and the Future, by the word ‘tomorrow’.
- Since there are no tenses and agreement in Khmer, Cambodian learners tend to use the unmarked base form of the English verbs, thus failing to add the *-s* in the Third Person singular verb or the *-ed* in the Past Tense form (and by the same token, failure to pluralize nouns). Pronunciation of these endings is also a major area in which Cambodian speakers are at a disadvantage compared with European learners of English. In addition, English tenses and aspects are common sources of confusion for Cambodian learners.
- The basic word order in Khmer is Subject-Verb-Object although the subject or object is sometimes omitted in clear context, explaining why they often drop the subject or object in

their English. The Khmer noun phrase is different from the English one. It has the order: *head noun + adjective + numeral + classifier + demonstrative*. Since Khmer lacks a system of articles, Cambodian learners often have difficulty in using English articles.

- Cambodians learning English often have problems pronouncing the following sounds, among others: /ð/, /θ/, /ʃ/, /z/, and /v/ because these do not occur in the first language. Dropping final consonant sounds are also common because they don't pronounce them in their mother tongue.

## Student Comments

- Cambodians don't feel appropriate calling the teacher by the first name or arguing with the teacher. They address the teacher by respectfully using the title 'Teacher', which is considered inappropriate in an American context.
- Most Cambodian learners feel more comfortable having things written on the board so that they can copy them down and learn at home. They expect to have handouts of rules, summaries or lecture outlines.
- Some Cambodian learners mention that they face a lot of pressures of how to adjust into the new cultural environment and how to get along with their peers in class. Some feel lonely or socially lost simply because the ways they dress or talk are so different.
- As parents, many learners have difficulty dealing with the complexities of raising children in a foreign culture. They do not know how to teach their children appropriately because child-rearing at home is so different from that in the host culture. For example, in Cambodia children accept their parents' wishes or advice without arguing or physical punishment is possible in order to discipline the misbehaving kids.

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