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Profile of Cambodia

Overview

Cambodia is officially known as the Kingdom of Cambodia (or Preah Réachéanachâkr Kâmpuchea).

It is a constitutional monarchy with an estimated population of 13.8 million (July 2006 estimates).

The border countries of Laos (to the northeast), Thailand (to the west and northwest) and Vietnam (to the east and southeast) all played a part in Cambodia's history.

Today, Cambodia is one of the poorest and most corrupted states in the world.

It has also been both the actor and victim of a troubled history. Angkor Wat is the main reminder of a glorious time when the powerful Hindu and Buddhist Khmer Empire ruled over an area of land stretching as far as Vietnam, China and the Bay of Bengal.

History

From the sixteenth century, the Khmer kingdom started declining through wars with its neighbouring countries of Thailand and Cham (today's Vietnam).

The Khmer kingdom served them as a vassal state between short-lived bouts of independence until it sought protection under French colonial rule in 1863.

Cambodia remained part of the French protectorate of Indochina¹ until November 9, 1953 when it gained independence. It became a constitutional monarchy under the reign of King Norodom Sihanouk, soon destabilised by war in neighbouring Vietnam.

Cambodia then witnessed the darkest episode of its history when in April 1975, after five-year of civil war; Communist Khmer Rouge took power, emptied the cities and subsequently crushed the country civilians through a reign of terror and genocide.

Pol Pot² and its minions led to the death of an estimated 1.5 to 3 million Cambodians through execution, starvation and forced labour!

The dictatorial regime and subsequent civil war brought on by the Vietnamese occupation between 1978 and 1991 brought the country to its knees and sparked a massive emigration flow. It is estimated that 1.3 million Cambodians left the country between 1975 and 1987.

Peace enabled Cambodia to come back on the international scene and benefit from economic assistance from organisations such as the World Bank and IMF. From 2001 to 2004, the economy

1 French Indochina comprised today's Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

2 Pol Pot is the leader of the Angkar, the hidden face of the Kampuchean Communist Party, widely known as Khmer Rouge. He imposed absolute rules of terror in Cambodia from 1975, date of the fall of Phnom Penh, to 1978, year of the Vietnamese invasion.

After their defeat, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge retreated to the remote western part of Cambodia from where they led guerilla warfare that would last for another 20 years. Pol Pot died in April 1995 of supposedly heart failure, having been the instigator of the bloodiest conflict ever committed by a tyrant on his own people.

grew thanks to a boost in the tourism and clothing sectors. However, corruption remains a big shadow over economic expansion and poverty is rife with 40% of the population living under the poverty line.

Besides, Cambodians still rely heavily on the declining farming sector (75% live on agriculture) put to the test with depleting arable land, the lasting presence of land mines and years of mismanaging natural resources.

Finally, poor health and educational standards, the threat of the avian flu, and spread of HIV among the population (2.6% of adults are HIV positive) hamper development.

In terms of freedom of speech and human rights, Cambodia still fares poorly (although no doubt, much better than under the Khmer Rouge regime!) as the authorities maintain a tight grip on the media and opposition leaders have been victims of intimidation campaigns.

Tensions between Cambodia and its neighbours are still in the air and led to minor scuffles in recent years.

When it comes to ethnic minorities, 90% of the population is of Khmer descent and Cambodia only counts over 20 ethnic minorities (Ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham, Khmer Loeu³ and Indians) amounting for the remaining 10%.

During its regime, the Khmer Rouge committed horrific abuses of the ethnic Vietnamese and Cham Muslim minority in particular.

Nowadays, despite the restoration of peace, ethnic Vietnamese (known as Montagnards) are still being persecuted and the action of the Cambodian police and authorities condemned.

Ethnic Groups in Cambodia

Cambodia's ethnic minorities live mainly in Mondolkiri and Ratanakiri provinces, in the Northeast of the country, where they actually outnumber the Khmer!

Hence, "ethnic groups" is a better denomination than "ethnic minorities".

Few Ethnic Groups

As we mentioned in the country introduction, Cambodia counts over 20 distinctive groups but most are regrouped as follows:

The Khmer Loeu or Leu

They are also called 'indigenous people' or 'highland people'.

The Khmer Loeu or Leu are the most ancient inhabitants of Cambodia. They often call themselves *Choncheat*.

The Khmer Loeu groups are the following:

³ Khmer Loeu literally means 'Highland Khmer'. The Cambodian government created this expression in the 1960s with the aim of unifying the highland ethnic groups with the ruling lowland ethnic Khmer.

- Jarai with an estimated population of 15,000⁴ located in Ratanakiri province
- Rhade with only a dozen individuals left in Mondulakiri province!
- Kachac (est. 2,200 living in Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri provinces)
- Tampuan (est. 18,000 mainly located in Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri provinces)
- Brao (est. 6,000 in Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces)
- Kreung (est. 14,000 in Ratanakiri)
- Kravet (est. 4,000 in Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces)
- Lun (est. 300 living in Ratanakiri and Stung Treng provinces)
- Phnong (est. 19,000 living in Mondulakiri, Stung Treng and Ratanakiri)
- Stieng (est. 4,000 living in Kratie and Mondulakiri provinces)
- Kraol (est. 2,000 in Kratie and Mondulakiri)
- Mel (est. 2,000 in Kratie province)
- Poar (est. 1,500 in Kampong Thom and Pursat)
- Saoch (est. 175 in Kampong Speu and Pursat provinces)
- Suoy (est. 1,200 in Kampong Speu)
- Khmer Khe (est. 1,600 in Stung Treng)
- Kuy with an estimated 14,000 individuals living in Preah Vihear, Kampong Thom, and Stung Treng.
- Other little known groups: the Robel, Thmaun, Loemoun, Kola, Kanning, Poang and Roong.

The Khmer Chinese

The Khmer Chinese (50,000 individuals) used to be the largest ethnic minority in Cambodia.

However, years of economic stagnation, Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese persecution and warfare led to their emigration and nowadays they have been supplanted in number by Ethnic Vietnamese.

In Cambodia, Khmer Chinese still heavily contribute to the local economy: 60% of them are engaged in commerce and based in urban centres, whereas the remainder operate as small traders and money lenders.

4 These numbers are estimates extracted from an ADB report dating from 2002.

The Khmer Cham

The Khmer Cham are ethnic Muslims - descendants from the Kingdom of Champa.

In Cambodia, they number approximately 220,000 individuals and are mainly found in Phnom Penh and provinces of Battambang, Kompong Thom, Kompong Cham and Pursat.

They used to be 800,000 Chams in Cambodia in the 1960s but the Khmer Rouge's ascension marked their decline.

Pol pot regime persecuted them and many died or fled the country.

The Khmer Cham are often educated and take an active part in trade and commerce.

The Ethnic Vietnamese

The ethnic Vietnamese, also known as *Montagnards*, are located in southeastern Cambodia along the border with Vietnam and in the central provinces.

They count 95,000 individuals in Cambodia itself. They dominate in the country fisheries and manual trades.

The Vietnamese distinguish themselves by the way they dress, their religious beliefs (they are Christians and Mahayana Buddhists, whereas Cambodians are Theravada Buddhists) and their social structure.

Finally, there is also a small minority of Indians.

A Dominant Khmer Language Hiding a Wealth of Other Languages

In 1998, the National Population Census of Cambodia distinguished 17 indigenous groups on the basis of their spoken language.

There are two linguistic families within the indigenous Khmer or Khmer Loeu:

- The Austro-Thais (Malayo-Polynesians) consisting in Cambodia of the Jarai and Rhade mixed with the Phnong in Mondulkiri.
These two groups are linguistically related to the Cham subgroup.
- The Mon-Khmer linguistic group includes Brao, Khmer Khe, Kravet, Kreung, Kraol, Lun, Mel, Phnong, Poar, Raong, Saoch, Stieng, Suoy, Kuy, Tampuon and Thmaun ethnic groups.

The Khmer Chinese could originally be divided into five linguistic groups:

- The Teochiu (spoken by 60% of Khmer Chinese)
- The Cantonese (spoken by 20% of them)
- The Hokkien (the language of 7% of Khmer Chinese)
- The Hakka (practiced by 4% of Khmer Chinese)

- The Hainanese (idem)

The Khmer Cham speak a language similar to Malay and derived from the same Austro-Asiatic family of languages.

Cambodian French, vestige of the French colonial period, is still spoken among older Cambodians and top ranks of the government.

A mosaic of languages and groups can seem a bit daunting at first, but it is also a survivor of Cambodia's cultural history and a legacy of regional migration patterns.

We will now explore further one of these groups: the Khmer Leu.

The Khmer Leu

Origins and Languages

The origins of the Khmer Leu are unclear but these ethnic groups might have followed one of two different patterns of migration into Cambodia:

- The Mon Khmer-speaking groups are thought to have emigrated from the northwest into the border area of Cambodia.
- The Austro Thai-speaking groups –the Rade and Jarai- first settled on the coast of Vietnam and then migrated west towards Cambodia.

Some Khmer Leu groups settled beyond the borders of today's Cambodia in Vietnam, Southern Laos and Thailand.

Historically speaking, these groups were virtually free of administrative control before the French protectorate imposed a border in 1903, limiting their movements and artificially separating them.

For instance, the Jarai can be found in the Vietnamese province of Pleiku (see Vietnam section), and some Phnong in the province of Dalat.

The Kuy are also present in Thailand and Laos; and the Brao and Kravet from Southern Laos are closely related to those in the Cambodian area of Ratanakiri.

The Highland Khmer

The origins of the name Khmer Leu (or Loeu), meaning *Highland Khmer*, are attributed to the Cambodian government in the 1960's.

The authorities were then keen to create a sense of unity between the highland ethnic groups and the majority of lowland ethnic Khmer.

However, traditionally the indigenous groups have called themselves *Choncheat* and Khmer pejoratively named them *phnong* and *samre*.

Therefore, the term 'Khmer Leu' is rather controversial, as most of these people do not actually share the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds as the Khmer majority.

The Kuy, Phnong, Brao, Jarai and Rade are the largest groups among the tribal Khmer Leu population living in Cambodia.

Strategic Location

The Khmer Loeu mainly live in the northeastern provinces of Rattanakiri, Stung Treng, Mondulkiri and Crate.

The northeastern region of Cambodia, where most Khmer Leu groups settled centuries ago, is also a fertile and politically strategic area in which neighbouring countries and successive colonisers have exerted political control and exploited local resources.

The rivers Sre Pok and Sre San and their affluents have long played a key role in trading goods and slaves in the region.

These power plays and trade movements affected the indigenous populations. Highland villages were sometimes raided and highlanders traded as slaves until the nineteenth century.

The geographical relief though isolated many groups from regular contacts with outsiders up until the 19th century. More recently, the wealth of natural resources of the highlands, its forests and fertile grounds have attracted investors and boosted tourism but more often than not indigenous groups have not benefited from this economic development.

An increase of migrants into the region has intensified the pressure on land availability and created tensions. It has also reduced indigenous people's access to non-timber forests.

Today, Khmer Leu groups remain among the poorest in Cambodia.

Surviving Cultures

Since the 1960's, indigenous groups' cultures and languages have stood through testing times.

First, it was the attempts from the authorities to assimilate them under army supervision into the Khmer majority in their lifestyle and farming techniques.

As part of this 'Khmerisation' drive, the government encouraged lowland Khmers to populate the less populated highland provinces such as Ratanakiri and the Khmer Loeu were supported in implementing lowland rice farming methods.

Then, it was the even more challenging iron-fist rule of the Khmer Rouge who prohibited the practice of local cultures and languages!

However, after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, many indigenous villagers returned to their ancestral land and went back to their traditional ways.

Today's formal education tends to fail these indigenous groups, and many are turning to non-formal education to receive the necessary training and knowledge to help them survive.

Finally, as folk literature is orally transmitted rather than in put in writing, it is feared some traditions will be lost without record.

Village Structure and Agriculture

The Khmer Leu live in scattered temporary settlements surrounded by fields and thick forests with only a few hundred villagers.

Houses do not follow a single structure: they vary in sizes and might be either built on the ground or on stilts.

Longhouses accommodate several families, whereas small structures only accommodate a single family.

Local elders and a village headman represent the village authority and are responsible for taking all-important decisions such as choosing a village location, moving the village, etc.

The village itself is often located close to a river, source of fish and fresh water, and forests that provide raw material such as wood and a hunting ground for food.

The Khmer Loeu groups cultivate a variety of plants but their main staple consists of upland rice. Contrarily to wetland rice, this rice does not require paddy fields and Khmer Loeu traditionally resort to the slash-and-burn method of cultivation.

As a result of their cultivating methods, arable land in Khmer Loeu villages' vicinity is fast exhausted and the village abandoned for new grounds.

As mentioned in the previous section, central authorities have discouraged the use of slash and burn technique. However, it is still a widely used cultivating technique among indigenous populations of the highlands.

Religion and Beliefs

Many Khmer Leu groups differentiate themselves from ethnic Khmers with their religious and cultural conservatism by not adhering to Buddhism.

The Khmer Leu are animists: they believe that spirits inhabit forests, cities, villages and houses, etc.

Khmer Leu Clothing

So many groups, as many traditional outfits!

Although nowadays Khmer Leu clothing tends not to differ from that of other Cambodians' in everyday life, they wear a distinctive outfit on special occasions (wedding day, religious celebrations, etc).

Today's young Khmer Loeu are increasingly influenced by Western fashion and many turn away from the traditional dress in favour of a more modern outfit in search of mainstream acceptance.