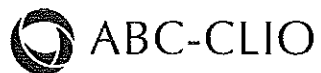


# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ASIAN AMERICAN FOLKLORE AND FOLKLIFE

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Volume One

**Jonathan H. X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau, Editors**



Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Encyclopedia of Asian American folklore and folklife / Jonathan H.X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau, editors.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-313-35066-5 (hard copy : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-313-35067-2 (ebook)

1. Asian Americans—Folklore—Encyclopedias. 2. Asian Americans—Social life and customs—Encyclopedias. I. Lee, Jonathan H. X. II. Nadeau, Kathleen G.

GR111.A75E63 2011

398.2'08995073—dc22

2010030699

ISBN: 978-0-313-35066-5

EISBN: 978-0-313-35067-2

15 14 13 12 11 1 2 3 4 5

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130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911

Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911

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Manufactured in the United States of America

key traits in Cambodian culture, such as compassion, modesty, and collective good, which contrast with American values of individuality, self-esteem, and pride.

—Kanara Ty

### Further Reading

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## Religion

The Cambodian American religious landscape is primarily Buddhist, but the history of religion in Cambodia is diverse. Cambodian and Cambodian American religious culture is a blend of influences mainly from India, but also China. Therefore, it reflects an intermixing of elements from Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucian, Islamic, and indigenous beliefs that are embedded in religious practices and beliefs. Together, these influences have forged a distinctively Khmer faith that has sustained Cambodians through the war and genocide that nearly destroyed their nation in the last third of the 20th century and helped anchor diaspora communities around the world, including the largest—in the United States.

### History of Cambodian Religions

Historically, Hinduism (Siva and Vishnu Cults), and Buddhism have existed together in Cambodia from the 1st century BCE to the 14th century CE. Khmer religious expression finds still different influences coming from Islam and Vietnamese religions. For instance, Cambodian Muslims are descendants of the Chams, who migrated from central Vietnam after the final defeat of the kingdom of Champa by the Vietnamese in 1471.



Monks at the Khmer Buddhist Society in Seattle, Washington, 1994. (Dan Lamont/Corbis)

Cambodian Muslims adopted a fairly orthodox version of Sunni Islam and maintained links with other Muslim communities throughout Southeast Asia. There is also a small, heterodox Islam community, the Zahidin, who practice a form of Islam similar to the Muslim Chams of Vietnam, but who only pray once a week on Friday, and observe Ramadan only the first, middle, and last day of the month. Khmer Muslims represent a close-knit community, marrying only within their own faith community. Their total population is more than 300,000 in Cambodia, but much smaller in the United States.

### **Khmer Theravada Buddhism**

Theravada Buddhism (“the Way of the Elders”) is the dominant faith in Cambodia, having been the state religion since the 13th century, enduring through both French colonialism until the 1950s, and after, up until the 1970s Communist revolution under Pol Pot. The Khmer Rouge, as the Communists called themselves, ruthlessly attempted to remove religion from Cambodian life by destroying many temples and executing many of the *sangha*, or Buddhist community of monks and nuns. Most of the 3,600 temples that existed in Cambodia were destroyed, and fewer than 3,000 of the 50,000 monks survived the genocide. Not until 1979, following Vietnam’s occupation of the country, was religion allowed to be practiced publicly again. However, the rebuilding process relied heavily on Theravadian monks from Thailand.

Khmer religion is best characterized as a combination of Buddhist, Hindu, indigenous folk, and Chinese beliefs and practices. However, most Khmer are Buddhist and hence share certain basic understandings and beliefs. The most central of these is the concept of karma (*kam*), the belief that one’s actions in previous lives and the merit (*bon*) that one has accumulated determine one’s current and future life situation. This is coupled with the notion of reincarnation, the belief that every individual is at a certain stage of the rebirth process. Many Khmer will invoke their understanding of karma to make sense of their current lives. According to Theravada Buddhism, life is ultimately characterized by unease (*anicca*), obfuscated by the impermanence of all things. The first of the Four Noble Truths, taught by the historical Buddha Siddhartha, envisions life as suffering (*dukkha*) that one is expected to endure because the suffering has an end.

### **Khmer Folk Religious Elements**

Khmer folk religion conceptualizes various spirits and souls that influence peoples’ lives—positively or negatively. Khmer believe that there is a guardian mother spirit, an “invisible mother” (*me ba*) who protects a baby during the early years of infancy, but who can also be potentially dangerous. The invisible mother is a “spirit mother” of the baby in a previous life, who watches over her baby with

much love and affection during the early years of infancy. However, many Khmer elders express ambivalence toward the invisible mother because she is potentially dangerous if the baby is left alone. Central to Khmer understanding of life is the belief that there are many nonhuman life forms cohabiting with humans; some are benign while others are frightening. Spirits of locality (e.g., mountains and villages) are called *qnak ta* ("ancestral people") and are relatively benign. Spirits of known or unknown deceased persons, ghosts of the dead (i.e., *khmoc lan* and *bray*), victims of murder, or babies who die at childbirth are potentially dangerous.

### Buddhist Temples

Cambodian Buddhist temples are a key cultural institution in the Cambodian American community. Early on in the development of these communities, because of a lack of financial resources to construct a community temple, many Khmers will construct a Buddhist shrine in their homes. Temples are considered important sites not only for moral education and children's socialization, but also for rituals, including weddings, blessings, exorcisms, and funerals. When available, a monk is the preferred officiate for a ritual; however, a religious layperson (*achaa*) may step in to perform a ritual in lieu of a monk. The scarcity of Khmer Buddhist monks remains a big obstacle to the establishment of Khmer Buddhist temples among various communities in the diaspora. This is not to suggest that Khmer American communities are never able to produce the necessary capital to finance the construction of a temple. For instance, in 1984, about 800 Khmers in Portland, Maine, established a nonprofit organization, the Watt Samaki "Unity Temple," to raise funds for the purchase and construction of a temple. Since immigrating to the United States, Khmer Buddhist communities have been successful in establishing and building nearly 40 temples nationwide, in Long Beach and Stockton, California; Seattle and Tacoma, Washington; Lowell, Massachusetts; Jacksonville, Florida; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Silver Spring, Maryland—to name a few places. Several of these temples were once home to Christian congregations, which says much about religious pluralism in contemporary America.

Cambodian temple building comes with a potential backlash from xenophobic neighbors who invoke zoning laws and regulations in attempts to stop the building of temples in their neighborhoods. For example, in Silver Spring, Maryland in 2008, neighbors counted cars and kept detailed records and photos of people visiting the temple during festival celebrations. The Maryland State Supreme Court denied the group, then known as the Khmer Buddhist Society, a permit to build a temple on Newtown Hilltop. Afterwards, the Newtown Zoning Board presented the Khmer Buddhist Society with a "cease all religious services and festivals permanently" order (*The Hartford Courant*). As with Lao, Vietnamese, Sikh, and

Chinese Americans, rebuilding temples and other religious institutions is a fundamental aspect of Cambodian American religious work because it affirms the community's ethnic, religious, and cultural identity. Religious institutions and the ritual spheres are important social spaces in the adaptation to a completely new society.

### **Belief and Practice in the United States**

Khmer Buddhism in the United States plays a huge role in the socialization and moral education of younger Khmer Americans. The majority of Khmer Americans identify themselves as Buddhists, to the extent that ethnic and religious identities are deeply entwined. In Cambodia, Buddhist temples are places where young people, especially boys, learn moral lessons and proper respect toward elders. In the United States, many Khmer elders attribute the immorality among young Khmer Americans to the scarcity of trained Khmer monks and the shortage of temples. The life and narrative of the historical Buddha is a popular folklore in Khmer families. Adapting to American culture, Khmer American children frequently enjoy watching Bernardo Bertolucci's film *Little Buddha* (1993), starring Keanu Reeves.

Many Khmers will perform merit transfer ceremonies on behalf of their family members who died under Pol Pot, to provide their deceased with comfort and chances for a good rebirth. In Buddhism, karma chains all living creatures in the endless cycles of reincarnation and suffering. Merit is the counterweight of karma, and may be gained primarily by supporting the community of monks and nuns, or by assisting the needy, or by meditating on compassion and peace. Merit is also transferable. Hence, the living may perform rituals and offerings to earn merit, which may then be transferred to their beloved to assist them in the afterlife and in getting reborn into the human realm. When available, a monk is preferred; however, a lay religious person may agree to perform the necessary rituals.

Most Khmer jointly worship and perform rituals important in both Buddhism and folk traditions. There is no tension, no struggle for membership, between Theravada Buddhism and spirits in folk belief; many times one will find shrines to local tree spirits in front of Buddhist temples, or shrines to ancestral people around a Buddhist temple. In the United States, in Khmer American communities, Buddhist temples become repositories of Khmer culture, brokers in cultural adaptation, and centers of community solidarity and Khmer identity.

—Jonathan H. X. Lee

*See also:* Pan Asian Americans: Siddhartha Gautama.

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## Rites of Passage

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Cambodian and Cambodian American folk beliefs and folklore are expressed in rites of passages and rituals. These rituals emphasize traditional social values that help to shape Cambodian American cultural identity and community in the context of the United States.

In Cambodian American culture, the wedding ceremony serves as a visible marker reinforcing the importance of marriage and family kinship. Marriage acts as a symbol of status amongst Cambodian/Cambodian American families. Marriage could raise the status of either the groom's or bride's family, depending on the reputation of families of both parties. Marriage acts as an indicator of social identity for both the groom and bride, since they are public displays of both masculinity (the groom being able to support a family) and femininity (the bride's virtue).

In the United States, the Cambodian wedding ceremony may be shorter, but the amount of time and money spent on preparation and on the actual day of the ceremony are quite demanding due to the elaborate nature of the event. The groom's family takes care of the cost of the wedding through the bride-wealth (a sum of money usually negotiated between the two families), as well as providing gifts (consisting of alcohol, food, and clothing) and finally, the jewelry to be first given at the engagement. The at-home ceremony could cost between \$2,000 and \$5,000, while the banquet could cost between \$6,000 and \$10,000. On the other hand, the bride's family organizes the wedding, including hiring photographers and videographers, reserving the restaurant for the banquet, hiring Cambodian American traditional bands and modern rock bands, and making food preparations for the guests. All organized into a single day, the Cambodian American wedding ceremony takes place in the morning at the bridal home, while the reception follows at a Cambodian American restaurant