



We'll get back to the specifics of Cambodian culture in the next chapter. But first let's look at a few of the things that have gone into shaping the people and their culture.

legendary beginnings

“Don't take the winding path, don't take the straight path. Take the path of your ancestors.”

—Cambodian proverb

My son, observe the commandment of your father, and do not forsake the teaching of your mother.

—Prov. 6:20

Cambodia has many legends about the beginnings of its country. These stories are accepted and quoted, without concern about which one is “true” or “right”. They just are. Khmer legends also frequently mix Hinduism, Buddhism, and spirit worship, with no apparent concern about inconsistencies or contradictions. You will see later that this is also true in the religious life of most Cambodians. We call this practice of mixing different beliefs or religions “**syncretism**”.

One legend tells that the Hindu god Indra gave life to his son Ketomeala as a human being. Ketomeala was to “protect Buddhist religion and take care of the Kingdom in glory, prosperity and peace.” After many ritual bathings and incantations from seven divine Brahmans (Hindu priests), Ketomeala was flown over Indra's many palaces, so that he could choose one as a model for the temple he would build on earth. His choice then became Angkor Wat. On the day that Ketomeala was crowned as sacred king of the Kingdom, Indra gave him the name “Powerful Destroyer of Enemies” and gave the land the name “Kambuja” or Cambodia.

Another story, more like a fairy tale although possibly based in history, tells of an Indian prince, exiled from his country because of his quick temper. In his wanderings, he went out to an island to relax, and fell asleep on a hill under a tree. When he woke up, the tide had come in, surrounding him and the tree. He was also amazed to see that a mermaid princess and all her ladies in waiting were sunning themselves on the hill near him. He immediately fell in love with the princess, and spoke sweetly to her. She returned his love, and they agreed to meet back on the island in eight days to be married. The prince worked feverishly, preparing himself and gathering lavish gifts. On the eighth day, the king and queen of the mermaids came with their daughter to meet the groom. They were impressed with the Indian prince and his gifts, and they agreed to the match. As a wedding gift, the king of the mermaids sucked up all the water around the island. The dry land that emerged was the land of Cambodia, and it became the kingdom of the Indian prince and mermaid princess. They were the first king and queen of Cambodia. According to the story, this happened in 267 BC.



history

The origins of the Cambodian people will remain a mystery, since Cambodia doesn't show up in recorded history until the 6th century, AD. At that time, small Khmer states already existed near the Mekong Delta, and made war on the declining Funan empire. Funan followed many aspects of Indian culture, and was a merchant state, controlling trade between India and China. The Khmer overran the Funan between 550–650 AD, but then fell into chaos and disorder.

What emerged from the chaos was the Khmer state of Chenla. It adopted the Indian culture left behind by the Funan dynasty, and established its capital by the Tonle Sap near present day Siem Reap. Under expansionist rulers, its authority pushed into the territories of what are today Thailand and Laos. The kingdom soon divided into Upper Chenla (present day Cambodia) and Lower Chenla (now the Khmer Krom people in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam).

Angkor period

In the ninth century, one man came to dominate Upper Chenla. His name was Jayavarman the second. His name means "Victory Armor". Jayavarman revived the cult of the Devaraja—an Indian tradition of the "god king" where the ruler is seen as divinity. He was crowned "Universal Monarch" on Kulen Mountain (near Siem Reap) and declared himself to be the "King of Kings". His followers bought into the cult, and in one ancient inscription proclaimed him to be "the Lord of the Universe, who is King." The Devaraja concept continues to this day. An entirely different set of vocabulary is used when speaking or referring to the king. These words are also used for any god.

After Jayavarman's reign, the two Chenla kingdoms were peacefully reunited and a strong, sophisticated society began to develop around Angkor.

The Angkorian period reached its peak during the period from the 11th to the 13th centuries. Suryavarman II (1113–1150) killed his uncle in battle, reigned for 40 years, warred against the Muslims of Champa (in Northern Vietnam), and sent ambassadors to China, whose emperor considered Chenla to be his "great vassal". Suryavarman was the builder of Angkor Wat itself, patterned after the mythical home of the Hindu gods, Mount Meru. It was a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of the Hindu goddess, Vishnu. Today, it is still one of the largest religious buildings in the world, and a great source of national pride.

The last and greatest king of the Angkorian period was Jayavarman VII (1181–ca. 1218). He reversed the Cham encroachments which had taken place after the death of Suryavarman II, and actually conquered Champa, briefly reducing it to a vassal state. His kingdom encompassed present day Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos to Vientiane (the capital city) and south to include the small trading city-states of the Malay Peninsula. Jayavarman (who is also known as the "leper king") supervised the building of many spectacular temples. He restructured the road system and built shelters for travelers, as well as many hospitals.



present day borders of SE Asia



Jayavarman's prolific building programs took a heavy toll on the finances and the human labor force of the Angkorian empire. This drain of resources coincided with the gradual intrusion of the Mongols and the Thai (who were fleeing the Mongols themselves). In 1295, Jayavarman VIII abdicated the throne to his brother-in-law (Srindravarman) in the face of a Thai invasion.

Under the Thai influence, Theravada Buddhism was introduced from Sri Lanka to Cambodia. Theravada Buddhism, with its egalitarian focus, replaced the old Mahayana Buddhism, which stressed hierarchy and a stratified society similar to the Hindu caste system of India.

The Khmer dynasty slowly subsided until its disappearance in 1327. Of the period following this time, we know virtually nothing. No inscriptions remain. The royal chronicles do not mention any reliable name for a king. According to legend, the last king was accidentally killed by a gardener while picking sweet cucumbers.

Here is a brief time line, tracing what we know of the history of Cambodia from the 1400s to the present day:

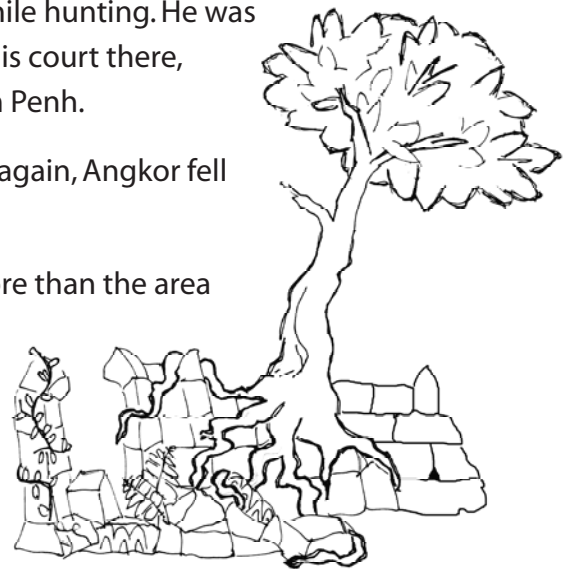
1432 The capital of Angkor was captured and sacked by the Thai. The fall of Angkor ended the dominant period of the Khmer state.

1434 The city of Phnom Penh was founded, signalling the shift from a pure agrarian (farming) society, to one which involved trading.

1550 King Ang Chan discovered Angkor by chance while hunting. He was so stunned by the beauty of that place that he moved his court there, although the capital remained near present-day Phnom Penh.

1594 Angkor was again conquered by Thailand. Once again, Angkor fell into oblivion, and was abandoned to the jungle.

By this time, Cambodia's borders had shrunk to little more than the area around the Tonle Sap, the flood plain to the southeast, and some territory west of the Mekong River. To the east, the collapse of the kingdom of Champa in 1471 opened the Khmer (lower Chenla) lands of the Mekong Delta to the steady expansion of the Vietnamese people to the south.



1863 Cambodia was colonized by France. When France began their involvement in Cambodia, they encountered a society which had been largely unchanged for centuries, but withered to the point of decay. The French colonial interest in the region coincided with the Cambodian king's need for protection from the ambitions of both Thailand and Vietnam. So, a French protectorate was established, which prevented the complete disintegration of the kingdom.

1886 France puts down a Cambodian rebellion using Vietnamese troops



1941 Cambodia surrendered Battambang and Siem Reap to Thailand as a result of the Franco-Siamese war.

1945 Japan invaded Cambodia and swept the French administration out of the country. Japan induced the king to proclaim "independence," however, Japan remained firmly in control.

1946 France returned to reimpose their authority after Japan's defeat at the end of World War II. They permitted Cambodia the right to have its own constitution and the right to form political parties.

1949 France managed to secure the return of Battambang and Siem Reap to Cambodia.

1953 Norodom Sihanouk (appointed regent by France because they thought he was more easily manipulated than the legitimate heir to the throne) announced Khmer independence on a triumphant return from negotiations in Paris. The next decade witnessed intense political maneuvering by Prince Sihanouk to retain the supreme authority of the newly "appointed" royal family and suppress the stirrings of opposition.

1969 The USA secretly commenced "carpet" bombing on suspected communist base camps in Cambodia. During the next four years, thousands of Cambodian civilians were killed.

1970 A coup d'état displaced Prince Sihanouk and installed the Khmer Republic, with its dependence on the United States for military assistance. The leader of this government was Lon Nol. Prince Sihanouk retreated to China in order to unite, publicly, with the cause of the Khmer Rouge. After a period of increasing dislocation of the rural population from the war raging both inside Cambodia and on its borders, and because of rampant corruption and incompetence in the administration of the military effort, the Republic fell before the onslaught of the Khmer Rouge on April 17, 1975.

1975

Democratic Kampuchea was formed and the era of the "Killing Fields" began. Thus began the period often referred to as "Year Zero", the attempt to propel Cambodia into a pure communist state and radically alter traditional Cambodian society. In the short span of less than four years, cities were emptied of their inhabitants. The people were forced into the countryside, where vast labor camps were created. The population lived terrorized lives with sometimes less than minimal conditions for survival. Massacre after massacre assaulted the ranks of even their own Khmer Rouge leadership, and historical antagonism with Vietnam burst forth into a renewed war.



1979 The arrival of the victorious Vietnamese and their allies ended the horrific experiment in social engineering and replaced it with a regime closely aligned with Vietnam, but under at least nominal Cambodian control. Many exhausted survivors struggled to the border to seek refuge in camps on the Thailand side of the border. Some people were resettled in many



countries around the world, while others remained stranded in the refugee camps administered by international organizations, or by one of the three factions still contesting power in Cambodia.

1993 The UN oversaw the first “Democratic Elections”—a coalition government was formed by the two strongest parties, who nevertheless remained in conflict with each other.

1997 Hun Sen, the second Prime Minister (and former Khmer Rouge soldier) ousted his opponent, Prince Ranariddh (son of King Sihanouk) in a military coup and took control of the country.

1998 The UN oversaw the second “Democratic Elections,” in which the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) won in a land-slide victory, installing Hun Sen as the undisputed Prime Minister of Cambodia. Prince Ranariddh, leader of the FUNCINPEC (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia) party, came in second place and served as the leader of the Parliament. FUNCINPEC and CPP formed a coalition government in order to achieve the required majority of seats in Parliament to form a legitimate government.

2003 The third “Democratic Elections” were held, but no party captured enough seats in parliament to have a clear majority. The three major parties—CPP, FUNCINPEC, and the Sam Rainsy party—sat in a stalemate, and no government was formed for almost a year.

2004 Due to much political (often constitutionally questionable) maneuvering, the CPP and FUNCINPEC parties once again formed a coalition, giving them the majority of seats in parliament. This ended the 11 months of gridlock, and gave Cambodia a government once again. Sam Rainsy and many of his leaders were forced to resign their seats on the government and some fled the country. Perhaps in a sign of protest, the aged King Sihanouk abdicated his throne to his younger son, Sihamony.

According to the Cambodian constitution, the monarchy may only be changed by reason of the death of the current king.