

Various Points of Khmer Culture with Explanations

Greetings and Initial Conversation

1. Greet people using the traditional Khmer greeting (sompeah) by putting both hands together in front of your chin. (Shows respect to those you greet.)
2. When Khmer people meet each other they usually ask, “Where are you going?” or “Where have you been?” This is a method of greeting, not actually a way to find out about a person’s movements. Sometimes they will ask like the Chinese, “Have you eaten yet?” These are conversation ice-breakers that we should use too.
3. Always greet older people or people of higher status first. (Respect for age and social status are extremely important.)
4. Adults do not need to sompeah children. Adults only need to acknowledge the child. Children should sompeah the adult first.
5. Shaking hands is not necessary unless they extend a hand to you first. Men should not shake hands with women unless their hand is offered first.
6. Men should not touch the body of Khmer women while greeting them.
7. Do not greet with a European type of kiss.
8. Women should not touch a Buddhist monk. Men should not shake hands with a monk.
9. Khmer usually ask about ages so that they can refer to a person correctly as older or younger. Do not be insulted.
10. Khmer like to ask about wages so they know what status level you fit into. It is alright to be vague and non-specific. It is okay to answer, “not much” or “enough to live.”
11. When a Khmer calls someone fat, he means that the person is healthy and well-looking and strong. To speak about a person’s weight is a common way to ask about his health when he has been away for a long time.

Addressing

1. Use titles such as uncle, grandfather, older sister, depending on their age in relation to yours.
2. If you would like to know the name of a person you are talking to, excuse yourself first as this is more polite.

Eating

1. If a close friend visits at mealtime, extend the invitation to stay for the meal. They want to encourage closer friendship.
2. If you visit someone and they are in the process of eating and if they ask you to join them, say, “I have eaten already, thanks.” They will not be put out.
3. Do not feel the need to offer to pay for the meal if you have been invited by a Khmer. Find another way of compensation for the meal.
4. It is not polite to lick your fingers or use your finger nail to clean your teeth when others are present. When using a toothpick, cover your mouth.
5. One should not eat while walking around whether in a house or on the street. This is very impolite.
6. Men can eat a lot but do not eat fast.
7. If guests come during a meal, they must be invited to eat.
8. Serve guests water or drink even if they come for a short visit. Do not ask them what they

want to drink. That is impolite. They are obligated to choose the cheapest drink.

9. There should be limited talk during meals. Speak only if asked something. Talk business after you have finished eating.

10. When eating in a restaurant or at a feast, clean your glass and dishes at least with a napkin.

11. Bring a gift when invited to a meal. Often it can be a special fruit, drink or dessert.

Speaking

1. Do not lose your temper. Speak softly and gently. Loudness is considered rude.

2. Patience and humility are virtues.

3. Do not make a fist or point a finger while speaking. That is considered an insult.

4. Giving criticism or discussing an individual's problems must not be done in public. (The recipient will lose face, want revenge and will be unable to accept your idea.)

5. Sometimes it is best to use a third person when criticizing, as this is less direct for the one being criticized.

6. Do not criticize elders or people with more status who are not your friends. You should complain through another friend indirectly.

Laughter and Smiles

Khmer laugh in situations where laughing seems to be out of place for non-Khmer. There are several reasons for the laughter.

1. The Khmer may not have understood what the other person said, so he laughs out of embarrassment.

2. The sense of humor of Khmer may not be the same as yours. For example, he may laugh during a sad part of a film because he is amused at the role of the actor.

3. A Khmer will laugh when he does something wrong. This shows that he is willing to admit that he is wrong and isn't angry at the person who is criticizing him.

4. Khmer often laugh when they hear us speaking their language, as they are pleased and surprised.

Touching

1. When a man speaks with a woman, he should not stand too close or touch her at all. A woman must not stand or sit close to or touch a priest's robes because he must keep himself pure.

2. Do not touch a person's head because the head is considered to be very special. A child is an exception. It is permissible to touch a child's head to show tenderness toward them. It is not polite to reach over the head of another person or any part of their body.

3. Do not show displeasure when a Khmer touches your child.

4. Khmer do not show love openly before others even if it is a child because it is considered a private matter and not necessary for others to see.

Sitting and Standing

1. When speaking to someone in high position, it is incorrect to stand with hands on one's waist, elbows on the table, hands in one's pockets, arms crossed across one's chest or across one's back or resting on the back of a chair or anything else close by.

2. Do not use gestures or point to anyone, or across in front of someone else or over his head.

3. In the presence of a respected person, one should not sit with legs crossed or apart or

pointing the foot at something or elbows on the table. It is considered by Khmer as unbecoming and disrespectful.

4. Do not point directly at someone or beckon someone with hand facing up, rather with hand facing down.
5. When sitting on the floor, men can sit in the lotus position while eating, though it is more polite to sit with legs tucked behind.
6. Women must sit with legs tucked behind them.

Walking

1. Do not wear shoes or hats in the house or temple.
2. Do not step across any part of the body of a Cambodian, go around them.
3. Do not step over books, feet or purses. Either move them aside, ask someone to move their feet or walk around.
4. Do not walk between people who are talking. If it is unavoidable, stoop lower than their heads to show respect.

Etiquette (Additional things)

1. It is considered strange to say please or thank you in a store or restaurant since you have paid for the service. Please and thank you are used to ask for a favor or after gifts have been given.
2. Cleanliness of a home is judged mostly by the cleanliness of the floor. Things above your head are not considered as important to be cleaned.
3. Giving and receiving
 - a. Give with your right hand, with your left hand holding the right forearm or in giving a letter or money you can give with both hands but not with your left hand alone.
 - b. Allow Khmer to open their gift at home.
 - c. Do not open a gift in front of the giver.
4. Do not give too meager of a gift no matter how thoughtful and how meaningful it might be.
5. Do not expect compliments from Cambodians.