

Social Customs of Cambodia

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Abstract

There is a great influence of the Asian civilisations on Cambodian art, culture and etiquettes. The country's own animistic beliefs and Indian religions of Buddhism and Hinduism have considerably contributed to its expressions. In fact, around 95% of the population believe in Theravada Buddhism, teaching the concept of reincarnation and hierarchy in society. French influence has also speckled it. After independence from the French in 1953 revival of traditional forms has been undertaken. The government has made serious efforts to restore the high culture. The traditional customs, therefore, strongly run throughout the country. Gradually globalisation began to merge urban and rural life. Thus, it, too has left its impression on Cambodian culture and social customs. Since Cambodia is a collective society, it harps on preservation of the reputation of the nation as well as the people. Hence, visitors to Cambodia should be aware of the manners and etiquettes to avoid faux pass or causing offence.

Keywords

Cambodia, culture, customs

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The Kingdom of Cambodia sincerely follows the protocols to maintain peace and harmony in the country. Its face culture points to the fact that face loss can be a major issue, and is, hence, unacceptable.

Listed below are some suavities of the country:

Greeting: Based on the hierarchy or relationship of the people, the most senior is greeted at first and the youngest one in the end. The ‘sampeah’ gesture, like the Indian ‘namaste’ or the Thai ‘wai’, is the usual method of greeting. It comprises a small bow along with pressing both the palms together in front of the chest. While showing higher respect the Cambodians make a deeper bow and the hands go high, to the nose level. Today, though Cambodian men may shake hands, the women prefer to go the traditional way. It is better for a visitor to respond to the greeting he is given. Men are usually addressed as Lok (Mr.) and women as Lok Srey (Mrs.) followed by their names. Nowadays, these titles are used in social or professional classes to reflect differences.



Image 1: Sampeah Gesture

Head and Feet: Cambodian culture considers head to be the most sacred part of the body. It is the focal point of spiritual substance and intelligence. On the other hand, the feet, being the lowest part of the body, are regarded as unchaste. Hence, nobody should pat or touch a person’s head. No one uses his feet to point at it or even an individual. It is insulting to sit or sleep with the soles of the feet pointing towards a person.

Dress: A relatively reserved country, Cambodia prefers formal dressing. However, it has been modified by religion and time. The royalty still wears Sampot, a traditional wear over

the lower body. The ladies usually wear sbai or rabai kanornng, a traditional cape draped over the left shoulder. Especially in places like temples and palaces, visitors should be careful about their dressing.

Gift Giving: On the eve of Cambodian new year (Chaul Chnam) gifts are exchanged.

Unlike western countries birthdays, here, are unimportant and not celebrated. When invited to someone's place the invited can take a small gift for the host. Fruits, sweets, pastries or flowers are the most desired presents. Sharp objects are a strict no-no. They are wrapped in colourful papers. They are not opened immediately on receiving. One should politely use both hands to give or receive gifts. He can also touch his right elbow with his left arm and hand over the present with his right hand.

Dining: Table manners are important. The eldest person should eat first. Only after he starts eating can the others start. Business or profession is kept out of such social setting. Upon invitation the guest should respect the hierarchy arrangement of the home. Although Cambodians use chopsticks, spoon and fork, they also use their hands when eating. Lip-smacking, slurping and chewing can be loud. One generally covers his mouth with his hand while using a toothpick.

Interacting with monks and entering Wat: Before entering the temple everyone, including the king, removes his shoes or sandals. Entering it the devotees should sit bent with both feet tucked to the side, Som Pas and bow to the floor 3 times. A woman cannot touch a monk. She places her offering either on the monk's receiving cloth or keeps it within his reach. The visitor sits before the seated monk and talks to him. It is disrespectful to touch a Buddha statue or stand on the altar. A monk is commonly addressed as "Venerable" followed by his

first or full name. An engagement is created keeping in mind a monk's eating schedule. Foods taken for the monks are not tasted before offering it to them.

Entering a Home: One enters the home after removing his shoes outside. It is also polite to take off the hat inside the home. Cambodians offer food and drinks, such as, tea, juice, water, to their guests. It is courteous to accept the offer. Often guests are offered beds or mats to sit. They sit by tucking their feet backwards.

Respecting Elders: Cambodians teach their children to respect elders from an early age. They Som Pas an elder first, whether he is a host or a guest. A young person should always sit at the same level or below the elder. While sitting on a chair he shouldn't shake his leg or sit cross legged. He bows before an elder passing before or walking front of him. An elder accepts or gives a gift with his one hand but a younger person should use his both hands. He shouldn't touch or pat any elder's head. He should also not put his hand on his shoulder while taking a photograph. While talking to elders, he doesn't put his hands inside his pockets.

Business: The business world also adheres to the hierarchical culture. Reverence and deference should be shown to the most senior first. Although handshakes are normal, they are not compulsory. Business cards are treated with respect. Business meetings are punctual and do not stick to any specific schedule or agenda. Circular meetings entail addressing issues separately or collectively later on. Cambodians prefer non-verbal and indirect communication. Modesty and humility are emphasised while showing emotions and pushy conversations are indicators of negative behaviour. Slow and clear way of communication is normally implemented.

Conclusion

Thus, the unique Cambodian culture has been formed by the influx of different religion and invasions. Although western civilisations have influenced the country, it predominantly observes traditional norms and decorum. Needless to say, with the change of time, the guidelines have relaxed but not too overtly.

References

- Image credit to the rightful owner
- Sampeah gesture: Wikipedia

About the Author

Amrita Mallik is born and brought up in Kolkata. She has done M.A (English) and B.Ed from Calcutta University. She has been a school teacher but presently a housewife. Reading and writing are her hobbies and passions.

