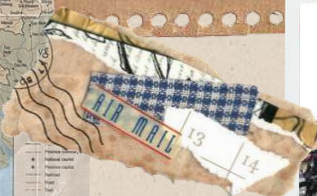


KHMER REFUGEES

DISPLACEMENT AND CAMBODIAN AMERICANS



Cover Photo Page Sources

Siddarth Hanumanthu

lbpost.com

travelbeyond.com

RJ Mickelson for The New York Times

Project by

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OVERVIEW

Cambodia is a country located in mainland Southeast Asia with a current-day population of over 17 million people.

It borders several other Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand and Laos, which lie North and Northwest of Cambodia, and Vietnam to the east.



The country is known for its geographical features, which are dominated by vast plains and farming areas that make up a majority of the country's land, as well as its rainforests and low mountains.

In 2022, about 75% of Cambodia's population was observed to be rural

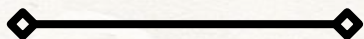


cambodiatravel.com

The majority of Cambodia's population is comprised of the **Khmer people**, with populations of ethnic minorities such as the **Cham**, and small populations of Vietnamese and Chinese people. Most Khmer people are Buddhist. The country's main language, **Khmer**, is heavily influenced by Sanskrit, a language originally from India. Cambodia's culture also traces back to India, and French colonial rule is known to influence the culture as well.



Cambodia has undergone many major events that have left a lasting impact on the country. Cambodia has faced heavy economic and political instability due to wars and genocides. Education and culture have especially faced setbacks due to major political conflicts.

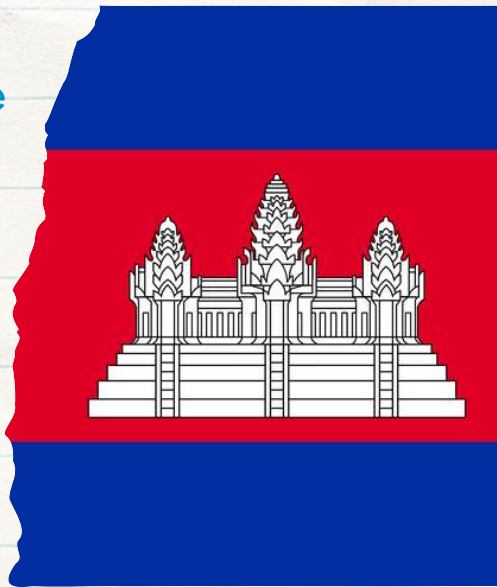


17.8% of Cambodians in Cambodia were observed to be living under the poverty line in 2019.

15% experience significant food insecurities.

There are over **1 million** Cambodians living outside Cambodia as part of the Cambodian Diaspora.

Today there are over **300,000** Cambodians currently living in the United States.



The Vietnam War and U.S. Involvement in Southeast Asia

A North Vietnamese tank rolls into the presidential palace of South Vietnam.

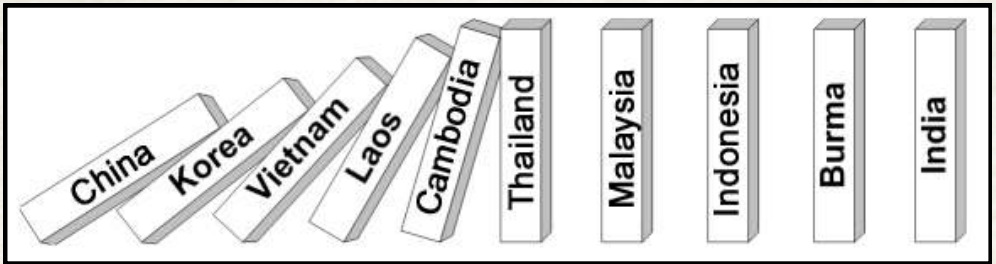
AFP/Getty Images



The Vietnam War was a significant factor that contributed to Cambodia's instability. The Vietnam War lasted from 1954-1975, and managed to spread into neighboring countries such as Laos and Cambodia. The **Northern, communist** portion of Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh competed for power with the **Southern, anti-communist** part of Vietnam, which had the support of the United States.

The Vietnam War was significant event during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, as the **Soviet Union** aimed to spread communism in countries like Korea and Vietnam, while the **U.S.** aimed to combat the spread.

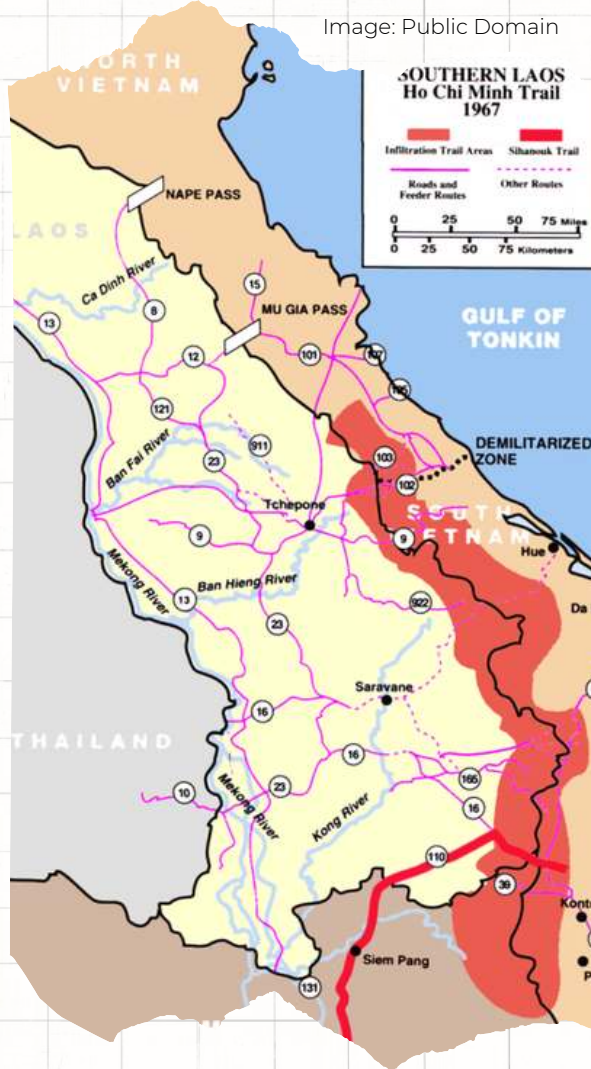
Domino Theory



Political leaders, such as former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, cited the “Domino Theory,” which explained how the downfall of one country to communism—in this case, Vietnam—could lead to more countries succumbing to the same fate. Due to this theory, the U.S. often intervened in the affairs of foreign countries to prevent the spread of communism, even if such involvement faced opposition or debate among U.S. citizens. The Vietnam War, supported by U.S. President Richard Nixon, had already resulted in the loss of over 58,000 American lives and costed large amounts of money. The government believed that communism could pose a threat to the security and safety of America if left unchecked.

Key Event: Operation Menu

As the Vietnam War went on, the U.S. became aware of how North Vietnam utilized several neutral Southeast Asian countries to give them a military advantage. Specifically, the **Ho Chi Minh Trail** ran throughout Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and was used to transport Northern Vietnamese troops and weaponry to South Vietnam in an attempt to spread communism throughout the entirety of the country.



Nixon claimed to support the policy of **Vietnamization**, which involved pulling American troops out of Vietnam to allow South Vietnam to pursue its fight independently in the conflict. However, he continued to fuel U.S. military intervention through secretive operations throughout Cambodia, which were not revealed to the general public until several months after they began, leading to extreme backlash. **Henry Kissinger**, who worked alongside Nixon, played a large role in the execution of these bombings.

Henry Kissinger

(May 27, 1923 – November 29, 2023)

Kissinger served as Secretary of State and the National Security Advisor for the U.S. during Richard Nixon's presidency, as well as Gerald Ford's. He was educated at Harvard University and became known for serving alongside multiple presidents and in the government throughout his lifetime, and became known for his controversial involvement in South America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Kissinger approved the carrying out of over 3000 bombing raids in Cambodia. The exact amount of deaths in Cambodia caused by the bombings remains unknown but is estimated to be around or over 100,000.



Together, Nixon and Kissinger authorized the U.S. to conduct Operation Menu, a large and hidden bombing campaign that aimed to reduce the amount of North Vietnamese/Vietcong resources being transported throughout the Ho Chi Minh Trail, further preventing them from taking power. A predicted 500,000 tons of bombs were dropped in Cambodia in areas where the North Vietnamese used travel routes and had bases.

Image by Yousuf Karsh

Opposition to the War: Kent State University Shootings



Image: May 4 Collection, Kent State University Libraries

On May 4, 1970, anger with the government ran high as students at Kent State University in Ohio protested against the U.S.'s invasion of Cambodia as part of the Vietnam War. The Ohio State Guard was called in to handle the situation. Tear gas was used on protestors, and rifles were later used, firing over 60 shots into the crowds of protestors. 4 students were killed, and 5 were injured. The event triggered mass hostility towards the actions of the United States in Cambodia across the country.



Nowadays, many Americans commemorate the anniversary of the Kent State Massacre on May 4th. Students at universities across the country, such as UCLA and Columbia, have protested the U.S. government by establishing encampments in solidarity with Palestine. They aim to persuade schools to divest from financial contributors connected to the destruction of homes and deaths in the Gaza Strip. These significant gatherings today reflect Americans' opposition to foreign involvement and echo the legacy of the Kent State protests.

Impact of Operation Menu

It is important to note that the intensive destruction that occurred during the American bombing operations left Cambodia significantly unstable and damaged, which further created grounds for a new era of communism to arrive.

The Khmer Rouge

The Khmer Rouge was a large and brutal mass genocide and communist movement that took place in Cambodia from 1975-1979. During these years, an estimated one to two million Khmer people were murdered, and many Cambodians died from starvation and malnutrition.



Getty Images



The Khmer Rouge was a communist group led by **Pol Pot**. Pol Pot was a communist, known in the present as being responsible for the mass murder of millions of Khmer people. He was originally born in Cambodia in a farming family and later went to Paris, France to study radio electronics. There he became interested in communism and joined the French Communist Party.

The Khmer Rouge aimed to create an agrarian and classless society. They supported the concept of **collectivization** or eliminating private property and creating large farms run by the government, and eliminating Western influence. The communist Khmer Rouge was supported by groups such as the communist Vietcong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Khmer Rouge had amassed around 200,000 members due to their claims that they would rebuild Cambodia after the destruction caused by the United States bombings.

The Khmer Rouge moved Khmer citizens out of cities like Phnom Penh into rural areas to work in agriculture, leaving urban areas empty. They also targeted certain groups of people and aimed to eliminate widespread education among Cambodians to achieve their goal of an agriculture-based society. Educated individuals, teachers, students, intellectuals, and those considered knowledgeable were often killed.



Wearing eyeglasses was enough to make one come off as suspicious. Monks were disrobed. Schools and institutions were destroyed. Many former Cambodian refugees can recite their experiences of having to lie about their social and career-related statuses back in Cambodia. For example, some claimed to be banana sellers to avoid becoming targets of execution.



Sjoberg / AFP / Getty Images

The Khmer Rouge also fueled the destruction of Cambodia's cultural aspects such as music. Today, while other Southeast Asian countries' music industries have begun to flourish and gain ties to global music culture, Cambodia still is in the process of rebuilding its musical influence.

CAMBODIA'S MUSIC



Argot Pictures

SINN SISAMOUTH

POPULAR SONGS

Dance a Go Go
Under the Sound of Rain
Don't Think I've Forgotten



ROS SEREY SOTHEA

POPULAR SONGS

Don't Be angry
Chnam Oun Dop-Pram Muy (I'm 16)
Old Pot Still Cooks Good Rice

Ros Serey Sothea and **Sinn Sisamouth** were just two of Cambodia's well-known musical artists and singers. Both went missing during the Khmer Rouge, leaving many to assume they had been executed due to their statuses as artists. Those who made music were considered to have too much influence over the Cambodian people, and therefore they were targets.



Khmer Rouge Movie Recommendations

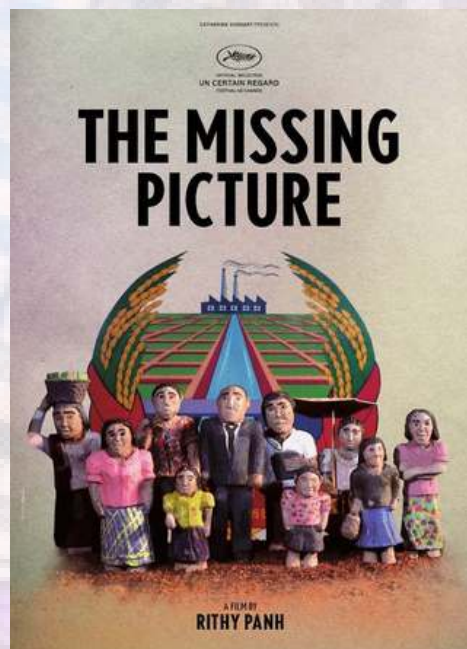


Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll

This is an important documentary that covers the music and artists that Cambodia lost during the Khmer Rouge. It includes a soundtrack with songs that existed both before and after the genocide and also covers topics like the destruction of recording studios and traces of Cambodia's culture.

The Missing Picture

This movie aims to depict the Khmer Rouge's serious effects on cultural connections and identity through the use of clay figure stories and animation, as well as real archived footage.



Aftermath

The genocide in Cambodia ended in 1979, after the Vietnamese invaded and overthrew the Khmer Rouge. In the present day, there are large amounts of leftover munition remaining in Cambodia as remnants left by the Khmer Rouge, Cambodian Vietnamese forces, and the U.S (who dropped bombs during the Vietnam War). Following the Khmer Rouge's end in 1979, over 64,000 deaths have been traced to the presence of unexploded bomb clusters. Most of these dangers are present in rural areas, where about 75-80% of Cambodians live (according to the World Bank Group), posing a serious threat to safety.



Refugees

The Khmer Rouge displaced many Cambodians, and thousands fled for safety. Refugees would stay in camps, usually located in areas on the border of Cambodia and Thailand, as well as in the Philippines, for several months before being transported to the U.S. One of the most well-known camps that housed Cambodian refugees was the **Khao-I-Dang** camp, which opened in 1979 right after the fall of the Khmer Rouge.

Khao-I-Dang managed to amass over 100,000 Cambodian refugees and eventually reached a population of around 160,000 people. A portion of Khmer refugees would stay in camps like this for several months before being transported to the West; predominantly France, the U.S., and Australia, while others would return to Cambodia after the conflicts de-escalated.



According to the National Library of Medicine, around 158,000 Cambodians arrived in the U.S. as refugees starting in 1975.

As they made their arrival, they dispersed across the country. Cambodian communities became concentrated in specific areas of the US. Thousands settled into the West and East Coasts. Just like Little Italy or Chinatown, Cambodians formed “Cambodia Town.”



Cambodians in New York

In the 1980s and 1990s, around 10,000 Khmer refugees escaping the Khmer Rouge arrived on the East Coast of the United States, in New York City. A majority settled in one main borough: the Bronx, with a majority residing in **Bronx Park East, Fordham, and University Heights.**



Image: Adi Talwar for The New York Times

Whilst **Cambodian communities** managed to flourish in other parts of the country, such as in California, the **Cambodian community in the Bronx** struggled regarding their resettlement, as their population began to deteriorate throughout the **1990s and early 2000s.** **Cambodian housing** was often sponsored by agencies and **Khmers** were placed in run-down apartments and projects, where social separation and cultural isolation became prominent as a result of living in an enclosed, poverty-ridden community.

Refugees faced a low quality of life and a lack of education in their new American environment. Some faced gang-affiliated violence. Due to the lack of jobs, as well as trouble assimilating, many Cambodians left the Bronx and relocated to areas such as Lowell Massachusetts, Providence Rhode Island, and California, leading to a large decrease in the population. The 2005 American Community Survey recorded that 1,024 Cambodians out of the 3,364 in New York State were living in NYC. The cities with the highest Cambodian populations more recently greatly surpass the population in the Bronx. The U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 census recorded a population of 102,317 Cambodians in California. Massachusetts followed behind at 28,424 people, and Washington was third, with a population of 22,934 Khmer people.

Statistics

Poverty still is present in today's Cambodian communities in the Bronx. The rates of public benefits such as food stamps being used in the Bronx are **almost double** the amount being utilized nationwide, according to NYU's Cambodian CHNRA (Community Health Needs & Resource Assessment).

54% of Cambodians in the Bronx receive government health insurance, which is higher than the amount of health insurance provided to all New York City residents (**34%**).

Cambodian Americans in general face significant struggles with education and poverty.

According to SEAARC, a vast majority of Cambodians living in the U.S. do not receive a higher education. Only **17%** have achieved a bachelor's degree or higher, which is equivalent to **half the amount of Cambodians who didn't graduate high school**.

Cambodians are the least likely Southeast Asian group to have a high school diploma. **14%** of Asian Americans in general are recorded to lack a high school diploma.

However, over a third of Cambodians (**34%**) do not have one, which is about **double** the amount of Black Americans and over **triple** the rate of White Americans that lack a high school diploma. The poverty rate for Cambodian Americans is about **20%**, which is **one of the highest rates** out of all Asian American groups.

An Interview With A Khmer American from the Bronx

Sokunthary Svay is a former Khmer refugee. She grew up in New York and currently lives in Queens, and works as a college teacher, composer, and writer. Her mother and father are originally from Cambodia. She was born in Thailand at the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp and later traveled to the United States, where she grew up in the Bronx, New York City. Pushing past the struggles with education and fitting in as a Cambodian American, she has managed to become a well-established writer in the Cambodian community and holds a PhD in English. She has published two books, “Apsara in New York,” and “Put It On Record.” Here, she discusses her experiences as a young Khmer teenager in West Farms and her Cambodian culture.



What was it like being one of the only Cambodians growing up in the Bronx during your childhood? How did you feel?

I felt very disconnected. I knew that I was connecting to people via our locality, and we were united as people living in the Bronx together. But, I didn't feel like I was connected via the experience of being Cambodian, partly because I didn't know what it meant, you know, aside from watching my parents, and then whatever bits I could pick up from books or media.

Do you recall what it was like to get along with other Asians who weren't the same ethnicity as you?

It was a struggle because I couldn't find other Cambodians; the next group I found was Chinese people because they were abundant, you know. And I thought, you know, if I'm around people who look like, similar to me, then maybe I can feel like I'm part of something. But I noticed some of the differences; they would speak in Cantonese, and I would feel kind of left out. There was nobody who even understood where Cambodia was. So even in that group, I felt kind of alone.

Can you describe what your living situation was like with your family and your apartment at the time?

Well, we lived in two places when I was growing up. The first one was the five of us in a one-bedroom apartment. The sleeping arrangements would change; my mother and father would sleep on a pull-out couch in the living room, and me and my siblings would sleep in the bedroom. Imagine having just this one bedroom and the living room. There were a lot of roaches. They were everywhere, and I never got over that. But I got better at killing them.

Then we moved to the projects, where I finally got to have my own room. Even though it was a three-bedroom apartment, it was a very small three-bedroom apartment. It was public housing, so, you know, not the best reputation. People were like, "Why are you moving west? You're moving the wrong way."

There was another Cambodian family there, but we looked lighter-skinned and more East Asian than them. I felt that I stood out, and not in a good way. I didn't like walking in my neighborhood. I knew I wanted to get out of there, and I knew there had to be something beyond that.

I know that you felt divided from other people because you were Cambodian. But at the same time, did you have a significant connection to your culture that accounted for that feeling of separation? Or did your parents not teach you about your culture at all?

There was no direct teaching. I think part of it, perhaps, was that my parents didn't know how to do that. Every now and then, they'd say, "This means this." But there wasn't enough of that. I think that's what was lacking; I didn't get that transfer of information. No one ever explained anything to me; I just had to watch and pick it up. It was like osmosis, just learning it by being around it. Nobody teaches you, you just hope they tell you someday. You learn from books. For some reason, Khmer parents didn't want to talk directly to their kids. I think their concern was survival, their concern was that they could pay rent, that they could feed us, and that we did well in school. It wasn't about passing culture on, but they didn't want us to lose the language of course.

Do you think that lack of communication had anything to do with them wanting you to assimilate?

You know, I don't recall much of the "You cannot speak Khmer": they never did that. When we went to elders' homes, they were like "Oh, you can't even speak Khmer" or like, if you don't greet them properly and say jum-reap-suor (hello) or sohk-sabbay (how are you) and all that stuff, there was real shaming from the kids. We lost everything, our language and our culture when we came here. I still knew Khmer, and I still do, but it's just been dormant. Meanwhile, there's my brother, and I think birth order and where he was born affected his relationship with Khmer. When we were younger, we'd spoken Khmer to each other but not a lot, it was like Khmer English. Like, "Pass me the phuoy (blanket)".

Do you think that lack of communication had anything to do with them wanting you to assimilate (continued)?

It wasn't until I got away from my parents or went to Cambodia, that I was thinking about language. Especially when I started my master's in language and literacy, I started to think about language in an intellectual way. Like removing it from the emotional-personal side of the shame that comes from it. I started thinking about Khmer but with an English mind. I started thinking about it, almost in a scientific way. A lot of the Khmers I have met that are your generation and a little older, a lot of them are really uncomfortable with it (speaking Khmer), so, you know, we are just kind of happy that we can all be vulnerable together.



Khmer American Businesses

Even though the population of Bronx and New York City Cambodians have declined throughout the years, those that have stayed have made their mark by establishing Cambodian businesses.



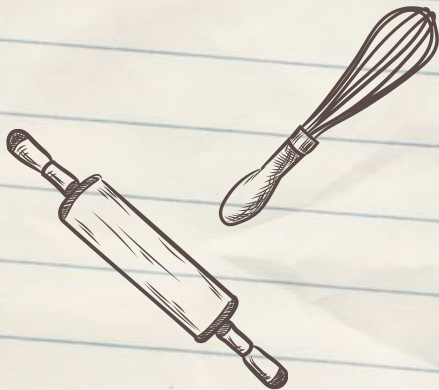
Photo: An Rong Xu

A Cambodian Chef in Brooklyn: Chinchakriya Un

Chinchakriya Un is just one of the Cambodian Americans currently living in New York City who has chosen to pursue their own Khmer business. Chakriya is known for her series of pop-up cooking events, also known as Kreung Cambodia, where she utilizes space in various restaurant kitchens and bars to prepare Cambodian dishes. Using the money she makes from selling her dishes, Chakriya aims to contribute to her Khmer family across the world by purchasing rice farming equipment for them. Growing up in America, Chakriya's environment has influenced how she expresses her culture. Even though her dishes are primarily Khmer, she substitutes other ingredients in the recipes she uses and utilizes the resources she has in Brooklyn to make her cooking unique. Her cooking brings together Cambodians from around the city. Soon, she plans to open a brick-and-mortar called Bong, where she can serve food from her own business location.

Whisk and Whiskey

Located in Park Slope, Brooklyn, Whisk and Whiskey is a bakery and bar that fuses Southeast Asian and Caribbean cuisines. It is managed by two women of color, including Chandra Touch, a Cambodian American. Aside from serving as a bakery, the owners use the space to host a variety of events, including ones where communities from around the city, including Khmer visitors and non-Khmer visitors, can spend time trying Cambodian cuisines made by Chandra, dancing, and socializing.



Khmer Donut Shops

One of the most significant traces left by Cambodian refugees is donut shops. In 1975, a man by the name of Ted Ngoy arrived in Orange Country, California, with his family from Camp Pendleton, a base in San Diego where thousands of Southeast Asian refugees from Laos and Cambodia settled temporarily. He became inspired by a donut shop he saw serving a line of customers, and after having previous experience working in a donut shop, he opened his own. As his business grew successful, other arriving Cambodians opened their shops, and Ted sponsored these fellow Cambodian neighbors' visas.



Photo: PBS

Currently, California is home to over 1,500 Cambodian-owned donut shops, but they are occasionally present in other states as well. These shops are unique, especially due to their packaging. Cambodian donut shops box donuts in bright pink boxes, which originally were cheaper than white boxes, and eventually became a symbol for refugee-owned businesses.



Donut (W)hole is a series of artworks created by Phung Huynh, an Asian artist who utilizes the existence of pink donut boxes to create artworks depicting Cambodian and Vietnamese refugee stories in the U.S. Above are several of her artworks, depicting family and multiple other interviewed Asians and images of their stories, as well as messages and pictures inscribed on pink donut boxes. Phung Huynh aims to display stories of displacement and assimilation among Southeast Asian living in America. phunghuynh.com

Movie Recommendation:



This documentary covers the story of Ted Ngoy and his journey in establishing his own donut shop in Orange County, California. It covers topics of assimilation in a new environment, the experience of immigrants, and the American Dream.

Cultural Expression

khmerpostusa.com



Cambodians often celebrate their culture and hold Cambodian New Year celebrations across the country.

This image shows a parade from a Khmer New Year festival in Long Beach California.

People of all ages, from young kids to the elderly, are able to attend these

celebrations. Khmer people will often wear traditional attire.



Photo: Faine Greenwood



Photo: Ethnic Seattle

Cambodian Religion in the Bronx: Wat Jotanaram

For older members of the Khm diaspora, going to temples and showing dedication to religion is one of the most valued aspects of their culture. The rate of young adult Khmer American Buddhists is much lower than the amount of Khmer Buddhists present in older generations.

Wat Jotanaram is a temple and gathering place for Khmer Buddhists. Located in the Bronx, it attracts many Cambodians from around the surrounding areas of the city.

Cambodian refugees who had escaped the Khmer Rouge and relocated to the Bronx helped to raise thousands of dollars to purchase the property and turn it into a religious building where the community could practice Buddhism together.

Even as Wat Jotanaram primarily serves as a gathering place for older Cambodians and monks, young Cambodians can connect and learn about Khmer language and culture here by connecting with elders.



Image: jotanaram.wordpress.com



Sophouns Kandaal Pheach, head monk at Wat Jotanaram

Image: dgeigsinsingapore.com

Cambodian American Youth

Even with the existence of Khmer religious institutions and festivals, younger generations of Cambodians go about connecting to their heritage and knowledge of their culture in various ways. In the U.S., finding Khmer community can be difficult. However, the **California State University of Long Beach** is home to multiple classes regarding Cambodia, such as a Khmer Language class and Cambodian American Experience class. Students at the university also have their own Cambodian Student Society where they can connect. The school also holds cultural graduation ceremonies for Cambodians. Long Beach California has a population of **486,000** people, with **4%** of its residents being Cambodian, so CSULB serves a place where Khmer students can connect and learn with many other people of the same background.



**Students at CSULB
Cambodian
Graduation Ceremony**

Image: Ashley Balderrama
for LAist

Information about Cambodia can still be hard to find in school curriculum. Other ways that young Cambodians learn about their culture is often through activism and summer internships for Asian Americans.



A full-page background image featuring a sunset over a body of water. In the distance, the silhouette of a temple with multiple spires is visible against the bright orange and yellow sky. The temple and the sky's colors are reflected in the calm water in the foreground. Overlaid on this scene is the text 'THANK YOU FOR READING' in a large, white, elegant serif font, centered horizontally and vertically.

*THANK
YOU
FOR
READING*

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