

# Cambodia – college essay



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Cambodia resides in South East Asia and is one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in that region of the world. The ethnic Chinese make up 4% of the population and the ethnic Vietnamese make up only 1% with the other 95% being ethnic Khmer. Currently, Cambodia has a population of over 15 million people and has foreign visitors which total upwards of two million people a year. Around 90% of the Cambodians live in the central lowlands regions and are predominately Buddhist. Cambodia has a long history that goes back centuries.

The first advanced civilizations on record in the region of what is now known as Cambodia can be dated back to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. The states of Funan and Chenla, or modern day Cambodia and parts of Vietnam were the center of trade and fishing at this time. By 800 AD, there were already large numbers of Cambodians living in the area. Their staple diets were rice and fish. From the time of 800 AD to 1431 AD, within Cambodian history, this is referred to as the Angkor Period. " During that time, the Khmer kings ruled over one of the largest regions in all of Southeast Asia.

Their Hindu religious rituals were very important to the people and to the cultures; and it was these beliefs that made the Khmer kingdom so powerful. " ( cite) Many times, these kings were seen to possess god-like qualities and were worshiped and honored as gods. This was done through the building of huge monuments which were built by slaves. Many of these temples were built in stone and were highly complex and even to this day, the formation of these temples within the Angkor Period, are regarded as the highest symbol of their culture.

These temples serve as tourist attractions for the rest of the world as a sense of pride for the people of Cambodia. The French began their rule of Cambodia in 1863 but they soon discovered that Cambodia had not the hidden wealth they had hoped for and their dream of making Cambodia “ the Singapore of China” was an illusion that would never come to fruition. During this time, the French did little to improve the life and conditions of Cambodia except to collect taxes and took what they could from Cambodia’s resources.

However, modernization, which was occurring in the West and in France, was no present in Cambodia during this time. As a result, the relationship between the French and the Cambodian Nationalists were at times, contentious. One such example of this was the 1916 tax revolt. The French were collecting a higher tax from the citizens of Cambodia than in any of the three regions of Vietnam that they occupied. This led to a march of thousands of peasants on Phnom Penh in order to petition King Sisowath for a reduction of their taxes.

But the effort was for naught and the villagers’ revolt led to the death of a French official and subsequently, the tightening of French rule on Cambodia. However, the French did bring some improvements to the country. Roads and railroads were built in order to connect Phnom Penh to the Thai border through Battambang. ” The cultivation of rubber and corn was economically important, and soon Battambang and Siemreab province became the rice bowls of Indochina.”

In the 1920’s Cambodia economics thrived through the profits brought from the sale of corn and rubber but this soon ended with the Great Depression of

1929, which resulted in a drastic decrease in the demand for such items. Before this downturn in the financial health of Cambodia, immigration to the country was high as others sought to partake in the opportunity that Cambodia was able to offer to anyone willing to work and to submit to French rule. Many Vietnamese came to Cambodia as they soon were able to dominate aspects of the work force in Cambodia.

The Chinese also had relatively strong numbers in Cambodia. “ The Chinese had been living in Cambodia for centuries, and they dominated commerce before the French arrival. Under the French, this status quo remained the same, but the French placed restrictions on the Chinese. However, Chinese merchants and bankers in Cambodia developed commercial networks that extended throughout Indochina to China as well. ” Unlike Vietnam, civil unrest was almost non existent during this time.

The French felt as though they had the ability and knowledge to handle the Cambodian monarchy, which by the 1930's had become more ceremonial than ever before during the history of its reign. Even though there was little civil unrest at this time, or at least outward displays of it through force or other forms of civil disobedience, it was at this time that Cambodia saw a sharp rise in nationalism which was emerging among the urban Khmer elite. “ One of the greatest sources of resentment, was the feelings by a majority of the Cambodians, that the Vietnamese were being favored by the French within their own country.”

Some of these early members of this nationalist movement were Pazch Choeun and Son Ngoc Than who condemned French colonial practices,

brought light to its corruption, its domination of Cambodia's own economy as well as what was seen as the place of privilege that the Vietnamese seemed to have within Indochina. World War II saw a change in the fortunes of France. The Allied Army had won the war but many of the former powers like Britain and France, had become nearly bankrupt in the effort.

As a result, the French hold on their Indochina weakened a great deal during this time. During the war itself, Japanese forces put a great deal of pressure upon The French control of Vietnam and temporarily forced them from the region, only to have them return after the defeat of Japan in WWII. It was also during this time, that Japan was able to weaken the hold that French had on Cambodia, not only through force, but through and equally as effective force, propaganda. In July of 1942, The Japanese forces urged that Asia be controlled by the Asiatic.

This resonated in the hearts and minds of the growing number of Cambodian nationalists so by March of 1945, in a desperate attempt by the Japanese to enlist local support for their failing war effort, Japan was able to dissolve the French colonial administration within Cambodia. Cambodia responded by declaring their independence. On August 15, 1945, the day that Japan surrendered in WWII, Son Ngoc Thanh, one of the early Cambodian nationalists who preached for independence and was a leading voice for nationalism, was declared the foreign prime minister. But this victory was short lived.

With Japan having surrendered, Cambodia lost their support structure and Thanh was arrested for collaborating with the Japanese and thrown in house

arrest back in France. After the end of WWII, the fate of Cambodia was up in the air. The Free French, headed by Charles deGaulle, were determined to recover their loses regarding Indochina and to further maintain their dominance over the area as they did before the war. The French did offer more concessions towards a sort of quasi self government but the people of Cambodia were no longer interested in remaining a colony.

Their brief taste of independence from March to October 1945, had been short lived but a positive one and had forever left a desire for Cambodia to ruled by Cambodians. Negations began as Cambodia petitioned France for their freedom. The road to independence would not come quickly and it would not come easily. In 1946, the French allowed the Cambodians to form political parties and to hold elections in order to form a ruling government whose chief job would be to advise the monarch on drafting the country's constitution. What came out of this relationship was the Democratic Party and its leader Prince Yuthevong.

The Democratic Party at this time pushed for immediate independence, democratic reforms and a parliamentary government. " This platform attracted mostly, teachers, civil servants, active members of the Buddhist priesthood as well as anyone else who was attracted to the idea of a separate and independent country, free from foreign dominance. Elections were held in December 1947 and the Democratic Party won a decisive victory. However, the Democratic Party would be at odds with the monarchy for the next couple of years. But French dominance had to come to and end as they saw their influence in the country steadily decrease.

The end for the French came in 1953 when Cambodia was granted full independence from the French government. But the next few years of Cambodian independence would not be full of peace and successes. In the years following the independence of Cambodia, the area would be fraught with some of the darkest chapters in the history of the world. In March 1955, King Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his father in order to pursue a career as a politician. In May 1965, Sihanouk broke diplomatic ties with the United States as he favored closer ties with Vietnam and China.

This did not help America's efforts in the region but neither did it help the United States and Cambodia to become friends in the near future. President Nixon suspected that the Vietcong was receiving direct assistance from Cambodia and started a bombing campaign on Cambodia. During this time, the Khmer Rouge, a Cambodian guerrilla movement, gained strength and started to gradually assume control over the countryside. By March 1970, the Khmer Rouge was poised and set to instigate a coup d'état and established a republic.

Sihanouk moved to China where he remained in exile. This helped to put into motion, the darkest chapter in the history of Cambodia as well as one of the darkest in World History. With the formation of Cambodia's new military government, brought stiff resistance from some factions within Cambodia that were on the political fringe for some time. One of the most infamous of these figures was Pol Pot. Pol Pot had been educated in Paris but became enthralled in Marxism while in school and came back to Cambodia in 1953 to help form an underground communist movement.

In the years following this, despite Pol Pot being driven into the jungles by his political rivals, formed the Khmer Rouge which means Red Cambodians and helped to wage a guerilla war against the establishment. Also, during the Vietnam War, there was also a number of Vietnamese who were attracted to the movement as well and joined forces with the Khmer Rouge. From 1969 to 1973, as the bombing of Cambodia by US forces drew much of its citizens into the countryside and to take up residence in Phnom Penh, the capital city, this military destabilization in Cambodia helped the power of Pol Pot to surge.

So by 1975, when US troops vacated the region, Cambodian's government had lost the support of the US government. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Pol Pot and his army marches in the capital city on March 17, 1975 and took control of Cambodia. Once in control, Pol Pot started to form a strong surge of nationalism as seen by the Boxer Rebellion of China in 1900. All forms of Western Influence were to be abolished: city life, religion and all aspects of western culture were to be extinguished in favor of extreme form of communism. All foreigners were expelled, embassies closed and foreign assistance was refused.

Newspapers and televisions were shut down and, telephone usage and the use of money was strictly curtailed, health care eliminated. Cambodia during this time, was shut off from the outside world. And what was more troubling was the fact that millions of Cambodians were forced into slave labor by the Khmer Rouge. " Workdays in the fields began around 4 am and lasted until 10pm with only two rest periods allowed during the 18 hour day, all under



the armed supervision of young Khmer Rouge soldiers eager to kill anyone for the slightest infraction.

Starving people were forbidden to eat fruit and rice they were harvesting. After the rice was harvested, Khmer Rouge trucks would arrive and confiscate the entire crop. " Throughout Cambodia, " purges" of the old communities, the minorities as well as all aspects of western influence, was being done away with. All of these actions were orchestrated by Pol Pot.

Ethnic groups were attacked including the three largest minorities: the Vietnamese, Chinese and Muslims along with twenty other similar minorities. Fifty percent of the 425, 000 Chinese living in Cambodia in 1975 perished. " Not until December 25, 1978, did the terror of Pol Pot come to an end when Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia in order to stop the reign of terror started by Pol Pot. Phnom Penh fell quickly and Pol Pot retreated to Thailand where he formed another guerilla force who warred with the succession Cambodian government for the next seventeen years.

Not until April 1998, when the 73 year old Pol Pot died of an apparent heart attack, did the infamous reign of Pol Pot end. It is estimated that from 1975-1979, more than 2, 000, 000 people died at the hands of Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge army. Despite this dark chapter in Cambodia's history still having a lasting effect upon the country and its citizens, Cambodia can look forward to a better future. This is due to the ruling monarchy that is in place today. Pol Pot is gone and it is unlikely that a more informed Cambodia as well as the rest of the world, will ever let such an event repeat itself.

But that is not to say that Cambodia is not free from corruption and wrong doings. In a recent BBC report, it was discovered that corruption is running rampant in many aspects of the Cambodian government. A large percentage of the foreign aid that Cambodia receives, much of it coming from the United States, is not allowed to trickle down to the people in need but is kept and exploited by government officials. This only continues to keep the masses within Cambodia, poor and unable to obtain a fraction of the prosperity that could be available to them.

One positive aspect of the new Cambodian government is that there is not one single individual who is responsible for the well being of 15 million Cambodians. Even though there is a monarch in Cambodia, it is largely ceremonial and is there mainly to advise the Prime Minister. Another positive aspect of modern day Cambodia is that they are a member of the United Nations and has formed relations with many other countries in the world. Gone are the days of oppressive isolation as was seen in the days of the Pol Pot regime. Cambodia has also established relations with the European Union as well as many of its Asian neighbors.

“ And even though there still remains civil strife and unrest, as in the case of the riots in Phnom Penh in 2003 against Thai nationals, Cambodia actually made restitution to individual Thai businesses that were damaged in the riots as well as the reconstruction of the Thai Embassy that had also been destroyed. ” Even though Cambodia has a long road of progress ahead of her in order to become a country that is not plagued with corruption, Cambodia has come a long way from the days of Pol Pot’s “ Killing Fields. ” One

Cambodian, now living in Chicago who experienced these killing fields is Kampo Speu.

She is an adult now but back in 1975, she was a young teenager. The fact that she was within the 94% of the ethnic majority of the country, she was given a greater chance to stay alive and survive. But she also knew that since she had actually seen the deaths of many of her countrymen and women as well as those who were loyal to Pol Pot, killed in front of her, she did not feel that anything could be singled out as giving her an advantage. She never placed eyes on Pol Pot, but had direct contact with his guerilla armies on a daily basis.

She recounts those days: " My mother and father had spoke out against communism and Pol Pot before he came to power. Once Pol Pot became the leader, my parents were singled out. One night, I was awoken to find members of the Khmer Rouge dragging my mother and father out of out house. I never saw them again and can only assume that they were put in work camps where they died of exhaustion or were killed right on the spot and their bodies dragged away. I was too scared to look for them as I knew that myself and my younger brother would have been as easily murdered."

Ms. Speu says that a day does not pass when she does not think of her parents as well as her younger brother who was too scared to go with her as she escaped into Vietnam one night. She never saw any member of her family again and was able to travel to Vietnam where she knew that she would remain safe and then eventually to Chicago in 1997, just a few months

before Pol Pot died. “ Even though I was living in Chicago, only after I heard that Pol Pot had died, did I feel as though I might start to feel safe again.”

This is understandable since for the seventeen years that Pol Pot remained exiled in Thailand, he continued to make war against the form of government that had succeeded him in Cambodia. Cambodia saw one of the worst examples of genocide which had ever taken place. Over two million victims who fought for their beliefs in their religion or in just the idea that communism was morally repugnant to everything that the world holds dear with regard to human dignity and respect of another human being, were killed for that resistance.

Cambodia experienced ninety years as being ruled by a French colonial power, only to pass on a greater injustice to its own people once they were given the chance to rule independently. This served as an impediment to the Cambodian people but for those still there or those, like Ms. Speu who will also consider herself to be a Cambodian, the hope for a brighter future, one where the fear of government corruption or state sponsored genocide is no longer a threat, is a source for hope an optimism in the future of country with a troubled past and uncertain future.

There is little chance that Cambodia will return to its since of the past, but a pessimistic feeling concerning the future of any social, political or economic improvements are now taking its place. But only if the masses of Cambodians can come together and ensure that their future and the future of their country is advantageous to a free and successful society, can the world hope for Cambodia to move in the right direction.