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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### FASCINATING STORIES ABOUT CAMBODIAN RELIGION-AN BREAKDOWN

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#### Abstract

Cambodia is among the countries where people have the strongest and most absolute faith in religion in the world. Since the dawn of the nation, the holy spirit has been a crucial part of daily life. Nowadays, the imprint of traditional cults and creeds is apparent in both the lifestyle and the architecture of the Cambodian. Exploring Cambodian religion, you will step into a whole new world full of myths and legends. In general, Buddhism is the official Cambodian religion. About 97% of the Cambodian population are Buddhist followers. Most of them are Theravada Buddhist. Other popular religions include Islam (2.1%), Christianity (1.3%), and ethnic religions (0.3%). Buddhism plays such an essential part that Dhamma teachings in monasteries with Sangha (monks) developing in most of the temples in Cambodia. Over time the original beliefs of Theravada Buddhism did integrate with the local rituals to create an indigenous culture of the Cambodian.

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#### Introduction:-

The Golden age of Cambodia was between the 9th and 14th century, during the Angkor period, during which it was a powerful and prosperous empire that flourished and dominated almost all of inland Southeast Asia. Angkor eventually collapsed after much in-fighting between royalty and constant warring with its increasingly powerful neighbors, notably Siam and Dai Viet. Many temples from this period like Bayon and Angkor Wat still remain today, scattered throughout Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam as a reminder of the grandeur of Khmer arts and culture.

Cambodia's unparalleled achievements in art, architectures, music, and dance during this period have had a great influence on many neighboring kingdoms, namely Thailand and Laos. The effect of Angkorian culture can still be seen today in those countries, as they share many close characteristics with current-day Cambodia.

#### Dominant Religions In Cambodia

##### Buddhism

Buddhism has been existing in Cambodia since the 5th century AD at least. Some documents even suggest that it had dominated the country from the 3rd century BC. With more than 95% of the citizens following Theravada Buddhism, Cambodia is among the greatest capital of this religion. The government authorized Theravada Buddhism as the national and official Cambodian religion in the late 13th century. Since then, it has become one of the Cambodian cultural identities.

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Theravada Buddhism appears in not only cultural and spiritual events but it is also recognized in the national laws under Article 43 of the Cambodian Constitution. In the Cambodia's national slogan: "Nation, Religion, His Majesty", we can see that Buddhism is really important for the Khmer community. The spiritual life has been deeply etched into the belief and become a typical part of the Khmer.<sup>1</sup>

Cambodian Buddhism suffered greatly during the Khmer Rouge period from 1975 to 1979. Religions were prohibited, temples and religious monuments were damaged or destroyed. An estimated number of 50,000 monks were murdered during that dark time.

Today, Buddhism is still an influential force in Cambodian religion and in everyday life. It has been doing a good job in rebuilding after the loss of many leaders and preachers during the Khmer Rouge period.

### **Hinduism**

Cambodia was first influenced by Hinduism during the early days of the Funan Kingdom (50/68 AD–550 AD). It is one of the official Cambodian religion. During the most glorious time of the Khmer Dynasties, King Suryavarman II (1113 AD – 1150 AD) had built the current largest Hindu temple, Angkor Wat. The construction of Angkor Wat was initially prepared for the King Mausoleum. The walls of Angkor Wat depict the Hindi cosmology with bas-reliefs as Suryavarman II was influenced by Vaishnavism, dedicating to Vishnu rather than Shiva god.

Unfortunately, under the reign of Jayavarman VII (1181 AD – 1215 AD), the dominance of Mahayana Buddhism replaced the position of Hinduism in Cambodia. Angkor Wat turned into a Buddhist shrine. The Hindu followers in Cambodia is now a minor community. Still, you can still notice a lot of Hindi imprints on the architectural styles.<sup>2</sup>

### **Khmer Islam**

Khmer Islam is the religion of the majority of the Cham people (also known as the Khmer Muslim) and a small number of Malays residing in Cambodia. Traditional Cham people still retain many traditions and rituals of Islam. They consider Allah almighty, but they also respect other non-Islamic practices. They share many similar points with the Cham people in the coastal areas of Vietnam.

### **Islam**

Islam is one of the main religions of Cambodia. The Muslim population of Cambodia is made up almost entirely of Cham-Malay ethnic minorities. Cham villages are mostly concentrated in the Kampong Cham region in the central part of country. Cham people originate from the Kingdom of Champa, located in present-day Vietnam. After the collapse of the Kingdom of Champa at the end of the 13th Century, the Cham people fled to Cambodia, seeking refuge from the Vietnamese. As a targeted group by the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s, Cambodian Muslims were massacred by the thousands, devastating the population.<sup>3</sup>

### **Christianity**

The first known Christian missionary work in Cambodia was performed by Gaspar da Cruz, a Portuguese member of the Dominica in 1555-1556. Although Cambodia became a French colony in the 19th century, Christianity had little influence on that country. One percent of the Cambodian population is identified as Christians, of which Roman Catholics form the largest group, followed by the Protestant community. Many of the Catholics remaining in Cambodia in 1972 were Europeans – chiefly French; and still, among Catholic Cambodians are whites and Eurasians of French descent. Steinberg reported, also in 1953, that an American Unitarian mission maintained a teacher-training school in Phnom Penh, and Baptist missions functioned in Battambang and Siem Reap provinces. Despite the French colonization in the 19th century, Christianity made little impact in the country. In 1972 there were probably about 20,000 Christians in Cambodia, most of whom were Roman Catholics. Before the repatriation of the Vietnamese in 1970 and 1971, possibly as many as 62,000 Christians lived in Cambodia. According to Vatican statistics, in 1953, members of the Roman Catholic Church in Cambodia numbered 120,000, making it at the time, the second largest religion. Estimates indicate that about 50,000 Catholics were Vietnamese.<sup>4</sup> The first known Christian mission in Cambodia was undertaken by Gaspar da Cruz, a Portuguese member of the Dominican Order, in 1555-1556. According to his own account, the enterprise was a complete failure; he found the country run by a "Bramene" king and "Bramene" officials, and discovered that "the Bramenes are the most difficult people to convert". He felt that no one would dare to convert without the King's permission, and left the country in disappointment, not having "baptized more than one gentile whom I left in the grave"

Until the late 19th century, there were no Protestant missions to Cambodia. A Christian and Missionary Alliance mission was founded in Cambodia in 1923; by 1962 the mission had converted about 2,000 people. American Protestant missionary activity increased in Cambodia, especially among some of the hill tribes and among the Cham, after the establishment of the Khmer Republic. The 1962 census, which reported 2,000 Protestants in Cambodia, remains the most recent statistic for the group. In 1982 French geographer Jean Delvert reported that three Christian villages existed in Cambodia, but he gave no indication of the size, location, or type of any of them. Observers reported that in 1980 there were more registered Khmer Christians among the refugees in camps in Thailand than in all of Cambodia before 1970. Kiernan notes that, until June 1980, five weekly Protestant services were held in Phnom Penh by a Khmer pastor, but that they had been reduced to a weekly service after police harassment. His estimates suggest that in 1987 the Christian community in Cambodia had shrunk to only a few thousand members. Various Protestant denominations have reported marked growth since the 1990s, and by some current estimates Christians make up 2-3% of Cambodia's population. There are around 75,000 Catholics in Cambodia which represents 0.5% of the total population. There are no dioceses, but there are three territorial jurisdictions - one Apostolic Vicariate and two Apostolic Prefectures. The president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Gordon B. Hinckley, officially introduced missionary work to Cambodia on May 29, 1996. The church now has 31 congregations, 27 Khmer language and three Vietnamese language, and one international). Jehovah's Witnesses are present in Cambodia since 1990 and opened their third Kingdom Hall in 2015.

### **Colonization and Christianization**

Christianity reached Cambodia the same way it reached most other colonized countries, by way of European trade ships in search of spices. The first record of Christianity in Cambodia is in 1500, when the Catholic Church sent missionaries to the region. The first Protestant missionaries arrived nearly four centuries later, though neither religious affiliation had significant success converting the Buddhist Cambodians. Catholic and Protestant missionaries continued to venture into Cambodia until the mid-1900s, when as many as 50,000 Christians were deported. Christians faced harsh persecution and slaughter as a targeted group of the Khmer Rouge regime. By the end of the regime in 1979, as few as 200 Christians had survived.

### **Indigenous Beliefs in Cambodia**

A small percentage of the population of Cambodia lives in rural, tribal communities in the northeastern part of the country. Made up of 14 or 15 different tribes including Jarai, Prou, Lun, Kravet, and Kreung, these groups of people are collectively known as the Khmer Loeu, or the highlanders. Though each of the tribes is distinct in language and cultural practices, the Khmer Loeu practice animism, or a belief in the spirituality of all things. Shamans are the tribal mediators between the physical and spiritual worlds. Highland tribal groups, most with their own local religious systems. These were arguably the earliest religious people in Cambodia. Hinduism came to Cambodia mainly during the reign of the Chola king Raja Raja Chola in the 10th century. Even before that, Buddhism had arrived in Cambodia. Now tribes include approximately 150,000 people only.[30] The Khmer Loeu have been loosely described as animists, but most indigenous ethnic groups have their own pantheon of local spirits. In general they see their world filled with various invisible spirits (often called yang), some benevolent, others malevolent. They associate spirits with rice, soil, water, fire, stones, paths, and so forth. Shamans, sorcerers or specialists in each village contact these spirits and prescribe ways to appease them. In times of crisis or change, animal sacrifices may be made to placate the anger of the spirits. Illness is often believed to be caused by evil spirits or sorcerers. Some tribes have special medicine men or shamans who treat the sick. In addition to belief in spirits, villagers believe in taboos on many objects or practices. Among the Khmer Loeu, the Austronesian groups (Rhade and Jarai) have a well-developed hierarchy of spirits with a supreme ruler at its head.<sup>5</sup>

### **Top Holy Breakthroughs in Cambodia**

#### **Angkor Wat**

As a strong magnet for thousands of visitors every year, Angkor Wat is the most sacred and mysterious tourist destination in Cambodia. This is the largest religious temple in the world, built in the early 12th century by King Surya Varman II. The temple has a rectangular structure surrounded by a moat, five main gates and the tall towers in the center. In particular, all details at Angkor Wat are carved, sculpted with patterns of religious stories, the goddess Apsara, a war story.

**Bayon.**

Located in Angkor Thom complex, Bayon temple was built exclusively for the worship of Mahayana Buddhism in the 12th century. With 54 towers of all shapes and sizes, Bayon Temple is the most impressive temple in the Angkor temple complex.

**Ta Prohm**

As a temple built in King Jayaraman VII regime to pay tribute his mother, Ta Prohm has an iconic design, very distinctive from other religious buildings in Cambodia. After its completion, the temple was abandoned and surrounded by tropical forests. Over time the temple could not retain its original shape. Instead, the giant tree roots cover, crawling through the stone walls to create strange shapes. These attract flocks of visitors to witness mysterious combination between a manmade structure and the hands of Mother Nature.

**Angkor Thom**

Angkor Thom is the last and longest-standing capital of the Khmer empire built by King Jayavarman VII in the late 12th century. This temple complex covers an area of more than 9 km<sup>2</sup> with 5 different entrances. Each entrance has different guarding statue with unique architectural styles.

**Phnom Bakheng**

Phnom Bakheng is a famous and sacred temple of Cambodia. The temple is associated with the legendary story “Twelve Angkorian girls” with the square tomb lying deep underground. Built by King Jayavarman I before the time of Angkor Wat, Phnom Bakheng Temple is no longer in its original state. But the ruins and spectacular location also attract a lot of visitors. From Phnom Bakheng temple, visitors can watch the romantic sunset on Angkor Wat complex or in the Tonle Sap Lake area.

**Judaism**

There is a small Jewish community in Cambodia consisting of a little over 100 people. Since 2009, there has been a Chabad house in Phnom Penh.

**Bahá'í Faith**

The introduction of the Bahá'í Faith in Cambodia first occurred in 1920, with the arrival of Hippolyte Dreyfus-Barney in Phnom Penh at the behest of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.[14] After sporadic visits from travelling teachers throughout the first half of the 20th century, the first Bahá'í group in Cambodia was established in that city in 1956.[15][16] By 1963, Bahá'ís were known to reside in Phnom Penh, Battambang, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville, with a functioning Spiritual Assembly present in Phnom Penh.<sup>6</sup>

During the rule of the Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s, the Bahá'ís of Cambodia became isolated from the outside world.[18] Many of them joined with the flood of refugees that dispersed around the world following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, resettling in places such as Canada and the United States, where special efforts were made to contact them and incorporate them into local Bahá'í community life. Bahá'ís in Thailand and other countries reached out to the Cambodian refugees living in camps on the Thai-Cambodian border; this eventually led to the growth of Bahá'í communities there, including the establishment of Spiritual Assemblies.

The Bahá'í community has recently seen a return to growth, especially in the city of Battambang. The city hosted one of 41 Bahá'í regional conferences worldwide in 2009, which attracted over 2,000 participants. Two regional youth conferences occurred in Cambodia in 2013, including one in Battambang and one in Kampong Thom.

In 2012, the Universal House of Justice announced plans to establish a local Bahá'í House of Worship in Battambang. Its design was unveiled in July 2015, with the groundbreaking following in November. The House of Worship—the first Bahá'í House of Worship to serve a single locality—was dedicated in a ceremony in September 2017, attended by 2,500 people. According to a 2010 estimate, Cambodia is home to approximately 16,700 Bahá'ís.

**Angkor Wat in the 21st Century**

Though never forgotten by the Cambodian people, Angkor fell into disrepair and was all but consumed by the thick vegetation of northern Cambodia. It was unknown entirely to the western world until the French, while expanding their colonial power in southeast Asia, discovered and wrote extensively about the ancient temple complex. These writings and sketches fueled an insatiable curiosity in the French, who, by the early 20th Century, had established

restoration societies in Cambodia to attempt to free the temples from the overgrowth and vegetation. Restoration was halted during the World War I, World War II, and the Khmer Rouge regime, though since the 1990s, there have been continuous conservation efforts. In 1992, Angkor Wat was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

### **Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge, and the Cambodian Genocide**

Between 1975 – 1979, the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia's left-most political party, under the leadership of Pol Pot, carried out a genocide of nearly 25% of the population in an attempt to establish an agrarian, Communist state and reclaim the power of the ancient Khmer Empire.<sup>7</sup>

The Khmer Rouge's leader, Pol Pot was a staunch atheist, and he implementing state atheism and targeted members of all faiths, including Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians. The end of the regime saw the reestablishment of the freedom of religion, but an estimated 1.7 million people were massacred before the violence came to an end.

### **Conclusion:-**

Buddhism is the state religion of Cambodia. Approximately 97% of Cambodia's population follows Theravada Buddhism, with Islam, Christianity, and tribal animism as well as Baha'i faith making up the bulk of the small remainder. The wat (Buddhist monastery) and Sangha (monkhood), together with essential Buddhist doctrines such as reincarnation and the accumulation of merit, are at the Centre of religious life. According to The World Factbook in 2019, 97.1% of Cambodia's population was Buddhist, 2% Muslim, 0.3% Christian and 0.5% Other. According to the Pew Research Center in 2010, 96.9% of Cambodia's population was Buddhist, 2.0% Muslim, 0.4% Christian, and 0.7% folk religion and non-religious.

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