

CAMBODIA

Source: Walter L. Williams, "Cambodia" in *Greenwood Encyclopedia of LGBT Issues Worldwide*, edited by Chuck Stewart. Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2008.

Cambodia is a small Southeast Asian nation that is just now recovering from a disastrous civil war, but it offers much potential as a welcoming country for LGBT immigrants. Because its national religion is Buddhism, like its neighbor Thailand, Cambodians do not harbor religiously-motivated hatred of homosexuals. It has an interesting history, with penis worship as part of its religious heritage. Though it is not as wildly liberationist as Thailand, in its own quiet way Cambodia offers a safe haven for LGBT people.

Over 95% of Cambodia's population are Khmer, the most ancient settlers in Southeast Asia. The only ethnic diversity in Cambodia is with small isolated hill tribes in the northeast, on the border of Laos and Vietnam, but there are some Khmer who have converted to Islam or Christianity. Over 95% of the population is Buddhist. Though in recent times Cambodia has had a tragic history, it has a glorious past as the site of one of the world's greatest empires.

As in other areas of the world, the earliest human occupants of Southeast Asia were nomadic hunters and gatherers. The first main turning point in Southeast Asian history occurred with the domestication of rice, other plants, chickens and water buffalo. By using buffalo to plow their fields, people were able to abandon their previous hunting-gathering mode of existence, and to settle down in permanent small farming and fishing villages. In Southeast Asia, rice farming was (and remains today) the mainstay of life.

Once their basic needs for food were met, farmers desired other things they could get by trade. Trading networks formed, especially up and down the long Mekong River that runs through the middle of Cambodia.

Another major turning point in Southeast Asian history occurred about two thousand years ago, when seafaring traders from China and India began arriving in large numbers in the Mekong River delta area. The Khmer were not much affected by the Chinese, but they were intensely impressed by Indian culture. They adopted writing systems that were based on Indian scripts. Indian science, law, political theory, and especially religion, had a huge impact on Khmer people. With India as their inspiration, over the next few centuries large state-level political organizations emerged, as those who gained the economic advantage from new Eurasian trade networks used the profits to build big water irrigation projects. Farmers gave their loyalty and support to a central leader because irrigation vastly increased the yield of their rice farming. Populations increased dramatically. Southeast Asia became the breadbasket (or more literally, the ricebasket) for much of Asia. Khmer silk weaving was traded to India, and from there to the empires of Southwest Asia and ultimately to the Roman Empire. Among the Roman elite, Asian silk was highly valued as clothing.

The political organizations that emerged among the Khmer were city-states, similar to those of ancient Greece. Each city was the trading center for a surrounding agricultural production area. The ruler of each city-state was obeyed because he provided protection for farmers and merchants to trade in the city, established regulations for trade and measurements, and coordinated the irrigation projects on which the farmers depended. Hindu missionaries from India worked to convert each local Khmer leader to

Hinduism by emphasizing that the ruler could better retain the loyalty of his subjects if he was considered blessed by the gods. Indian Hindu religion was perfectly compatible with this focus, with its multiplicity of gods and spiritual forces. Those men in positions of power adopted Hinduism, declared themselves to have been deemed by this or that Hindu deity as a king, and that they had the special spiritual protection of this deity. From the kings, Hinduism spread to the mass of the Khmer people.

A third dramatic change in Southeast Asian history occurred in 802 C.E. when a military leader named Jayavarman managed to unite all the Khmer city-states. He founded the Kambuja Empire. This is where the name Kampucha, or Cambodia, came from. Shortly after he had consolidated power, in a huge Hindu religious ceremony Jayavarman was proclaimed to be the god-king of a new religion.

Jayavarman established a new version of Hindu religion that was focused around penis worship. What historians call a “Linga Cult” emerged as central to Khmer kingship, religion, and art. The penis was said to represent the Hindu god Shiva, and the spiritual power of this stone penis was said to transform Jayavarman from a man into a god. A major underlying reason for the idea of a Sacred Penis is that it symbolizes the fertilization of life. Just as the farmer needs to scatter seeds in the fields, the penis begins new life by scattering sperm. Documents do not tell what personal reasons led Jayavarman to emphasize penises so much, but for whatever reason he was the instigator for penis symbols to become a prominent part of religion in Southeast Asia.

Most of the carved stone penises that were central objects of worship in Khmer temples have been stolen over the centuries, though many are on display in the Cambodian National Museum in Phnom Penh. Special carved stone water basins, called

yanni, were built within the temples, and the water that was poured over one of these stone penises was considered sacred. People coming to the temple washed their face and body in the sacred water as it flowed from a niche in the yanni basin. Doing this ceremonial washing was believed by worshipers to bring them good luck and protection from illness.

Khmer religion strongly emphasized penis worship. In Phnom Kulen and also at Kbal Spean, in northern Cambodia, a thousand penises were carved into solid rock in a riverbed, in order to “fertilize” the waters that fed the surrounding rice paddies. Today these sites are known as “The River of a Thousand Lingas.” The idea of a magical penis is thus engrained into Southeast Asian culture. This belief is reflected, even today, in Southeast Asian religion. Carved penis symbols are blessed by Buddhist monks, and become part of some Buddhist shrines.

After establishing the Kambuja or Khmer Empire, Jayavarman expanded his rule and enlarged the empire from Cambodia into parts of today’s Thailand and southern Laos. Once he conquered the warring city-states and established unification, peace and prosperity existed in this area of Southeast Asia. This penis-worshipping king is one of the most important people of medieval world history. He reigned successfully until his death in the year 850. At a time when Europe was languishing in the Dark Ages, the Khmer Empire became one of the most prosperous societies of that epoch.

Thirty years after Jayavarman’s death, his successor constructed a grand temple at Preah Ko, in honor of the founder of the Khmer Empire. This was the first Hindu temple in Southeast Asia that was built as a tall tower. For Khmer people who were used to seeing only the flat countryside of Cambodia, a towering temple must have been awe-

inspiring. Later, another king built the empire's first large water reservoir at the place that was later to become known as Angkor. The defining characteristics of Khmer religion thus became characterized by large towering stone temples, grand water projects, and penis worship.

In 893 C.E. Angkor (which means "holy capital city" in Khmer) was established as the capital of the Khmer Empire. As more territory was added to the empire, in today's Thailand and Laos, wealth and tribute flowed into Angkor. The royal court flourished, and Angkor became one of the world's largest cities with over a million people in residence. By the early 1100's the Khmer Empire united present-day Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, the southern third of Vietnam, and parts of Myanmar. In gratitude for the empire's success King Suryavarman II undertook the largest building project in Southeast Asian history, constructing the temple that is known today as Angkor Wat. Covering the walls of the temple are thousands of artistic representations of dancers, musicians, kings, soldiers, and court officials. Also depicted are scenes from the Indian epic Ramayana. With a beautiful reflecting pool in front, and with a stupendous entry walkway leading to the main gate, Angkor Wat is one of the world's most impressive structures built by pre-modern humans.

Between the tall towers of Angkor Wat are water basins, constructed of carefully fitted lava rocks and sandstone with resin between the stones to make the whole basin water-tight. As rainwater filled the basins, many thousands of pilgrims would journey to Angkor each year to receive blessings. The water was drawn from a basin by a Hindu priest, and then poured over a stone penis symbol. Once the water was made holy by the Sacred Penis, pilgrims bathed in the magical water. Just as for Hindus today who come to

bathe in the sacred water of the Ganges River in northern India, the sacred water of Angkor was the destination for religious pilgrims coming from throughout Southeast Asia. Angkor was a religious center comparable to Mecca for Islam and the Vatican for Catholics. As they waited to be blessed by the water of the Sacred Penis, pilgrims made prayers. Over the years millions of religious devotees came to Angkor to worship the Sacred Penis.

In 1177 the Champa Empire in central Vietnam attacked the Khmer Empire and captured Angkor. But a Khmer resistance movement began, and the military leader who forced the Champa to leave Angkor in 1181 was proclaimed as the new king. He took the name Jayavarman VII. He had previously been influenced by a Chinese Buddhist monk to convert to Mahayana Buddhism, and he attributed his victory to the Buddha's help. He broke with four centuries of Khmer royal tradition in making the new Khmer Empire Buddhist. Many statues of the Buddha were carved and placed in the temples of Angkor and other parts of the revived Khmer Empire, to replace the statues of Hindu deities. Interestingly, though, Jayavarman VII did not remove the stone penises, probably because penis worship was so central to Khmer religion. Buddhism incorporated the idea of a sacred penis, and even today it is not unusual to see boys and men wearing a small stone carved penis attached to a cord around their waist. This symbol is considered to bring good luck and spiritual protection.

In 1203 Jayavarman VII annexed the Champa Empire, in today's central Vietnam, and expanded the Khmer Empire in other directions as well, building Buddhist temples wherever he went. Probably no other person in the history of the world built so many religious structures as this man. For the rest of his life Jayavarman VII ruled over a vast

Buddhist empire stretching from the shores of Vietnam on the South China Sea, to the plains of Burma. It was one of the world's largest political structures, governing many millions of people.

Though a later Khmer king attempted to convert the Khmer Empire back to Hinduism, that effort failed, and ever since then Khmer people have been Buddhist. In 1351 Thai separatists established their independence as the Kingdom of Siam, and just one year later the Siamese army invaded Angkor. The Khmer were forced to sue for peace and to give up some Khmer-speaking provinces that still remain as part of Thailand today.

Over the following centuries there were a number of wars between Siam and the Khmer Empire. After a seven-month siege on Angkor in 1431, Khmer King Ponhea Yat decided to move his capital to Phnom Penh in the south, where he hoped it would be less vulnerable to Thai attack. As Vietnam unified it also took Khmer territory in the Mekong Delta. The Khmer Empire was critically weakened, and it never regained its former glory. Siam's capital city of Ayutthaya replaced Angkor as the leading metropolis of Southeast Asia. With the capital moved and the royal court gone, the city of Angkor went into decline. Eventually the great temples of Angkor were abandoned and thick jungle overtook the area that had been one of the world's largest cities in its heyday.

By the 1860s, after France expanded its colonial empire into Vietnam, the French convinced the Khmer king to make his kingdom a French protectorate as a way of saving the Khmer people from further losses at the hands of Siam. The former empire became the colony of Cambodia, part of French Indochina. The French retained control until 1942, when the Japanese Empire invaded Southeast Asia. When the Japanese were

defeated by the United States in 1945, however, the French tried to reestablish their colonial possessions. United States President Franklin Roosevelt opposed colonialism, but after his death in 1945 the new President Harry Truman made a crucial mistake in supporting the French colonialists. Cambodia's King Sihanouk reacted against the French and the Americans, and became determined to make Cambodia independent once again.

Sihanouk led a masterful diplomatic effort to establish independence, which he proclaimed in 1953. Over the next decade, King Sihanouk led Cambodia in making great progress. Good schools were established, and the little country seemed off to the start of a hopeful future. The Americans, however, had made another crucial mistake in dividing Vietnam. The efforts of the North Vietnamese to reunite their country eventually resulted in full scale war with the United States, and by the late 1960s Cambodia was drawn into the fighting.

In 1970 U.S. President Richard Nixon secretly supported a coup to overthrow King Sihanouk, and ordered massive carpet bombing of eastern Cambodia, in an ineffective effort to stop North Vietnamese supply lines to the Viet Cong in neighboring South Vietnam. This U.S. initiative was a disaster on two counts. First, it resulted in the deaths of many hundreds of thousands of innocent Khmer villagers who were killed in the massive bombardments. Second, the removal of the king destabilized Cambodian politics, and many Khmer people decided to support the communist Khmer Rouge rebels who led the opposition to the new American-supported government.

The corrupt and unpopular pro-American government was overthrown by the Khmer Rouge in 1975. Though many were hopeful that the new leader Pol Pot would establish an effective government that would root out corruption, as soon as the Khmer

Rouge established control these fanatic communists began a ruthless campaign of terror from which Cambodia has still not completely recovered. Pol Pot had visited the People's Republic of China during the Cultural Revolution and was inspired by Mao Tse Tung to destroy Cambodia's feudal and capitalistic past in an effort to construct an ideal communist society. Within days after entering the capital of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge ordered all residents of Cambodia's cities to pack whatever clothes they could carry and move to the countryside. Under the new order everyone was ordered to become a peasant. Both Buddhism and Western-style liberal education were declared to be counter-revolutionary. Schools and Buddhist temples were closed and ransacked. Leading monks, intellectuals, artists, and pop musicians, were rounded up and executed. Torture chambers and death camps were established, on the order of what the Nazis and the Stalinists had done in Europe and Russia in the 1940s. Anyone who complained was immediately shot or clubbed to death. Even many young children were killed. The genocide inflicted on Cambodian people by the Khmer Rouge became one of the world's worse human rights violations of the entire bloody 20th century. This disaster occurred because two great powers, the United States and China, could not leave the little country of Cambodia alone. Both the American capitalists and the Chinese communists attempted to impose a government and a foreign ideology on the Khmer people, and in both cases the result was disaster.

The Pol Pot regime was not only murderous, but also incompetent. It ran the Cambodian economy into the ground. What had been a rapidly developing country now became an economic wasteland. Perhaps a million Cambodians died of starvation. As the revolution ground to a halt, increasingly radical Khmer Rouge militants turned on each

other, with purges and mass executions of anyone who was suspected of the slightest disloyalty. The People's Republic of Kampuchea is one of the most extreme examples of the murderous tendencies of national governments. Somewhere between two million and three million Cambodians (out of a total population of ten million) died as a result of mass executions, mass starvation, fighting, and American bombing in the 1970s.

At last, in 1979, the Vietnamese came to the rescue, and overthrew the murderous Pol Pot regime. They installed a government under the leadership of Hun Sen. Though the Vietnamese voluntarily withdrew within a decade, in a complex struggle for power the Cambodian civil war continued to bring despair and devastation to the Khmer people into the 1990s.

In 1993 the Kingdom of Cambodia was reestablished as a constitutional democracy, and Sihanouk was rethroned as king. Though he has remained popular with the mass of Cambodians, this time he did not have much power, and he had to face a strong Prime Minister in Hun Sen. After defusing many crises, by 2004 King Sihanouk had had enough of partisan politics and announced his abdication and retirement.²¹

One of the last public announcements that Sihanouk made was his statement that same-sex marriages should be legalized in Cambodia. He said he was inspired by television news reports of gay and lesbian couples in the United States petitioning for legal marriage rights. This may also have been a calculated political move on his part to legitimate his son as the new king.

Under the 1993 Cambodian constitution, the Royal Council of the Throne selects the successor to the king from among the male members of the dynasty who are age thirty or older. In 2004 the Council bypassed King Sihanouk's eldest son and logical heir,

Prince Ranariddh, because he was the head of the Royalist Party and considered too politically partisan to be given the title of king which is largely an apolitical ceremonial role. The Council chose instead King Sihanouk's seventh son, Prince Norodom Sihamoni as the new king.

King Sihamoni was born in 1953 and grew up in Europe. From an early age he had a great interest in European classical ballet, which was encouraged by his mother who is a great supporter of the arts. He was sent to be educated in Europe, where he became a star ballet dancer. Later Prince Sihamoni became director of the Prague Ballet Company. He speaks fluent Czech, French, and English. In the 1990s he became Cambodia's representative to the United Nations and a leader of cultural affairs for the United Nations Organization. He has never married or sired children.³

Overview of LGBT Issues

What is most crucial in understanding LGBT issues in Cambodia is that all of Khmer society is still recovering from the devastation of the Khmer Rouge years and the civil war that engulfed Cambodia from the 1970s through the 1990s. Every family I spoke with during my research trip there in 2008 has stories of relatives who were killed or died of starvation. As a consequence, all of Cambodian society is still in the beginning stage of development. There is, therefore, understandably little organization of a LGBT community or movement. Nevertheless, gay community businesses are starting to spring up. In the capital city of Phnom Penh, within a stone's throw of the National Palace is a nightclub with a well produced drag show that is popular with ladyboys. Several gay bars and a gay men's sauna exist in the city, as well as one bar and one sauna in the northern

city of Siem Reap. A Cambodian business owner in the seaside resort of Sihanoukville is planning to open a gay disco there.

In 2003 Mu Sochua, the Minister of Women's Affairs in the Cambodian government, made a public statement in support of equal rights for transgender people, who she said should be included in women's affairs questions. Gay rights received a big boost in 2007 when Prime Minister Hun Sen made a public statement saying that he favored equal rights for LGBT people. Though no action to pass a non-discrimination law has been taken by the national legislature, this statement by the Prime Minister has set a tone of acceptance that has helped LGBT people and their families to feel positive about the future.³

The mood of Cambodians seems quite accepting of gay people, with little discrimination evident. Every gay man and ladyboy that I interviewed was open to their family and completely accepted by all their relatives. When I went with a gay friend to three non-gay discos, we danced together as a couple. Not only did I see no negative reactions, but in each disco we got smiles and "thumbs up" gestures. Several other men invited me to dance with them as well. In talking with a number of parents of small children, I asked them what their reaction would be if one of their children turned out to be LGBT. Every one of these parents said whatever their child chose for their life was fine with them.

Education

On my research trip to Cambodia one of the first things I noticed among the people was the significantly greater level of English proficiency than in Thailand. At first

I thought this must be the result of better schools in Cambodia. But later, as I visited with Khmer families and saw television programming I understood why Cambodians speak better English. In Thailand, cartoons and other children's programs are entirely in the Thai language. But in Cambodia, cartoons and other children's programs are entirely American, and it has been this way for the past two decades. When young children hear this constant barrage of English, on a daily basis, they learn comprehension and correct pronunciation much more effectively even without good schooling, than Thai children manage to learn in years of ineffective English classes.

Cambodia does not have compulsory education laws, so poor people often do not send their children to school, or if they attend it is only irregularly and only for a few years. Those children whose parents cannot afford to send them to school spend their time playing and doing work to help the family, such as fishing. Many children never attend school at all, or if they do it is only irregularly. Given the poverty of Cambodia, and the lack of government resources, public schools in Cambodia are substandard. Government schools typically pack forty to fifty students into each classroom. One of the big problems with Cambodia's government school system is that each student is expected to pay the teacher a certain amount of money each day. Without these daily payments, the teachers could not afford to live since their monthly salary provided by the government is so small. The result is that if parents don't have enough money that day, their children cannot go to school. Even with these individual payments, however, the income level for public school teachers is so low that talented people do not go into this field. All too often a teacher will not show up and the children are just sent out to play during that day.

Middle and upper class Cambodians feel that they have no choice but to send their children to private schools. Though these schools are expensive, especially if they employ Western well-educated teachers, the quality is much superior to government schools. There is a strong need for teachers and other educated and highly skilled people in Cambodia.

Employment and Economics

As a result of the disastrous economic policies of the Khmer Rouge and the long civil war, Cambodia is one of the most impoverished nations in the world today. Between one and two million Khmer people starved to death in the 1970s and 1980s. Considering what the nation was like in the 1990s, Cambodia has made amazing progress within the last decade, but the majority of the population is still desperately poor. Khmer people are industrious, though, and determined to make a better life for themselves and their children in the future. Little businesses and markets have sprung up everywhere, and even with the stress of not knowing if they will have enough money to buy food there still seems a desire among people to enjoy life.

A major part of the current economic revival is based on tourism. Cambodia benefits from the nearby location of Thailand, which is one of Asia's leading tourist sites. In 2007 over a million people visited Angkor Wat, and the government is making major efforts to encourage tourists to visit other parts of the country and to stay for longer time periods.

Social/Government Programs

The Khmer Rouge considered dance and art to be decadent, and had almost completely wiped out Khmer classical dance as well as Cambodian folk dancing. It was revived in the 1990s by the extraordinary efforts of Princess Bopha Devi and other members of the royal family. The Varman royal family has taken it on themselves to spearhead a revitalization of Khmer culture, and so art, dance and music are given particular attention. The Royal Academy of the Arts and a fine National Museum are located right next to the National Palace.

When the new constitutional government was established under the 1993 constitution, numerous NGOs from Europe and the United States offered to help Cambodia deal with its many problems. Faced with limited resources and a traumatized population in need of many social services, the Cambodian government enthusiastically welcomed these NGOs. Though they have performed many vital services, especially for the poor and for children, and numerous officials have been selflessly devoted to humanitarian goals, the impact of the NGOs has not always been constructive. First, a number of these organizations spent more money on outlandishly high salaries for its Western employees than on the poor Khmer people the organization was meant to serve. Second, sometimes the NGOs have imposed their own foreign ideologies onto Cambodia in ways that are counter to traditional Khmer values. This is particularly true for sexual issues, especially in imposing Western notions that persons under the age of eighteen should not be sexually active.

Given how chaotic Cambodia was after two decades of civil war, in some respects the current government is an amazing success. The Khmer Rouge was at long last forced to dissolve, violence has been quelled, Phnom Penh and other cities are operating fairly

smoothly, tourism and clothing manufacture have been developed as major national industries, and there is no longer mass starvation.

While recognizing that life has definitely improved over the last decade, however, many Cambodians widely condemn the government for its widespread corruption. Everyone I asked told me that leading government officials have become wealthy by taking bribes from government contractors, kickbacks from utility companies and other businesses wanting licenses. This pattern of payments to officials is seen at all levels of government, from the heads of agencies down to the local police precinct. Some people take the attitude that since the salaries offered to police are so low, that it is understandable for police to want a supplemental payment for services rendered, but others complain bitterly about this. Some business owners have told me that Cambodia is not a good place to do business because the bribes are so onerous. With little government regulation and few restrictions on business, however, others say that Cambodia is a great opportunity for financial gain.

According to Cambodian law, foreigners cannot own land themselves, but they can make a real estate partnership with a Cambodian. As long as the Cambodian owns at least 51% of the partnership or corporation, foreigners can own up to 49%. The Cambodian government is anxious to attract immigrants, who they feel will bring in skills and experience to help Cambodia's economy grow. While a one month tourist visa can only be extended for one additional month, for a bit more money the government offers an extremely flexible business visa, which a foreigner may use to extend his or her stay in Cambodia indefinitely. Little except a cash payment is expected in terms of proving that

a business actually exists. Even retired people manage to live in Cambodia on an extended business visa.

Sexuality/Sexual Practices

Practically as soon as I arrived in Cambodia, I was approached by numerous motorcycle drivers and taxi drivers asking if I would be interested in locating “a lady” for sex. When I replied that I was not interested, the next question was, “Oh, then do you want a boy instead?” Just as in neighboring Thailand, there is an assumption that either heterosexual or homosexual prostitution should be offered. Numerous massage businesses offer varied types of massage including erotic massage.

Homosexual behavior seems to be a topic of little remark by Cambodians, whose Buddhist religion offers no prohibitions on consensual sex except for monks. Khmer people seem comfortable with LGBT people, both Cambodian and foreign. Cambodians are generally friendly people, and it is not difficult to arrange a sexual liaison with people of either sex. Few prohibitions seem to exist in terms of popular attitudes.

Though government policy does not discriminate against LGBT people, and police do not arrest people for voluntarily engaging in sex for pay, the one area of intense government concern is with adult-child sex. As sex tourism became a phenomenon in Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s, American and European NGOs placed strong pressure on the Cambodian government to prohibit sex with children. Ironically, at a time when several European nations have lowered the age of consent to ages thirteen or fourteen, the NGOs pressed Cambodia to set the age of consent at age eighteen. The Bush administration of the United States has been particularly strident in pressing for this

increased age of consent as a facet of United States foreign policy. Large billboards in areas frequented by tourists, and full page announcements in tourist publications sharply warn foreigners not to have sex with anyone below age eighteen. Several highly publicized cases exist of both foreigners and Cambodians who have received prison sentences of up to twenty years for sex with sixteen or seventeen year olds. While this government program is laudable for preventing children from being forced into prostitution, it also criminalizes consensual relationships engaged in by young people. Countless American adults and teenagers have been imprisoned under these types of laws, and under the Bush administration this system is being forced on other nations like Cambodia as well.

Family

Family relations are strong in Cambodia. Indeed, the family was often the only social institution by which people survived the horrors of the civil war years. Families tend to accept their LGBT members equally without discrimination.

Health

Though some fine hospitals exist in Phnom Penh, Cambodia does not have a good healthcare system. Many poor people cannot afford medical care, and die early. This pattern spelled disaster for many when HIV infections first reached Cambodia in 1990. Soon Cambodia had the highest rate of people with AIDS of any country in Southeast Asia. Remarkably, though, within the last decade government public awareness

campaigns promoting condom use have been extremely successful, to the point that HIV infection rates are low.

Politics and Law

[delete this section, since this topic is already dealt with above]

Religion and Spirituality

Because Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia has similarly accepting attitudes toward LGBT people as in Thailand, see the essay on Thailand for this subject.

[note: should I repeat here what is said about Buddhism in Thailand, or just refer readers to that essay as worded above????]

Violence

Though Cambodia was an extremely violent society into the 1990s, with heavily-armed factions battling each other in the civil war, there has been a strong government program to confiscate firearms. As a result, violence is no longer a major problem in Cambodia today. There is not noticeable violence directed against LGBT people because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.

Outlook for 21st Century

Though Cambodia's recent history has been full of tragedy, and though it remains among the world's most impoverished countries, it has the potential to become a

significant haven for LGBT people fleeing oppression in other countries. Foremost in importance is the lack of religiously-inspired homophobia, due to Buddhism's attitude of compassion and respect for all people. With recent public statements by King Sihanouk and by Prime Minister Hun Sen in support of LGBT equality, if the government will follow up with passage of an anti-discrimination law and with legalization of same-sex marriage Cambodia could become a leading nation in the area of gay rights.

Resource Guide

Suggested Readings

David Chandler, A History of Cambodia 4th edition

Videos/Films

Websites

www.utopia-asia.com leading informational gay website for Asia

Beauty and Darkness: Cambodia, the Odyssey of the Khmer People

www.mekong.net/Cambodia

www.norodomsihamoni.org the official website of Cambodian King Norodom Sihamoni

Organizations

Selected Bibliography

Notes

1. Much of this essay is based on the author's research trip to Cambodia in April and May, 2008, as well as David Chandler, A History of Cambodia 4th ed. (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2007); John Tully, A Short History of Cambodia: From Empire to Survival (Sydney AU: Allen & Unwin, 2006); and a website "Beauty and Darkness: Cambodia, the Odyssey of the Khmer People" www.mekong.net/Cambodia
 2. www.norodomsihamoni.org is the official website of the King of Cambodia.
 3. www.utopia-asia.com for listings of gay related businesses and groups. Karen Coates, Cambodia Now: Life in the Wake of War (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co., 2005).
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