

The Cambodian New Year

Cambodia is a country located in South-East Asia. On some maps it is referred to by its former name, **Kampuchea** (kam-poo-CHEE-uh). It is mostly flat land with a few mountains on the southern border. Some of the countries surrounding Cambodia are Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Malaysia. The capital of Cambodia is **Phnom Penh** (puh NAWM pen). **Khmer** (cah'MY) is the official language. The population is 7.1 million people.

Cambodia has undergone conflict and invasions for several years. Because of these wars, hundreds of thousands of educated people have fled the country to find safety. With the loss of so many skilled workers the country has been weakened. As a result of this loss Cambodia is very poor.

Agriculture is a way of life in Cambodia. There are many small farms and plantations. Many farmers harvest rice. Cambodia is also one of the major world producers and exporters of rubber.

The people of Cambodia are concerned about the well-being of others. Helping one another is a custom of the South-East Asian people. The main religion of Cambodia is **Buddhism**. With this religion comes the belief that one can be freed from the pain and suffering of the world through righteous thinking and living. Buddhists believe that a person's life in the hereafter will be better if they fill their present life with good conduct and good deeds. The Buddhist monks teach them how to live a moral life and aid them in understanding the teachings of Buddha. Cambodian families often go to the Temple to pray to Buddha. Many families have small altars in their homes where they can pray to Buddha and their ancestors.

The Cambodian New Year is one of the major celebrations in the Cambodian culture. It is based on the lunar calendar, and is celebrated in mid-April, which is the first month of the year in Cambodia. This time of year also represents the end of the harvest. It is a time for farmers to enjoy the fruits of their harvest and relax before the rainy season begins. An astrologer determines the exact date for which the celebration will be held.

The celebration lasts for three days. During this time several people take work off to commemorate the new year. They spend time visiting family and friends, as well as the Buddhist pagodas. The Buddhist religion plays a major role in many of the celebrations activities.

The New Year is a celebration that is prepared for long in advance. Part of this preparation includes the cleaning of their homes. The people clean them thoroughly to rid them of any unclean spirits. They also buy silk to make new clothes. The men and boys wear black pants with white rounded-neck shirts, while the women and girls wear skirts with colourful, decorated robes. The clean house and new clothes represent a new beginning.

The celebration lasts for three days. Each day has a name and activities attached. Day one is called **Maha Sahkrant** (MOH-hah sahng KRAHN). It is the entry into the New Year, signalled by the drum or bell of the Buddhist temple. With the sounding, it is believed that the New Angel arrives. Throughout the day the people participate in ceremonies and games. One of these activities is the building of a small sand "mountain." Each piece of sand that is added is believed to produce more health and happiness in their lives. The people bring food for the monks and pray with them. There is a feast of traditional foods such as peanut curries, noodles and tree mushrooms.

The second day is **Yana Bat**. It is a time for more praying. This day is a day to show consideration to elders. Parents, grandparents, and teachers are given gifts from children out of respect. It is also a time to serve. Cambodians offer charity to the less fortunate, participate in service activities, and forgive others of misdeeds that may have been done to them. The people continue to add to their sand mountain.

The final day is called **Loeung Sack**. On this day the monks bless the sand mountain. This is also the day for the cleansing of the Buddha statues. The people wash their statues with perfumed water. It is thought to be a kind deed that will bring good luck, long life and happiness. The bathing also symbolises hope for sufficient rainfall for the rice harvest.

The Cambodian New Year is observed in other countries, including the United States, by many Cambodian immigrants. In the United States the celebration only lasts for two days. Many of the same ceremonies and activities are planned for and participated in. This allows for those who fled their country to remember their culture and share it with their children.