

Cambodian Minnesota

Cambodian Minnesotans include survivors of the Khmer Rouge era and their U.S.-born children and grandchildren.

Maintained by: Equity and Inclusion Operations Consultant

Living art, shared across generations

Minnesota's Wattanak Dance Troupe teaches and performs Cambodian classical and folk dance. Its work connects artistic growth with relationships across generations. Dance is a living practice here, not simply a reminder of the past.

- **Discover Wattanak Dance Troupe** — <https://www.wattanakdancetroupe.org/programs>

A different starting point

What would help you learn about someone's present-day interests and goals without asking them to revisit painful history?

Community overview

Buddhist temples are central for some families and not others; generations differ sharply on language.

Names and terms

Cambodian; Khmer

Also used: Cambodian American

Khmer names may be listed family-name first; ask.

History and place

Origins and the Founding of a People

Khmer peoplehood is older than the refugee file and older than the French protectorate. The Khmer Empire — Angkor as literacy for the desk, not a tourism sentence — is a state history with writing, irrigation, and monumental architecture. Khmer language and Khmer script are not oral-only. That matters when an English form meets an elder who reads Khmer, and when it meets an elder who does not.

History for the meeting

French colonial rule, independence (1953), Sihanouk, Lon Nol, and then 1975 are the modern political sequence. 1975–1979 is the foundational political event of Cambodian Minnesota. It is not the origin of the people.

What people brought

What people brought: language and script, Theravada Buddhism and ancestor practice, farming knowledge, kinship, and a memory of a state that ate its own. What they met in Minnesota: an English form, one “Asian” checkbox, and often one interpreter labeled anything but Khmer.

Do not start with embroidery or Angkor Wat as icebreaker. History is literacy for the desk. It is not a speech you give the family.

The Geography of the Khmer World

Homeland is Cambodia — the Mekong, Tonle Sap, Phnom Penh, the provinces people name. Khmer people also live in the Mekong delta and in a global diaspora: California (Long Beach among the named U.S. hubs), Massachusetts, Minnesota, France, Australia. Thai border camps — Khao-I-Dang and others — are exile geography, not home.

Homeland

Compass (ACS 2019–2023): 73.8 percent Twin Cities, 26.2 percent Greater Minnesota. Greater Minnesota is not an afterthought. Watt Munisotaram stands in Empire Township / Hampton, Dakota County — Twin Cities metro, a wat on farmland, not a downtown festival.

Minnesota

Do not assume Minneapolis. Do not assume the person in front of you has been to Cambodia. Secondary migration built parts of this map.

Minnesota and Cambodian History

This department will meet this community on waivers, child welfare, health care, cash, food, aging, and employment. Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota (26.2 percent is not an afterthought).

Places

Partners: United Cambodian Association of Minnesota historically; Watt Munisotaram in Empire / Hampton, Dakota County — among the largest Cambodian Buddhist temples in the United States, established 1982; other wats families name. CECLC is a door, not the whole community.

Partners

Public calendar: Khmer New Year in April; Pchum Ben; 17 April as genocide remembrance. A calendar click is not community engagement. Guest at the wat. Shoes. Head. Altar.

Cambodian staff are not unpaid interpreters and not the community. Identity is not a staffing plan. A New Year visit is optional professional development. You are a guest. It does not make you the expert.

Culture and everyday life

People, place, and perspective

This brief is about Cambodian / Khmer people as a people with a long state history on the Mekong and a

Minnesota community built after the Khmer Rouge. Pronounce Khmer. A common English rendering is kuh-MARE. Then ask. If you say “Cambodian” as if it were interchangeable with Hmong or Vietnamese, you have already told the household you did not study.

Who this is

This is not a Census “Asian” mash. It is not Hmong. It is not Vietnamese. It is not Lao. It is not Thai. It is not a generic Southeast Asian interpreter. Shared continent is not shared culture. A full mosaic is not a stereotype. A stereotype is when this page becomes the person in the lobby.

Who this is not

Minnesota Compass (ACS 2019–2023) puts the Cambodian cultural community near 11,984. About 73.8 percent Twin Cities, 26.2 percent Greater Minnesota. About 27.7 percent age 17 or younger; 11.0 percent 65+. About 50.5 percent foreign-born. Language other than English (age 5+) 61.2 percent; English less than “very well” 29.4 percent. Date the number you use. A rate is not the person.

The diversity inside this people is the point. A survivor of 1975–1979 who came through a Thai camp, a Christian grandmother, a monk whose wat is the civic center, a U.S.-born nurse, a Greater Minnesota household the building forgot, a college student who uses English with friends and Khmer with an elder — share a people and do not share a Tuesday.

How to read this

Always defer to the person in front of you. This page is a hypothesis you still test on this family.

Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979, and the Camps — Foundational Event

If the Secret War is the foundational event of Hmong Minnesota and 1991 of Somali Minnesota, the Khmer Rouge years 1975–1979 and the Killing Fields are the foundational event of Cambodian Minnesota.

Foundational events

17 April 1975: Phnom Penh fell. The Khmer Rouge emptied cities, abolished money and schools, murdered intellectuals, monks, and anyone marked as enemy, and worked and starved the rest. 1975–1979 is not a personality. It is not an icebreaker. Do not ask a survivor to narrate killing for your professional development.

Who you meet

Vietnamese invasion, 1979. Camps in Thailand. Resettlement to the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s through voluntary agencies and churches. Secondary migration. The desk in 2026 also meets their children — U.S.-born, English-dominant with peers, still translating for parents, still unable to get Khmer in the lobby.

U.S. policy later deported people with certain convictions, including people who have lived here since childhood. That is current structure. Do not collect status you do not need.

Family

Households are often larger than a nuclear English form. Compass: average household size 3.28 (ACS

2019–2023). Elders, adult children, and obligation sit in the same week. Who cares for the child may not match the waiver checkbox.

Who is in the household

Ask who should be in the room. A nuclear English form already has a who.

Who speaks

Khmer names on U.S. forms get split wrong. Family name often comes first in Khmer order and last in the file. Ask order. Do not treat unmatched last names as fraud by default.

Women's labor — factory, business, professional second generation — sits next to elder authority. Both can be true in the same room.

Khmer — the heart of a people

To be Khmer in Minnesota is to be a people with a state history and a catastrophe, filed under a U.S. racial checkbox that also holds Hmong, Chinese, Indian, and Korean histories they do not share. Face, elder obligation, and the wat travel into a waiver meeting. Harmony can look like agreement and then a plan nobody follows. Ask whether they agree. Do not take a smile as consent.

In this state

1975–1979 sits in some rooms as living memory and in some rooms as a school unit the grandchild studied. Do not assume which. Do not make it a personality.

This guide is a working orientation. Individual variation always supersedes group generalization.

Core Concepts

Khmer language and Khmer script. Not Hmong. Not Vietnamese. Not Lao. Literacy in Khmer is not guaranteed for every elder. The English form is still a gate.

Wat

Theravada Buddhist temple as civic and ritual center for many. Do not make a monk the case plan unless this family asked.

Ancestors and spirit practice sit beside Buddhism and, in some families, Christianity. An altar in a living room is not a case plan and not a museum.

Face and harmony

Direct refusal may be costly. A yes that is courtesy is not a signature.

1975–1979. Living memory in a waiver meeting is not an icebreaker. You do not use it. You know it so you do not trample it.

Religion and Healing

Theravada Buddhism is central for many Cambodian Minnesota families. The wat is civic and ritual. Christianity lives in some families — sometimes in the same cousin-line as a Buddhist altar. Spirit and

ancestor practice are not “extra.”

Streams

Do not make a monk the case plan unless this family asked. Do not treat Buddhism as decoration, and do not treat church as the evolved version.

Practice

Shoes off at the wat and in many homes. The head is high; do not touch it. Feet are low; do not point them at an altar, a Buddha, or a person. You still keep medical and legal time. You name the conflict instead of punishing it.

Illness meaning may not be the DSM sentence. Trauma and under-identified mental health sit in this community's U.S. literature. Date what you cite. Do not invent a rate.

Greetings

Elders first. Sampeah — palms together, slight bow — is ordinary in some rooms, especially with elders and at the wat. Many second-generation people will shake hands in English-language rooms. Follow this room.

Titles

Say the name. Pronounce Khmer. Ask.

This room

Do not import Somali right-hand rules or the Black nod onto this page. This is not those grammars.

Physical contact: ask the room. Do not touch the head. Cross-gender touch with elders is not a default.

Naming Conventions

Family-name patterns. In Khmer order the family name often comes first; U.S. forms put it last and split compounds wrong. The form that demands first-middle-last and a hyphen will invent a person.

How to file

Given names may be Khmer, English, Buddhist, or both. Ask how to say it and how to file it.

Do not “correct” a mother and child who do not share a last name as a fraud signal until you have a reason. Do not joke about names.

Pronounce Khmer. Ask. The building that will not say kuh-MARE has already closed a door.

Dates of Significance

Khmer New Year / Choul Chnam Thmey — mid-April. Public at wats including Watt Munisotaram. Guest, not researcher. A calendar click is not community engagement.

Calendar

Pchum Ben — ancestor fortnight, usually September–October. Families feed the dead. A missed

obligation can be a crisis when the English form thinks the crisis is a missed appointment.

Cambodian Genocide Remembrance — 17 April. Literacy for the desk. Not an icebreaker. Not a day you ask a survivor to speak to staff for professional development.

Buddhist holy days vary. Christian calendars in some families. Ask. Do not put “Asian holiday” on a case note.

Etiquette

Shoes off in many homes and at the wat. Accept a little food if offered. Elders first. Head high, feet low. Do not point your feet at an altar or a person. Do not touch the head.

In the home

Do not walk into a living room and photograph the altar. Do not touch ritual objects. Do not treat a monk as a mascot for Heritage Month.

Time

Hospitality is a virtue. You still keep medical and legal time.

On-time for appointments. Multi-household logistics are real. So is a courtesy-yes then no-show when the plan was never agreed. Ask whether they agree. Confirm in Khmer if that is the language they use.

Language and Communication

Khmer. Cambodian. Not Hmong. Not Vietnamese. Not Lao. Not “Asian interpreter.” An interpreter labeled Asian or Thai or Lao is a closed door for this household.

Language

Khmer script versus English forms. Literacy in Khmer is not guaranteed for every elder. Literacy in English is not guaranteed for every parent of a U.S.-born child. Compass: 61.2 percent language other than English (age 5+); 29.4 percent LEP. Date it.

A long answer may be story. A short English yes may be exhaustion or courtesy. Do not take a smile as consent. Ask whether they agree with the plan.

Do not make a Cambodian coworker the interpreter. The child is not the interpreter.

LGBTQ

Queer and trans Khmer Minnesotans exist. Conservative family, wat, and church climates can mean silence or exile. Some people live a public English life and a private Khmer life. You use the name they use. You do not out them to an elder as cultural humility.

This person

Minnesota’s Human Rights Act still applies. So does the duty not to treat a whole people as a family-values exhibit.

Do not use this chapter to raid a household. Do not pretend the tension is not there.

Hair, Dress, and Body

Traditional dress is public at New Year and at the wat, not a daily uniform. Second generation looks like Minnesota. Do not ask a woman in clinic whether she “still wears the costume.”

Dress

The head is high. Do not touch it. Do not touch a monk's robe as souvenir. Silver, krama, and sampot are art and history, not a mascot for the unit's Heritage Month table.

Follow this person. Do not photograph.

Music

Pinpeat and wedding music, later pop and karaoke, Christian music in some churches. The Khmer Rouge murdered artists and silenced instruments. That is history for the desk. It is not a speech. It is not a request that a survivor narrate the silence.

Variation

A playlist is not engagement. A wat ceremony is not staff entertainment.

Knowing that ritual music exists will stop you from talking over it as delay.

Sports

Soccer, volleyball, and ordinary school sport in the second generation. Do not assume the kid plays. Do not make sport the only excellence you can see.

Not the whole person

Sport clubs are social infrastructure. They are not language access and not a case plan.

A tournament at the wat is not consultation.

Literature

Khmer is a written language with a long inscriptional and literary tradition. 1975–1979 tried to end schools. Literacy in Khmer script is therefore not guaranteed for every elder, and English is not guaranteed for every parent. Both sentences are true.

Literacy in the lobby

Minnesota and U.S. Cambodian writers and memoirists exist. You do not need to quote them in the lobby. You need to know this is not a people without letters — and that the English form may still be a closed door.

Do not test an elder in English and call it capacity.

Art

Angkor is literacy for the desk, not a tourism poster and not Heritage Month. Classical dance, weaving, wat mural, contemporary work. Watt Munisotaram is public architecture on Dakota County farmland.

Guest

Guest, not researcher. Apsara is not a case plan. A temple visit is optional professional development. It is not consultation.

Do not photograph monks or altars as souvenirs.

Conflict, War, and the State

The Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979, the Killing Fields, the walk to Thailand, the camps, resettlement, and a United States that later deported people with records — that is the political event. A DHS badge is not automatically help.

The badge

Do not use 1975–79 as a personality. Do not ask a survivor to narrate killing for your professional development. Do not use genocide remembrance as an icebreaker in a waiver meeting.

Deportation climate is current structure. Do not collect status you do not need. Do not treat fear as noncompliance.

Adjacent Peoples — Do Not Mash

Not Hmong. Not Vietnamese. Not Lao. Not Thai. Not Chinese. Not “Asian American” as the file. Open the Hmong CI for Hmong. Open this for Khmer. Some households are mixed. Ask this household.

Adjacent doors

Camps in Thailand are a Cambodian and Hmong and Lao story of exile — they are not a reason to book a Thai interpreter for a Khmer elder.

Never one Asian module. Never one “Southeast Asian” interpreter.

Counts, Dated

Minnesota Compass, ACS 2019–2023, Cambodian cultural community: about 11,984; Twin Cities 73.8%; Greater Minnesota 26.2%; age 17 or younger 27.7%; 65+ 11.0%; foreign-born 50.5%; language other than English (age 5+) 61.2%; English less than “very well” 29.4%; high school or higher (25+) 72.3%; bachelor's or higher 15.5%; median household income about \$78,100 (2022 dollars, averaged); poverty 4.3%; owner-occupied 68.7%; renter-occupied 31.3%; average household size 3.28; without health insurance 7.3%; with a disability 12.1%.

Counts

Counts disagree across ACS vintages and definitions. Date the number. A poverty rate of 4.3 percent is not proof the gates closed. Greater Minnesota at 26.2 percent is not an afterthought.

What the count is not

A young age structure is not a personality. An owner rate is not a closed gate. A rate is not the person.

Doors and Sources

Minnesota Compass Cambodian profile (ACS 2019–2023). United Cambodian Association of Minnesota historically. Watt Munisotaram, Empire / Hampton, Dakota County. Wats this family names.

Public doors

CECLC is a door, not the whole community. An eList is not engagement. Pay partners. Report back.

Learn on your own time

Learn on your own time. Do not make a Cambodian colleague your unpaid tutor. Book a qualified Khmer interpreter. The child is not the interpreter.

Services, opportunity, and participation

Education

Compass (ACS 2019–2023): among Cambodian Minnesotans 25 and older, about 72.3 percent high school or higher; about 15.5 percent bachelor's or higher. Among those 5 and older, 61.2 percent speak a language other than English; 29.4 percent speak English less than “very well.” Date the number.

School and language

A parent who speaks fluent Khmer and limited English is not illiterate. Literacy in Khmer script is not guaranteed for every elder — camps and 1975–1979 destroyed schools. Both can be true. The English-only IEP is the gate.

The child is not the interpreter. Put Khmer on the line. Second-generation educational mobility is real. So is a gap a room that treats everyone the same will call “culture” instead of language access plus a school that never learned the name.

Other Considerations

Unvarnished, because Minnesota Nice is how a room that treats everyone the same deletes facts.

Named harms

Intergenerational trauma and PTSD sit in this community's U.S. health literature. Under-identified mental health is a pattern in some rooms. Do not invent a rate. Do not skip screening. Do not make 1975–79 a personality.

Some 1.5-generation gang history in U.S. cities is HISTORY. A last name is not a gang file. Do not score a child on a cousin's decade.

Deportation of Cambodians with certain convictions — including people who have lived here since childhood — is current structure. It changes who opens the door. Do not collect status you do not need. Do not treat fear as noncompliance.

LGBTQ Khmer Minnesotans exist. You use the name. You do not out someone to kin and call it culture.

Staff who share this community may add facts. They do not get to delete a fact because it is hard to say.

Health

War, camp, and Killing Fields trauma sit in the same clinics as U.S.-born children. PTSD and under-identified mental health are documented patterns in Cambodian American health literature. Date what you cite. Do not invent a Minnesota rate. Do not skip screening because you have no module.

Access

Compass (ACS 2019–2023): about 12.1 percent with a disability; about 7.3 percent without health insurance. A rate is not the person.

Traditional healing, the wat, and biomedicine are often both in the household. If they name a healer or a monk, listen. Do not make the monk the case plan unless they asked. Do not mock an altar.

Gender match may be requested in maternal and intimate care. Offer it. Believe reported pain. Do not fold this history into Tuskegee or into a generic “Asian stoicism” slide.

Work, Markets, and Government

Factory, small business, professional second generation, public employment. Cambodian staff inside the department are not unpaid interpreters and not the community. Identity is not a staffing plan.

Work

Relationship may precede a signature. That is not permission to skip a notice. It is a reason the first visit may not be the decision.

Staff

United Cambodian Association of Minnesota historically — pay, report back, do not BCC a cultural organization and call it consultation.

Health-care and Human-service Encounters

Khmer on the interpreter line. Literacy of the English form. Who is in the room. Gender. An altar or a monk in the story. Trauma that is not an icebreaker. Deportation climate. A nuclear form that cannot see who cares for the child.

Language

Confirm Khmer. Offer gender match. Ask who should hear. Do not make staff the interpreter. If they name a healer or a monk, listen. Do not make the monk the case plan unless they asked. Mandated reporting still exists.

The meeting

Do not open with 1975. Believe reported pain. The child is not the interpreter.

Connections to human services

Workplace culture and service delivery are both candidates.

Language: an interpreter labeled Asian, Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, or Hmong is a closed door. Book Khmer. Literacy in Khmer script is not guaranteed for every elder; literacy in English is not guaranteed for every parent. The form itself is a gate. Gender match may be requested in maternal and intimate care.

Names: Khmer order and U.S. order split people wrong. The database that flags unmatched last names as fraud is a gate.

Hour caps, exception processes, and life-sharing matches without language are not culturally neutral.

Child welfare and disability: trauma, stigma, and under-identified mental health are documented patterns. Help-seeking that becomes a report is part of why people wait. Mandated reporting still exists. So does the duty not to treat a whole community as a risk score. 1975–1979 is not an icebreaker.

Deportation climate: people skip clinic, school, and waiver meetings when a relative can be moved. That is not noncompliance. Do not collect status you do not need.

Notices and comment: an eList and an English PDF is not how this community was reached. Empty follow-up cells are theater.

Workforce: Cambodian staff are not the interpreter pool and not the community.

Legislation, funding, rule: you cannot advocate for a channel you will not study. This cultural intelligence exists so the 40% has a household in it — not a paternalistic program designed in a building that never learned to say Khmer.

Practice considerations

War and genocide trauma can sit alongside mental-health stigma; older adults may need Khmer for vital conversations. Do not press for history.

What to ask

- Khmer interpreter for this conversation?
- Who should be in the room?

Access considerations

- Interpreter booked; no family interpreting.
- Trauma-aware scheduling: do not require retelling of history.

Who to involve

- Language access lead or interpreter services, with the dialect written on the request.
- Equity Director for the administration or the person responsible for the program.
- Community partner organizations identified in this brief, with a clear purpose, role, compensation, and plan to report back.

Assumptions to examine

- Do not assume trauma or its absence.
- Do not lump with other Southeast Asian communities.

Continue the connection

- **Community engagement or co-design effort** — program page </paths/gp-3>
- **Equity Analysis Toolkit** — program page </learn/equity-toolkit>
- **Community engagement and connections** — program page </learn/community-connections>
- **Learning and resources** — program page </learn>

Sources

- **Community self-description** — A community-informed source and representation review are still needed.