

## “Making it Out”: Uncovering and Recovering the Cambodian Identity at Stanford University

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### **Abstract**

In efforts to seek refuge from the Khmer Rouge genocide, Cambodian communities began to form ethnic enclaves in the United States as more immigrants arrived in waves throughout the 1980s. Assimilation for these immigrants and their children was taken up through multiple forms; one prominent one identifying as language. Therefore, this begs the question of how one maintains a sense of identity and community away from home for college students at a predominantly white institution. This effort to recover the Cambodian identity can be observed through the lenses of the historical diaspora of refugees, socio-cultural impacts in the United States, and the intersection of education. Applying these to observed findings with interviewed college students at Stanford University leads us to conflicted results, where the institution can act to expand this gap but also help foster community resilience within the population. Thus, identity maintenance is still attainable with the assistance of academic courses relating to culture and language, as well as funding to student associations to promote community. However, there is still work to be done in order to fully aid in assimilating to the greater student population and into the community itself.

### **Introduction**

In 1975, Long Beach saw its first wave of Cambodian immigrants, right before the siege of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge regime. These were made up of generally educated people who were fortunate enough to have ties to the United States, including holding highly valued occupations and language skills. Following the genocide, there were also people who made up the second and third waves of Cambodian immigrants in the early 1980s from refugee camps (Keo, 2023). Having these connections to the community in the states through immigration sponsors was important for the newly immigrated population of Cambodians, who struggled to keep afloat, and had little knowledge of the widely spoken English language. However, the second generation of Cambodian refugees who were born in America had to adapt and assimilate into the society, which mainly took on the form of using English in preference to Khmer.

This diaspora of Cambodians and their culture leads to a multitude of definitions of “Cambodian American.” It was no longer a matter of following Theravada Buddhism and moral educational values—often in the traditional form of respecting elders, young women staying close to the home, and upholding a family’s reputation in favor of marriage (Smith-Hefner, 1999). It is more common to see the descendants of Khmer Rouge survivors find a connection to their Cambodian identity through refugee subjecthood, and healing from the survivors’ guilt that affects families through generations (Kwan 2020). With American values in the mix of identity formation, the study of language becomes an important factor as it is a sustained piece of culture post-Khmer Rouge tied to Cambodian heritage.

Assimilation into a greater American society has led me to ponder the necessity of utilizing a minority identity. This internal conflict leads me to further reflect on the parallel role of the unique Cambodian community within a larger context to shape young Cambodian

Americans' identity: how does their ethnic Cambodian identity impact their lives as adults?

A college education is often the rite of passage into adulthood, where students begin to learn more about themselves. Within this new step of their life, college students are known to often struggle through the common fight of homesickness, rigorous academics, and defining new relationships. The Cambodian American experience adds complexity to the unfamiliar transition as we do not frequently see success within education. Research done by the Pew Research Center shows that the ownership of a bachelor's degree resides only in 21% of American-born Cambodians, which is disproportionate to the overall Asian American graduates' rate of 30% (Budiman, 2021). However, data shows that with more college preparation and mentors within the community, more Cambodian Americans are enrolling in university. In a growing, diverse society, there must be a greater attempt to embrace identity to preserve it in academic spaces as we see growing rates of Cambodian Americans pursuing a college education.

Furthermore, to define the Cambodian identity is to understand and appreciate one's Cambodian history and culture. However, the pressure of assimilation leads to the disconnection between one's sense of individuality and their overall Cambodian identity. As a result, Cambodian American students must be able to maintain their sense of identity despite assimilation. Building new ties with other on-campus Cambodian American students and exploring my culture and identity here at Stanford has only strengthened my connection to my Cambodian American identity. Not only will this research on the Cambodian American experience in the collegiate setting help instruct how to preserve the Cambodian identity, but will also set an example for other smaller student groups who struggle with identity and culture preservation similarly.

The history of the Cambodian migration and settlement in communities, like Long Beach, gives context as to how Cambodian Americans—who will be considered as both American-born and/or American-raised to include the frequently studied “1.5 generation” that immigrated at a young age—found their sense of belonging with others. However, there can be a struggle to assimilate into American culture if trying to sustain Cambodian relationships, or a struggle to hold onto culture when developing the American identity in school. The educational system, especially for adults, can be seen as the major influence on assimilation. Thus, by taking assimilation into consideration, we can observe what shapes identity and what obstacles stand in the way of Cambodian Americans finding identity.

With Long Beach being home to the most populous group of Cambodians outside of Cambodia (Chang, 2023), this environment has unquestionably shaped how I initially viewed my identity before arriving at Stanford University. There was no need to identify as Cambodian among other Cambodians. Yet, committing to an academic institution with a distinct lack of Cambodian students reshapes this perception of Cambodian Americans. As I continue to distance myself from the place I called my home and family in exchange for an education, I have also lost my own self due to assimilation. This is important in understanding identity once leaving spaces that are occupied by numerous Cambodian families. The root causes and effects of identity is an issue I want to investigate since graduating with many Cambodian students in high school versus my Stanford graduating class of two. Thus, this leads me to ask: For college students at a majority white institution, how does one maintain a sense of identity and community away from home? To learn how the university context at Stanford sustains and obstructs identity, I aim to conduct a focus group discussion with undergraduate Cambodian students at Stanford University to demonstrate the perception of their Cambodian American identity since arriving on campus.

## Uncovering the Cambodian Identity Through Literature

### The Historical Diaspora of Cambodian Refugees

The Cambodian American identity, although nuanced, is shared through the diaspora of several thousands of refugees. To understand the root of the Cambodian American experience, we must observe the significant immigration waves of Cambodians in the late 1900s. Most families who sought asylum after the Khmer Rouge settled in communities with other refugees (Um, 2024), most notably in Long Beach, California. In this text, Um (2024) calls attention to the initial United States policy that failed to enforce the dispersion of refugees, as Cambodian Americans concentrated within a physical area exponentially surpassed expectations as more refugees received American sponsorship. As many immigrated to escape the aftermath of the genocide at home, this shared trauma between the community led to the need for locally based assistance seen in Buddhist temples or community centers. Despite the unspoken traumas of the genocide, there was an understanding for Cambodians to assist one another as the communities were also residing in impoverished areas. Surviving in American society became yet another feat to accomplish for many families.

Additionally, for the generations following these refugees, the Cambodian heritage was maintained through the teaching of Cambodian history and an understanding of losing their home and culture. “The multitude of losses... is not an individual but a group experience that includes both similarities and differences, which shapes Southeast Asian American identities” (Kwan, 2020, p. 81). As a result of the turmoil previous generations endured, Cambodian Americans still face the permanent social and mental consequences of the Khmer Rouge through intergenerational trauma. Understanding the struggles of family, and their persistent efforts to preserve their Cambodian culture give way to the development of the Cambodian American identity. Therefore, finding other Cambodian Americans who come from similar survivor backgrounds inevitably forms the intersectional “Cambodian American” community. This furthers the investigation as to how young Cambodian Americans thrive in selective academic spaces.

### The Sociocultural Impacts of Being Cambodian in the United States

As a part of the ethnic Cambodian community and national American society, there is a constant pull for each Cambodian American to try to fit into both (especially considering the niche Cambodian American population). The ideal structure of identities between worlds employs hybridization in order “to bridge their heritage culture and history with American practices” (Kwan, 2020, p. 83). Kwan (2020) makes the point that the space to freely embrace the overlap of identities is not commonly found outside of the home or community. This leads to most Cambodian Americans losing their sense of self as a result. Losing the Khmer language becomes another consequence as they assimilate to the English language. Language plays its role in this journey to identification, just as it did in helping connect the refugee community.

A college campus readily rejects Khmer practices and language in favor of the majority. Once Cambodian Americans are fully immersed in their American culture in education, Wright (2010) found many struggling to maintain their language while they assimilated into society. He emphasizes how losing the Khmer language will inevitably affect family relationships as they lose their main form of communication. Once this affects their home life, Cambodian Americans will begin to feel disconnected as language is their link to their identity and culture.

Consequently, Cambodian Americans will lose sight of their ethnic identity once family ties are affected. Similar to other cultures, there is a strong emphasis on family values in the Cambodian

custom (Chhuon et. al., 2006), increasing the pressure on college students to maintain these relationships while in school. Participants in Chhuon’s (2006) study discussed in their interviews that being Cambodian means caring for and supporting family, even away from home. Consistently having to maintain these relationships gets difficult as they advance in their academic careers, spending more time away from home. Employing the language of English inevitably separates their connection to a Cambodian identity. As a result, the conversation surrounding the cultural factors of identity tends to emphasize the academic spaces that fail to accommodate Cambodian history, language, and values.

### How Does Education Intersect with Identity?

The monolingual instruction of education inherently plays a systemic obstacle in affecting the mental health of Cambodian Americans in conjunction with identity. Wright (2010) further noted that the loss of the Khmer language in youth is “the dominance of English in early childhood education and in society” (p. 2). The interviewed high school graduates of the ESL program in Wright’s (2010) study emphasized how participants struggled with self-identification along with self-esteem. Unfortunately, the effects of losing a sense of ethnic identity in favor of keeping up with American culture is a shared experience among other populations, especially on college campuses where the community becomes limited to the physical campus.

At educational institutions, the academic community influences how students interact with one another. The loss of the Khmer identity, especially in selective institutions, becomes nearly inevitable if there is no effort made by both the student and the school. Lao and Lee (2009) support Wright’s (2010) findings by sharing that maintaining self-esteem is supported by the aid of other peers. Furthermore, to combat the effects of assimilation, there are a few instances of resistance where Kwan’s (2020) idea of hybridization is effectively being used. These come in the form of heritage classes, dual language programs, and extracurricular activities. Turning to other Cambodian American peers and on-campus student associations for support becomes an important factor in sustaining identity despite assimilation. The Cambodian students interviewed by Chhuon et. al. (2006) within the University of California system recognized that maintaining bonds with other Cambodian American students helped manage the distinct cultures and identities. The college community aided in maintaining the overall sense of Cambodian identity while providing the space for American practices. Despite the powerful urge to integrate solely American history, culture, and identity into schooling, the Cambodian identity of these students persisted through holding community.

### Implications of the Cambodian Identity at Stanford University and the Stanford Khmer Association

When it comes to the topic of building a sense of identity at a young age, experts like Keo (2023) and Um (2024) readily agree that historical Cambodian communities were a result of immigration patterns seen after the Khmer Rouge genocide, concentrated in places like Long Beach, California or Lowell, Massachusetts. These historically established Cambodian communities would then become an important factor in upholding Cambodian culture for American-born students. Observed factors that fully encapsulate the Cambodian American experience regard the Cambodian identity within the community, societal adaptations, and the educational system. A college campus, like Stanford University, can combine all three.

This led to the development of the Stanford Khmer Association. With Cambodian American students coming from diverse backgrounds, the Stanford Khmer Association was

established by students to bring together these intersecting spheres for incoming generations. The association provided an additional network to students, where peers can come together and preserve identity and culture on a communal level. The name of this voluntary student organization was later changed to the Cambodian Student Association in the mid-2010s.

Cambodian American students at Stanford must be able to find their place in several spheres, so an identity shift is something they are bound to encounter. Knowing that this is a possibility for students, I aim to investigate the effects of Chhoun et. al.'s (2006) idea of having two different feet in two different worlds: a traditional, Khmer world and a newfound American society.

### **The Method of Recovering the Cambodian Identity at Stanford University**

The tension between education and identity is a universal relationship for Cambodian Americans at Stanford University, where private lives are personified within our academic work. We can see how that is not always possible through the interview studies conducted by Wright (2010) and Chhuon et. al. (2006) once a community is involved. Therefore, I will analyze the effects and implications of identity formation during college through a series of interview questions. Following the format of these interview studies, these will include questions about the Cambodian identity as presented through the historical, sociocultural, and educational lens. Questions asked will include topics regarding their connection with the Cambodian culture and identity through the community at home versus at Stanford, the challenges they faced at Stanford, and what has changed about their perspective on the Cambodian community and identity.

I simultaneously interviewed two students in the Class of 2026 enrolled in Stanford University's "First-Year" Khmer class. These interviews consisted of conversations on their ethnic identity throughout their academic careers at Stanford. This focus group provides a discussion of community, which evolves from the overlapping experiences between Cambodian American students. A conversation about the Cambodian identity between several students within the Cambodian community further promotes this idea. I used Zoom as a meeting platform to best record and reference participants' narratives for thirty minutes. Overall, by using the college student population, I plan to investigate how being Cambodian American impacts college students at elite universities such as Stanford.

### **Results**

We began the focus group with a starting question regarding the benefits of being Cambodian at Stanford, and what they did to help maintain identity.

#### Establishing the Cambodian Identity

*"I mean, I'm sure CAMSA (Cambodian Student Association) would exist, even without Stanford funds, but like, it's cool that Stanford officially recognizes us as a club on campus."*

Participant 1 noted distinctly how the institution has been able to support the student association on campus despite the small size of the group. Participant 2 mentions an array of other Stanford courses dealing with identity, including the offering of the "First-Year" Khmer language class and the ethnic studies series for Asian American studies. This participant also added to Participant 1's comment on funding, and how providing the funds to conduct activities such as

workshops has fostered a stronger sense of Cambodian “togetherness”. This distinction between the ethnic identity versus the traditional Asian American identity, although also important, helped with identity maintenance.

### Challenges of Being Cambodian American at Stanford University

Moving forward with finding identity at a private institution, we went into reflection on our identity outside of school. Both participants gave context to their upbringings, and what their communities looked like in comparison to the Stanford community.

Participant 1 brought up the fact that they did not feel like a minority within the community of Stockton, California because of the abundant Cambodian population. This made Stanford’s lack of a Cambodian population a new encounter. However, this did not make them feel any “less” Cambodian, or insecure about their identity. Despite that, the lived experience of Participant 2 did contrast to Participant 1 since they grew up in the predominately white and Latino community of Santa Cruz, California. Because their family were the only Cambodians within the community, they did recognize their ethnic identity inside and outside of their hometowns. Since leaving their home and transitioning to Stanford as a student, they felt more connected to their identity when expanding their network on the Stanford campus. According to them, meeting a Cambodian person was exciting knowing that Stanford was able to foster their passion to explore history and/or identity with others.

On the other hand, there are challenges to combat the Cambodian identity within the larger Stanford community. Participant 1 introduces the feeling of being a minority within the Asian community. Participant 2 brought in the perspective of how these challenges manifest beyond the Stanford campus through affirmative action. They consider how it is a struggle witnessing their community being excluded from the institution (as the only solution is to continue advocacy to promote education and restrict harmful policies). However, they turn this challenge into an opportunity to educate.

*“It feels like I’m the odd one out because all of my friends were East and South Asian... It doesn’t hurt to explain ‘I’m from Cambodia.’ If anything, I kind of like it because I’m putting them on Cambodian culture. [But,] everywhere I go, I’m like a minority.”*

*“It’s like, we’re seeing... lower numbers with Cambodian students being admitted into university. Affirmative action was affecting all universities and colleges in admitting students from marginalized communities and backgrounds. So, that’s a really big challenge with maintaining identity and legacy for CAMSA (Cambodian Student Association).”*

### How to Be Cambodian at Stanford

Additionally, both mention how Stanford could listen to the feedback of students to implement a change and combat challenges. With both students being from the same “First-Year” Khmer language class, both students agree to the addition of a Cambodian professor. Participant 2 dives deeper into the need for Cambodian instructors, and the benefit of them for the Cambodian population.

*“I think incorporating and having classes more on Cambodian identity and history [with a Cambodian professor] emphasizes the importance of cultural identity and preservation.”*

To end the conversation, both participants added their input on their newfound perception of the

Cambodian community since coming to Stanford. Participant 1, being from a large Cambodian community, recounts how Cambodians are often associated with gang violence. This is a poor stereotype and statistic that has been prominent throughout generations and harms communities across the nation. Participant 1 wished that their community emphasized the importance of education to other students to break this identity factor and “make it out.” Even though Participant 2 feels more familiar with their Cambodian identity on campus, it emphasizes the need to have more Cambodians present as they did not get the chance to experience a community at home.

Stanford University’s support for Cambodian students is effective in mainly fostering their sense of belonging in the greater Stanford community by providing spaces for students to explore their identity. This was effective through the form of funds and classes. However, being a part of the Stanford community as a Cambodian American meant dealing with the outside American community. Both participants noted the downsides of being a minority within the social and educational spheres, which was an institutional challenge. There are faults within the system as affirmative action is a valued topic of discussion for Cambodian students, who are often combined with the general population of Asian Americans despite the disaggregated data.

Throughout the focus group, there was a constant urge and call for change within the Cambodian student community as a small, but integral population of Stanford. It is apparent that community was considered to be interwoven with identity, and the current actions taken on the Stanford campus have only strengthened the involvement of Cambodian American students together. Combatting the challenges together will open more chances to foster identity exploration and academic freedom for Cambodian students.

## Discussion

These findings conflicted with other studies conducted at public universities considering the community at Stanford is valued with greater importance. For instance, Wright’s (2010) claims about Cambodian students' integration into education was a cause of the supposed lower self-esteem. He emphasized that the assimilation into the American education system with fewer people of their own identity would create this feeling of loss of identity. Though I hypothesized that the Stanford community would replicate these findings, there was a clear counter to the argument where both participants felt closer to their identity by being closer to their community in one way or another. Participant 1 was even prouder of being Cambodian regardless of the shift in a community environment. Participant 2 felt more connected to their identity with more Cambodian students who were just as eager to connect with them.

On the other hand, the focus group discussion emphasized the importance of community as a means of identity maintenance, just as other sources supported the intersection with education and identity. The Stanford course for Khmer language especially allocates the space that Cambodian students need to reconnect with their culture, language, and history in an academic setting, which is not commonly offered at other private institutions.

One thing that furthers the gap in this research is the criticism that these students provided. For instance, the case of affirmative action and the unknown future of this policy at Stanford University has the Cambodian Student Association at risk as we see unstable admission rates (for context, the ten Cambodian students in the Class of 2026 were followed by a mere two Cambodian students in the Class of 2027). The admissions policy at a selective institution would provide more insight into the loss of community, especially with the low graduation rates traditionally seen in Cambodian communities. In addition, there is a clear emphasis for a

Cambodian professor to teach Cambodian students about Cambodian identity. This representation would help maintain Cambodian culture beyond the home, and into an academic setting. This was an issue not presented in the texts and is an important factor to take into consideration for providing community to future students at Stanford University.

Overall, the research conducted with students at other institutions also applied to the students at Stanford despite the differences in setting. The Cambodian Americans interviewed both revealed that Stanford was able to accommodate their ethnic identity, but there is still work to be done. Although we need the resources, like funding and academic support, we have had progress with accommodating and maintaining the Cambodian identity for students.

### **Limitations**

Though there is the possibility of a sampling bias, these students were chosen based on 2023-2024 enrollment in the “First-Year” Khmer class. Knowing that these students would be able to speak on their unique experiences at Stanford, they would also speak to the communities they are involved in. Although it would have been more insightful to include students who opted not to take the “First-Year” Khmer class, or who are not involved with the Cambodian Student Association, the already small network of Cambodian students at Stanford University would have been difficult to recruit. Without the class and the student association, the Cambodian American community would not know who they were. However, from my findings, it can also be assumed that because they would not be as connected to the Stanford community as much, there would inevitably be a disconnect from their identity.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, identity maintenance is still attainable at a selective institution like Stanford University with the help of academic courses that promote identity exploration and provide funding to student associations to maintain community. Stanford’s ethnic studies classes involve such topics like “The Development of Southeast Asian Countries,” “Introduction to Critical Studies in Race and Ethnicity,” and “Genocide and Humanitarian Intervention.” Being on a campus where academic exploration is encouraged makes integrating identity exploration more accessible. With the support of the university, this will help with combatting assimilation by dismantling American standards in the Cambodian context. Being connected with the Cambodian identity has even been used as a learning opportunity within the established Asian American community.

As an undergraduate student, there have been many other forms of keeping connections with identity. As family values arise in importance to the Cambodian community, keeping online contact with family members has helped tremendously despite residing hundreds of miles away. Finding a new sense of family on campus has made this feat more manageable, in addition to the ability to speak the language. Doing this alongside other Cambodian students at Stanford provides a resonance of hope and the ability to support the liberation of the community now with the opportunity of education and social mobility provided by Stanford. From my findings, universities should direct more funding to recruitment programs for larger enrollment for minority groups such as Cambodian Americans as it will assist with preserving the enriched cultural identity of Cambodian students.

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