

Telling the Khmer Story

Who are the Khmer people? What does it mean to be Khmer? I do not know for certain. Even though I am a Caucasian and not a Khmer, I am searching for the answer. Who are the Khmer people? Much of the world does not know the Khmer people. To leave the world ignorant of who Khmer people are and the very important contributions Khmer people have given world civilization, is unacceptable.

Who will tell the Khmer story?

I ask each Khmer person here today: Will you help me tell the story?

To tell the Khmer story, we must begin by examining the past, believing in the limitless power of the present, and the opening ourselves up to the possibilities of the future. Begin by knowing that you are a composite of the past, the present, and the hope for the preservation of the Khmer culture, values and traditions in the future.

Let me first speak briefly of the "past," followed by the "present" and then the "future."

The Past:

Some in the world know Cambodia because they have heard of "The Killing Fields." Even though the Reign of Terror was a very tragic moment in history, there is so much more to know about Cambodian people than just the historical events between 1975 and 1979. Cambodian history began nearly 2,000 years ago with the rise of the Chenla State. The Chenla kingdom was divided into two parts: **Chenla of the Land** (included Funan, Laos and Northern Cambodia; and **Chenla of the Sea** (included Lower Mekong). According to reports by two Chinese envoys, K'ang T'ai and Chu Ying, the state was established by an Indian Brahmin named Kaundinya, who in the first century C.E. married a Khmer queen named Soma, daughter of the king of the Nagas. In historical context, this event happened several decades after the death of Christ, about the same time the Buddha's teaching were recorded as the Pali canon, and at the same time the Roman Empire was at its height.

By 800 C.E., the Chenla State was conquered by a Javanese warrior who unified and gave rise to the first Khmer Empire. We know him as King Jayavarman II. Many centuries later, King Jayavarman VII built Angkor Wat between 1181 and 1220, and is the largest religious temple in the world. The amount of stone used to build Angkor Wat is equal to the Great Pyramid at Cheops, Egypt.

At its peak, Angkor Thom, including the Terrace of the Elephants and the Terrace of the Leper King, had a population of nearly one million, and its area of 9 square kilometer was comparable in size to anything in Europe at that time.

Lastly, by the 12th century, King Jayavarman VII also built highways that had few equals on earth. They can be seen from satellite photographs with roads spanning 220 kilometers northwest to Phimai, in modern-day Thailand.

Recounting the historical greatness of the Khmer people makes us feel proud of the accomplishments that Khmer people have made toward culture, arts, language, science and civilization, but looking back on "the good old days" is at the expense of what can be done in the present.

The Present:

The true greatness of any people is not what they have done in the past – for when the Ancient Khmer built Angkor, they built it in their present. When you center yourself **here** and **now**, there is no yesterday and no tomorrow. You have only **now** to think, only **now** to act. You have infinite potentiality. The true question is how will you use this moment?

I hope you will act now to commit yourself to higher education. As an educator for more than 25 years, I know the key to empowering yourself is through education.

Help me tell the world who Khmer people are. The world has seen many, many great Khmer people in modern day. Here are just a few names of Cambodian men and women who are helping to tell the Khmer story, who are changing the world, and who are making it a better place. (Names have been omitted in this copy)

The Future:

I began my speech by saying: "Begin by knowing that you are a composite of the past, the present, and the hope for the preservation of the Khmer culture, values and traditions in the future." Like the mighty Mekong, you are Khmer because the life-blood of the river and water of past events make you what you are today. All of the events of Khmer history flow down like a river making you who you are. If you are a Khmer-American child, you need to listen to your Khmer elders, read about Khmer history, study Khmer art and culture, and speak, read and write Khmer. You can do it! If this old man can do it, you can do it too.

If you do not drink from the knowledge of the Khmer river of history, you may find yourself standing on the bank of a dry river bed one day asking yourself, "Who am I?"

I talked about the past. I talked about the present. And now I will talk about future.

Frankly, I have little to say about the future. I wish I were a wise man and could know the future; but I am not. At the beginning of my speech, I asked, "Will you help me tell the Khmer story?" The pages foreseeing the future are blank. I have nothing to say.

I can only ask the Khmer story tellers in this audience, what story will you tell the world? Who amongst you will be the next great Cambodian scientist, poet, Nobel Laureate, musician, painter, actor, doctor, lawyer, teacher, animator, diplomat, or economist?

I don't know. You have **now**, the present, to decide if you will tell the world the Khmer story, your story.

Thank you. May your New Year be blessed with happiness, health and prosperity.

Happy New Year!