

**Khmer as a Heritage Language in the United States:
Historical Sketch, Current Realities, and Future Prospects**

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Abstract

Cambodian Americans are a fairly recent language minority group in the United States; most families arrived in the United States as refugees during the 1980s. Over the past 30 years, there has been great concern in the community regarding the maintenance loss of their native Khmer language. This article provides an historical and contemporary sketch of the Khmer language in the United States, and discusses implications for its future survival. Data are drawn and analyzed from the U.S. Census, the 2007 American Community Survey, and other statistical sources, in addition to research conducted in Cambodian American communities, and the author's experiences and observations as a (non-native) Khmer speaker. The findings indicate that the Khmer language is alive and well in the United States, and most school-age youth continue to speak Khmer, although few speak it with high levels of proficiency and few have literacy skills in the language given the lack of opportunities for Khmer HL education. Nonetheless, there are some positive factors that Khmer communities and educational institutions can draw on to ensure the future of Khmer as a HL in the United States.

In the early 1990s, I attended a forum held at California State University, Long Beach sponsored by the United Cambodian Students of America. The distinguished guest speaker was Mr. Neou Kassie, a well-known Cambodian American and an outspoken human rights advocate. Mr. Neou began speaking elegantly and powerfully in Khmer, describing his advocacy work in Cambodia. A few minutes into his animated speech, one of the young college student leaders, with an embarrassed look on her face, interrupted him: "Excuse me Mr. Neou, can you please switch to English? Most of us are having a very hard time understanding you in Khmer."

Cambodian Americans are a fairly recent language minority group in the United States; most families have been in this country for less than 30 years. However, as the vignette above illustrates, issues have already emerged related to the maintenance or loss of Khmer as a heritage language in the United States. Even within the first ten years of refugee resettlement, Cambodian parents and community leaders expressed concern at what they perceived as rapid Khmer language loss among their youth (Smith-Hefner, 1990). Nonetheless, Khmer continues to be widely used in Cambodian American families and communities across the United States, and there are some efforts to provide opportunities for the next generations of Cambodian Americans to develop and maintain their native Khmer language.

The purpose of this article is to provide a historical and contemporary sketch of the Khmer language in the United States, and to discuss implications for its future survival. Data for this article are drawn from the United States Census, the American Community

Survey, and other statistical sources, in addition to research conducted in Cambodian American communities, and my own experiences and observations as a (non-native) Khmer speaker¹. It is my hope that these analyses will be useful to policy makers, educators, and researchers, and also to Cambodian American community leaders, educators, and others who are actively working to preserve the Khmer language in the United States.

In this article, we first will look briefly at the history of Cambodian American immigration to the United States, including the tragic events in Cambodia leading to the large exodus of political refugees. Next, we will explore demographic information related to Cambodian Americans and the Khmer language in the United States, followed by a discussion of Cambodian Americans' relationship with Cambodia. We then consider issues related to Khmer language maintenance and loss in the United States, including community and institutional efforts that provide opportunities for the learning and use of Khmer. The article concludes with a discussion of the future of Khmer as a Heritage Language in the United States.

Cambodian Immigration to the United States

In the late 1960s, only a small number of Cambodians lived in the United States. Most came as international students, including a cluster of Cambodians who participated in an exchange program at California State University, Long Beach, and subsequently decided to stay (Needham & Quintiliani, 2008; Roberts, 1988). By the 1970s, the Vietnam War had spread into Cambodia; a U.S. sponsored coup further plunged Cambodia into civil war. In 1975, the Communist Khmer Rouge regime, under the leadership of the notorious Pol Pot, captured the capital city of Phnom Penh, and commenced a reign of terror on their own people. Cities were emptied, and the entire population was forced into rural areas to work as agricultural laborers under slave-like conditions. All institutions were shut down, including schools. The Khmer Rouge systematically executed former government and military leaders, teachers, doctors, engineers, and other members of the educated classes. Many more died of starvation and disease. By the time invasion from Vietnam in 1979 brought an end to Khmer Rouge rule, the Cambodian Genocide had claimed the lives of between 1 and 3 million people—about one-third of the entire population. Those who remained behind endured over a decade of more civil war as the Khmer Rouge and two other factions fought against the Vietnamese-installed Cambodian government. The United Nations' effort to end the war through an election in Cambodia in 1993 largely succeeded in bringing peace between the warring factions, with the exception of the Khmer Rouge. Despite threats and small attempts to disrupt the election, the Khmer Rouge failed to halt the peace plan. Eventually the Khmer Rouge withered away into insignificance as its aging leaders turned against each other² and/or obtained amnesty from the Cambodian government. As will be shown, the Genocide has had a long lasting effect on the education and literacy levels of Cambodian Americans. In Cambodia itself, about one-fourth of the population over 15 years old is unable to read and write in Khmer (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008).

Cambodian immigration to the United States is often described as waves. The first wave included the fortunate 4,600 Cambodians who managed to flee the country just prior to the 1975 Khmer Rouge takeover. This small wave mainly included former government leaders, those with close ties to the United States, and other members of the educated classes. The next wave took place following the 1979 Vietnamese invasion, with over 100,000 Cambodians fleeing as refugees to Thailand. The United Nations established refugee camps along the Thai border in response to the humanitarian crisis. From the camps, many refugees were given the opportunity to resettle in other countries, with most coming to the United States. Cambodian refugee resettlement in the United States peaked in the mid 1980s, and came to an end by the early 1990s.³ While this group of refugees included some educated individuals who managed to survive by concealing their backgrounds, the majority were from the rural areas of the country where there was less access to formal education (Weinberg, 1997). By 1990, 147,708 Cambodian refugees had resettled in the United States (see Table 1).

Table 1. Cambodian Refugees Admitted to the United States

Year	Total
1975	4,600
1976	1,100
1977	300
1978	1,300
1979	6,000
1980	16,000
1981	27,100
1982	20,234
1983	13,114
1984	19,849
1985	19,131
1986	10,054
1987	1,539
1988	2,897
1989	2,162
1990	2,328
Total	147,708

Sources: Data for 1975-1987: Ouk, Huffman, and Lewis (1988, p. 23); data for 1988-1990: Immigration and Naturalization Service (1996, p. 160).

Since 1990, a small number of Cambodians have immigrated to the U.S. each year. American recognition of the Cambodian government, formed through the 1993 UN-sponsored elections, has made it easier for Cambodian Americans to bring over family members, and many Cambodian Americans have sponsored relatives left behind in Cambodia to the United States. American recognition of the Cambodian government formed through the 1993 UN-sponsored elections has made it easier for Cambodian Americans to bring over family members. Marriages between Cambodians and Cambodian Americans or other U.S. citizens have been another major avenue for recent

immigrants.⁴ International adoptions of orphans from Cambodia has also brought in young Cambodians to the United States, though these children are usually adopted and raised by European Americans, such as the widely publicized adoption by actress Angelina Jolie of her Cambodian son Maddox.⁵ Finally, a small number of illegal Cambodian immigrants live in the United States. Many of this group came to the United States on student, business, tourist, or even missionary visas, but decided to stay once their visas expired.

Incorporation into American Society

Cambodians are distinctive as an immigrant group given that most arrived in the United States as impoverished political refugees who had experienced war, genocide, and poor living conditions in refugee camps. American political involvement in Southeast Asia that led to the refugee crisis, followed by the traumas experienced by survivors of the genocide, no doubt left many Americans feeling a sense of responsibility to welcome the refugees with open arms. Refugee resettlement was enabled by the federal Refugee Act of 1980, which included a domestic policy of refugee assistance through the newly created Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) of the Department of Health and Human Services. This policy provided for housing assistance, English as a second language courses, vocational training, health care, and financial support. However, the federal resettlement program was extremely disorganized and highly fragmented. Promised federal funds were drastically reduced and covered only a fraction of the cost faced by states, counties, cities, and institutions responsible for assisting with refugee resettlement (California State Social Services Advisory Board, 1980; Wiley, Spruck-Wriggley, & Burr, 1983). A number of churches and other charitable organizations were also involved in the sponsorship and/or support of Cambodian refugees. For example, as a young missionary in the Washington, DC area from 1986 to 1988, I was involved with helping families who were literally dropped off by refugee resettlement agencies into empty apartments in the worst neighborhoods in the city, with nothing more than a bag of rice and a few t-shirts.

The ORR attempted to distribute Cambodian refugees in cities across the United States, so as not to overburden the institutions in any single area (Hein, 1995). However, once Cambodians realized they had the freedom to move anywhere they wanted, secondary migration led to the formation of large communities (Mortland & Ledgerwood, 1987). Long Beach, with its small but established pre-war Cambodian population, became a large draw, particularly through desires to reunite with family members already there, and to take advantage of Southern California's weather and (then) generous welfare assistance programs.

The rapid growth of the Long Beach Cambodian community was a concern to area leaders and refugee resettlement officials. The Khmer Guided Placement (KGP) program was created in 1979 to identify and establish Cambodian communities in alternative sites away from Long Beach (see North & Sok, 1989). The twelve selected cities were: Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Columbus, Dallas, Houston, Jacksonville, New York City, Phoenix, Richmond, and Rochester.⁶ Efforts were made to place individuals

and families without other relatives in the United States in these sites. The program also included a Long Beach mini-project, in which a local Cambodian organization encouraged Cambodian families to leave Long Beach and take up residence in these alternative cities (Ebihara, 1985; Strand, 1995). Stein (1982) described the KGP program as a highly planned refugee program, which placed emphasis on self-sufficiency through job training and placement, and thus was a great benefit to about 8,000 Cambodians who participated in the program. While there was some secondary migration away from the KGP sites, overall these cities became home to established large and medium sized Cambodian communities (see Table 5 below). Despite problems related to lingering post-war trauma (Sin, 1991), poor educational programs (M. E. Goldberg, 1999; Hornberger, 1996; Smith-Hefner, 1993; Um, 1999; Weinberg, 1997; Wright, 1998, 2003), lack of needed services (Bruno, 1984; Streed, 2002; Wiley, Spruck-Wriggley, & Burr, 1983), gang involvement and conflicts with other ethnic minority gangs (Berthold, 2000; Haldane, 1991), early marriage (Holgate, 1994), welfare dependency, and forced deportations of non-citizens over sometimes minor criminal offenses (Hing, 2005), overall the Cambodian American population has made tremendous progress in the United States over the past 30 years (see below), and relationships between Cambodian community leaders and local city, county, and state leaders have been mainly positive.

Demographic Analysis of Cambodian Americans and the Khmer Language

The most recent demographics on the Cambodian American population are from the 2000 U.S. Census, and the U.S. Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is "a new nationwide survey designed to provide reliable, timely information for local communities on how they are changing" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007, p. 3). Unlike the Census, which is administered once a decade, the ACS collects data annually on a sample basis. In reviewing these data, readers must keep in mind that both are based on a sample of the population. The Census data come mainly from the long forms given to one in seven households. It is widely speculated that the Census undercounts the population, particularly smaller ethnic populations such as Cambodian Americans (Gallego, 1990). The ACS data are also based on small samples; the standard error of measure for many of the indicators is extremely large (up to nearly +/- 17,000), thus great care must be taken in interpreting these data. What may appear to be substantial changes between the 2000 Census and the 2007 ACS may in fact be reflections of estimate errors. Nonetheless, these are the best and most comprehensive data available to date.

Another issue is that current U.S. Census data reflect a change where for the first time individuals could select as many ethnic/racial categories as necessary to describe themselves. This resulted in painting a much more complex—but more accurate—picture of our diverse population. For the Cambodian American population, figures are available for those who reported their sole race as Asian and sole ethnicity as Cambodian, and also figures for those with Cambodian ethnicity in any combination with other racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Cambodian-Vietnamese, Cambodian-White (non-Hispanic), Cambodian-Mexican, Cambodian-African American). This article utilizes the mixed-ethnicity category as I believe it is more inclusive of all Americans who claim Cambodian heritage. However, readers should bear in mind that inclusion of Cambodians (and

families) of mixed race/ethnicity may paint a slightly rosier picture of the Cambodian American population, and that these figures may differ from other publications which focus on the “Cambodian-alone” data. Unless otherwise indicated, both 2000 Census and 2007 ACS data were retrieved using tools provided on the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Fact Finder website (American Fact Finder, n.d.).

Population Concentrations

Table 2 shows the current estimate of the Cambodian American population is 247,487; this includes about 28,863 individuals of mixed race/ethnicity. It also appears that the Cambodian American population grew by approximately 41,435 people between 2000 and 2007. Cambodian Americans make up approximately .08% of the total U.S. population. In comparison with the total population, the Cambodian American population is relatively young, with 33% of Cambodian Americans under the age of 18, compared to 25% of the total U.S. Population (see Table 3).

Table 2. Total Cambodian American Population

	CENSUS 2000		ACS 2007	
	Cambodian Alone	Cambodian Alone or in any Combination	Cambodian Alone	Cambodian Alone or in any Combination
Total	171,937	206,052	218,624	247,487
Male	83,723 (49%)	100,511 (49%)	102,753 (47%)	118,794 (48%)
Female	88,214 (51%)	105,541 (51%)	115,871 (53%)	128,693 (52%)

Table 3. Population by Age Group, 2007 American Community Survey

	Cambodian alone or in any combination	Total U.S. Population
Under 5 years	9.2%	6.9%
5 to 17 years	24.0%	17.7%
18 to 24 years	14.1%	9.9%
25 to 34 years	16.5%	13.3%
35 to 44 years	13.4%	14.4%
45 to 54 years	10.5%	14.6%
55 to 64 years	7.5%	10.9%
65 to 74 years	3.1%	6.4%
75 years and over	1.7%	6.1%

According to the 2007 American Community Survey, over half of Cambodian Americans (56%) were born outside of the United States. Among the foreign born, 34% have become naturalized U.S. Citizens. Thus, nearly three-fourths of Cambodian Americans are U.S. citizens. According to the 2007 ACS, 75% of the foreign born Cambodian American population arrived before 1990—the major period of refugee resettlement. Thus, only one-fourth of the foreign born population arrived after 1990, with 12% between 1990-1999, and 14% after 2000.

Cambodians currently reside in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, however, over 80% reside in just 10 states, with over 40% in California alone (see Table 4).

Table 4. Top 10 States – Cambodian American Population, Census 2000

State	Population	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
California	70,232	40.8%	40.8%
Massachusetts	19,696	11.5%	53.2%
Washington	13,899	8.1%	60.4%
Pennsylvania	8,531	5.0%	65.3%
Texas	6,852	4.0%	69.3%
Minnesota	5,530	3.2%	72.5%
Rhode Island	4,522	2.6%	75.2%
Virginia	4,423	2.6%	77.8%
New York	2,973	1.7%	79.5%
Georgia	2,905	1.7%	81.2%

Note: These figures based on “Cambodian Alone”

In an analysis of 1990 and 2000 Census data, Pfeifer (2001) found that with the exception of a slight decrease in California (-946 people), the Cambodian population increased in nearly all other states, including increases of 2,000-6,000 people in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Minnesota, and of about 1,000 in Georgia, Florida, and Connecticut.

Several large and medium-sized Cambodian American communities across the United States. Long Beach, CA has the largest Cambodian population outside of Cambodia, with over 17,000 people. Lowell, MA has the next largest population, with over 9,000 people. Cambodian American concentrations are even larger when entire metropolitan areas are considered. Table 5 shows the Cambodian American population for the top 15 metropolitan areas. Note that six of these areas are in California. The greater Los Angeles area, which includes Long Beach along with Riverside and Orange counties, numbers over 36,000 Cambodian Americans. These 15 metropolitan areas account for over three-fourths of the Cambodian American population.

Table 5. Top 15 Metropolitan Areas -- Cambodian American Population, Census 2000

Metropolitan Area	State(s)	Population
Los Angeles—Riverside—Orange County (<i>about half in Long Beach, CA</i>)	CA	36,233
Boston—Worcester—Lawrence (<i>about half in Lowell, MA</i>)	MA, NH, ME, CT	17,301
Seattle—Tacoma—Bremerton	WA	12,391
San Francisco—Oakland—San Jose	CA	10,552
Stockton—Lodi	CA	9,313
Philadelphia—Wilmington—Atlantic City	PA, NJ, DE, MD	7,790
Providence—Fall River—Warwick	RI, MA	6,330
Washington—Baltimore	DC, MD, VA, WV	4,555
San Diego	CA	4,314
Fresno	CA	4,178
Minneapolis—St. Paul	MN, WI	4,149
New York—Northern New Jersey—Long Island	NY, NJ, CT, PA	4,060
Dallas—Fort Worth	TX	3,310
Modesto	CA	2,959
Chicago—Gary—Kenosha	IL, IN, WI	2,764

Source: (Pfeifer, 2001). Note: these figures based on “Cambodian Alone”

Socioeconomic Status

While Cambodian Americans have made tremendous economic progress since initial refugee resettlement in the 1980s, they continue to lag behind the total U.S. population averages, and “have some of the lowest socioeconomic indicators among the Asian American population” (Asian and Pacific Islander Health Forum, 2006, p. 1). As shown in Table 6, about 19% of Cambodian families live in poverty, compared to only 10% for the total U.S. population. The poverty rate is slightly higher for those Cambodian American families with children under 18 years—23% in comparison with about 15% for the total U.S. population.

Table 6. Poverty Rates for Families, 2007 American Community Survey

	Cambodian Alone or in any Combination	Total U.S. Population
All families	19.2%	9.5%
With related children under 18 years	23.3%	14.9%

As shown in Table 7, median family income for Cambodian American families is over \$11,000 less than that of the total U.S. population. Cambodian Americans households also have higher rates of government assistance such as Supplemental Security Income, cash assistance, and food stamps, than the total U.S. population.

Table 7. Income in the Past 12 Months (In 2007 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars), 2007 American Community Survey

	Cambodian Alone or in any Combination	Total U.S. Population
Families	48,163	75,119,260
Median family income (dollars)	49,446	61,173
Households	56,706	112,377,977
With Social Security income	10.4%	26.9%
With Supplemental Security Income	14.8%	4.1%
With cash public assistance income	7.4%	2.1%
With retirement income	3.4%	17.5%
With Food Stamp benefits	15.0%	7.7%

As shown in Table 8, the majority of Cambodian Americans 16 years or over are in the labor force (64%), slightly less than the percentage of the total U.S. population (about 65%). Unemployment rates for Cambodian Americans are slightly higher (about 5%) than the total U.S. population (about 4%).

Table 8. Employment Status, 2007 American Community Survey

	Cambodian Alone or in any Combination	Total U.S. Population
Population 16 years and over	176,439	236,416,572
In labor force	64.1%	64.8%
Employed	58.4%	60.3%
Unemployed	5.2%	4.1%
Not in labor force	35.9%	35.2%

According to the 2007 ACS, over half of employed Cambodian Americans work in the following industries: manufacturing (30%); arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, and food services (15%); and retail trade (13%). Specifically, many Cambodian Americans work in lower paying jobs in factories, restaurants, hotels, and retail stores; however the retail trade category includes Cambodian Americans who own their own shops. One niche market popular among Cambodian business owners in several parts of the country is donut shops (Ardery, 2008).

Also, according to the 2007 ACS, Cambodian Americans have lower rates of home ownership (about 53%) than the total U.S. population (about 67%). In addition, typically more people live in Cambodian American households than in households for the total U.S. population in both owner-occupied housing units (4.28 vs. 2.70) and renter-occupied housing units (3.71 vs. 2.42) (see Table 9).

Table 9. Housing, 2007 American Community Survey

	Cambodian Alone or in any combination	Total U.S. Population
Occupied housing units	56,706	112,377,977
Owner-occupied housing units	53.2%	67.2%
Renter-occupied housing units	46.8%	32.8%
Average household size of owner-occupied unit	4.28	2.70
Average household size of renter-occupied	3.71	2.42

Education

According to the 2007 ACS, Cambodian American student enrollment in all levels of education (pre-school to graduate school) is 85,831 (see Table 10). Grades K-8 account for half of this school enrollment. As shown in Table 10, Cambodian American enrollment in early childhood education and higher education is slightly lower than that of the total U.S. population.

Table 10. School Enrollment, 2007 American Community Survey

	Cambodian alone or in any combination	Total U.S. Population
Population 3 years and over enrolled in school	85,831	79,329,527
Nursery school, preschool	4.0%	6.2%
Kindergarten	4.8%	5.1%
Elementary school (grades 1-8)	42.6%	40.5%
High school (grades 9-12)	22.9%	22.0%
College or graduate school	25.7%	26.2%

In terms of educational attainment, the Cambodian American population lags far behind the total U.S. population. While many Cambodian Americans have succeeded academically, the group as a whole has not done well (Rumbaut, 1997; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Sin, 1991; Smith-Hefner, 1993; Weinberg, 1997; Wright, 1998). Rumbaut (1995a), for example, in his study of immigrant youth in Southern California, found that Cambodian American students had among the highest rates of dropouts, the lowest scores on English proficiency and academic achievement tests, and the lowest career aspirations. The challenges faced by Cambodian students who came in as refugees included experiencing interruptions in their education in Cambodia due to the war and genocide, lack of access to quality education in the refugee camps, exposure to the trauma of war (Um, 1999), and difficulties as they and their families adjusted to the language and culture of the United States (see Pran, 1997 for firsthand accounts from many of these students). Many of these and subsequent generations of Cambodian American students also struggled academically due to low levels of education and their parents' low English proficiency, parents suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, low socioeconomic

status, and high rates of crime in their low-income neighborhoods (Berthold, 2000; Rumbaut, 1995a).

According to the 2007 ACS, 38% of Cambodians (ages 25 and over) have less than a high school diploma, compared to only 16% for the total U.S. population. Only 11% of Cambodian Americans have completed a bachelor's degree and only 3% have completed a graduate or professional degree, compared to 17% and 10% respectively for the total U.S. population. There are also greater disparities between female and male Cambodian Americans with regard to educational attainment. Among Cambodian American males, 71% are high school graduates or higher, compared to 54% of females. In contrast, females in the total U.S. population have a slightly higher percentage of high school graduates than males. Gender differences are much smaller for higher education, where 15% of Cambodian American males have a bachelor's degree or higher in comparison to 14% of females (see Table 11).

Table 11. Educational Attainment, 2007 American Community Survey

	Cambodian alone or in any combination	Total U.S. Population
Population 25 years and over	130,364	197,892,369
Less than high school diploma	38.1%	15.5%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	25.9%	30.1%
Some college or associate's degree	21.7%	26.9%
Bachelor's degree	11.2%	17.4%
Graduate or professional degree	3.0%	10.1%
High school graduate or higher	61.9%	84.5%
Male, high school graduate or higher	71.4%	83.9%
Female, high school graduate or higher	53.9%	85.0%
Bachelor's degree or higher	14.2%	27.5%
Male, bachelor's degree or higher	14.6%	28.2%
Female, bachelor's degree or higher	13.9%	26.7%

To provide a better sense of Cambodian American students' educational attainment in K-12, 2006 achievement data from the California Department of Education are analyzed below. While similar data are not presented for other states, the California students below represent about 40% of Cambodian American student enrollment nationwide. Data were retrieved using the reporting tools available on the California Department of Education Website for the STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) 2006 Test Results (California Standardized Testing and Reporting, n.d.).

Table 12 shows the results of the 2006 California Standards Test for English-Language Arts, administered to students in grades 2-11. On every grade level, there is a significant gap between Cambodian American students and White students⁷. On all grade levels the majority of White students (50%-69%) are deemed proficient or higher in English Language Arts, while the majority of Cambodian American Students (50%-73%) are

deemed below the proficient level. On average, the gap between the numbers of Cambodian American students and White students at the proficient level or higher is 24 percentage points.

**Table 12. Cambodian American Students and White Students
2006 California Standards Test, English-Language Arts**

Cambodian Students	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Proficient or Higher	49%	35%	49%	39%	40%	36%	32%	36%	27%	27%
Below Proficient	51%	65%	50%	60%	60%	63%	68%	64%	72%	73%

White Students										
Proficient or Higher	65%	55%	69%	63%	61%	63%	62%	63%	54%	50%
Below Proficient	35%	44%	31%	37%	39%	37%	38%	37%	47%	50%

Note: "Proficient or Higher" includes levels Proficient and Advanced; "Below Proficient" includes levels Basic, Below Basic, and Far Below Basic

Cambodian American students did better on the 2006 Mathematics California Standards Test (see Table 13) than on the English-Language Arts test. In grades 2-5, the majority (51% - 63%) were deemed as proficient, although the majority of students in grades 6-9 were deemed below the proficient level (56-87%). Nonetheless, as a group, Cambodian Americans lagged behind white students. In grades 2-7 the majority (58%-74%) of white students were deemed proficient or higher in Mathematics, and even in grades 8 and 9 where most White students were deemed below proficient, the percentage of students proficient or higher (21% to 38%) was still much higher than the percentage of Cambodian American students deemed to be proficient or higher (12% to 27%). The gap between Cambodian American students and White students on the Mathematics test, while lower than the gap for the English Language Arts test, is still significant, with an average gap of 12 percentage points.

**Table 13. Cambodian American Students: 2006 California Standards Test,
Mathematics**

Cambodian Students	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Proficient or Higher	63%	61%	62%	51%	44%	42%	27%	12%
Below Proficient	37%	39%	38%	49%	56%	57%	73%	87%

White Students								
Proficient or Higher	74%	73%	68%	64%	58%	58%	38%	21%
Below Proficient	26%	27%	31%	36%	41%	43%	61%	78%

Note: Grades 2-7 CST Mathematics; Grades 8-9 CST General Mathematics (Grades 6 & 7 Standards)

Language

In 2007, a large majority of Cambodian Americans—81%—reported speaking another language at home. Presumably, for all but a very few,⁸ this other language is Khmer, the dominant language of Cambodia.⁹ The 2007 ACS reported a total of 182,374 Khmer

speakers in the United States. Over half (56%) reported speaking English “very well.” (see Table 14).

Table 14. Number of Khmer (Cambodian) Speakers and Ability to Speak English (Population 5 years and over), 2007 American Community Survey

Number of Speakers	182,374
Speak English “very well”	56.1%
Speak English less than “very well”	43.9%

The large percentage of Cambodian Americans who speak English is likely a reflection of the relative youth of the population, and the majority of school-aged Cambodian Americans having been born in the United States. In Table 15, figures from the 2000 Census are broken down by the ability to speak English by age level. For ages 5-17, 90% reported speaking English “well” or “very well,” compared to 65% for ages 18-64, and 16% for ages 65+.

Table 15. Number of Khmer Speakers by Age and Ability to Speak English, 2000 U.S. Census

	Ages 5-17	Ages 18-64	Ages 65+	Total
Number of Speakers	57,935	116,680	7,270	181,885
Speak English “well” or “very well”	51,900	76,235	1,130	129,265
Speak English “not well” or “not at all”	6,035	40,445	6,140	52,620

Source: Generated from Modern Language Association Language Map (Modern Language Association, 2008).

While the large number of Khmer speakers suggests strong Khmer language maintenance, these figures do not include proficiency levels in Khmer. The 19% of Cambodian Americans (ages 5 and older) who were reported on the 2007 ACS as speaking “English only” represents over 42,000 individuals who are unable to speak their heritage language. This number most likely is made up of those school-aged students born and/or raised in the United States with little opportunity to develop or maintain Khmer language in school (see discussion below).

It is important to understand, however, that these English proficiency data from the Census and ACS data are self-reported, typically only by the person who fills out the survey on behalf of the family. Thus care must be taken in interpreting these results. A more accurate picture of the English proficiency of school-aged Cambodian American students is available from the California Department of Education, which keeps track of the number of limited English proficient and fluent English proficient students for each language group. These results are based on the results of English proficiency tests. While tests have changed over the years, and no proficiency test can ever provide a true indication of a students’ language ability (Valdés & Figueroa, 1994), these data nonetheless provide the most accurate depiction available, and they are official designations that determine which students require specialized language programs and/or assistance.

Table 16 shows the language proficiency of Khmer-speaking California students in grades K-12 from 1981 to 2002. In just over 20 years, the percentage of Khmer-speaking students designated as limited English proficient dropped from 86% to just 57%. Note also the rapid rise in the number of Khmer speakers through the 1980s as a result of refugee resettlement, and the slower rise throughout the late 1990s as Cambodian American children were born in the United States. The decline after the peak of 30,053 Khmer-speaking students may be partially due to movement away from California, but also is likely due to the growing number of English-only Cambodian American students who did not participate in English language proficiency testing, and thus do not appear in these data.

Despite this tremendous progress in learning English, it is important to note that over half of the Khmer-speaking K-12 students are officially classified as English language learners. Furthermore, there are concerns about the progress of LEP Cambodian American students in learning English. A state analysis of scores from the 2002 California English Language Development Test found that Khmer speakers had the lowest English proficiency improvement rate of all other language groups of English language learners (Hill, 2004). This rank is significant when one considers that the majority of these students were born in the United States. Cambodian students' scores provide further evidence that Khmer remains a dominant language in their homes and that the majority of Cambodian American K-12 students are still in need of quality English language programs.

Table 16. English Proficiency Designations for K-12 Khmer-Speaking Students, California Department of Education, Language Census Report 2002

Year	Limited English Proficient		Fluent English Proficient		Total
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
1981	2,474	86%	419	14%	2,893
1982	5,166	89%	650	11%	5,816
1983	6,695	88%	937	12%	7,632
1984	8,399	85%	1,434	15%	9,833
1985	10,730	84%	2,005	16%	12,735
1986	13,907	84%	2,723	16%	16,630
1987	15,665	80%	3,914	20%	19,579
1988	17,274	80%	4,283	20%	21,557
1989	18,111	80%	4,614	20%	22,725
1990	19,234	79%	5,243	21%	24,477
1991	20,055	79%	5,452	21%	25,507
1992	20,752	78%	5,903	22%	26,655
1993	21,040	74%	7,219	26%	28,259
1994	21,467	74%	7,481	26%	28,948

1995	21,028	72%	8,071	28%	29,099
1996	20,645	70%	9,056	30%	29,701
1997	19,981	66%	10,072	34%	30,053
1998	18,694	63%	10,823	37%	29,517
1999	17,637	62%	10,610	38%	28,247
2000	16,283	62%	10,010	38%	26,293
2001	14,582	54%	12,187	46%	26,769
2002	13,475	57%	10,172	43%	23,647

Sources: Years 1981 – 1996 reported in Wright (1999); data for 1997-2002 retrieved from California Department of Education (n.d.).

Demographic Summary

While most of the 247,487 Cambodian Americans were born outside of the United States, three-fourths are U.S. citizens. About one-fourth of the population is under the age of 18. Eighty percent of Cambodian Americans live in just 10 states, and about three-fourths live in one of 15 major metropolitan areas. In terms of socioeconomic status, Cambodians have a higher rate of poverty, lower median family income, higher reliance on public assistance programs, higher unemployment rates, lower percentage of homeownership, and higher household sizes than the total U.S. population. Employed Cambodian Americans tend to work largely in low wage-earning jobs in retail, factories, hotels, and restaurants. In terms of education, Cambodian Americans graduate from high school and college at lower rates than the total U.S. population, and current K-12 students (in California at least) have lower test scores than White students across all grade levels in Language Arts and Math. The Cambodian American population, as a whole, hardly fits the “Asian American Model Minority” stereotype, which falsely depicts all Asian Americans as academically and financially successful (Chun, 1995).

In terms of language, 81% percent speak another language home (Khmer for all but a very few), and over half report that they speak English well or very well. 57,935 Cambodian American school-aged youth (ages 5-17) are reported as Khmer speakers, and 90% are reported as speaking English well or very well. In California, however, 57% of Cambodian Americans students are classified as limited English proficient, thus providing further evidence that Khmer remains a dominant language in students’ homes, and that students are still in need of specialized language and education programs.

Cambodian Americans’ Relationship with Cambodia

Connections with the home country where the home language is dominant is an important factor in the maintenance of minority languages (Baker, 2006). Most Cambodian Americans maintain an intense interest in their home country, not surprising given their fairly recent immigration and that most still have family in Cambodia. While interest is naturally highest among older Cambodian Americans who were born in Cambodia and remember living there, young people, including those born in the United States, often show great interest in Cambodia. Cambodian student organizations are common at high schools and universities where Cambodian American students are enrolled. Many young

Cambodian Americans are fans of the music and popular media from the country, and there are several Cambodian American artists producing Khmer language media (music, movies, videos, Karaoke, etc.) in the United States. Some Cambodian American youth have traveled with their families or on their own to Cambodia. Others are actively involved in political or humanitarian efforts related to Cambodia, particularly in the larger Cambodian American communities.

Travel to Cambodia was very difficult in the 1980s, but normalized relations in the 1990s have made it much easier for Cambodian Americans to return to their homeland. Many current Cambodian government officials, leaders of non-governmental organizations, and business owners are Cambodian Americans who returned to help in the redevelopment of their home country. The Cambodian American National Development Organization (CANDO), for example, was a U.S. federally funded project that in the early to mid 1990s brought over dozens of mostly young adult Cambodian American volunteers to help rebuilding their country.

Prior to 1990, communicating with family and friends in Cambodia was very difficult given inadequate postal and telephone services. As a personal example, when I lived in Cambodia in 1993, mailing letters was handled through a pouch in Thailand or through colleagues who traveled back and forth to the United States. The introduction of fax machines provided a quicker but more expensive option. When my wife first came to the United States in 1994, communication with her family was limited to sending and receiving letters (and recorded audio tapes as her mother cannot read Khmer) personally delivered by friends who were traveling to the country. Today, we can send letters through the postal system, but rarely have the need to do so. Most of her family members now have cell phones, and we can now communicate by e-mail.

Cambodia's recent linguistic history is also important to understand the state of Khmer inside Cambodia and in the Diaspora. For 90 years (1863 – 1954), Cambodia was a French protectorate, and the French language was considered the most important foreign language before 1970, and was the second language spoken by leadership and the elite classes (Clayton, 1995). English became important as American involvement increased in Cambodia following a U.S.-orchestrated coup against King Norodom Sihanouk in 1970, in order to gain more Cambodian support in the Vietnam War. Following the Khmer Rouge takeover, knowledge of French or English was sufficient reason for execution. In the 1980s, Vietnamese and Russian became commonly used in higher education and government as these countries provided the bulk of aid and technical assistance, given the West's refusal to acknowledge the Vietnamese-installed Cambodian government (Clayton, 2000). Although teaching English was outlawed through the end of the 1980s, those with English skills were suddenly in demand in the early 1990s as the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) arrived to implement the peace plan and hold elections. An English craze swept through the country and continues to this day, with hordes of private English schools throughout the country.

France has made efforts to keep Cambodia a francophone country but is largely failing (Clayton, 1995). French and English were official languages of UNTAC, though English was by far the most prevalent and preferred language. Assistance from France to higher education institutions required French-medium instruction. Students have held protests against the use of French and made demands for more English. Today, most students in Grades 6 – 12 study English as a foreign language, though French is still an option. The quality of language instruction varies however, as Cambodia's education system is still struggling to rebuild itself since the end of the Genocide. Most universities teach content classes at the graduate level in English, and some private universities teach exclusively in English.

Cambodia has a strong interest in the Cambodian American populations in the United States and other countries. Many current government, business, and organizational leaders are Cambodian Americans who have returned to Cambodia. Cambodian Americans have the right to seek dual citizenship and to vote in Cambodian elections. Cambodian politicians frequently visit the United States to gain support and raise funds, and Cambodian political party chapters in several of the larger Cambodian American communities. Many Cambodians have relatives in the United States with whom they communicate frequently and who provide financial support to family members in Cambodia. Thousands of Cambodian Americans have returned to Cambodia to visit or work temporarily or permanently, and many Cambodians have been allowed to travel to the United States on tourist, business, student, or missionary visas. Many Cambodians have a strong desire to immigrate to the United States.

Cambodian youth in Cambodia and the United States share a strong interest in Cambodian popular culture and interact with each other on line, sharing Khmer music and videos, produced in Cambodia and the U.S, through websites like YouTube and through online virtual Khmer communities. While the content of media files is typically Khmer (with increasing amounts of English codemixing), text exchanges are nearly always in English. Some Cambodian Americans, however, who are unable to write the Khmer script and/or type in it on line, are still able to exchange Khmer text messages (via e-mail or online discussion boards) by writing it phonetically using the English alphabet; despite the lack of standardization, the messages are fairly simple to read and understand for those who can speak Khmer and read English. This phenomenon is now present on ever-popular Khmer Karaoke DVDs. Underneath the Khmer text are the same lyrics rendered phonetically in English, clearly to accommodate Cambodian American fans who cannot read the Khmer script.

Linguistic Characteristics of Cambodian Americans

Meeting the Linguistic Needs of the Group

In the larger Cambodian communities, many public institutions are equipped to accommodate the linguistic needs of non-English speaking Cambodian Americans. In Long Beach, for example, the courts employ a full-time interpreter, and the Long Beach Police Department has Cambodian officers and community liaisons. Bilingual Khmer teachers, paraprofessionals, and/or community workers work in K-12 schools and

facilitate communication with non-English-speaking parents. Public libraries in Cambodian neighborhoods include Khmer language books and materials; one library has a full-time Cambodian American librarian. Public hospitals employ bilingual Khmer nurses and other staff members, and a several Cambodian American doctors and dentists are in private practice with clinics catering to Cambodian communities. Most social service agencies have Cambodian American social workers, case managers, and translators. Federal agencies such as the Department of Health and Department of Motor Vehicles have bilingual staff and have created a Khmer-language version of the written driver's license test. The City of Long Beach produces relevant materials in Khmer; for example, the instructions on city recycling cans distributed to each residence are in English, Khmer and Spanish. City banners in Khmer promoting city events or themes are posted along downtown streets in the heart of the Cambodian community. Even the design of a Long Beach metro station incorporates Khmer script. Similar services are available in other communities based on the size of the Cambodian American population and its needs. However, even in smaller communities, Khmer translation can be provided in settings such as hospitals or courts via interpreters over the telephone.

Language Maintenance and Shift at the Community and National Levels

As the data and descriptions above reveal, the Khmer language is alive and well in the United States. As Baker (2006) has indicated, keys to language maintenance include the close proximity of speakers and the existence of mother-tongue institutions. With three-fourths of Cambodian Americans living in one of fifteen major metropolitan areas (see Table 5), most are afforded opportunities to use their mother tongue on a regular basis as they interact with other Khmer speakers outside of their immediate families. In large Cambodian American communities such as Long Beach and Lowell, there is Khmer language cable programming, several weekly Khmer-language newspapers, radio broadcasts, and frequent cultural events. Dozens of Cambodian Buddhist temples and Christian churches hold services in Khmer, and Cambodian markets and shops provide a variety of goods and services in large-to-medium sized communities. There are also hundreds of community-based organizations across the United States in which Khmer is used at least some of the time for official business, community outreach programs, and social events.

Even smaller Cambodian Americans communities form loose affiliations that organize annual Khmer New Year gatherings. For example, Hawai'i, with only 160 Cambodians (according to Census 2000) has an active organization to plan such events. This organization was also involved in providing assistance to a young Cambodian burn victim who was brought to Hawai'i for medical treatment. In addition there is a small but active Cambodian student organization at Brigham Young University, Hawai'i, made up of a handful of international students from Cambodia. In San Antonio, where my family lives, there are only about 100 Cambodian Americans but we have an unofficial association, which participates in the city's annual Asian Festival and also occasionally brings community members together for other events. Hardly a week goes by when one of our Cambodian friends is not over to our home (or we at their home) sharing homegrown vegetables, cooking Cambodian-style dishes, and conversing in Khmer.

Cambodian Americans living in isolation from other Khmer-speakers often bridge the distance by telephone. My wife, for example, spends hours each week chatting in Khmer with friends not only in other parts of the city, but also with friends in California, Arizona, Washington, Oregon, Minnesota, and Utah, and with family members in Cambodia. The internet is also rapidly growing as a popular means for connecting with other Cambodians throughout the United States and in Cambodia. Here in San Antonio, for example, I know a family with two teenage girls who were born in the United States, but who nonetheless maintain a strong interest in and ties with their Khmer language and culture. They are members of Khmer on-line communities where they post messages and chat (often in the phonetic English Khmer writing described above). While there are no markets anywhere near San Antonio where one can buy Khmer music or videos, these girls spend hours downloading Khmer songs from the internet and watching Karaoke and other Khmer language videos on YouTube and other sites.

As of November 30, 2009 there were over 219,000 videos on YouTube matching the keywords Khmer (130,000), Cambodia (66,000), or Cambodian (23,100), and hundreds of new videos are added each month. Sites such as YouTube enable social networking among Cambodian youth in the U.S. and around the world who share Khmer music videos, clips from Khmer movies and new reports, videos of community events and parties, home-produced videos, and video clips of daily life and interactions. While the latter are not necessarily always (or completely) in Khmer, they nonetheless are clearly marked as Cambodian. As just one illustration of the popularity of YouTube among Cambodian Americans, a humorous video titled *How to be Cambodian* was produced by a Cambodian American student named Jim in Massachusetts for his Khmer language class. The video pokes good-natured fun at their Khmer language and culture, and centers on teaching a clueless Cambodian American kid how to be Cambodian. Since its posting over one year ago, the video had been viewed 256,461 times, and generated 1,632 viewer comments, most of which appear to be from other Cambodian Americans. While most found it hilarious (as did my wife and I), there was also a debate with some accusing Jim and his friends of mocking their language and culture.¹⁰

Nationally, 57,935 Cambodian Americans between the ages of 5 to 17 are identified as “Khmer-speakers.” California alone identified 23,647 Khmer-speaking students in grades K-12 (57% of these speakers lack proficiency in English). These figures suggest that young Cambodian Americans are still speakers of their home language. Only a very small percentage appears to have shifted entirely to English. However, as mentioned above, these figures do not provide information on their proficiency in Khmer. As the opening vignette of this article illustrates, younger members of the first generation—the 1.5 generation—are losing proficiency in Khmer. Many of these students came to the U.S. as younger children who may or may not have had the chance to attend Khmer schooling in Cambodia or the refugee camps. Members of the second generation have not been afforded opportunities to fully develop their Khmer language skills in the first place given the lack of bilingual programs and the emphasis on English-only instruction in schools. Furthermore, many second-generation students are children of the 1.5

generation, and thus may have parents who are proficient in English but lack proficiency in Khmer. Khmer language loss is of great concern to Cambodian Americans as many continue to hold the view that “to be Khmer is to speak Khmer.” Parents often associate their children’s’ loss of Khmer as synonymous with losing their Khmer identity and culture (Smith-Hefner, 1990). While there is evidence that Cambodian American are forging a new Cambodian identity for themselves in the United States that does not necessarily require full proficiency in Khmer, many feel shame about their lack of proficiency in their “native” language and long for opportunities to improve it (Wright, 2007a).

Heritage Language Education

One, if not the chief, cause for Khmer primary language loss is the lack of heritage language programs where students can develop and/or maintain their home language, including learning how to read and write Khmer. The Khmer system of writing may appear overwhelming at first; it has more characters than any other alphabetic writing system, there is no spacing between words, and words are not written in strict left-to-right linear fashion as characters may be written over, above, underneath or surrounding other characters. However, the writing system is remarkably logical and consistent, much more so than English. Students in Cambodia do not find the language difficult to learn to read and write. Likewise, Khmer language programs in the United States have found that students can develop Khmer literacy skills fairly quickly with proper instruction (Wright, 2003; Olsen, 2001).

Very few Khmer bilingual programs have been created in U.S. public schools. Long Beach for example, only had transitional Khmer bilingual programs in two of its elementary schools (Whittier and Lincoln). These programs did not begin until after refugee resettlement ended in the early 1990s and they only lasted for about six years, coming to a close soon after the passage of Proposition 227 placed restrictions on bilingual education programs (Wright, 2003). Massachusetts had some of the only other transitional Khmer bilingual programs in the country (Smith-Hefner, 1990). Its programs too were only in a few schools and came to an end following the passage of that state's anti-bilingual education voter initiative (Official Massachusetts Information for Voters, 2002). The only in-school Khmer language programs that have survived appear to be a small number of Khmer-for-Khmer speakers courses at the secondary school level. However, schools' efforts to offer these courses in middle schools and high schools in cities like Long Beach and Fresno have been sporadic at best. Districts cite difficulties in hiring qualified teachers for these courses, particularly given the lack of Khmer certification for foreign language teachers at the secondary level. In addition, the need to offer remedial courses connected with low standardized test scores has led to low enrollment and the cancelling of Khmer-for-Khmer Speakers courses (Wright, 2007b).

The number of colleges and universities offering Khmer language courses is also miniscule. California State University Long Beach, Cornell University, Northern Illinois University, UC Berkeley, and the University of Hawaii are among the few that have offered courses within the past ten years. With the exception of Cal State Long Beach,

these courses have low enrollments and mainly cater to non-natives, though an increasing number of Cambodian American students are enrolling. The Southeast Asian Summer Studies Institute (SEASSI, n.d.) established in 1983 and hosted by the University of Wisconsin since 2000, provides annual opportunities for eight weeks of intensive instruction in Khmer, and other SE Asian languages, at the beginning to advanced levels. The Institute is open to undergraduate and graduate students from colleges and universities around the world. While originally designed for non-natives, the program added a heritage language component in 2000 to accommodate a growing number of Cambodian Americans eager to regain Khmer language proficiency. Since 2000, over 190 students have studied Khmer through the SEASSI program, including about 53 native Cambodian Americans in the Heritage Program¹¹ (Personal communication, Dr. Frank Smith, October 10, 2007).

To my knowledge, only the University of Hawai'i has a full-time tenured Khmer Foreign Language faculty member, Dr. Chhany Sak-Humphry. While Khmer courses during the regular year have low enrollments, Dr. Humphry and the University of Hawai'i obtained a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2005 to create the Advanced Study of Khmer program, which includes fellowships for six weeks of intensive Khmer language instruction in Cambodia at the advanced level. These fellowships are open to students and faculty members. Under the grant, 25 individuals participated in the program, including nine Cambodian Americans. Dr. Sak-Humphry has continued the ASK program beyond the initial grant and is seeking additional funding to extend this unique program (personal communication, September 25, 2007).¹² She has also created the first online Khmer language courses that can be taken by students from other universities for credit.

Most opportunities for Cambodian American youth to learn Khmer come through community-based heritage language programs. Large and medium-sized communities typically have heritage language programs that are offered through temples, churches, and/or Cambodian community associations. However, instruction in these courses tends to be of low quality; moreover, few appropriate materials are available, programs are difficult to keep staffed as most teachers are volunteers, and attendance tends to fluctuate (Needham, 1996). The longest running and highest quality community-based program in the country is Project KEEP (Khmer Emerging Education Program) in Fresno, California. This well-documented program, which receives some support from the local school district, was started as a grass-roots community effort, and has highly dedicated teachers and administrators, many of whom have been with the program since it first began over ten years ago (Olsen, 2001). Students attend two days a week after school on Thursdays and Fridays. The program provides instruction at several levels and claims that students who complete the top levels of instruction can read Khmer novels and newspapers. While the program serves about 100 students, this number represents a sharp decline from just a few years ago when over 300 students were participating. While declining interests may be one explanation for the decrease in participation, other issues include that parents have become busier, the program has been moved to another site further from the community,

and many students are required to participate in remedial-after school tutoring programs, or are involved in other after-school programs (Wright, 2007b).

Interactions with Members of the Dominant Group

As the 2000 Census data reveal, the majority (71%) of Cambodian Americans speak English “well” or “very well.” This total jumps to 90% for Cambodian Americans ages 5-17. Although in California over half of pupils in grades K-12 are deemed as lacking proficiency in English, considered together these data suggest that most of those deemed as LEP are likely at the intermediate and advanced levels of English proficiency.¹³ These proficiency levels no doubt reflect Cambodian Americans’ frequent interactions with English speakers in the dominant group. While older adults, particularly those in larger Cambodian communities, may find it possible to survive in the United States without learning English, few if any young people find the same, particularly if their schooling has been conducted fully or mostly in English.

Given the poor track record of Americans from the dominant group studying and attaining proficiency in languages other than English, and that Cambodians have made rapid progress in acquiring English, there has been little need for members of the dominant group to learn Khmer. Most American non-native Khmer speakers learned the language as missionaries working with Cambodians in the United States or in Cambodia. Other proficient non-native Khmer speakers include a handful of academics and/or individuals who have taken Khmer courses up to advanced levels where they are available, participated in the SEASII program, and/or worked in Cambodia or in Cambodian American communities for extended periods. However, many young Cambodian Americans have non-Cambodian friends who are genuinely intrigued and eager to learn a few words and phrases in Khmer.

Language Contact with the Dominant Group and/or Other Minority Groups

An important issue worth mentioning is that in addition to young Cambodians Americans quickly learning English through contact with members of the dominant group, many Cambodians live in urban neighborhoods with other minority groups. Thus, Cambodian American youth are also exposed to the varieties of English spoken in inner-city neighborhoods, which includes African American Vernacular English (or Ebonics) prevalent in the hip-hop culture with which many of them identify. Those involved in Cambodian youth gangs in particular have adopted this variety of English. Even those not in gangs will often code switch between Standard English and what some of them describe as “ghetto talk,” which indicates how they view the speech norms of the neighborhoods in which they grow up. Many Cambodian American youth growing up in the digital age who also identify with the hip-hop culture adopt the unique written discourse styles used in text messaging and on-line communication. Like other inner-city youth, some Cambodian American students may have trouble learning Standard English at school. They may not be aware of how the use of non-standard varieties of English may lead to problems when communicating with members of the dominant society who hold discriminatory views about non-standard varieties of English.

Future Prospects for Maintenance of Khmer in the United States

A cursory look at factors that encourage minority language maintenance, as outlined by Baker (2006) reveals many positives for Khmer in the United States. However, the most important factor is whether the language is being passed on to and used by subsequent generations of Cambodian Americans. As the data and discussion above indicate, Khmer is spoken by approximately 58,000 school-aged Cambodian Americans; however, it appears that few speak it at high levels of proficiency and/or have literacy skills in the language. This situation is understandable given the lack of opportunities for formal instruction through public schools, colleges, universities and community-based heritage language programs. And although there are mother tongue institutions present in many Cambodian American communities (e.g., temples, churches, organizations, etc.), many of these institutions operate bilingually, typically using the mother tongue mainly with adults who lack proficiency in English. For example, in some Khmer Christian churches, separate Sunday school classes are held in Khmer for the older adults and English for the children, teens, and young adults.

With over 12 million speakers in Cambodia and another million in areas outside of Cambodia including Vietnam, Thailand, Australia, France, Canada, Taiwan, and the United States, there is little threat to the longevity of Khmer internationally (Gordon, 2005). Khmer remains the dominant language of government, institutions and daily life in Cambodia. Despite Cambodia's English craze, most of Cambodia's population can speak only Khmer. In addition, the large base of Cambodians in the United States means there will be a continuing draw for more Cambodians to immigrate, resulting in fresh numbers of fluent Khmer speakers; however, this number will always represent just a small proportion of the Cambodian American population.

Prospects for passing on the Khmer language to the next generations, however, remain good. Many Cambodian Americans maintain a strong interest and sense of identify as Khmer, as evidenced by their participation in Khmer language programs when available, their participation in community-based events, their interest in Khmer popular culture, which bridges the gap between the United States and Cambodia, and their active participation in on-line communities of Cambodians via the internet. As the internet continues to open up avenues for easy communication and interaction in Khmer, it will increasingly become an important place for Cambodian American youth to maintain and develop their knowledge of Khmer. The increasing number of Cambodian American youth who travel to Cambodia with their families or on their own, especially those who go there to work or volunteer, are finding opportunities to reconnect with and practice using their language. As more opportunities open up for Khmer heritage language courses in public schools, colleges and universities, I suspect more and more members of the 1.5, 2nd and subsequent generations will participate in them.

While a growing number of non-natives also are learning and developing proficiency in Khmer, given that Khmer is not a major world language and has little utility outside of Cambodia and Cambodian American communities, there will not likely be a big demand among other Americans to learn the language. For example, dual language bilingual

programs following the 50/50 model (where half the students are non-native Khmer speakers) are unlikely, as there will be few non-Cambodian parents anxious for their kids to learn Khmer.¹⁴ However, Khmer is on the list of languages of which the federal government needs more advanced-level speakers (National Security Education Program, 2001). Thus the government does have interests in seeing the Khmer language developed and maintained by both native and non-native speakers.

Those Cambodian American youth who are able to develop and maintain their Khmer language skills will have advantages over those who do not. First, they will likely have a greater sense of self-identity and be admired by others. Many subscribe to the belief that to be Khmer is to speak Khmer, thus one's proficiency in Khmer may be used as a marker of one's degree of Khmerness. Popular Asian American culture describes an alternative to the FOB ("Fresh off the Boat") acronym, a derogatory term used to describe to awkward newcomers. The desirable FOB is "Fabulous Oriental Being" with one of the criteria being "You speak perfect English and are fluent in your native language" ("Fobulous," 2009). "Fobulous" Cambodian Americans will likely have better relations with non-English-speaking parents and other relatives. They will be able to communicate effortlessly with family and friends in Cambodia. They also will be eligible for employment requiring bilingual skills in both the United States and Cambodia, and they may be better suited for rewarding work in Cambodia helping to rebuild and develop the country.

Soben Huon, Miss Utah USA 2006, was the first Cambodian American to compete in the Miss USA Pageant. During the competition Huon proudly declared that she "speaks fluent Khmer." (Wikipedia, 2009). In addition to being an all-around American (honors student, plays the violin and piano, volunteers with the Red Cross and United Way), Soben is a Cambodian classical dancer, and has spent time in Cambodia raising awareness of and speaking against human trafficking. While officially representing only the state of Utah, support for Soben during the pageant came from Cambodian Americans across the country, as well as in Cambodia. Despite losing the Miss USA pageant, she has remained somewhat of a celebrity. She has been invited to events in Cambodian American communities throughout the country, and was even featured in her home town of Long Beach at the 2006 Cambodian New Year Parade. To many Cambodian American youth, she is the exemplar of "fobulousness" to which they aspire.

Practical steps are needed to maintain and promote the Khmer language in the United States. First and foremost, Cambodian American youth need more opportunities to participate in Khmer heritage language programs. Schools with large Cambodian American populations should actively work to create in-school bilingual programs or other forms of Khmer heritage language instruction, such as Khmer-for-Khmer speakers courses at the high school level. State certifications need to be adjusted so that Khmer foreign language teachers can be certified and hired. Cambodian American communities need to be more active in offering community-based programs. Greater federal support for Khmer language programs—for both in-school and community-based programs—would go a long way in promoting the learning of a language the government has deemed

important. Existing programs need greater stability, and need to improve their curriculum and instruction to make the programs more attractive to students. Greater uses of technology can be used to facilitate communication between Cambodian students in the United States and Cambodia.

Outside of formal education programs, internet resources can be developed to help Cambodian American youth learn to read Khmer. Already there are a few websites dedicated to learning Khmer, including *Learn Khmer*, (Heng, Phirun, Lihong, Heng, Malin, Sophoeun, et al., n.d.), affiliated with the University of Cambodia. Khmer language learning videos are starting to appear on sites like YouTube, but greater use can be made of web and video sites like these to post instructional videos. An example is Frank Smith's *Study Khmer* (Smith, n.d.), which offers monthly video podcasts for Khmer study. In addition, networks could be developed through on-line voice-over-internet-protocol services such as Skype) to offer live on-line video language lessons.

Khmer print material, such as books and magazines that appeal to Cambodian American youth, is also needed. Just as Karaoke has created great interest in learning to read in Khmer, so can engaging print materials. Perhaps the phonetically written Khmer in the English alphabet that is used on the internet and on Karaoke videos can become standardized and used in some print materials as a bridge for those who want to learn to read in Khmer, or at least to be able to access Khmer language materials.

Parents, of course, have a role as well as a responsibility to help their children learn their Khmer language. Indeed, by continuing to speak Khmer at home, Cambodian parents have already done much to keep the Khmer language alive to some extent in their children. Nonetheless, Khmer parents could be doing much more to help their children maintain their Khmer language. In addition to speaking it with their children and insisting their children speak it to them, parents could create and support community-based programs, and pressure local schools to offer Khmer language programs.

Finally, greater value needs to be placed on bilingual skills in the United States among language minority students and community members. Current education policies such as No Child Left Behind discourage quality heritage language programs (Wright, 2007b), and current societal ideologies bashing immigrants and favoring English-only policies create a hostile environment where individuals who maintain and use their native languages are often viewed as un-American (Wiley, 2005). If the United States wants and needs more bilingual citizens, it must do much more to change Americans' views of Americans on the value of bilingualism.

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Notes

¹ I began acquiring the Khmer language as a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, serving among Southeast Asian refugees in the Washington, DC area from 1986-1988. Subsequently I attained more formal language training through community-based programs in Long Beach, and through university language courses at Cornell University (through the SEASII program) and California State University, Long Beach. I lived and worked in Cambodia for the first time from 1993 and 1994, where my Khmer language skills were further developed. I am married to a native Khmer speaker, and my family is one of the over 59,000 Cambodian households identified by the 2005 American Community Survey. ([back](#))

² Pol Pot was betrayed by his own Khmer Rouge leaders in 1997 after he ordered the brutal murder of one of his top leaders and his 11 family members. He died suddenly under mysterious circumstances in 1998 while under house arrest. Some Khmer Rouge leaders have been granted amnesty by the current Cambodian government, and there is currently a genocide tribunal in Cambodia, which is trying a handful of surviving Khmer Rouge leaders for their crimes against humanity. ([back](#))

³ Those remaining in UN refugee camps in the early 1990s when resettlement programs ended were repatriated back to Cambodia as UN efforts were succeeding in bringing peace and stability to the country. ([back](#))

⁴ While many of these marriages are legitimate, marriage has become a key strategy for families to bring over relatives. Many marriages are strategically arranged (either through relatives or paid non-relatives) to speed up the immigration process. ([back](#))

⁵ International adoptions of Cambodian orphans were halted temporarily in the midst of scandal revealing many of the children were not, in fact, orphans. One American woman who led a major adoption program was arrested in the United States when it was revealed her staff were essentially buying children from poor parents so rich Westerners could adopt them. (Goldberg, A. B., & Apton, 2005). ([back](#))

⁶ Rumbaut (1995b) noted that during this time many Cambodians dubbed the KGP project as the “Khmer Refrigerator Project” as several of the alternative sites were in frostbelt locations. ([back](#))

⁷ In fairness, the gap sizes between Cambodian American students and all students in California are much smaller, and in some cases a higher percentage of Cambodian Americans were deemed proficient or higher on some grade levels compared to all California students as a whole. This however reflects the large number of poor and/or minority students in the state. ([back](#))

⁸ I know, for example, two Cambodian-Mexican American students in San Antonio who speak Spanish and English, but not Khmer. This is understandable given their mother is a monolingual Spanish speaker, their Cambodian father can speak English and some Spanish, and they have grown up in a largely Hispanic city. ([back](#))

⁹ There are ethnic minorities in Cambodia including Vietnamese- and Chinese-Cambodians; however, they usually speak Khmer fluently in addition to their other language. There are several hill tribes with unique languages, but to my knowledge few if any have migrated to the United States. Thus, Khmer is the dominant language of most immigrants from Cambodia. ([back](#))

¹⁰ After the video had been on YouTube for one year, Jim posted a strongly worded (and profanity-laced) response on his video in the “about this video” section where he responds to those who posted comments accusing him of mocking Khmer heritage and culture. He comments on his own shock over how many people are still watching this video, which he said he made to get out of a writing assignment in his Khmer language class. In his own way, he expresses his Khmer pride and warns of the dangers of people who take their culture too seriously. Jim asks, “are we so proud a race that we can't humble ourselves long enough to find humor in the things we do?” ([back](#))

¹¹ Dr. Frank Smith, Khmer coordinator for the SEASII program, indicated that separate courses were created for Khmer heritage program students for the first two years, but since 2002 they have, for the most part, been integrated into the intermediate level class. ([back](#))

¹² The ASK Program at the University of Hawai'i has existed unofficially since 1994 and was formally institutionalized in 2002 with seed money from a few Southeast Asian Summer Studies Institute consortium universities. According to Dr. Sak-Humphry, over 90 people have participated in the program since its inception, either formally or informally (personal communication, June 25, 2009). ([back](#))

¹³ The Census and ACS data only ask for self-reported data on speaking ability. LEP designations in the CA K-12 school system also include listening, reading, and writing. Redesignation as fluent English proficient in California requires not only meeting cut scores on an English language proficiency test, but also obtaining certain scores on the state's content-area tests given to all students. Many Khmer students who sound fluent in their oral English proficiency may remain classified as LEP due to difficulties with reading and/or writing in English, and/or passing these content-area high-stakes tests. ([back](#))

¹⁴ However, I suspect that in the near future, there may be possibilities for dual language programs consisting of two types of students – recent immigrant ELLs who speak Khmer fluently and Cambodian American students who speak English fluently. This model is common for dual language programs around south Texas for Spanish speakers. ([back](#))