

Review Article

Temples to Policy Plans: Tracing the Political Trajectory of Education and Governance in Cambodia, from Antiquity to Contemporary Reforms

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Abstract

This literature review traces the evolution of education in Cambodia from antiquity to the present, analysing changes across nine significant periods. Beginning with informal learning in prehistoric civilizations and oral traditions rooted in indigenous knowledge, the study delves into the evolution of temple-based education during the Angkor Empire, the dualism of colonial-era schooling, and the nationalizing drives that followed independence in 1953. It explores how the Khmer Rouge's rule (1975-1979) affected the educational system, how the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979-1993) dealt with reconstruction, and how current advancements fit into global development frameworks. Important issues include incorporating religious and cultural values into education, the consequences of foreign influence and political ideology, and the continued difference in access and quality between rural and urban areas. This recent study, which combines policy texts and contemporary data, demonstrates Cambodia's amazing ability to rebuild its educational institutions in the face of adversity. It also identifies gaps in the literature for comparative regional studies, equity-oriented research, and post-conflict educational memory. This study adds to general understanding of how education institutions in postcolonial and post-conflict settings respond to globalization, national identity, and developmental aspirations.

Keywords

Cambodian Education History, The Angkor Empire, Educational Reform, Colonial Education, Post-conflict Reconstruction

1. Introduction

Cambodia has a rich and extensive civilizational history spanning two millennia, highlighted by complex religious beliefs, magnificent architecture, and vibrant oral and literary traditions. Chandler and Coedès argue that from the early Funan and Chenla periods until the Angkor era, both Indic and indigenous cultural influences had a significant impact on Cambodia's historical route [6, 9]. Harris argues that the inclusion of Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly Theravāda

Buddhism, has significantly influenced the spiritual and intellectual underpinnings of educational institutions [14]. This religious-educational nexus continued to operate long after the Angkorian era had ended. According to these experts, temples and monasteries were significant learning centres that transmitted moral values, religious scriptures, and creative traditions through Pali and Sanskrit textual cultures. According to Edwards, the French colonial era (1863–1953)

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transformed education into a contentious sector where Western pedagogical approaches coexisted with traditional Buddhist teaching [10]. Clayton delves more at how this resulted in a broken educational landscape, with clashes between colonial modernism and indigenous cultural preservation [7]. Ayres' post-independence reforms of the 1950s and 1960s sought to close this gap by establishing a national education system based on Khmer identity and contemporary pedagogical concepts [2]. The Khmer Rouge period (1975–1979), on the other hand, was a radical break with Cambodian educational methods. During this time, several educational institutions were destroyed, teachers were persecuted, and intellectual pursuits were outlawed, according to Ayres and Kierna [2, 20]. MoEYS, claims that following regimes, from the People's Republic of Kampuchea to the modern Kingdom of Cambodia, have made significant efforts at rehabilitation. Curriculum reform, international alliances, and strategic programs such as the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) and the Education Sector Support Programme (ESSP) all seek to improve educational access, quality, and equity [24, 26]. According to the examined literature, Cambodian education should be considered as a reflecting medium for deeper sociopolitical changes, civilizational resilience, and national growth, rather than simply an institutional mechanism. It has long served as a vital tool for nation-building, cultural preservation, and social development.

Two primary objectives guide this scholarly investigation. The primary goal is to compile all available historical and contemporary literature on Cambodian education and its growth over time, highlighting key institutional, cultural, and ideological shifts. Second, it intends to map out the key phases, shifts, and reform initiatives that occurred from indigenous educational practices in the Angkor era to the complexities of colonial dualism, the post-independence modernization phase, the Khmer Rouge's collapse, and the subsequent reconstruction and globalization of education in the post-1993 era. These objectives are not only to create a comprehensive historical narrative, but also to uncover trends, disruptions, and continuities that can inform current educational policy and future study.

This academic research is significant for both intellectual and practical reasons. Tan points out that Southeast Asian educational history is underrepresented in global comparative education studies [36]. Although Angkorian civilization and the Khmer Rouge period are widely studied, few books attempt to provide a longitudinal synthesis of Cambodian education throughout historical periods. This work addresses a significant gap in multidisciplinary educational research by drawing on a variety of disciplines, including archaeology, religion studies, colonial papers, and contemporary policy assessments. Furthermore, the study provides important fresh perspectives on how education has helped Cambodia navigate globalization, genocide, and colonialism. According to a variety of scholars, knowing the historical foundations of Cambodia's education system is crucial for developing suc-

cessful and contextually informed policies. Curriculum localization, professional development for teachers, and educational equity between rural and urban areas are all important. As Cambodia works toward the Sustainable Development Goals, notably SDG 4 (Quality Education), this historical context provides an important prism through which to examine and address current challenges and prospective futures.

2. Prehistoric and Early Educational Practices

Prehistoric Cambodian education, according to Huot with his co-authors, evolved from innate preservation strategies to more imaginative and structured learning procedures [18]. Based on archaeological and anthropological evidence, they propose that early Cambodians learned through entrenched social practices in which observation, imitation, and participation were critical for acquiring basic skills such as toolmaking, subsistence farming, and spiritual ritual. According to Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning, learning is essentially a social process enmeshed in real-world environments [21]. Under their philosophy, which is based on Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), newcomers join a community of practice by first performing low-risk, basic chores. As they acquire more information and experience, they gradually become more involved in the community's activities. This development stresses that learning is more than just acquiring abstract knowledge; it also entails actively participating in a community's traditions and customs. Children in kinship-based agrarian communities learned by participating in productive and ceremonial activities, which were often guided by elders in apprenticeship-style partnerships.

Penny with colleagues back up this claim, citing intricate socio-cultural structure among Neolithic communities as indicated by burial sites, ceramics, and subsistence systems at Laang Spean and Samrong Sen [27]. Such educational dynamics as enculturation, where learning includes the implicit transmission of gender roles, beliefs, and social norms, reinforced via everyday practice and societal expectations, are discussed by Rogoff [29]. This transition from intuitive to creative learning laid the groundwork for Cambodia's sustained cultural and intellectual growth, as pointed out by Huot with colleagues [18]. Their study finds two main themes in prehistoric education: survival-driven knowledge and the slow development of creative and symbolic expression, a process that, as Isin and Nyers propose and indicates the growth of global citizenship through localized cultural learning [19].

In this regard, the unstructured yet highly regulated modalities of early Cambodian education paved the way for the more formalized religious and philosophical learning systems that would characterize later historical periods. Understanding these roots, as Huot with colleagues argue persuasively, is critical to appreciating Cambodia's academic heritage's

lengthy continuity in culture [18]. The change from primarily experiential learning to formalized oral traditions was a watershed moment in Cambodian educational history. According to Harris, oral transmission was the main means of delivering moral, spiritual, and practical advice before written texts became widely available [14]. Whether via proverbs, folktales, or myths, storytelling served not just for entertainment but also as a teaching tool for moral ideas, social ideals, and cosmological narratives. Ledgerwood emphasizes the persistence and instructional significance of oral traditions, particularly in situations where formal education is disrupted or unavailable [22]. After the Khmer Rouge government fell, many rural Cambodian villages turned to oral tradition and ceremonial practice to rebuild a feeling of continuity and cultural identity. Furthermore, Bellwood et al., suggest that

indigenous knowledge systems were inextricably linked to environmental awareness and spiritual cosmologies [3]. Ritual, singing, and embodied practices often taught agricultural cycles, medicinal plants, and seasonal changes. Bellwood and his colleagues maintain that these educational frameworks gave knowledge divine meaning and highlighted its responsible transmission within the society.

Describing these networks of knowledge as dynamic, flexible, and important to local epistemologies, UNESCO and UNICEF underline even more their continued relevance [41, 43]. They are still important components of ecological literacy, moral education, and rural pedagogy today, providing critical foundations for contextualizing and supplementing formal schooling initiatives in Cambodia, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Early and Historical Educational Methods Applied in Cambodia.

No.	Period	Mode	Important Personality Traits	Academics
1.	Early Years	Observational strategies	learning incorporated in daily survival activities; no official instruction	(Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003)
2.	Prehistoric Period	Community Involvement and Apprenticeship	Work Skill intergenerational transmission	(Penny et al., 2019)
3.	Oral Customs (Pre-Angkor)	Transmission of Storytelling and Mythology	Transmission of cosmology, cultural identity, and moral principles	(Harris, 2005; Ledgerwood, 1990)
4.	Post-Angkor Oral Traditions	Oral Memory Restoration Post-Conflict	Resilience of oral narratives and moral teachings following times of disturbance	(Harris, 2005; Ledgerwood, 1990)
5.	Indigenous Knowledge	Ecological and ceremonial knowledge	Taught via song, ritual, and embodied practice; knowledge seen as holy	(Bellwood et al., 2000; UNESCO, 2023)

3. Education Under the Angkor Empire (9th–15th Century)

Academics agree that the Angkorian period, 9th–15th century CE, is a dynamically intellectual and cultural era in Cambodian history. According to Chandler and Coedès, monasteries and temples (vihāras) not only fulfilled religious purposes but also functioned as main hubs for official education and creative output at this period [6, 9]. These buildings, they propose, were fundamental in the administrative infrastructure and ideological establishment of the Khmer state. Vickery points to epigraphic inscriptions from sites like Preah Ko, Banteay Srei, and Angkor Wat, which document the existence of learned elites, (*panditas*) trained in Vedic rituals, Sanskrit grammar, astronomy, and sacred philosophy [44]. He emphasizes that these centres housed libraries and palm-leaf manuscripts (*latāpatra*) and offered curricula that spanned religious instruction, philosophy, astrology, poetry, law, and the arts. Such scope, he contends, indicated a complete edu-

cational paradigm meant to produce royal advisers, ceremonial experts, and academics. Many of these temples, Harris says, served as residential schools for young novices learning under monastic discipline [14]. The instructional approach aligns with South and Southeast Asian scholastic traditions, emphasizing oral memorizing, chanting, and interpretive commentary (*vyākhyāna*). Overall, education during this period was, as Harris observes, elite, male-centred, and tightly interwoven with both religious doctrine and state administration.

Sao and Yon argue that the intellectual foundation of Angkorian education was shaped by a synthesis of Hindu and Buddhist traditions [30, 46]. Yaśovarman I and Suryavarman II were among the early kings who generously supported the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava temple schools, ensuring that students were taught Vedic liturgy and Sanskrit literature. Emphasizing ritual accuracy and metaphysical doctrine in keeping with the *devarāja* concept of kingship, this kind of schooling, they propose, strengthened dynasty legitimacy by religious orthodoxy. The rise of Mahāyāna and, later, Theravāda Bud-

dhism during the 12th century, as remarked out by Harris and Pou, marked a notable change [14, 28]. Monastic institutions that prioritized moral teachings (sīla), ethical behaviour, and the Pāli canon replaced court-based Brahmanical institutes as the primary educational institutions. Buddhist monks played increasingly important roles in village education, giving basic literacy and doctrinal instruction via works such as the Dhammapada. Instruction was given using techniques including chanting, repetition, and organized argument, therefore enabling considerably broader access to education outside of aristocratic groups. According to these historians, this religious and pedagogical revolution did not only increase educational access but also laid the conceptual framework for Cambodia's long-lasting moral and cultural identity.

Evans and Stark and Griffin clarify that the fall of the Angkor Empire in the 15th century, ascribed to foreign intrusions, ecological problems, and internal political disintegration, also reflected the decline of its educational institutions [12, 35]. With the loss of royal patronage, they note,

many temple schools and Brahmanical centres were either destroyed or abandoned. Ledgerwood and Ebihara observe that in this post-Angkorian period, education became decentralized and primarily monastic, with Theravāda Buddhist temples in rural areas sustaining basic literacy and moral instruction [23]. While the sophistication of Angkorian scholasticism reduced, a simplified educational model continued under support from itinerant monks and lay practitioners. Though their use moved toward education in Buddhist ethics, folktales, and community rules rather than classical Sanskrit texts, palm-leaf manuscripts (kraing) remained in circulation. Rather than a complete rupture, this period, according to Ledgerwood, reflects an interval of cultural continuity through adaptability. The legacy of Angkorian educational values persisted in a decentralized, village-based form, eventually forming the foundations of Cambodian education long into the colonial era and beyond, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Education During the Angkor Empire (9th–15th Century).

No.	Theme	Key Features	Educational Agents	Sources
1.	Formal Educational Institutions	Temples and monasteries functioned as centers of learning; instruction in Sanskrit, philosophy, and the arts; temple libraries with inscriptions and manuscripts.	Brahmins, monks, panditas, royal academics	(Chandler, 2018; Harris, 2005; Vickery, 1998)
2.	Curriculum's Religious Impact Early	Curricula were influenced by Hinduism's Vedic writings, while Buddhism included ethical teachings and Pāli texts. Monks were also instructed in moral conduct and scripture	Early time Brahmanical priests; Mahāyāna and thereafter Theravāda Buddhist monks	(Coedès, 1968; Pou, 1991)
3.	Decline of Education Post-Angkor	Collapse of temple schools; reduction of royal patronage; shift to village-based Buddhist monastic education with simplified curricula and local language use.	Village monks, lay practitioners	(Evans, 2010; Ledgerwood & Ebihara, 2002)

4. Colonial Age and Educational Revolution (1863–1953)

The arrival of French colonial control in 1863 brought about a basic change in Cambodia's educational system. According to Clayton and Edwards, French administrators employed secular, Western-style schools as both a colonial control device and a limited means of modernization [7, 10]. Unlike the indigenous Buddhist monastic system, which emphasized moral instruction, communal literacy, and religious practice, the colonial model aimed mostly to produce a small, French-speaking elite for bureaucratic service. According to Ayres, the establishment of Lycée Sisowath in Phnom Penh in 1905 was symbolic of this agenda [2]. The

curriculum, modelled after the French system, stressed disciplines such as French language, mathematics, and European history, with little emphasis on Khmer culture, language, or Buddhist philosophy. As Edwards goes on to say, this centralized and elitist school system was so exclusive that it mostly left the rural population out, except for the urban elites and royal descendants [10]. As a result, a narrow Francophone class emerged, socially distanced from the broader Khmer-speaking population and disconnected from local cultural and spiritual frameworks.

Despite its drive toward modernization, the French colonial administration did not abolish existing educational traditions. Hansen and Harris point out that a dual education system evolved whereby Buddhist temples kept providing moral and religious instruction to the rural population [13, 14]. Pagoda schools, using Pāli literacy and Khmer script, were the major

educational option for most Cambodians outside the urban elite. According to Clayton and Edwards, this divided structure produced a strong sociocultural gap [7, 10]. While French schools provided social prestige and opportunities for government jobs, monastic schools maintained spiritual ideals and communal identity. However, the French-educated elite increasingly saw traditional Buddhist education as out of date and incompatible with the contemporary state. The dual system thus conserved cultural legacy while perpetuating inequities in educational access, literacy levels, and professional opportunities. As Huot with his colleagues contend that this dual educational system reflected deeper political tensions under colonial control, so embedding structural inequalities that sustained educational inequality and fractured Cambodia's intellectual development [16].

Ayres and Kiernan highlight many structural constraints in the colonial educational system [2, 20]. Linguistically, education was almost entirely in French, which alienated Khmer-speaking students and helped to explain low enrolment and high dropout rates, especially in rural areas. Khmer

language teaching above the elementary level was scarce, maintaining a linguistic and cultural hierarchy that excluded local identities. Resistance to French instruction was especially strong among the monastic community and portions of the traditional elite, who, according to Ayres, saw secular education as harmful to Buddhist ideals and Cambodian identity [2]. Compounding these cultural challenges was a lack of funding for rural educational infrastructure, so strengthening geographical inequalities.

According to UNESCO, during the early 1950s, only approximately 2.5% of Cambodians were literate, and less than 1,000 students were enrolled in secondary school, highlighting the limited breadth and elitist direction of colonial education policy [39]. Although the colonial era did set the groundwork for centralized government and official educational systems, the ideological and institutional dualism it brought about kept complicating national education reforms long into the post-independence era as a breakdown of this synthesis is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *The Educational Revolution in Colonial Cambodia (1863–1953).*

No.	Topic	Key Characteristics	Agents	Scholars
1.	French national educational policies	Western-style secular education was implemented. The curriculum focused on French language, science, and European history	Lycée Sisowath was built by colonial officials with French training for Khmer elites	(Ayres, 2000; Clayton, 1995; Edwards, 1999).
2.	Dual Education System	Traditional Buddhist education continued in pagodas; coexisted with French schools; established a cultural split in educational access and ideals.	Buddhist monks, pagoda schools, rural temples	(Edwards, 1999; Hansen, 2007; Harris, 2005).
3.	Limitations and Challenges	Language obstacles, elite access, and urban bias; low literacy rates; poor rural infrastructure; cultural resistance to secular content	Colonial officials, local community's traditionalist Buddhist clergy	(Ayres, 2000; Kiernan, 2002; UNESCO, 2018)

5. Educational Developments Following Independence (1953–1975)

In 1953, Cambodia gained its independence, which marked a watershed moment in the country's educational history. Under the direction of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and his Sangkum Reastr Ni-yum movement, Ayres and Clayton assert that education was central to a nationalist agenda meant at modernization, cultural sovereignty, and nation-building [2, 7]. These experts underline that the Ministry of National Education gained complete control of formal schooling, commencing widespread initiatives to expand access to education at all levels. Kiernan and Sen notice that throughout the late 1950s to early 1970s, there was a fast growth in the construction of schools, including provincial teacher training

institutes and the creation of the Royal University of Phnom Penh in 1960 [20, 31]. At the elementary level, education was declared free and mandatory; significant infrastructure and institutional improvements were funded by this declaration. Additionally helping these initiatives were international bodies like UNESCO. Still, academics point out that these developments were not equally shared; rural communities in particular suffered great shortages of competent teachers, physical resources, and dependable infrastructure, therefore restricting the reach and quality of education.

According to Ayres, curricular reform was crucial to the post-independence endeavour, particularly in terms of recreating national identity and regaining cultural heritage [2]. A major change was substituting Khmer for French as the main language of education, therefore attesting to both a symbolic and pragmatic postcolonial autonomy. French was lowered to the level of a foreign language course, and new

Khmer-language textbooks were created to honour local values and historical conscience. Hansen emphasizes the reintegration of Buddhist ethics into public education, echoing Sihanouk's idea of Buddhism as a cultural cornerstone [13]. Apart from religious instruction, the updated curriculum included Khmer literature, national history, civic studies, science, mathematics, and vocational training. Huot and Em and Tan underline how closely curricular implementation depends on concurrent investment in teacher development [17, 36]. Established to create a cadre of Khmer-speaking teachers with pedagogical and subject-specific competencies, new teacher training centre. Many of these educators, meanwhile, lacked enough tools and continuous professional development, therefore restricting the depth and consistency of reform results.

Sen and UNESCO report that by the early 1970s, the national education system had made measurable progress [31, 38]. Literacy rates among youth exceeded 50%, and enrolment in secondary and tertiary institutions had risen dramatically in comparison to the colonial era. These advances were

seen as representative of Cambodia's goals for modernity, autonomy, and freedom. Ayres does warn, nevertheless, that these achievements concealed ongoing shortcomings [2]. Particularly in rural areas where a lack of trained teachers, poor facilities, and limited teaching resources hampered learning, educational quality stayed somewhat uneven. Secondary dropout rates remained high, and disparities in educational access persisted based on urban-rural and gender. According to Kiernan, political upheaval in the early 1970s, such as the Cambodian civil war and US military participation, seriously harmed the educational system [20]. As the crisis progressed, as indicated in Table 4, schools closed, attendance dropped, and infrastructure deteriorated.

Overall, the post-independence era was a critical period in the reinvention and development of Cambodian education. Despite its numerous obstacles, it lay the framework for subsequent reforms and continues to influence discussions about equity, localization, and national growth in the education sector.

Table 4. Educational Advancements Following Cambodian Independence, 1953–1975.

No.	Theme	Key Attributes	School	Resources
1.	Nationalization of Learning	Nationalization of Learning: Establishment of a consolidated education system; expansion from elementary to tertiary levels	Ministry of National Education, the Royal University of Phnom Penh, and provincial institutions provide free and mandatory primary education	(Ayres, 2000; Clayton, 1995; Sen, 2022)
2.	Curriculum Reform	The Khmer language is prioritized; Buddhist concepts and national history are included; and teacher development programs are emphasized	Curriculum components, teacher training programs, Khmer teachers	(Ayres, 2000; Hansen, 2007; Huot & Em, 2024; Tan, 2007)
3.	Achievements and shortcoming	Rising enrolment and literacy; uneven quality; rural-urban differences; high dropout rates; 1970s conflict-related disruption	System of national education, rural schools, relief organizations	(Kiernan, 2002; UNESCO, 2015)

6. Educational Collapse and Khmer Rouge Rule Between 1975 and 1979

The Khmer Rouge's ascent on April 17, 1975, signalled an unparalleled fall-off in Cambodia's educational system. Led by Pol Pot and the Communist Party of Kampuchea, Ayres and Kiernan contend that the government followed a radical agricultural philosophy that saw official education, intellectualism, and urban expertise as challenges to revolutionary purity [2, 20]. As a result, within weeks after assuming power, the regime shut down all schools, universities, and educational institutions across the country. Chandler and Etcheson report that educational infrastructure was systematically de-

stroyed, buildings were abandoned or repurposed into agricultural warehouses or, more horrifically, detention and execution centres such as the infamous Tuol Svay Prey High School, converted into S-21 [5, 11]. The Khmer Rouge proclaimed education a bourgeois relic, targeting even the most fundamental types of literacy. Individuals who wore spectacles, spoke French, or possessed books were routinely labelled as revolutionary foes and killed. Clayton and UNESCO underline the detrimental effect on Cambodia's human capital [8, 38]. Over 80% of the country's teachers and 75% of university professors are thought to have been executed or died because of forced labour, famine, or illness. They argue that this intellectual purge resulted in the near-total annihilation of institutional memory, crippling the country's educational capacity for decades.

While formal education was eliminated, the Khmer Rouge did not totally reject the idea of "education." Rather, Ayres and Hinton contend that education was reinterpreted as a tool for ideological indoctrination enforced by authoritarian control, propaganda, and forced labour [2, 15]. Under the notorious maxim "To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss," education became a tool for imposing Angkar (the Organization) compliance with revolutionary ideas. According to Hinton, children were forcibly separated from their families and placed in community camps where they were given no literacy training but were forced to tell on their parents and imbibe official propaganda [15]. Chandler and Kiernan note that "education" during this period was reduced to rote memorizing of slogans, rudimentary military manoeuvres, and agricultural labour under cruel and often de-

grading conditions [5, 20]. This ideological attack had long-term effects of extreme severity. Clayton notes that beyond physical destruction, the Khmer Rouge severed intergenerational knowledge transmission, creating an intellectual vacuum [8]. UNESCO confirms that by the end of the regime, Cambodia had one of the lowest literacy rates in the world and faced catastrophic declines in human development across all sectors [37].

The Khmer Rouge period left deep and lasting scars on Cambodian society, fundamentally dismantling its educational infrastructure. Subsequent reconstruction efforts, as various scholars indicate, had to begin almost entirely from zero, relying heavily on international assistance and regional cooperation to restore even the most basic educational services as stated in table 5.

Table 5. *The Khmer Rouge Regime and Educational Collapse (1975–1979).*

No.	Theme	Key Features	Institutions	Sources
1.	Destruction of Educational Infrastructure	All schools and universities closed; books and libraries destroyed; educators and intellectuals executed or forced into labor.	Khmer Rouge cadres, S-21 prison, abolished Ministry of Education	(Chandler, 1999; Clayton, 1998; Etcheson, 2005; Kiernan, 2002)
2.	Ideological Indoctrination	Education is replaced by propaganda, forced labor, and revolutionary training camps; children are indoctrinated in communal settings.	Angkar (the Organization), child labor brigades, youth revolutionary camps	(Ayres, 2000; Hinton, 2005; UNESCO, 2011)

7. Reconstruction and Reforms in the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–1993)

The fall of the Khmer Rouge in January 1979 left Cambodia in a state of institutional devastation, particularly in the field of education. Ayres and Clayton emphasize that the newly established People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), backed by Vietnamese forces, inherited a society suffering from genocide, starvation, and the complete dismantling of its educational infrastructure [2, 8]. One of the PRK's immediate priorities was the reopening of schools and the restoration of basic education. By the end of 1979, hundreds of primary schools had resumed operations, and secondary institutions were slowly being revived, despite immense shortages of materials, personnel, and trained educators. Due to the near-total destruction of the teaching workforce under the Khmer Rouge, the PRK, as these scholars note, mobilized surviving individuals, many with only rudimentary educational experience, to serve as emergency teachers. These educators often had to relearn subject content themselves. Damaged or repurposed school buildings were rehabilitated

with basic resources under extremely austere conditions.

Brinkley and Slocumb highlight the critical role of international aid in this recovery process [4, 32]. Socialist allies, including Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and East Germany, contributed textbooks, technical training, and financial support. Though Cold War geopolitics initially limited Western involvement, agencies such as UNESCO began offering support by the mid-1980s. These collaborations were pivotal in laying the groundwork for the revitalization of Cambodia's shattered education system. Amid this fragile post-conflict recovery, the PRK introduced several policy initiatives to reconstruct the education system as a more standardized and socialist-oriented model. Ayres argues that the emphasis was placed on universal basic education with core priorities in literacy, numeracy, hygiene, and civic responsibility, seen as essential for rebuilding social cohesion and public trust in government institutions [2]. The Ministry of Education developed new curricula that explicitly rejected the anti-intellectual ideology of the Khmer Rouge. Instead, they integrated scientific knowledge, Cambodian history, and socialist values influenced by Vietnamese and Soviet pedagogical frameworks. Slocumb and Tan note that while the curriculum carried ideological weight, it also made a measured effort to reincorporate traditional Khmer values, such as Buddhist ethics, national literature, and cultural heritage, into

classroom instruction [33, 36]. Given the severe shortage of qualified personnel, Clayton and Sen observe that teacher training became an urgent focus [8, 31]. Emergency workshops, provincial teacher training colleges, and peer-mentoring systems were rapidly established. Though early training emphasized discipline and rote learning, more participatory methods were gradually introduced by the early 1990s, signalling a slow shift toward a more responsive pedagogical approach.

Despite the PRK's determined efforts, UNESCO reports that systemic challenges persisted throughout the reconstruction period. Many schools operated without electricity, running water, furniture, or textbooks [39]. In rural areas, students studied in makeshift classrooms, sometimes outdoors, and faced overcrowded, under-resourced conditions. The human capital crisis remained acute. Brinkley and Slocomb note that many emergency-trained teachers lacked formal qualifications, and attrition rates were high due to low salaries and poor working conditions [4, 32]. Moreover, the ideological foundation of PRK education often clashed with public expectations for a return to Buddhist moral instruction and pre-revolutionary cultural continuity. Tan highlights that Cold War isolation further hindered Cambodia's access to Western educational support and delayed broader modernization efforts [36]. Only after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991 and the arrival of UNTAC did more extensive international cooperation resume, paving the way for comprehensive post-conflict educational reforms in the subsequent decade.

8. Contemporary Educational Reforms and Global Integration (1993–Present)

Following the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements and the adoption of the 1993 Constitution, Cambodia embarked on a new phase of educational reform characterized by decentralization, modernization, and global alignment. MoEYS and the World Bank note that the Cambodian government has actively pursued reforms consistent with international frameworks such as the Education for All (EFA) initiative and the SDGs [24, 45]. Central to this transformation, the ESP and ESSP have served as foundational policy instruments. Launched in 2001 and regularly updated, most recently in the 2019–2023 cycle, the ESP sets national objectives related to access, quality, governance, and global benchmarking. UNESCO highlights that the ESP prioritizes universal primary education, gender equity, and educational inclusion for rural and indigenous populations [40]. In parallel, the ESSP facilitates collaboration between MoEYS and international partners such as the ADB, UNICEF, and the European Union. These programs have resulted in major initiatives such as school construction, textbook distribution, girls' scholarship schemes, and nationwide curriculum revision. MoEYS further reports that emphasis has been placed on improving teacher profession-

alism through both pre-service and in-service training, as well as strengthening policy through data systems like the education management information system [25].

Sen and UNESCO observe that one of the most striking developments in recent decades has been the exponential growth of higher education institutions (HEIs) [31, 40]. From fewer than 10 in the early 1990s, the number of public and private universities has exceeded 100 by 2020. This growth, they argue, is driven by liberalization policies and private investment, resulting in increased diversity of academic programs in fields including business, medicine, law, and engineering. The ADB highlights the government's concurrent efforts to promote STEM education through strategies such as the Rectangular Strategy Phase IV and the Industrial Development Policy (2015–2025) [1]. Vocational and technical training has also received renewed support, aiming to prepare a workforce for a knowledge-driven and industrial economy. Sok with colleagues emphasize the growing role of international cooperation in shaping Cambodia's higher education landscape [34]. Cambodian universities have joined regional initiatives like the ASEAN University Network (AUN), participated in scholarship exchange programs, and established international research collaborations. Infrastructure and capacity-building efforts have been supported by countries such as Japan, South Korea, China, and Australia, further aligning Cambodian higher education with global standards.

Despite notable progress, persistent challenges continue to affect Cambodia's education sector. UNICEF and World Bank report that stark disparities in access and quality remain between urban and rural areas [42, 45]. While primary enrolment has risen significantly, dropout rates, particularly at the secondary level, remain high due to barriers such as poverty, child labour, and inadequate transportation. UNESCO notes that educational quality is uneven across the country [40]. Many schools lack sufficient instructional materials, and teacher absenteeism continues to be a systemic concern. In rural areas, teacher qualifications remain low, and professional development opportunities are unequally distributed. Moreover, ethnic minority communities often face language barriers due to instruction in Khmer, affecting both comprehension and retention.

ADB highlights additional structural issues, including dependence on donor funding and the slow pace of decentralization [1]. While education has claimed a larger share of the national budget in recent years, implementation remains fragmented and vulnerable to funding shortfalls. Local education offices often lack the autonomy and resources needed to respond effectively to school-level needs. Nevertheless, Cambodia's ongoing reforms reflect a sustained commitment to building an inclusive and globally relevant education system. The path forward will require careful balancing of modernization imperatives with contextual realities, ensuring that global competitiveness is matched by cultural relevance and equitable access.

9. Conclusion

Cambodia's educational history reflects a complex interplay of cultural tradition, foreign influence, and political change. From informal learning in prehistoric communities to temple-based instruction during the Angkor Empire, education was deeply rooted in Hindu-Buddhist values. The colonial era introduced a dual system, French secular and traditional Buddhist, creating a divide that persisted post-independence. After 1953, nationalization efforts expanded education in line with Khmer identity and Buddhist ethics. The Khmer Rouge era (1975–1979) brought devastating collapse, wiping out institutions and intellectual life. The subsequent PRK government (1979–1993) began rebuilding with limited resources and socialist support. Since 1993, Cambodia has pursued extensive reforms under global frameworks like the ESP and ESSP, aiming for expanded access, improved quality, and integration into global education systems, despite ongoing disparities.

Cambodia's experience highlights the resilience of education as both a cultural foundation and a tool for recovery. Education has mirrored shifts in power and ideology, from Angkorian theocracy to colonial assimilation and socialist reconstruction. The post-genocide revival shows remarkable institutional and community commitment. However, external influences have often shaped reforms, sometimes at odds with local needs. Thus, policies must remain context-sensitive and culturally grounded with the following points:

- 1) Comparative studies with regional neighbours (e.g., Vietnam, Laos, Thailand) to explore similarities and divergences in education systems.
- 2) Deeper research into rural education, indigenous knowledge, and gender equity.
- 3) Exploration of how education addresses memory, particularly the Khmer Rouge era, for post-conflict healing and civic education.

In sum, Cambodia's educational journey is one of endurance and transformation, offering critical insights into how education can support national resilience, identity, and future development.

Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EFA	Education for All
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESP	Education Strategic Plan
ESSP	Education Sector Support Program
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
LPP	Legitimate Peripheral Participation
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (Cambodia)
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

Author Contributions

Sovanna Huot is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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