Cambodia

Ways of Life in the Kingdom of the Khmers

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CAMBODIA is one of the five countries which constitute French Indo-China, France's greatest colony in Asia. It is bounded on the north by Siam, on the west by Siam and the Gulf of Siam, on the south by Cochin China, and on the east by Laos and Annam. In size it equals one-third of France. The climate is tropical; the monsoons divide the year into equal parts, the dry and the rainy seasons.

Cambodia owes the whole character of its life and activities to the great Mekong, which inundates and fertilises the country. The river rises with the rains in June, and later overflows the high dykes which bound it. The rich, alluvial deposits on either side form miniature plateaux, which are well cultivated and support numerous villages.

Beyond lies a swampy district, unfit for agriculture, and beyond that again come the hills, at the foot of which rice is grown. On the lower slopes oilnut trees flourish, and these are succeeded by great forests, which extend to the mountain peaks. Towards the end of September the inundation has reached its limit, and the water gradually subsides. As it does so, it fills all the canals communicating with the Mekong. By March the river is very low and the canals are dry.

When the Mekong is at its highest, the Great Lake, or Tonle Sap, is 118 miles long by 15½ miles broad with an average depth of 39 feet. During the dry season this immense inland sea empties itself into the Mekong, and its size is reduced to one-sixth of its former dimensions. This marks the beginning of the fishing season, when enormous quantities of fish are caught. The export of salt fish has become an important item in the trade of the country.

The capital of Cambodia is Pnom Penh, which takes its character from a hill in the centre called Pnom, on which stands the celebrated Khmer Pagoda. Pnom Penh has 85,000 inhabitants. It is the residence of the King of Cambodia, for whose help and guidance France appointed a Résident Supérieur. In addition to the Pnom Pagoda, there are other curious monuments such as the King's Palace and the Silver Pagoda. Pnom Penh is also a very busy commercial port, being well situated at a point where the Mekong is joined by four tributaries, which constitute the boundaries of Laos, Tonle Sap, and the neighbouring provinces.

Other interesting Cambodian towns are Kampot, on the Gulf of Siam, Oudong, the former capital, Battambang, the centre of a large agricultural district, well known for its cardamom plantations, and Siemreap, where tourists land on their way to visit the famous Angkor ruins. The present Cambodia is only a feeble remnant of the Khmer Empire, which, at the height of its power in the twelfth century under Jayavarman VII., stretched from

KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA

the Gulf of Bengal to the China Sea and was divided into sixty self-governing states. At this epoch Angkor Thom was of greater importance than the Rome of Nero, and the splendour of Khmer art was incomparable.

A thousand years ago Cambodia was a great Hindu Empire in Indo-China, stretching from the Gulf of Bengal to the China Sea, populous, wealthy, and adorned with immense palaces which were wonders of architecture. Under its kings and priests the tropic jungle had been tamed, the Khmer jungle folk civilized and trained, and a network of great roads ran through land that is now a deadly wilderness. The great Mekong river and its huge lake, by the wonderful capital city of Angkor, fertilised the best ricefields in the world and provided more food than the people needed. All this was the result of a thousand years' work by colonising Hindu warriors and Brahmans, assisted by Malays from the Hindu kingdoms of Sumatra and Java.

CAMBODIANS LEAN TOWARDS "EUROPEAN WAYS"
Cambodians have a greater resemblance to the Siamese than to the Annamese, but the Khmer, or old inhabitants, show a decided Caucasian origin. Western ways are fast being adopted, and this youth insisted on a European setting to his photograph

Cambodia is still under the influence of Hindu tradition, though only a vestige remains of the power and splendour of the ancient race. Province after province was torn from the old empire by the Mongol masters of China, and by the northern invaders of Tibetan stock, who now form the Siamese and Burmese nations. By putting themselves under the protection of France, the Cambodians just saved themselves from complete destruction by the Siamese and Annamese, and recovered from their old enemies their ancient capital of Angkor and the jungle lands surrounding it. But in their fragment of territory most of their native jungle tribes have shrunk to insignificant numbers, owing to tropical disease, and lapsed into a pathetic state of savagery.

Little remains of all the great and glorious Hindu work of civilization, except a charming, romantic puppet court, upheld by the strength of France; some old crumbling, colossal works by Hindu architects and sculptors, cleared in recent years from over-growth; and a royal school of ballet dancing, whose sacred performances cannot be matched on earth.

Modern Cambodia is nearly as large as England with an estimated population

HEAD MISTRESS OF THE BALLET
Erstwhile première danseuse, with authority unbounded, she supervises the training of young lokhon, or ballerinas, with impartial rigour. Her weighty jewels and many rows of golden chains worn over her left shoulder, betoken the lavishness of royal favour

of a little more than a million and a half. Malarial fever and other tropical diseases make much of the land of marvellous fertility uninhabitable. The savage tribes dwell on the uplands and hunt in the lowlands in day-time when the fatal mosquitoes are resting. The civilized Cambodians live by their Great Lake and along the banks of the Mekong river, on which rises the modern capital of Pnom Penh.

I shall not easily forget the emotions of wonder and delight which thrilled me on my arrival at Pnom Penh. The city was like a vision in a dream. Amid luxuriant foliage of the jungle, with miles on miles of ricefields and plantations, by little native villages with their cotton fields and rich pastures, the way ran from the seaport of Saigon. Then on the west bank of the Mekong, in a setting of giant palms, flowering trees and marvellous verdure, rose slender sculptured spires of temples and fantastic radiant roofs in tiers of many-coloured tiles with snake decorations.

The streets were full of movement and colour. The women walked straight and graceful as flowers, their hair short cut, their breasts exposed, and their sampots of shimmering hues pulled between their legs to form breeches. The men were tall and well-proportioned and, though a mixture of Hindu and Malay, looked to me like natives of Benares. Scattered among them, a priest draped in flowing garments of golden yellow, and naked children as beautiful as classic bronzes, squatted and played at street corners.

When I visited Angkor Vat and Angkor Thom, my first vision of the splendid ruined city was by moonlight. We had come, a whole party of us, by steamer from Saigon up the flooded Mekong river. Sampans landed us on the edge of the tropical forest. We were led along a narrow path under the dark vault of trees, mysterious sounds reaching us from the wooded depths. Then, as we came again into the open, the prodigious spectacle of palaces and temples, of white towers glittering in the moonlight, met our awe-struck gaze. This tremendous work of human hands suddenly appeared in the very midst of untouched nature. A silence of death reigned over the vast buildings, where centuries before there was so much life and beauty.

But it needed daylight to appreciate all the details of the different temples,

terraces, and walls. The principal temple of Angkor Vat is some 820 feet long by 656 feet broad. It is formed in terraces one above the other, and there are five towers, of which the central one is 123 feet high. Every inch of stone-work is finely and minutely sculptured.

The walls and archways of the town of Angkor Thom are sculptured in the same way as those of the temple. Along the wall of one terrace we saw elephants, life size, sculptured from one end to the other. The five doors of the town are in the form of elephants picking lotus flowers with their trunks. The favourite subject of sculpture—even more popular than that of animals—is that of women, priestesses, celestial dancing girls, goddesses. It is the dress and attitudes of these wonderful sculptures which are adopted in all the dances and ceremonies of Cambodia to-day.

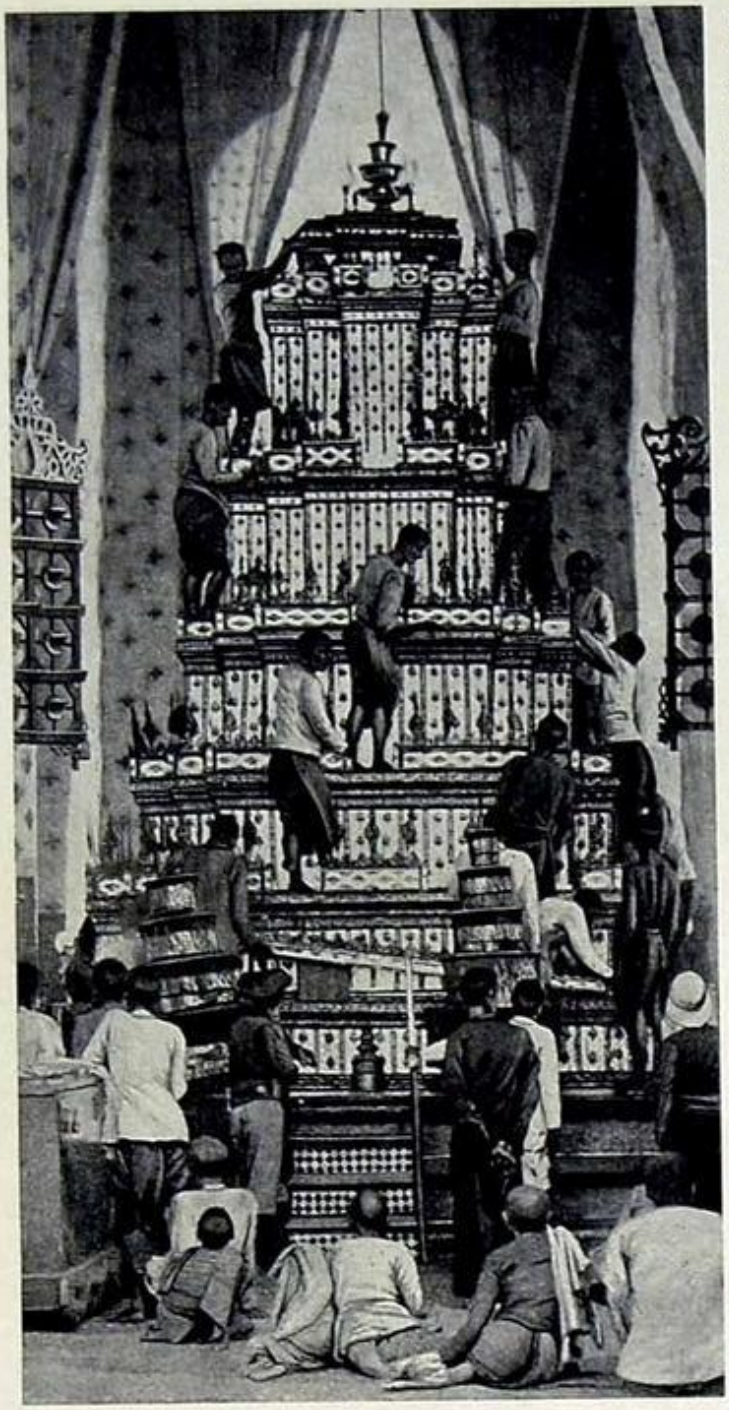
The national costume consists of a coat and the celebrated sampot. This is merely a straight piece of fabric loosely caught up between the legs, but the fabric itself is often a magnificent silk, woven by girl weavers upon primitive looms. The people on the whole are tall and robust. Their skin is often light in colour, and when of pure blood they have the European eye instead of the almond-shaped eyes of the Annamese. The frail, cunning Annamese cheat and despise the powerfully built Cambodian, who is something of a rustic philosopher, and nickname him the buffalo.

It is sad to see how the big, quiet men even in their own city are tricked and injured by the little Mongolians. The picturesque remnant of the old conquerors and civilizers has lost all self-confidence; they show no energy and seem to lack power to defend themselves against their exploiters. Before the French came to protect them, they helplessly suffered great cruelty from the Annamese river pirates, who landed in the villages, laid them waste with fire and sword, and acted like devils.

I was told, for example, that they used to bind the villagers in threes and bury them up to their necks, and then on the tripod of living heads the little monsters would place a heavy saucepan of rice and cook it. By this means of terrorisation they were depopulating the rice country and fishing grounds of the Mekong river when the French intervened. Yet in anything like warfare with weapons of equal power the tall Cambodians, if they had faith in themselves, could rout probably twice their number of dwarf-like foes. But they seemed to wait for extinction, and a new

AN EASY-GOING GARMENT

The sampot or straight piece of cloth bound round the waist, and so fastened as to form a loose trouser-like skirt, is adopted by members of both sexes in Cambodia, and does not detract from ease of movement



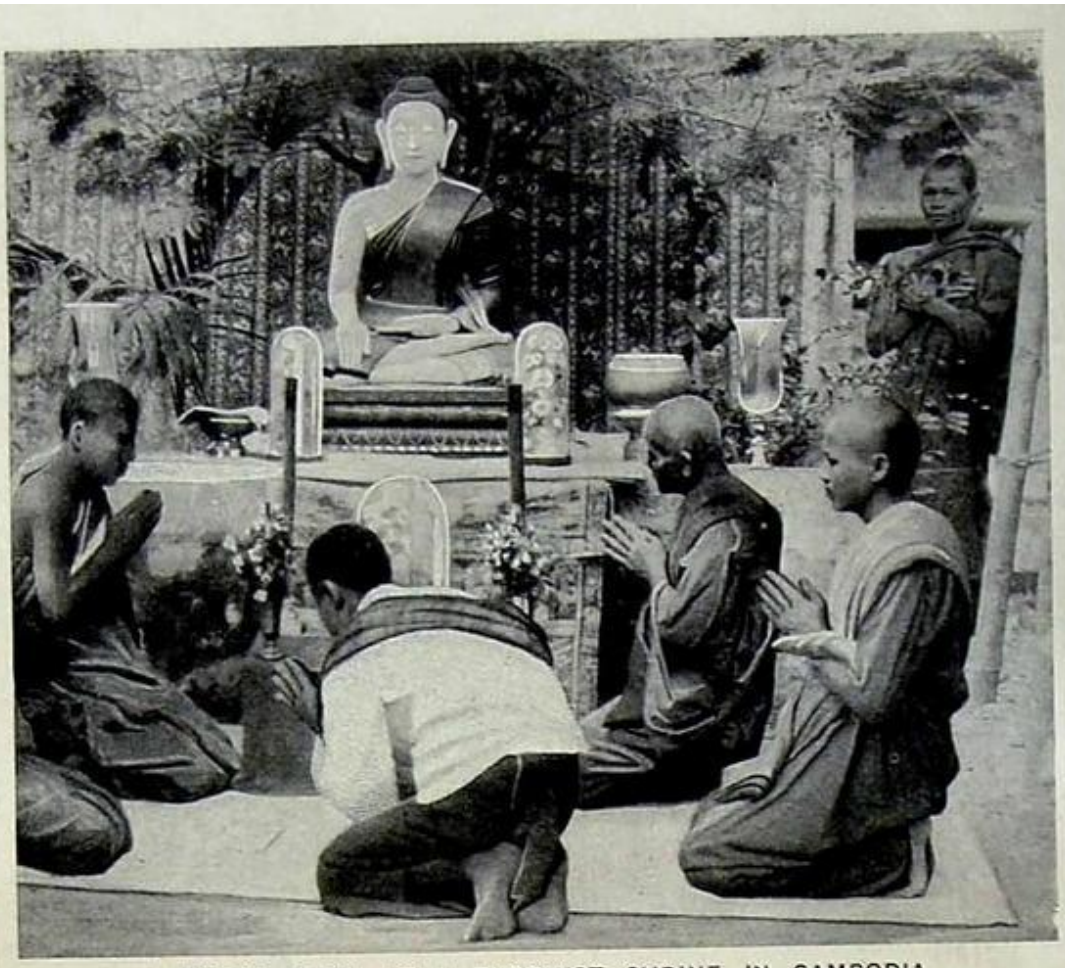
BUILDING THE ROYAL RESTING-PLACE

This catafalque displays the still-existing creative powers of the Cambodians. More than 2,000 years ago they built cities and raised monuments which by reason of their size and grandeur ranked high among the architectural masterpieces of the world

migration of Chinese, who excel the little Annam folk in the art of monopolising every trade, is gripping Cambodia and draining it. In ancient times the Cambodian was a grand city builder, but now he dislikes even a village crowd. He prefers a lonely house on a rice-field, or on a forest upland, and builds it on piles some six feet from the ground. Its height saves him from tiger attack in the forest region, and from the great river floods of the Mekong and Great Lake country. Here he is a waterman and a landsman according to the season, and uses the same road by boat or ox-cart in turn.

A remarkable handy-man, he makes his own tools, boat, and cart, and displays in his work a fine traditional crafts-manship. He has, besides, many of the qualities of a nobleman fallen into the condition of a peasant fisherman, being courteous, refined in taste, and a lover of literature. He seems ever to be meditating upon the vanished glories of his race. All Cambodians can read and write.

Every child goes to school in one of the old temples. The most remote forest community is not neglected, for everywhere in the kingdom there are temples built in the old days, many of which have not yet been discovered by Europeans, and when a re-settlement is made by one of them the priestly teachers return. Even in depopulated regions small bands of religious men at times maintain in a deadly jungle the old service of the shrine, and jungle folk, who have forgotten both names and rites of Siva, Rama, and other favourite deities of the past, make pilgrimages to the desolate holy places. Some of them are also said to guard



WAYSIDE PIETY AT A BUDDHIST SHRINE IN CAMBODIA

By rule Buddhist priests should live the most abstemious lives. They are supposed to have no money or possessions of their own, and are supplied with their daily food by the villages that support them. At this small woodland shrine a group of yellow-robed pilgrim priests are devoutly reciting prayers to the inscrutable figure above them—Buddha, the serene of face

stores of golden and jewelled treasure left in their keeping by their broken, fugitive masters. Forests dripping with leeches, ruins, and swamps, from which clouds of fever mosquitoes rise, likewise guard the mystic treasures of the lost children of Brahma.

Meanwhile, the old dying master race gives its trading towns over to the Mongolian, leads the simple life on rice, dried river fish and fruit, composes poetry, and excels in improvised dialogues between lovers, showing fine talent in devising metaphors. Also they are great musicians, and with instruments of bamboo, clarionets, many-toned drums and gongs, they make strange, charming orchestral music with some wonderful effects.

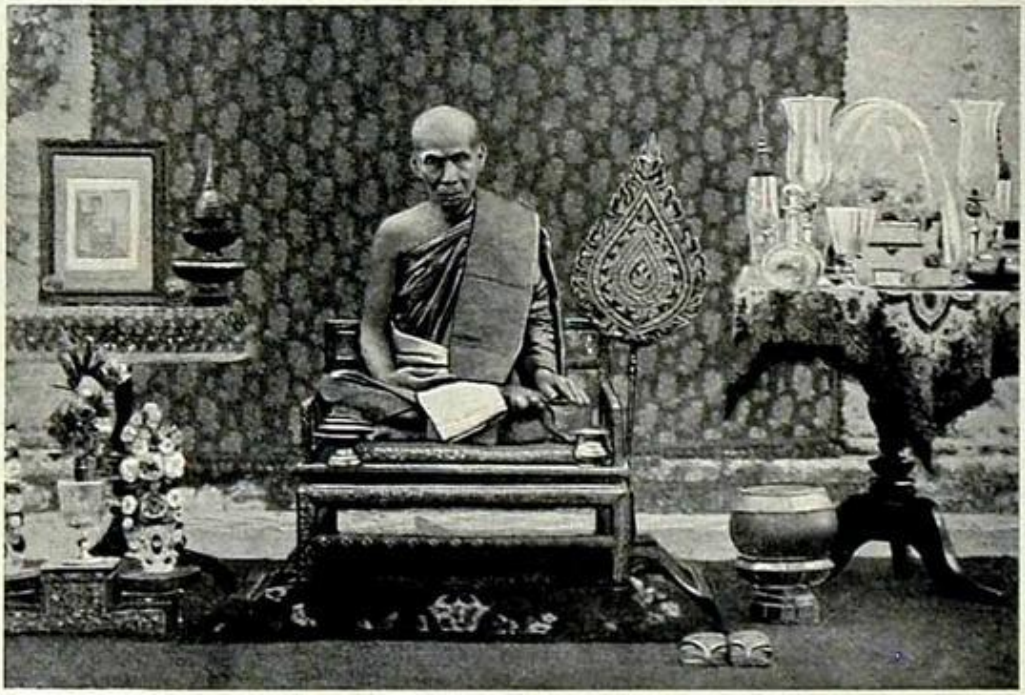
They have also retained some of their decorative art. In the early part of the nineteenth century, Oudong, higher up country, was their capital. Now that the ravages of pirates have ceased, the king lives on the main river by Pnom Hill, from which rises the celebrated Khmer Pagoda. Much fine work shows that the descendants of the great builders of the past have not lost their feeling for grace of design and intricate beauty of colour work. In the king's palace is a room some hundred feet long, paved with silver, and holding a life-sized idol of solid gold and jewels. Yet the effect is not garish, or even barbaric ; it has a kind of tranquil, quiet beauty. It is the European appointments of the palace that are out of place.

The wild tribes, who also are of Khmer stock, have some of the qualities of mind of the civilized Malay Hindus. They are smaller in stature, but intelligent looking, and, although they go almost naked, they have to a European

eye a more pleasant appearance than that of an Annamese. Raided by slave hunters on all sides, they are naturally suspicious of strangers, and only a man in armour could safely travel through some of the mechanical defences of their remote hamlets, and even he might be trapped in tiger and elephant pits after trampling over the ground stuck with poisoned darts. The stock is probably akin to the wandering Moi tribesmen of the Annam highlands, but seem to be on the whole more affected by the old Hindu culture. They believe in a supreme god Bra, who may be Brahma, but have no priests, and at most only a kind of vague respect for ruined temples and old treasures, which are sometimes considered as holy things on which the safety and prosperity of the tribe depend.

Occasionally slaves are said to be killed as a sacrifice to an uncertain kind of demon in accordance with the old Hindu creed of the country. Otherwise slaves are kindly treated, and freemen are usually punished only by fines. When a man owes his commune a large amount—say twenty buffaloes—he is often sold as a slave. But most things are held in common, as in the ancient communes under the Hindus. The wild folk are skilled and industrious, working admirably in iron and ivory, and doing some weaving. One of their favourite amusements is to send up kites, to which they attach a musical instrument in somewhat the shape of a bow. This, when agitated by the wind, produces melodious sounds to which they are fond of listening. It is very doubtful if their love of kite-flying was acquired from the Chinese. It may be that the Chinese learnt from the tribes near their border, who at one time were strong in Yūn-nan, in Southern China.

Harsh are the circumstances in which they live. Their lands are overrun with tigers that will claw their way into the lightly-built dwelling places, if these are left within their reach. The wild pig, the elephant, the wild buffalo, and an occasional rhinoceros, make farming a difficult business. Snakes are many and



HIGH PRIEST OF BUDDHA IN A CAMBODIAN PAGODA

He might well pass for a carven image of Buddha himself, so set are his features, so wooden his pose. Buddhism is the dominant creed of the Cambodians, but Brahmanism is still maintained at the Court. The bonzes, or priests, are a gentle, tolerant and much respected sect; they live by voluntary alms, and in return undertake the instruction of the youth of the country

venomous; leeches in the rainy season make woodland life intolerable; while disease-bearing mosquitoes would make life entirely impossible, but that the tribesmen seem to have become immune to the pestilence that has killed most of the white men who tried to live with them. What the white man needs to save his life is a well-built house with perforated zinc windows, in addition to the best mosquito curtains.

Though the jungle folk have survived the ruin of the Cambodian civilization, and are still gentlemen in character, and hospitable, they have paid a price for their continued existence. In spite of their well-developed foreheads, they are not only utterly letterless, but their memories are bad, and they have remarkable difficulty in learning to calculate. For example, they will sell you a hundred ears of maize for a small piece of fine brass wire. But they cannot count down the hundred ears from one of their harvested heaps. They pick each ear out singly until they have a bundle of ten; then with great care they make nine other bundles of ten, and verify.

CHINESE SKILL JOINED TO CAMBODIAN CUNNING

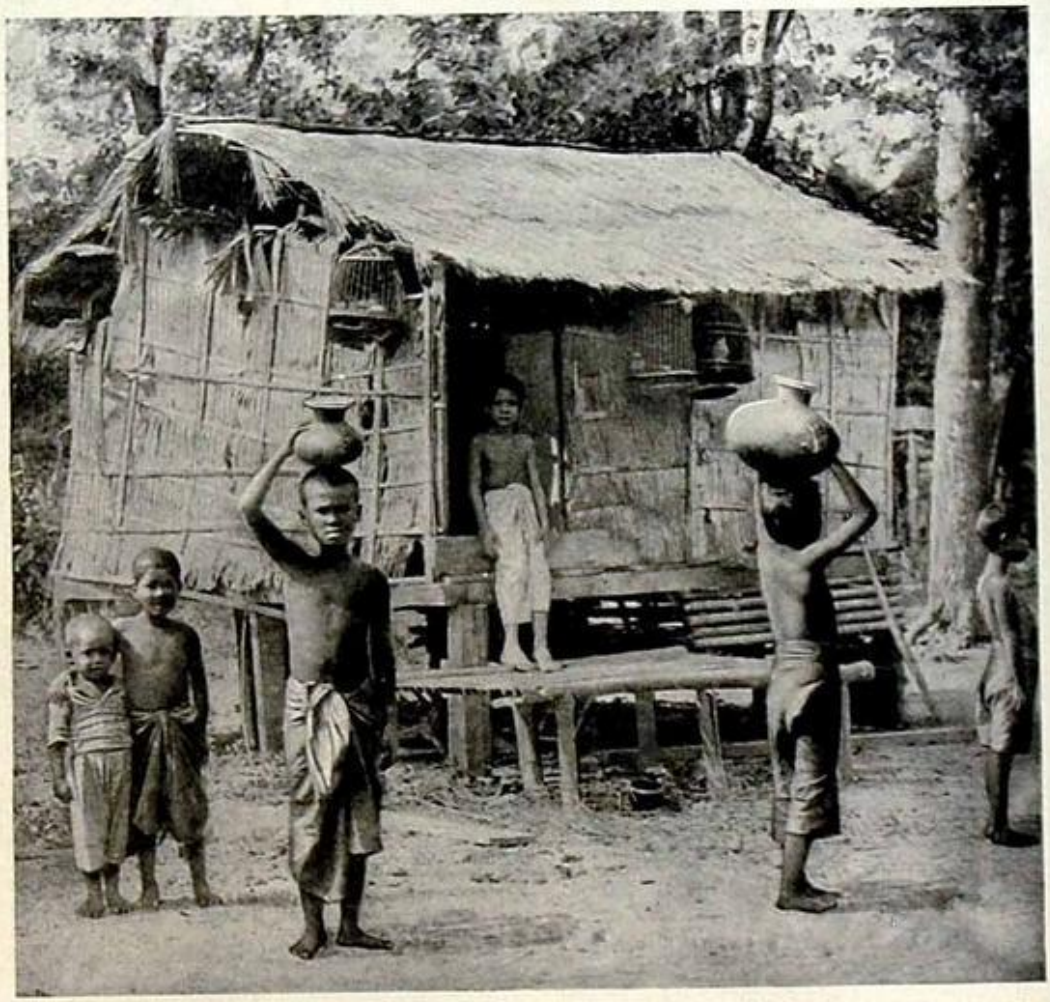
Half-breeds are numerous in French Indo-China, the resting-place of so many and varied races. This bedizened girl is of Chinese and Cambodian parentage, and occupies the proud position of instructress in the art of fencing

The Cambodians keep many festivals, and on these occasions all kinds of sport take place. There are horseraces, canoe-races, and games of all sorts, wrestling, boxing, and all manner of bodily exercises, which have been handed down unchanged from ancient times. One of their favourite games is played with a cane ball, which they kick to one another while standing in a circle.

The religion of Cambodia is the Buddhism of Ceylon, which at the end

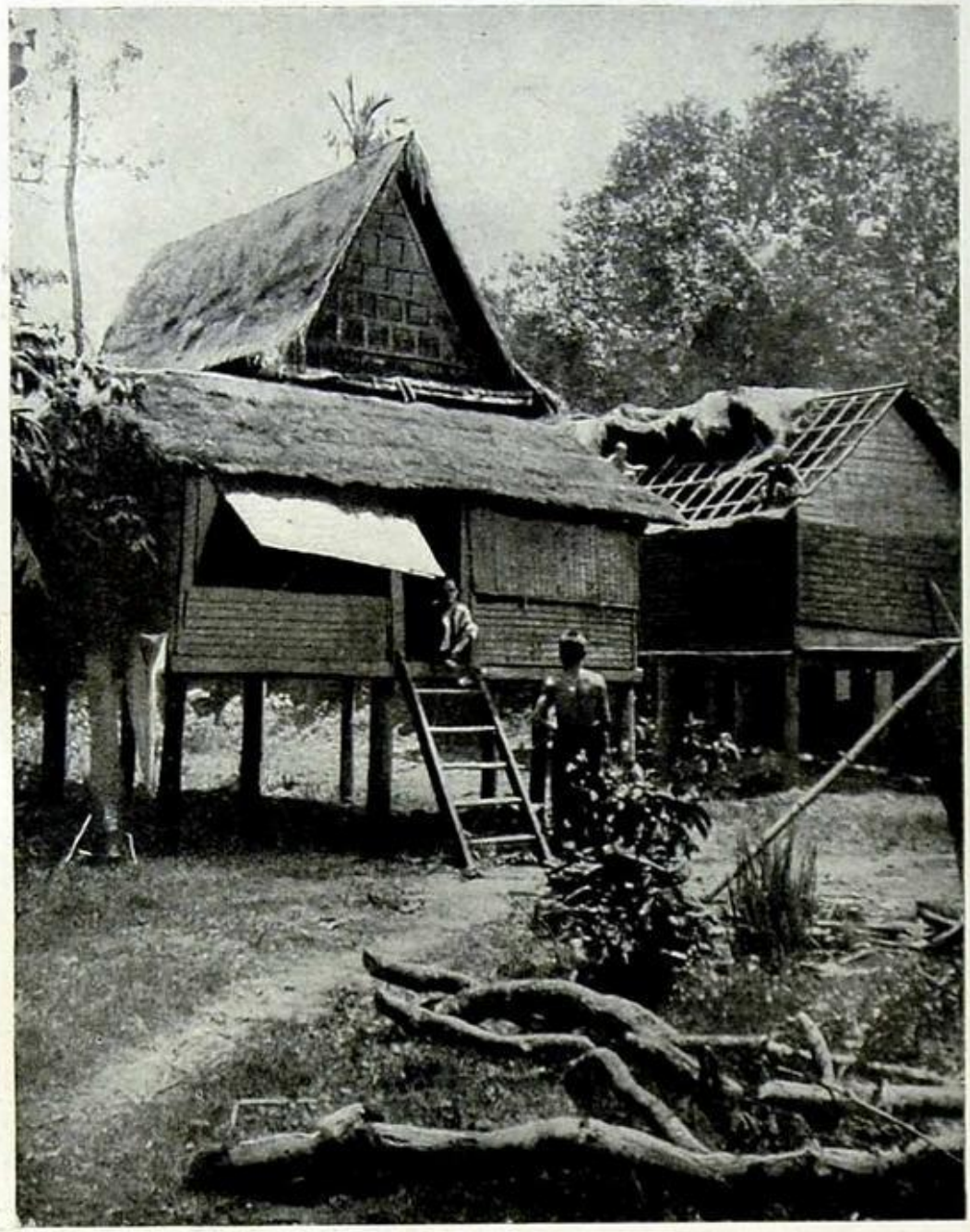
of the thirteenth century replaced Brahmanism without entirely destroying the imprint of Vedic myths and local superstitions. The dead are not buried, but burnt. The bonzes, who among the Annamese and Chinese are the most despised of men, enjoy considerable influence with the Khmers. They are the teachers of kings and people alike. Princes, in common with the sons of the poor, go humbly to the pagodas for instruction. The bonzes earn their livelihood by begging. They sometimes fast to such a degree that they injure their health. They do not take part openly in politics, but it is they who in reality form the current ideas throughout the country.

Family life among the Cambodians is solid and of good repute. There are always a great many children, paternal authority is lenient, a child is never beaten. The adoption of children is facilitated as in China. Polygamy is permitted, but more often than not they content themselves with one wife. Wives are recognized as of the first, second, or third degree. These last are simply bought. Any woman who lives openly with a Cambodian, or has a child by him, becomes his legal wife. The moral authority of the wife and her position in the family are as good as that of any wife in Europe. Daughters share the inheritance of their parents equally with the sons.



HOMES OF FISHERMEN WHOSE HANDS ARE THEIR ONLY FISHING-TACKLE

Most inland houses are slightly elevated, and the leafy roof and walls bespeak no great durability. The ultra-modern method of building in Cambodia employs tiles, otherwise the primitive architecture remains unchanged. Cambodia's great lake is near this humble home, and these little urchins are never happier than when, its waters receding, shoals of fish are stranded on its swampy bed



UNSOPHISTICATED CORNER OF CAMBODIAN NATURE

They are living in the vicinity of the great Cambodian river, Mekong, which with pitiless pertinacity rapidly swells during the rains and floods the neighbourhood for many miles round. As a precaution, the natives build their houses on piles, but despite their long wooden legs, so frail and fragile are these tiny homesteads, that many a one falls victim to the fury of the onrushing waters

The marriage of Cambodian women with foreigners was forbidden for many years. There are, however, a great many French, and still more Chinese half-castes. Divorce is easy, and can be demanded by the man or the woman. Adultery used to be punished in a shocking manner. Nowadays all punishments are relatively light. King Sisowath abolished the chaining of prisoners in 1905. Suicide is very rare; infanticide and abortion are almost unknown.

The Cambodian smokes opium, having learnt the habit from the Chinese and Annamese, but not to excess. Alcohol figures in religious and family ceremonies, but drunkenness is unknown. The staple food grown is rice.

UP-TO-DATE STYLES IN AN OLD-WORLD CAMBODIAN VILLAGE

The men of this Cambodian family are less conservative than the women and display a decided taste for European fashions, but their sampots, the national trouser-skirt, seem scarcely in keeping with collars, ties, and watch-chains. Nevertheless, at heart they will be always Cambodian, and French civilization can never induce them to depart from some of their favourite customs

PARTAKING OF DAINTY DISHES OF RICE AT THE MIDDAY MEAL

Cambodian women enjoy a respected position and a fair amount of liberty, and may often be seen taking a quiet stroll, their naked babies sitting astride their hips. The sampot and coloured upper-cloth form the usual dress, but when ceremony demands it, considerable attention is paid to personal adornment. Rice is the staple food, and like the men, the women are much addicted to chewing betel