



KAMBOJA ARCHER

THE CONFEDERATION OF THE KAMBOJAS

CULTURE AND GOVERNMENT

The Confederation of the Kambojas is on the far eastern border of the Thousand Nations of Persia, beyond the mountains of the Hindu Kush. The hostile terrain and savage locals of the province of Sogdia, and the ruined, blasted wasteland that is left where Baktria once lay, means that contact with the nations of the Middle Sea is rare and difficult. For the most part, this has always suited Kamboja well; they have little use for the quaint customs and savage power struggles of the trackless western forests. It is rumoured that the lands to the west are so wild and disordered that they do not even have a true monsoon season, instead suffering mists and rains that plague their countryside at random and unpredictable intervals – proof, as if any more were needed, that the Divine Spirits hold them in great disfavour.

The citizens of Kamboja (ethnonym: Kamboja, Kambojas) are a proud and civilised people, ruled by a highly developed republican system. The monarch, currently Queen Raawiya, is a titular head whose duties are primarily religious and ceremonial, and has no day-to-day influence over the running of the country. The typical answer a Kamboja gives when asked how many towns and villages are within the Confederation is “ten lakh”, or one million; this is likely an exaggeration, but only the census-takers know the true numbers; and they are secretive, knowing that a maliciously inclined sorcerer might use the information to formulate an accurate curse upon the government. Unlike some of its southern neighbours, Kamboja has no caste system; it practices slavery and indentured servitude, but free households are broadly considered equal in the eyes of the law, with status afforded to those most enthusiastic and pious in their Temple devotions.

RELIGION

The twin Temples of Nataraja and Vahara (more reverently, Siva Nataraja and Vaharadeva, though these formal names are unlucky to speak without covering one’s eyes, lest the Divine Radiance blind one) are at the heart of Kamboja culture.

Vahara, the Bright One, is the embodiment of the creative force. The Bright One is strongest at the midday sun, and associated with light, energy, revelation and madness. They are often represented as a great boar or sow holding the bowl of the world aloft on their tusks.

Nataraja, the Dancing One, is the embodiment of darkness and the destructive force. The Dancing One is strongest at midnight, and associated with darkness, rest, solace, grief and renewal. Nataraja is usually represented as a four-armed human figure dancing upon a floor of bones, or the splintered ruins of cities.

The core of the Kamboja religion is that the two Powers of Creation and Destruction, or Light and Darkness, are held in eternal balance at the heart of the universe; by revering and sacrificing to these entities and their attendant messengers, mortals contribute in their own tiny way to maintaining the fundamental balance of existence. The Temples of Kamboja also hold in reverence a



hundred minor gods, called Devas, but all these are figured through the lens of their allegiance to the Dancing One or the Bright One.

Both Powers are commonly represented with characteristics of any gender, or none. Dancing is seen as a sacred act of destruction and renewal, and has a high place of respect in Kamboja tradition; those skilled in the art are often adopted into the Temple and their families treated with great reverence. It is common to show respect and admiration for a performance of dancing (and its inherent invocation of Siva Nataraja) by breaking a piece of crockery at its conclusion, or spilling one's drink upon dry earth. Mirrors and objects which reflect or generate light are sacred to Vahara, and a small genuflection or gesture of worship to the Bright One should be made before touching or handling these.

Periodically an itinerant priest or traveller from the lands beyond the Thousand Nations will survive the arduous crossings over the high passes, snow-blind and frostbitten, to speak of the strange customs lands that seem to hold their tutelary spirits and small gods in reverence that should be reserved for Nataraja and Vahara alone. Kamboja sages have long puzzled over these reports, reasoning that one or other of the foreign gods must surely be a distant avatar of the two Powers, but speculation has proved largely fruitless without more accurate evidence. It is known that in the Thousand Nations of Persia, Vaharadeva and Siva Nataraja were long revered as Ahriman and Ohrmazd. This was a worthy and honourable tradition, and recent news of its overthrow has caused significant consternation among the priesthood and the royal household; it is seen as a betrayal not only of sacred oaths but of the fundamental order of the universe, and a retreat into primitive and superstitious behaviours better suited to the cave-dwelling barbarians of the far north. This is a worse sin by far than the more distant foreigners, for while they have never known the light of truth, the Persians have known and then rejected it.

CUSTOMS AND DRESS

Kamboja have no burial customs beyond those required for urban hygiene. Once a funeral has been performed, and the soul committed to the care of one of the minor tutelary death gods, the crucial matter is that the deceased's life serves as a lesson and example in piety. Stories are told of the acts of religious devotion, martial skill and civic duty that the dead one carried out in life, and their descendants and survivors exhorted to match and exceed their actions in reverence for their memory.

Many Kamboja, but particularly those travelling abroad, wear a symbol in red ink or dye upon their faces to mark their devotion to their Temple. The nature of the symbol itself is broadly cosmetic (many use one of the characters representing life and happiness, or a traditional family symbol, or an initial denoting their village); the importance is the side of the face upon which the symbol is placed. Those following the left-hand path of Vahara the Bright One, the path of creation – potters, visionaries, lamp-lighters, architects and warriors who use the bow – wear the symbol upon the left cheek or temple. Those following the right-hand path of Nataraja the Dancing One, the path of destruction – surgeons, gravediggers, warriors who dance with the sword, miners and farmers – wear the symbol upon the right-hand side of the face. Those priests who revere both Powers will mark this with a symbol in the dead centre of their forehead or between the eyebrows. Foreigners tend to assume it is the symbol itself, not the positioning, that is significant; Kamboja travellers in barbarian lands are known to take endless amusement from deliberately confusing them by





changing symbol from day to day, or coming up with increasingly dramatic and outrageous explanations for the symbols' origins.

Shaking or clasping hands is considered supremely unlucky in Kamboja; to grasp either the right or the left hand of a new acquaintance first immediately sets the engagement in terms of either creation or destruction, either of which could be disastrously precipitous. Instead, it is considered courteous to cross both hands over one's breast, maintaining eye contact, at a first meeting. More intimate friends and family members might clasp both hands together.

The Kambojas have a fierce warrior tradition of which they are extremely proud. All able-bodied adults are expected to have served in one of the armies in some capacity or another; in the last few generations, this tradition had become something of a joke, the armies having subdued all rebellious neighbours for a hundred miles in every direction. However, seventeen years ago, the Kamboja armies were mobilised against an invasion by Western forces from across the Kush. The invaders' leader was said by the sages to be an incarnation of Skanda, the war-god and commander of the armies of Heaven under the Dancing One; opinion was divided on whether some impiety had offended the Deva, or whether this was a test sent by Siva Nataraja to assess the piety of their followers. The fight was brief but fierce and bloody, and Skanda's advance elements almost reached the capital Rajapura before they were turned back by an overwhelming force of elephant cavalry. He retreated in haste, thoroughly defeated, and has not troubled civilisation since.

Since this attack, over the "uncrossable" western mountains, the younger generations have taken a keen interest in martial skill. A youth who can draw one of the great Kamboja war-bows, show excellence at the sword dance, or command a siege howdah is now considered as righteous and reverent as one who shows great skill at music or literature.

Kamboja dress is similar (to foreign eyes) to eastern Persian fashions. Flowing robes and long, draped garments are common, universally gathered at the waist with a sash (often in contrasting colour). Belts are unpopular, and leatherwork in general is seen as an appropriate material for the battlefield only; the smell is considered distasteful in polite company. The fertile terrain of Kamboja can be treacherous in the dry season, and long trousers or ankle-length skirts make it difficult to ascend an elephant, so skirts tend to end at the knee and trousers are always gathered in tall boots or wrapped in long strips of fabric to keep them strapped close about the ankle and calf. Warriors, scribes and those who work with their hands traditionally gather their sleeves in the same way, and from this a recent fashion for elbow-length spiral arm-wraps has developed.

The sages say that an act of great magic is being performed upon an island at the heart of the Western sea-beyond-the-mountains, and that those brave enough or foolhardy enough to travel there may yet have a hand in the destiny of the barbarian nations – and perhaps even of Kamboja itself.



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