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Tree and serpent worship

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America

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late king by keeping him "*au fait*" in the news of his late kingdom. It is said the present king would not be unwilling to do away with, or at least to modify, some of the most revolting features of this great slaughter, but that his subjects would regard such an act as a neglect of his most sacred duties, and he might lose his throne as a punishment for such impiety.*

None of the works above referred to make it clear what the negro's ideas of immortality are, probably because none such exist. That they have an idea of a future state, and that they consider this world as merely one of transition, is evident. All pass on to the next and better world, but with the same wants, feelings, and desires that they possessed while sojourning here, and apparently with the same distinction of rank. The last king, however, is the one especially honoured, and the reigning monarch, when he dies, expects the chief worship to be paid to him, and no doubt he is the one who takes the greatest interest in sublunar affairs. They never rise apparently to the rank of gods, but if they do not die they are at least very soon forgotten.†

When contemplating this, to us, strange religious development, the question inevitably arises, How far are we to consider this Dahoman worship as a living fragment of the oldest religion of the world, or how far may it have grown up in more modern times?

The traditions of the country are, as might be expected, far too vague to be of any avail in such an enquiry, and we are left to draw our conclusions from such information as we can gather elsewhere. We know from the Egyptian monuments that neither the physical features nor the social status of the negro have altered in the slightest degree during the last 4,000 years. If the type was then fixed which has since remained unaltered, why not his religion also? There seems no *à priori* difficulty. No other people in the whole world seem so unchanged and unchangeable. Movements and mixtures of races have taken place everywhere else. Christianity has swept Serpent Worship out of what were the limits of the Roman world, and Mahomedanism has done the same over the greater part of Northern Africa. Neither influence has yet penetrated to the Gold Coast, and there apparently the negro holds "his old faith and his old feelings fast" in spite of the progress of the rest of the world. It may be very horrible, but so far as we at present know it is the oldest of human faiths, and is now practised with more completeness in Dahomey than anywhere else, at least at the present day.

AMERICA.

There are few things in connexion with the ancient mythology of America more certain than that there existed in that country before its discovery by Columbus extreme veneration for the serpent. Whether or not this should be designated "worship" is not so clear. The total absence of any native literature renders it extremely difficult to realise the exact interpretation to be put on any observed phenomena, and we

* Burton, ii. 176.

† Among the Zulus the snake is held in great respect, and is not willingly killed; as their dead ancestors are supposed to reappear in the form of snakes.—Colenso, on the Pentateuch, p. VI. p. 142.

gather very little trustworthy information from the early Christian missionaries or historians. They were either too ignorant or too prejudiced to take a dispassionate view of what they saw, and were too much inclined to see the serpent of Eve, or the deluge of Noah, in the vague traditions of the natives; though, to account for these, they were obliged to make St. Thomas missionary to Mexico—before it was founded—as well as first Bishop of Madras. The consequence is, that we are dependent either on a very imperfect examination of the Sculptures, or on very vague oral traditions, for our knowledge of the subject; and it need hardly be added, that with only such data it is extremely difficult to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion. At the same time, however, it must be admitted that if a systematic examination of such data as exist were undertaken, with special reference to Tree and Serpent Worship, a great deal might yet be effected; but as no one has yet attempted the investigation, the subject must for the present be left in its original obscurity.

The principal deity of the Aztec Pantheon seems Tezcatlipoca, or Tonacatlecoatl, literally the Sun Serpent. According to Sahagun, in his character of God of Hosts, he was addressed by the Mexican high priest: "We entreat that those who die in war may be received by thee, our father the sun, and our brother the earth, for thou alone reignest."*

The name of the primitive goddess, the wife of Tezcatlipoca, was Cihuacohuatl, or Tonacacihua, the female serpent or the female sun. She, according to the Mexicans, gave to the light at a single birth two children, one male the other female, to whom they refer the origin of mankind.†

A still more remarkable myth is that of Quetzal-coatl, literally the feathered serpent. He is by some represented as born of a pure virgin in the province of Tollan; by others as a stranger coming from a "far countrie," some time between the sixth and ninth century of our era. Be this as it may, he was the great lawgiver and civilizer of the inhabitants of Anahuac. He taught them religion, gave them laws, instructed them in agriculture and the use of metals, and the various arts of life. He is generally represented as an old man, with a white flowing beard and venerable aspect. He was, in fact, the Lycurgus and the Bacchus of Central America, and having finished his mission he withdrew, like the former, it is said, by sea, promising to return. So implicitly was this believed by his subjects, that when the Spaniards appeared on the coast they were joyfully hailed as the returning god and his companions. Alas! they came only to destroy them and their institutions.

If all the evidences bearing on this legend were thoroughly sifted by some one competent to the task, I feel confident they would result in an historical residuum; and if so, it would throw great light on one of the most perplexing problems connected with the civilization of the New World.

As we shall see presently, Serpent Worship was the faith of a great and prosperous kingdom in Cambodia at the time just indicated as the age of the Mexican prophet; and it is more than probable that the worship prevailed in China and the islands to the eastward at that time. Is it possible that it may have crossed the Pacific, and

* Squier's Serpent Symbol in America, p. 162.

† Gama, Descripcion Historica y Cronologica de las pedras de Mexico, 1832, p. 39.

landed on the western coast of America, and, finally, bloomed in Anahuac? If such a solution were possible, it would explain many similarities between the religion and arts of the Old World and the New, which are now extremely puzzling, for want of some such evidence of intercommunication.

On the other hand, if we may trust the antiquaries of the United States, there are great serpent mounds formed of earth, 1,000 feet long and more,* which would seem to prove that before the present race of Red Indians inhabited the states Ohio and Iowa, a race of Serpent Worshippers occupied their places, and they have been the ancestors of the Toltecs. When, however, we remember with what curious credulity Stukeley manufactured a Dracontium out of Avebury, and Bathurst Deane saw a serpent seven miles long in the groups of Menhirs at Carnac, we must pause before we feel sure that these American mounds do really represent serpents at all. This point cannot be settled without much more accurate surveys and more cautious observers than have yet turned their attention to the subject.

If it should turn out that these are really representations of the great serpent, and that this worship is indigenous in the New World, we are thrown back on the doctrine that human nature is alike everywhere, and that man in like circumstances and with a like degree of civilization does always the same things, and elaborates the same beliefs. It may be so, but I confess it appears to me that at present the evidence preponderates the other way. It should be mentioned, however, that in America the snake that is worshipped is always the indigenous rattlesnake. Whether as separate images or as adorning the walls of the temples of Yucatan, this characteristic seems invariable, and in so far would favour the local origin of the faith. The greatest difficulty of the investigation arises from almost absolute destruction of all the monuments of the capital by its barbarous conquerors, and the consequent paucity of real reliable data on which to found our conclusions.

It seems, however, impossible to read the numerous evidences which Müller† has collected together with so much industry not to feel convinced that Serpent Worship did prevail all over the continent. In Peru apparently with qualities similar to those of the Serpents in the Old World,‡ But in Mexico, and among the North American Indians, occasionally with attributes of terror which were never ascribed to him on this side of the Atlantic. Quetzalcoatl is always an exception to this inference; and on the whole it seems more reasonable to suppose that these characteristics are to be ascribed more to the horror of the Christian narrators than to the feelings of the worshippers. We have no native accounts, and depend consequently wholly on those who looked on the worship from an outside and antagonistic point of view.

If, however, we may trust Bernal Diaz, he tells us that living rattlesnakes were kept in the great temple at Mexico as sacred and petted objects. They were kept in a cabin of diversified form, in which a quantity of feathers had been strewed, and there they laid their eggs and nursed their snakelings. They were fed with the bodies of the sacrificed, and with dogs' meat.§ The same author tells us that on

* Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge, vol. 1.
See also Squier's Serpent Symbol, p. 137 to 141.

† Amerikanische Urreligionen. Basel, 1855.

‡ Müller, p. 366.

§ Bernal Diaz, translated by Lockhart, i, 233.

Cortes' march to Mexico they arrived at a place called Terraguca, which the Spaniards called the Town of Serpents, on account of the enormous figures of these reptiles which they found in the temples, and which the natives worshipped as gods.* But though it is impossible to read any of the narratives of the conquerors without being struck with the frequency with which sacred Serpents and Serpent Worship are spoken of, it is always as a thing accursed, and to be avoided; never as an object worthy of attention, or to be inquired into, and their narratives consequently throw very little light on the subject. The Sculptures would do more; but it will require a long and patient investigation by some one competent person on the spot before their evidence can be considered as available; at present we know very little of what they may contain.

It need hardly be remarked that human sacrifices were found accompanying Serpent Worship in America almost to as great an extent as in Dahomey. Even here, however, it is probable we must make a distinction which may be of some importance. In Africa the sacrificial rites seem to be purely ancestral. In America they were made to propitiate gods, not apparently the ancestors of the reigning family, nor nearer to them in time than Quetzalcoatl. The principal object seems always to have been augury to obtain from the gods an indication of their will, which does not seem to have been the case in Dahomey. It was also no doubt considered that the sacrifice itself was agreeable to the deity, and it was expected that the oracle, which was the declaration of his will, would be favourable in proportion to the number of the victims.

It is by no means improbable that when looked for, Tree Worship will also be found to have prevailed extensively in the New World. Mr. Tylor mentions two instances that came under his notice.† The first was a venerable deciduous cypress, with a stem sixty feet in circumference near its root, and with a fountain gushing up within the hollow of the trunk itself. It was hung all over with votive offerings, besides hundreds of locks of hair, teeth, and bits of ribbon. The other was treated in the same manner, and had the valuable property for whoever touched it, that all feeling of weariness left him. Müller also finds traces of Tree Worship all over the continent of America, and generally in juxtaposition, if not in actual connexion, with that of the Serpent.‡ But here again we must pause for further information before attempting to generalize.

* p. 125. See also pp. 3, 7.

† Anahuac, 215, 265.

‡ Amerikanische Urreligionen, 494. See also 107, 124, 264, *et seq.*