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## **Tree and serpent worship**

**Fergusson, James**

**London, 1868**

Oceania

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[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-62112](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-62112)

surrounded by canvas screens. The furniture consists of an altar and four lighted candles. Seven tables, or stands, are laden with cakes (shewbread), and as many with fruits; and seven lamps take the place of the seven-branched candlestick. There are four woodcuts representing the deities worshipped in the temple. One of these

No. 3.



NĀGA, FROM CHINESE SUTRA.

is reproduced in fac-simile in the annexed woodcut. It is a form of the Serpent God which was invented in India in the twelfth or thirteenth century, and with which we shall presently become familiar.\* A human head and body, ending in a serpentine form from the waist downwards, but with the much more characteristic accompaniment of a degenerate serpent hood. In the first figure in this Chinese work, the Nāga has three serpents rising behind its head; in the second, five; in the third—that in the woodcut—seven; and the last, nine serpents. The lower extremities of the first and second are spotted like serpents. This one and the fourth have scales more like those of a fish. In India between the third century B.C. and the thirteenth A.D., we find serpent hoods ranging from three to seven heads, but never the human body terminating in a serpent downward, till after the last quoted date.

Although all this may have been derived from India, and in its present form probably was so, still it is interesting to find it practised in China so long after it has been forgotten there. At the same time, however, as hinted in speaking of Cambodia (p. 49), it is by no means clear that both India and China may not have borrowed their Serpent Worship from some common centre in Thibet. We are not yet, however, in a position to say whether it penetrated to China by the southern route it afterwards certainly took, or whether it may not have reached it by the north, or from a common centre in Tartary.

## OCEANIA.

It has long been known that Serpent Worship prevailed to a considerable extent in some at least of the islands in the Pacific, but the notices of it that I have met with are singularly vague and unsatisfactory. No one with the requisite local knowledge has yet thought it worth while to collect and arrange the facts, so as to render them available as historical data; and till this is done, it is impossible to employ usefully even such information as we possess.

My own impression is that, wherever we find human sacrifices prevailing, or what—if we dare put such words together—we ought rather to designate as religious

\* Vide infra, page 67.

cannibalism, there Serpent Worship will be found also. In the Feejee islands it certainly exists. Degei, one of their principal gods, is supposed to be enshrined or to exist in the form of a serpent, lying coiled up in a cave of Navata, a mountain on the coast of Viti Levu. Some traditions represent him with the head and part of the body of a serpent, the rest of him being of stone, emblematic of his everlasting and unchangeable nature.\*

The savages of Australia, it is said, believe in the existence of a gigantic serpent, who created the world by a blow of his tail, and who is the cause of earthquakes. Nothing will induce them, however, to reveal to the white man the rites with which they worship the serpent, but which are reported to include human sacrifices and cannibalism.†

Traces of Serpent Worship are found at Suku and Kedal, and other places in Java, but there apparently not connected with Buddhism,‡ but as a local superstition of the natives; and other instances might be quoted, if it were worth while, or they could be depended upon. So little, however, is this the case, that the subject would hardly have been worth mentioning at all, were it not that one of the most interesting problems connected with the subject is the supposed connexion between the Serpent Worship of the Old World and that of Central America. Is it possible it could have migrated viâ the Feejee Islands and the Marquesas? There does not seem to be any other route which presents greater probabilities, if we are prepared to concede the previous question that America did borrow her Serpent Worship from the East; but as yet this is far from being settled.

#### CEYLON.

We must wait for further information before we can speak with anything like certainty, either regarding the extent to which Serpent Worship prevails in Ceylon, or with reference to any material evidences which may attest its existence in former days. Except Mr. Upham's,§ no work that I am aware of treats of the subject, and no drawings except his have been published which afford any information regarding it. Though far from being exhaustive, Mr. Upham's work is sufficient to show how imperfect the conversion of the natives to Buddhism has been, and to what an extent the worship of the Nâga still prevails. In Ceylon, however, it seems now to be mixed up with Demon Worship and the worst superstitions of the Hindu Pantheon to such an extent as to be barely recognizable, and it will require considerable labour to resolve all these superstitions into their component parts.

In addition to this, I have seen native drawings of mythological subjects, which show a greater admixture of Serpent Worship than would be found in similar representations on the continent of India; and I have also had access to original drawings by Europeans in which the three or seven-headed Naga is found adorning

\* Seemann, Mission to Viti, p. 290.

† Manuscript information.

‡ Sir S. Raffles, Java, vol. ii. p. 47. Crawford's Dictionary of the Eastern Archipelago, sub vocibus.

§ History and Doctrine of Buddhism in Ceylon, by Ed. Upham. London, 1829.