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Tree and serpent worship

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Ceylon

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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 Nāga 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.

almost every sacred spot in the country.* The difficulty is to judge from such imperfect materials of what is really old and what may have been added, and till the photographer reaches Ceylon this uncertainty must probably prevail in so far as people in Europe are concerned; but any competent antiquary on the spot could very easily tell us all we wish to know.

On the other hand, the testimony of the Buddhist scriptures seems to be as distinct as such evidence can be expected to be, that Ceylon was inhabited by a Naga race of serpent worshippers when converted to Buddhism, the legends say in the sixth, but more probably in the third, century, B.C. Whether Gorresio, the translator of the Rāmāyana, is correct in asserting that the Rākshasas whom Rāma encountered in that island were Nagas or not, is a question that must be left to Sanskrit scholars to decide. It does not appear that the passages are so understood by the modern Hindus. Snakes never appear as Rāma's opponents in any of the thousand and one representations of that famous war; but Gorresio may be correct nevertheless, and it would be interesting to know.†

The three Ceylonese historical works which have been translated—the Mahāwanso, the Ratnācari, and Rājāvali—all commence with an account, more or less detailed, of the conversion of the Nagas of Ceylon by Buddha himself.

The account in the Mahāwanso is to the following effect‡:—In the fifth year of his Buddhahood, the vanquisher of the five deadly sins perceiving that a conflict was in hand between the Nagas Mahodaro and Chūlodaro for possession of a gem-set throne, out of compassion to the Nagas visited Nāgadwīpo.§

At that time this Mahodaro was a Naga king of a Naga kingdom, 500 yojanas in extent, bounded by the ocean. His sister had been given in marriage to a Naga king of the Kanawaddhamāno mountain, and her son claimed the throne by inheritance, &c. “To them the vanquisher preached a sermon of reconciliation. Both parties rejoicing thereat, made an offering of the gem-set throne to the divine sage. The divine teacher alighting on the earth, seated himself on the throne, and was served by the Naga kings with celestial food and beverage. The lord of the universe procured for 80 koṭis of Nagas, dwelling on land and in the water, the salvation of the faith, and the state of piety” (p. 6).

The maternal uncle of Mahodaro, the Naga king of Kalyāṇi, who was preparing to join in the war is also converted, and at parting Buddha promises to return, meanwhile bestowing on the Naga king the gem-set throne, and having planted the Rājāyatana tree, at parting addressed them thus, “Oh, Naga kings! worship this my sanctified tree; unto you, my beloved, it will be a comfort and a consolation.”

The same story is told, with slight and unimportant variations, in the other

* Mr. Nicholl, the artist who made the drawings from which all the architectural subjects in Sir J. Emerson Tennent's work were engraved, recently showed me his original sketches. Everywhere at Anurādhapura, Pollonaruwa, Dambūla, &c. the Naga appears prominent. The engraver, not knowing what it was, has converted it into a head-dress, which it requires a very practised eye to recognize as a seven-headed snake.

† When so good a Sanskrit scholar as Muir doubts, it would be presumptuous in me to advance an opinion. See Sanskrit Texts, II. 436.

‡ Mahāwanso translated by the Hon. G. Turnour, p. 4.

§ The translation limits the term Nāgadwīpo to the northern portion of Ceylon, but on what grounds does not appear. The context seems to imply the whole island.

two histories, and from that time forward the Mahawanso teems with Naga legends; they seem, however, all to refer to the continent of India rather than Ceylon, and will be alluded to when necessary hereafter. The conversion of the island seems to have been complete in the time of Asoka, B.C. 250,* and as the earliest of the scriptures we have were not reduced to writing in their present form before the fifth century after Christ, we must not expect from Buddhist authorities any admission of a faith adverse to Buddhism existing in the island at that date.

This, however, is just one of those cases in which the monuments are so useful to supplement the "litera scripta." If they were examined we should see how far the conversion was radical, and to what extent the people still adhered to their old faith. My impression is, that after more than 2000 years, their conversion is still far from being complete. Whenever any competent person will look below the surface, I am very much mistaken if the old Serpent Worship is not found still practised by the aboriginal races in all remote parts of the island; but it is useless speculating when real information can be so easily obtained.

Whatever may be the result of the investigation into the Serpent Worship of Ceylon, there is no doubt whatever about the prevalence and importance of Tree Worship in that island. The legend of the planting of the Rājāyatana Tree by Buddha has already been alluded to, but the history of the transference of a branch of the Bo Tree from Buddh-gyā to Anurādhapura is as authentic and as important as any event recorded in the Ceylonese annals. Sent by Aśoka (250 B.C.) it was received with the utmost reverence by Devanampiyatisso, and planted in a most conspicuous spot in the centre of his capital.† There it has been revered as the chief and most important "numen" of Ceylon for more than 2000 years, and it, or its lineal descendant sprung at least from the old root, is there worshipped at this hour. The city is in ruins; its great dagobas have fallen to decay; its monasteries have disappeared; but the great Bo Tree still flourishes according to the legend, "Ever green, never growing or decreasing, but living on for ever for the delight and worship of mankind." Annually thousands repair to the sacred precincts within which it stands to do it honour, and to offer up those prayers for health and prosperity which are more likely to be answered if uttered in its presence. There is probably no older idol in the world, certainly none more venerated.‡

INDIA.

In every essential respect the religious history of India is extremely similar to that of Persia, but with one curious accidental difference, which influenced to a considerable extent their outward aspect and ultimate fate. From the accession of the Achæmenidæ till the old religions were practically swept away by the Mahomedan invasion, all the countries of Central Asia were united under one sceptre, and subject

* Throughout this work the year 250, as a date easily remembered, is assumed as that of Asoka. It is probable that the true date of his accession is 270, and as he reigned 35 years, his death took place in 235 B.C.; 250 B.C. is therefore a fair mean, and has the merit of involving no hypothesis as to the chronology of the period.

† Mahawanso, chap. xviii.

‡ Sir Emerson Tennent, Col. Forbes Leslie, Chapman, and indeed everyone who has written about Ceylon, mention the fact. The drawings of it also are numerous.