

A CUSTOM OF PRIVILEGED THEFTS.*

Read on 5th March 1924.

The subject of this paper is suggested to me by an interesting article in the May-June (1923) issue of the *Revue Anthropologique* of Paris. The article is entitled "Une curieuse Coutume a l'age de la puberté" (A Curious Custom of the Age of puberty) and is from the pen of Dr. J. P. Kleiweg de Zuaan. The custom referred to is that of a kind of, what may be termed, "Privileged theft." The object of this paper is (a) to narrate that custom in brief, as described by the author of the article, and (b) to refer to some cases of privileged theft among some people on our side of India.

I.

According to Dr. Kleiweg, a strange custom of a kind of privileged theft exists among various people, living wide apart a various distances. According to this custom, a boy when he was circumcized on his coming to puberty, or a girl when she first arrived at the state of her monthly course, which was the sign of her arriving at puberty, had a right to steal anything he or she liked, especially food, from the houses of neighbours.

As our author says, it is often stated by ethnologists, that, at times, similar and analogous customs are met with among people, who, as far as is known, have never come into contact, or have come into very little contact, with one another. The analogy or similarity is difficult to be explained. It is often possible that one people has taken such similar customs from another, or, that the customs have arisen independently among different people.

Coming to the custom in question among the primitive people of South Africa, we are told, that a boy, who is being circumcised, is permitted with impunity to commit a theft during the

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time of the ceremonies which precede the ceremony of Circumcision proper. During this preceding period, boys are permitted to take all sorts of liberty which are prohibited otherwise in ordinary times. If they are caught, they are not punished. Any punishment on such an occasion is considered unjust. Among the Makhâ negroes, the Mkuhwa or priest educator, keeps an eye over the conduct of the young men who are to pass through the ceremony of circumcision which lasts long. He can punish other bad behaviour during the period, but not that of theft or immorality. Similar ideas prevail among certain tribes of the Indian Archipelago, far away from Africa. In some places, the boy is prohibited to speak with any body for some time after circumcision. He cannot speak even to ask for his meals. But he has the liberty to go and take or steal food or steal anything which he likes from anybody else's house. In Somba in Indian Netherlands, the circumcision takes place at the time, when they think of marrying the boy. The boy is taken to a garden, where there is water and where there are banana trees, so that the boy may be at a cool place where the inflammation, following the operation and the wound, may soon be cured and healed. Then he is taken to a rice-field, where he is kept in a hut till he is cured, his food during the period consisting of cold things. During this period, the boy can enter into any cottage and steal poultry or a pig or even a buffalo. The owner cannot object. The only thing he can do is that he may ask his boy, when he comes to puberty and goes through circumcision, to go in his turn to the house of the above boy-culprit and steal similar animals. The animals so stolen are killed by the boy and his party and eaten. The explanation given by the tribesmen for this custom is, that thereby the people of the village may know, that the circumcision of such and such a boy has taken place. The act is understood to serve as a kind of evidence.

Our author refers, on the authority of the "Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits" (Vol. V. 1914), wherein Dr. Seligman describes some customs of the

Torres. According to the custom there prevalent, when people see signs of puberty in a young girl, they inform the mother of the fact. The girl is taken to sea-shore, at some distance from her house, by her paternal aunt who makes a pit in the sand and the girl lies therein. The aunt covers her with wet sand and then constructs a primitive hut where they both sleep. The girl is permitted to get out of the pit only in the evening when she goes to the hut to sleep. Both of them live on certain food, turtle or fish being prohibited. They are not visited by any member of the family. They remain there for two months. At the end of the period, the girl has a bath at the sea. Then she goes to the house of her aunt and takes some food. The family then prepares for a feast for the next day. The girl is then blackened with a piece of carbon from head to foot and receives all kinds of ornaments. She then returns to the house of her parent. Her father and her aunt then exchange present of food. Now, during the time that the girl lives in the hut with her aunt, the latter can enter with impunity, before sun rise, into the hut of anybody and take away anything she likes without payment.

Thus, we see, that in far distant countries like Africa, Tamor, Soemba and New Guiena, during the ceremonies of puberty—circumcision in the case of a boy and menstruation in that of a girl—thefts of things required by the parties are permitted. In the case of the girl, in some cases, it is her parental aunt that commits the theft.

Our author sees at the bottom of this custom, the belief in taboo. The boy and the girl and their relatives being tabooed, they cannot be caught or arrested. They are respected and, so are permitted to do whatever they like. It is the blood of circumcision and menstruation which produces the taboo. Our author asks at the end of his short paper the question: "Peut-être sera-t-il possible de trouver chez d'autre peuples des coutumes

analogues ?" *i. e.* " Perhaps, is it possible to find analogous customs among other people ?"

Our answer to him is in the affirmative.

II.

We know of some instances of a kind of " privileged thefts on our side of India. Upto about 50 years ago, there was among the Parsees of Bombay, a custom of " washing the feet " of the bridegroom after marriage. The custom is still prevalent among some Parsees of some mofussil villages, and it is also prevalent among some other people of Gujerat. In former times, the Parsees put on Indian shoes (*ਜੈੜੀ*), which were easily removable, and they did not put on stockings. So, after marriage, some near relative from the bride's party, got the bridegroom to remove a shoe from one of his feet and washed his foot with water. At one time, I thought, that the object of this custom was to wash away all past mistakes and to drive away all evils and misfortunes.¹ But I now think, that this custom symbolized an act of hospitality towards the bridegroom on the part of the bride's family. Even now, the first act of hospitality, extended to guests coming from some other village or town, is to offer him hot water to wash. Now, in the case of marriage, the custom of washing the feet seems to be a relic of that custom of welcome.

Now during this process, somebody of the brides' side stealthily took away one of the shoes of the bridegroom. The bridegroom, on not finding it, when he looked for it when the ceremony of washing the feet was finished, had to wait, and it was only on his offering a present in money to the lady who had stolen it that the shoe was returned to him.

I am told² that there is a custom even now prevalent among the Anawls of Gujerat, that some one of the party of the bride-

¹ *Vide* my paper on "The Marriage customs of the Parsees" read before this Society in February and July 1899.

² I am indebted for much of this and the following information to my friend Mr. Sorabji Muncherji Desai, of Naosari, who is a folk-lorist of an excellent type.

groom steals a small cup (વાડકે) or any other small vessel from the house of the bride. It is said that among some Jain Banias, the bridegroom is asked to dinner by the bride's parents on the day next after marriage, and then the brother of the bride steals the shoes of the bridegroom. These are returned only when he is paid some money for their return (ઢેડામણ). It is said that though now, owing to some changed and reformed ideas, shoes are not stolen, still payments are made, in some places of Gujerat, by the bridegroom as customary presents and these payments are a relic of the old custom.

Now this kind of privileged theft is spoken of as *prem chori* (પ્રેમ ચોરી) *i. e.*, "affectionate theft" or theft out of affection for the person from whom the theft is committed. It is believed to serve as a preventive or a precautionary remedy or antidote for a likely evil, aimed at by some evil-disposed person to the bridegroom. Just as poison (zeher زہر) has its antidote (pâv zeher پاپا زہر), so these malevolent *choris* (ચોરી) or thefts have, as their antidotes, *prem-chori i. e.*, affectionate or benevolent thefts, which are always taken as preventives. A marriage is a very happy occasion in a family or in a man's life. Such happy occasions are believed to draw hostile or evil or jealous eyes of others, who, in order to wreak their vengeance or satiate their hostility or from some such evil motives, may try to do some mischief to the marrying couple by magic. While the above referred to case of the theft of a shoe by a lady is a case of a kind of *bona-fide* privileged theft, an evil-disposed person resorts to unprivileged *mala-fide* thefts to get possession of some thing belonging to, or connected or associated with, the bride or bridegroom, so that, by means of the thing thus stolen, he may get a magician to work some evil influences upon her or him. These malevolent persons are on a look-out for things which they can steal. At times, they are frankly invited as guests by the families of the bride or bridegroom. On such happy occasions, families generally like to make up old quarrels, especially those with near ones. Then, when thus invited, an

evil-disposed person tries to steal something belonging to the bridegroom or the bride. It may be a clothing or a part of a clothing or a few grains of rice thrown over the marriage couple while saying marriage-blessings (ॐ शिवाय नमः), or the wick of the lamp burning during the marriage ritual, or even a few drops of ghee (clarified butter) burning in the lamp. He or she, generally she, then gives this stolen thing to a so-called necromancer or magician who exerts some magical bad influences through that thing upon the bridegroom or bride. It is to anticipate such mala-fide unprivileged thefts by evil-disposed persons, that some near relatives of the bride or bridegroom, at times, resort, to the above kind of bona-fide privileged thefts, e. g. the theft of a shoe.

At times, the mother of the bride or bridegroom herself stealthily lifts up from the ground a few grains of the rice thrown upon the marrying couple by the priests during the recital of the marriage benediction (*ashirvād*) and eats them, or, at times, stealthily puts them into the mouths of the bride and bridegroom to be eaten by them. This then is another case of a pre-chori (प्रेम चोरी) or affectionate privileged theft. I have myself seen such instances of a few grains of rice being lifted up and eaten by mothers or other near lady relatives and of their being stealthily given to the couple to be eaten during the recital. In the case of the bride and bridegroom, the stealth may be taken to be somewhat significant, because the marrying couple, having performed the *kusti-pādyāb*¹, a kind of short religious sacred ablution, before sitting to be married, the *kusti-pādyāb* is, according to ordinary customs vitiated, if the party eats something, however little, during the celebration.

At times, the mother of a bride, draws out a small silk or cotton thread out of the *sāri* or the upper loose garment of the bride and swallows it, or, at times, makes the bride swallow it.

¹ Vide my paper on "Purification ceremonies" before the Society.

Similarly, the mother of the bridegroom draws out a thread from the linen coat (*dagli*) or the upper full dress (*jâmâ*) of the bridegroom and swallows it. Formerly, it was done *apparently* stealthily, because the superstition was well-nigh common, but now, in present comparatively reformed times, when such actions would be generally laughed out, some superstitious mothers do so very stealthily. This swallowing by the mothers themselves acts as a preventive antidote against any magical evil influences that may be worked upon. Again, at times, no sooner the marriage ceremony is finished, the relatives of the bride or bridegroom extinguish the lamps burning on the sides of the marrying couple, so that, if any malevolent person then takes away the wick or a portion of the burning ghee, it matters little. The power of being susceptible to magic influence exists only when the marriage lamps are burning. After extinction, they do not possess the power of being the medium of necromancers.

We saw above, that the thefts by evil-disposed persons of something belonging to the marrying couple are unprivileged mala-fide or malicious thefts. Other cases of such thefts are known. An evil-disposed woman is said to go to a neighbouring house, where a girl has just delivered and steals something belonging to the girl, even her placenta ($\overline{\text{म}}\text{र}$), and carrying it home, asks some so-called necromancer to work magic through it on the girl. At times, the people of the house, who, at times, are themselves familiar with such practices, are very cautious, and take very great care to see that nothing is taken away from the room of the girl who has delivered. They keep a sharp eye over neighbouring visitors. But, it is said, that in such cases of over-caution the evil-disposed visitor carries away some parts of the placenta or the blood that may have fallen on the ground by stealthily rubbing her shoes or slippers over these. On going home she removes these little attached stolen portions and gives them to a necromancer to work his spell.

Such practices of unprivileged mala-fide thefts are resorted to by women who are sterile or by their mothers. It is believed that by virtue of the things so stolen they can get the magic-practitioners to transfer the fertility of motherhood from the newly delivered girl to the sterile women themselves. At times, even the embraces of evil-disposed women have stealthy evil influences. Such women are said to go to the houses of girls that are *enceinte* and, under the garb of friendship, embrace them and even such stealthy embraces are believed to have harmful effects.
