

THE ROOT-IDEA AT THE BOTTOM OF NUDITY SPELLS.¹

Mr. Sarat Chandra Mitra, in his paper, entitled "A Recent instance of the Use of Nudity-spell for rain-making in Northern Bengal,"² describes a case, where, in order to pray for rain, to their Rain-god Hutumdeva, the Râj-bunsi women of Northern Bengal stripped themselves naked and danced before the god. The author attributes this custom to the belief that the god was frightened by nudity and therefore poured forth rain. As said by Mr. Sarat Chandra Mitra, Mr. W. Crooke, one of the most distinguished of our ex-presidents, in one of his works,³ refers to such nudity-spells. He says, that these nudity-spells have their parallels in Europe. He begins by describing the nudity-spell in Servia which is referred to by Mr. Sarat Chandra Mitra in his paper. He also refers to a nudity-spell in Russia. He then refers to Mr. Conway's *Demonology* (I. 267), wherein the author thinks "that the nudity of the women represents their utter poverty and inability to give more to conciliate the god of the rain." Mr. Crooke thinks it difficult to account for the nudity part of the ceremony. However, he adds "It may possibly be based on the theory, that spirits dread indecency or rather the male and female principles. This may be the origin of the indecencies of word and act practised at the Holî and Kajarî festivals in Upper India, which are both closely connected with the control of the weather."⁴ As a parallel to the

¹ This paper was read before the Anthropological section of the eleventh Indian Science Congress, held at Bangalore, in January, 1924. (*Jour. Anthropol. Sty. Bombay* Vol. XIII, No 5, 424—31.)

² Read before the Anthropological Society of Bombay in November 1923, *Journal* Vol. XII.

³ *An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India* by W. Crooke (1894) pp. 39-43 &c.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 40.

custom in Servia, Mr. Crooke describes the following case in India : " During the Gorakhpur famine of 1873-74 there were many accounts received of women going about with a plough at night, stripping themselves naked and dragging it across the fields as an invocation to the rain-god. The men kept carefully out of the way while this was being done. It was supposed that if the women were seen by men the spell would lose its effect."¹

II.

Now the question is : What is the root-idea at the bottom of the custom ?

Is it an appeal to the rain-god as suggested by Mr. Conway on the ground of poverty and inability, Various root-ideas (a) Expression of poverty. the appeal saying as it were : " O Rain-god ! We appeal to you to send forth rain. We are willing to make an offering to you, in order to give some concrete form to our appeal. But we are sorry, we are very poor and are reduced to utter poverty. Look to us ; we are so poor that we have no clothing upon our bodies. We therefore pray that you help us, who are poor, by poring down your rain."

Or is it an attempt to frighten the rain-god, as suggested (b) Attempt to frighten. by Mr. Crooke and by Mr. Sarat Chandra Mitra ? We have not sufficient ground, at least in the cases submitted, to take it that the idea was to frighten the rain-god.

The root-idea may be that of temptation or allurements. (c) Temptation. Some of the tribal gods or spirits are supposed to be evil-minded having all the passions and desires of men. So, we may say, that the idea may be that of alluring them, of tempting their passions, and of thus propitiating them. Mr. Crooke refers to a case of Hindu women referred to by Mrs. Fanny Parkes, in

¹ *Ibid*, p. 41.

her "Wanderings of a Pilgrim in search of the Picturesque," and says, that the nudity practised by the women was to *propitiate* the goddess. Now we cannot propitiate by frightening or by creating dread. One can propitiate by a tempting offering of pleasure, or by offering a sacrifice.

Again, the root-idea may be that of an expression of all
 (d) Expression of humility. An initiate, when he is presented
 humility. before a Master-mason, for being admitted
 into the Masonic craft, is presented, if not all naked, at least in a
 state of half-nudity. He is deprived of all his upper garments
 and is made pennyless, all his money—not only his purse contain-
 ing his money, but even every bit of metal that may pass as money,
e. g., his keys, and his spectacles—being taken away from
 him. The idea being to say, as it were, "Naked I come and naked I
 will go." The root-idea at the bottom of the custom in question
 may be something similar. The applicants, the village women
 in this case, appear before their master, their rain-god, in all
 humility and appeal to him for rain.

Perhaps, the idea may be that of shaming the rain-god
 (e) Putting to shame. and thus of forcing him to do his duty of
 pouring forth rain. The rain-god has been
 recalcitrant, and so, the women attempt to shame him by their
 nudity. A story in Classical writers¹ suggests this view. Once,
 Cyrus the Great of Persia had his capital of Pasargadæ invaded by
 his enemy. He, with his Persians, went out of the city to drive
 away the enemy but had a great reverse. So, he and his Persians
 were running away to the city. The women of the city, knowing
 what had happened, all came out of the city, and, removing
 their lower garments, went towards their flying husbands;
 brothers, fathers and sons, in a state of half-nudity, and upbraided
 them for their cowardice in running away from the enemy
 and trying to shelter themselves within the city gates. Pointing

¹ Account of Ctesius preserved by Amaxemenes, Strabo.

to the naked part of their bodies, they said, as it were: "Where do you fly? Do you fly here? It is shame that you should run away and put your women to the risk of being captured by the enemy. Turn back and fight valiantly for your women-folk": It is said that Cyrus and his Persians were put to shame and they all went back to the battle-field, fought valiantly again, and won. It is said that the successors of Cyrus remembered this episode, and whenever they went to the city, they presented a silver coin to every one of its women. It is further said, that a miserly successor, in order to avoid the payment, avoided entering into the city and proceeded in his journey from without. Thus, the nudity-spell may have at its bottom, the idea of putting the rain-god to shame.

Again, in the Avesta, land is compared with a woman

(f) Appeal for fertility.

A fertile piece of land is like a child-bearing woman, and a barren piece like a barren childless woman. We read in the Vendidad

(III 24-25): "That land, which is cultivable by a cultivator is (*i.e.*, feels) unhappy, if it long lies uncultivated. It is like a young man's good handsome wife who has long remained childless. O Spitama Zarathushtra! For him, who cultivates this land from the left side to the right side and from the right to the left, the land carries some fruit or crop, just as a loving husband, lying on a bed with his loving bride, gives her (*i.e.*, makes her conceive of) a son (as) a fruit (of the marriage)." So, perhaps, the idea is that the women of the village, going to the fields, with their conceiving organs naked, appeal as it were, with a kind of sympathetic magic to the rain-god, the god of fertility, to give fertility to the soil just as their males give them fertility.

Again, the fact, that the women go to the fields with a plough, reminds us of the custom of the Shâhs (kings) of Persia, even up to a few years ago, going to a field on the Jamshedi Naoroz day, the day of the vernal equinox when Spring sets in. He moves

the plough and turns the first clod as a good omen, praying for God's blessings upon the fields. In the case of the nudity-spell in question,—the nudity associated with the above idea of suggesting fertility—the turning of the plough by the women adds an additional suggestion and prayer.

But one must not generalize. There may be different ideas at the bottom of the various customs and beliefs of nudity in various countries. It may be that of an appeal to the god on account of their poverty or that of creating a dread or fright, or that of temptation to a kind of carnal enjoyment or pleasure or that of an expression of humility or that of putting the god to shame or that of expressing a desire of fertility.

But, I think, in the case of a somewhat higher class of society, the idea is that of a kind of sacrifice.

(g) Idea of self-sacrifice. It is something like that, which corresponds to, what Herbert Spencer calls, "Self-surrender" which lies "at the bottom of many of our modern practices of salutation."¹ In the present case, the case is that of salutation, not to fellow-men, but, to a god. It is a case of salutation and prayer to a god. Here, the idea is that of self-sacrifice, sacrifice of what is most dear and valuable to us. The idea, at the root of the rite, is to do a very unusual thing which may be considered as a great sacrifice. In this case, the women do the most unusual thing viz. the sacrifice of their high sentiments of decency. They say, as it were, to the Rain-God: "We offer to you as sacrifice what is nearest and dearest to us, our Modesty, and pray to you to accept our offering and to give us rain in return."

I remember, that when I was eleven or twelve years of age, there was the marriage ceremony of the son, the only child, of my paternal aunt. She seemed to have taken a vow, that when

¹ Vide my paper on "Tibetan Salutations" before the Anthropological Society of Bombay, read on 28th January 1914 Vol. X, pp. 165-177. Vide my Anthropological Papers Part II, pp. 110-123.

God brought about the marriage of her only son, she would do some unusual thing which may strike others; and what she did was, that, at the time of welcoming her son or her daughter-in-law, I forget whom, at the threshold of the Fire-temple where the marriage was to be celebrated, she took off her slippers and stood and performed the welcoming-ceremony, with bare feet; I remember my father being annoyed at this unusual act of a little want of manners before a large assembly. Here, she sacrificed, for the sake of a religious vow to God, good manners, which should be sacredly observed. So, the idea seems to be that of sacrificing what is most dear to us. Take, for example, the case of the Patriarch in the Bible sacrificing his dear son.

Again, take the case of the women of ancient Babylon, which;
 Case of Babylon. from our modern point of view, is worse than
 that of the Bengal women, referred to by
 Mr. Sarat Chandra Mitra. Herodotus (Bk. I. 199) thus refers to this matter:—¹ “The most disgraceful of the Babylonian customs is the following: every native woman is obliged, once in her life, to sit in the temple of Venus, and have intercourse with some stranger. And many disdain to mix with the rest, being proud on account of their wealth, come in covered carriages, and take up their station at the temple with a numerous train of servants attending them. But the far greater part do thus: many sit down in the temple of Venus, wearing a crown of cord round their heads; some are continually coming in, and others are going out. Passages marked out in a straight line lead in every direction through the women, along which strangers pass and make their choice. When a woman has once seated herself, she must not return home till some stranger has thrown a piece of silver into her lap, and lain with her outside the temple. He who throws the silver must say thus: ‘I beseech the goddess Mylitta to favour thee:’ for the Assyrians call Venus Mylitta. The silver may be ever so small, for she will not reject it, inasmuch as it is not lawful

¹ Carey's Translation, p. 86.

for her to do so, for such silver is accounted sacred. The woman follows the first man that throws, and refuses no one. But when she has had intercourse and has absolved herself from her obligation to the goddess, she returns home; and after that time, however great a sum you may give her you will not gain possession of her. Those that are endowed with beauty and symmetry of shape are soon set free; but the deformed are detained a long time, from inability to satisfy the law, for some wait for a space of three or four years. In some parts of Cyprus there is a custom very similar." The supposed or real custom of giving the right of the first night to the head priest in some tribes seems to have a similar object.

Here also then the root idea is that of sacrificing, to the God of the Temple, once in life, what is most valuable and dearest with women viz: their chastity.

I have said more than once, that many a custom passes from the Church to the State or to the Society. Take the case of such a process in what we hear of some Parliamentary elections. To win the favour of, what we may call, their temporary god, the voter, a lady, the wife of, or some other lady closely related to, the candidate, sacrifices her modesty and gives a kiss to a stranger to have the favour of a vote.

I will refer here to the case of the 4,000 Japanese women, who, out of regard and love for their holy temple, sacrificed what was dearest and nearest to them, viz. their hair which gave them beauty. It is the case which I have referred to in my second paper on my visit to Japan, read before this Society. I will quote here what I have said there: "I had the pleasure of seeing, on 11th April 1922, a grand temple of one of the offshoots of this sect (of Honen), the Higashi Hongwanji, at Kyoto. The original temple is said to have been burnt by fire and the present one was built in 1895 by public subscriptions,—gifts in money and gifts in kind. The gifts

in kind consisted of building materials like timber, etc. One of such gifts in kind was by the women of Japan, 4,000 of whom are said to have cut off their hair as a holy sacrifice and offered them for the preparation of ropes to lift up heavy loads of timber required in the construction of the temple. Japanese women have very long hair and the ropes, woven from the long hair of 4,000 pious, self-sacrificing daughters of Japan, were many. When moving about in the temple, I was struck by its grandeur, but more so by the sight of four—out of many, which were, as I was told, in the godowns—huge rolls of such hair-ropes which were placed there to inspire pious thoughts among the worshippers. Women often make noble sacrifices for their country and their religion and here was an example of that kind. Four thousand Japanese women sacrificed what was more valuable than jewellery, their hair, which added to their natural beauty. I was tempted to take a few hair out of these ropes to present them to my daughters and daughters-in-law, as mementoes of my journey to a country whose women were all masters of courtesy and such self-sacrificing piety.”¹

In Burmah, it is a general practice for women to dedicate their locks of hair to their temples. That was a prevalent custom in some parts of ancient Greece. According to Pausaninus “Twezanian maidens used to dedicate locks of their hair in the temples of the bachelor Hippolytus before marriage.”²

The gift of the best of our possessions when voluntarily given, takes the form of a sacrifice or offering, but, when compulsorily demanded, takes the form of a punishment. The above is the case of a voluntary offering of hair by women. But at times, women were compulsorily deprived of their hair and then it was the case of punishment. The old Parsee Punchayet, about more than hundred years ago, punished, on rare occasions, incorrigibly bad women by cutting off their hair.

¹ *Vide* Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay, Vol. XII, p. 658.

² Pausaninus by Frazer p. 28.