

A NOTE ON THE "MYSTIC EYES" ON INDIAN BOATS.¹

This brief note is suggested to me by the paper on "The Eyes of Horus" by Dr. Jamshed Maneckji Unvala, B.A., Ph. D., read before the Anthropological Society of Bombay on the 4th January 1928. Dr. Unvala says:—"The eyes of Horus, the Egyptian Sun-god, plays an important part in mythology and superstition of the ancient Egyptians. They are called by Egyptologists *ujas* or *mystic eyes* on account of the mystic influence which they exercise on enemies of those whom they protect." He further says that this Eye of Horus or *ujas* "was worn as an amulet hanging down from the neck like a pendant. It formed also the decoration of a bracelet. These *ujas* acted as "protective amulets" and as such "were found on Egyptian mummies". Even the Divinities of Egypt were "in danger of attacks from their enemies, the evil spirits," and so, "they are often placed under the protection of the eyes of Horus." They stand on guard in the heavens exactly over the prow and over the helm of the barque (Maspero, *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l'Orient Classique* page 93)". These *ujas* "were excavated in recent years from the ruins of Susa, the Capital of ancient Elam".

These *ujas* or "mystic eyes" of the ancient Egyptians, especially those found "over the prow and over the helm of the barque" remind us of the figures of eyes, which we see on some of our Asiatic boats. I remember having seen them on some boats in my voyage towards the furthest East—Burma, China, Japan in 1922. We find this eye upon some boats in our Bombay harbour. The object of this paper is to say a few words on the subject of this mystic eye on Indian boats and to explain its signification.

The custom of putting an oculus or eye upon boats seems to have been prevalent from olden times upto now, and from the Mediterranean in the West to the Chinese Seas in the East. We find an interesting account of this kind of carved eyes in a

¹ Read before the Anthropological Society of Bombay, on 4th January 1928 (Vide Vol. XIV, No. 1, pp. 77-83).

Paper, entitled "The Significance of the Oculus in Boat Decoration", read by Mr. James Hornell, Director of Fisheries, Madras Government, in the Zoological and Ethnological Section of the Indian Science Congress which met in our City of Bombay in January 1919. This paper forms an Appendix to Mr. Hornell's larger Paper, entitled "The Origins and Ethnological Significance of Indian Boat Designs," read before the Lahore session of the Indian Science Congress in January 1918 and published in the Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. ¹

Mr. Hornell's Paper is very interesting for us from, among others, an anthropological point of view. The Interest of Mr. Hornell's Paper. Mr. Hornell says;—"During recent years several ethnologists have endeavoured to adduce evidence of the spread and penetration of ancient Mediterranean culture by sea along definite trade routes from the Red Sea to India, thence eastwards to the myriad islands of the Malay Archipelago and the Pacific and onwards to the American continent itself. A great diversity of customs and many domestic articles of utility or ornament have been examined to see how far they bear out this hypothesis." So, Mr. Hornell commenced an inquiry "with a view to see what light an examination of the main types of sea and river craft found in India at the present day would shed upon this theory of a cultural world drift from west to east." This inquiry led the author to prepare the above paper and he thinks that there is a "correlation of particular designs with definite regions on the coast line characterised by some clearly marked physical features and usually also by racial divergence. ²

According to Mr. Hornell, "the coast and island regions distinguished by characteristic boat types" on the Indian coast are eight. Of these eight, three are those of (a) the North-West Coast, comprising Baluchistan, Sind, Kutch and Kathiawar; (b) The Bombay Coast southward to Mangalore and (c) Malabar and Travancore. "Each of these regions has its own boat-types, its own characteristics in weather, climate and coast formation".³ Mr. Hornell gives in this paper five illustrations of oculi on boats:-

¹ Vol. VII, No. 3, pp. 139-256.

² Ibid. p. 139.

³ Ibid p. 140.

1. "Prow of an Egyptian funeral barge, circa 1400 B.C. (after Maspero)," p. 247.
2. "Fore part of a Greek galley from a vase in the British Museum ; c. 500 B.C. (after Chatterton)," p. 248.
3. "Bow of a Ganges cargo boat showing oculus in braces on a black ground and a garland hung from the stem" (Original), p. 250.
4. "Oculus of boss-shape, on the head-boards of a Chinese junk, Shanghai" (Original).
5. "Elongated oculus characteristic of Annamite boats".

This custom of providing boats with eyes is very old. As pointed out by Mr. Hornell, it prevailed in Ancient Greece and Rome. The figure of boats on the vases and friezes of these ancient countries are said to have these mystic eyes. Among the Egyptians, their funeral boats, which carried the mummies over the Nile had such oculi. "These eyes, carefully depicted with well-defined conventionalized lids and eyebrows symbolized the eyes of unseen Osiris who would eventually guide the bark of the dead to that other land not to be entered save by the aid of this deity and his shallop. Except on these funeral boats the Egyptians do not appear to have used this eye symbol. The carefully drawn paintings of their sea-going vessels, such as the great sailing galleys employed by Queen Hartshepsut on her famous trading venture to the land of Punt, show no trace of it."¹

The appearance of eyes upon boats in Europe has been traced from 500 B.C. downwards. "The custom died out in the Middle Ages in the case of the large ships of commerce and war... Thenceforward its use was limited to the fishing boats and small coasting craft of communities that clung with more than usual tenacity to the customs of their forefathers. Such survivals at the present day are found among the boats of Portuguese fishermen, the Xebecs of Calabria, the harbour craft of the Maltese, and occasionally among the fishing boats of the Sicilian and Greek coasts.

¹ Ibid p. 248.

² Ibid pp. 248-49.

Coming eastward, Mr. Hornell finds very few survivals of the custom in countries under Mahomedan influence, but the custom is found in Ceylon and India "wedded entirely with Hinduism". This custom is observed by some "cargo-carriers on the Ganges, the small Hindu-owned coasters of the north of Ceylon", on the boats of "Point Calimere over against Ceylon and the masula-boats of the Coromandel coast". In these cases, the eye is "fashioned in brass".¹ Among the frescoes in the Ajanta caves, of about 600 A.C. there is depicted a three masted ship and a royal barge both provided with eyes on the brows (R. Mukkarji, Indian shipping page 41). In Java, there are generally two pairs of eyes, one on the bows and the other on the quarters. The survival of the custom is seen, according to Mr. Hornell, in connection with the completion and landing of boats in the Coromandel Coast. "When newly-built boats are first launched, elaborate puja ceremonies are performed connected with the worship of the sea-goddess Kanniamma, and one of the rites is the incising, scratching, or daubing of the crude out-line of an Eye ☺ on each bow. This ceremony is termed 'opening the eye' some of the older men state that their idea in doing this is to endow the boat with life"²,

According to Mr. Hornell, "in India the protecting deity of sailors and fishermen is feminine".....This becomes a sufficient explanation for the fact that ships are considered feminine in Europe and especially in England."³

Now, what is the significance of the mystic eyes? A tinald on the coast of Ceylon explained thus to Mr. The significance of the Mystic Eyes. Hornell. "The eyes were there to enable the ship to see her way, to avoid rocks and sandbanks—in his words 'without the eyes she would be like a blind man alone in

1 Ibid p. 249.

2 Ibid pp. 249-50.

3 Ardviçura, the Yazata presiding over water among the Iranians. is also a female-deity.

the street.¹” Mr. Hornell says that that was the explanation of the ancient Greeks and Romans and that is the explanation of the modern Chinese. But Mr. Hornell himself thinks that the eyes on the boat were the eyes of “the gods under whose protection they sailed”.

The Egyptian Osiris, who guarded the dead to the other world, resembled the Iranian Mithra, who judged the dead. I have shown this at some length in my Paper, entitled “The Belief about the Future of the soul among the Ancient Egyptians and Iranians.”² Both were sun-gods who judged the dead. The Horus referred to in the above paper of Dr. Unvala, assisted Osiris by superintending the work of weighing the action of the dead, just as Āstād assisted Mithra.

The Egyptian idea of the “eyes of Osiris” guiding the dead to the other world reminds us of the Iranian idea of the association of a dog’s eye with the funeral ritual of a dead person. The dog, required for the purpose, is spoken of as “Chathru-Chashma” i.e. four-eyed dog.

Again, each of these regions has its own propitiatory ceremonies observed with a view to keep off danger. The Hindu fishing crew, and among them even some converted Roman Catholic Christians, on our Bombay Coast have their own ceremonies.

(a) On leaving the shore, they empty “a chatty of water over the prows”. This reminds us of the modern European ceremony of breaking a bottle of champagne when a new vessel is launched into the sea. Perhaps, this breaking of a bottle of champagne may be a renewal of the old custom of sacrifice.

(b) Once every season, special propitiatory or help-seeking ceremonies are performed in honour of a local deity.

¹ Memoir of the Asiatic Society of Bengal op cit p. 253.

² Journal, B.B.R.A. Society, Vol. XIX pp. 365-74. Vide my Asiatic papers, Part I, pp. 137-46.

(c) At times, "a crude vermilion figure of *Ganapati*" is painted near the mast or at the stern.

(d) At times, a goat is killed and cocoanuts are broken on the prow.

(e) These offerings are accompanied with acclamations of prayer-like words like "mâtâ mâtâ" on our side.

In my paper, entitled "Note on the Kolis of Bassein", read on 25th July 1906, (1) I have briefly referred to the propitiatory ceremonies of the Bassein fishermen in honour of their sea-god Gomavir. I have given in that paper the following couplet from their prayer-song in honour of their god Gomavir:—

समुद्राना डोले ताडे अले, वारांनी डुभते,

गोमाराची कृपा आली तरी ताडे लागते.

From the point of view of what Dr. Unvala says of the Horus or Mystic Eye of the Egyptians and what Mr. Hornell says of the oculus on boat-decoration, I am now inclined to think that, perhaps the word "डोले" in the above couplet, which I then took in the sense of *dolvun* (डोवुं, Sans. डुरु to swing) to move, may be taken in the sense of *dolo* डोला, an eye.

About the boats on the adjacent coast of Ceylon Mr. Hornell says;—

"In the recess below is a little shelf a few inches above the deck; on this.....was a blowing conch and the lamp used in the ceremonies. When worship is to be performed, one of the crew who acts as *pujari*, puts ash on his forehead, lights the little ghee lamp lying on the shelf, burns camphor and incense, breaks a cocoanut, and rings a bell, while an assistant blows intermittently upon the conch. Offerings of plantains, betel-leaves and areca-nuts are made to the god and then distributed among the crew."

1 Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay, Vol. VII No. 8 pp. 521-25. *Vide* my Anthropological Papers, Part I, pp. 263-67.

Horus, the Sun-god of the Egyptians, corresponds to Hvar

The Eye, the (𐎧𐎡𐎴𐎠) Pahlavi Hur (𐎧𐎡𐎴𐎠, Sans. सूर) Eye of God.

the Iranian Sun-god. In the Avesta, the Sun and the Moon are taken to be, as it were, the Eyes of God¹. Ahura Mazda (God) helps and protects the world through the Sun, who is, as it were, his eye. God protects the world and, in it, the suffering men and their ship. So, the figure of an eye placed over boats, came to symbolize and signify God's protection. Some represent the Sun in pictures in the form of an eye.

P.S. NOTE.—On a brief report of this paper appearing in the daily papers, Mr. Jehangir Burjorji Sanjana has kindly drawn my attention to the following passage in "The Three Midshipmen" (pp. 330-331) by Mr. W.H.G. Kingston.

"The Junk, on board which the midshipmen were prisoners, was a curious piece of marine architecture. She was flat-bottomed, flat sided, flat bowed and flat sterned. There was no stern but a huge green griffin or dragon or monster of some sort, projected over the bows, on each side of which were two large eyes—Chinaman's eyes in shape; and as Jos remarked about them, 'Ship no eyes, how see way?'"