

## SAVAGE LIFE AND CUSTOM.

BY EDWARD LAWRENCE.

## VIII. SUPERSTITION, MAGIC, AND RELIGION.

WE have now to consider the most difficult, yet at the same time most significant and important feature in the mental life of our savage—his belief in the supernatural and the customs which he has, in the course of time, gradually built upon that belief.

All savages believe in the existence of, and the influence exercised by, beings to which the name supernatural is applied by ourselves; but there is this profound difference: to the savage mind these things are part and parcel of the natural order of things; they exist as part of nature, not above or beyond it; in other words, they are natural and not, in our sense of the term, *super-natural*.

Everything in nature is held by the savage to be permeated by some vivifying, unseen influence, and it is his belief in this mysterious agency which shapes his course in life, from birth to the grave, and which forms the basis of his conduct and his religion.

Absurd and foolish as many practices to be detailed may appear to us, nevertheless these customs are profoundly significant, for out of them have grown the complicated codes of law and ethics of civilized communities.

Had not the conduct of primitive man been moulded by his superstition, it is a question whether any other form of influence would have been equally powerful in shaping his life and in restraining him from performing certain acts which are in themselves anti-social and which long experience proves that nature does not desire. Superstition, perhaps, has on the whole made for good.

Thus, for example, savages usually regard adultery as a most heinous crime. It is usually punished with the death of one party or the other, sometimes both offenders are killed. It is considered to be not only a crime against the person but against the community at large, for it causes bad weather and prevents rain; it mars the earth's fertility and blights the crops.

Again, if a man goes to battle he must live a continent life, otherwise his expedition will fail or calamity overtake his family.

Superstition likewise comes to the aid of sanitation. No savage, if he can prevent it, will allow any person to possess any portion

of his clothing or of his nail parings, because the possessor would be able to exert a magical influence over him and even cause his death. Hence savages take constant precautions to hide away their discarded belongings; all offal and excreta are buried or destroyed, and thus, as Basil Thomson has well pointed out, superstition creates a law of cleanliness more rigid than that enjoined by the Mosaic code itself.

In India the fear that the dead may at any time return as *choorah* or ghosts and persecute those persons who have tyrannized them during their life on earth, has to a great degree the merit of restraining would-be oppressors.

To justify his beliefs, the savage can triumphantly point to many facts which appear to coincide with his superstitions. Thus on one occasion a medicine-man in the Congo State was flogged for poisoning certain people. The following day a severe storm arose—a most unusual occurrence—consequently the natives held that the punishment of their doctor had brought about the storm!

Beccari, the Italian traveler who explored Borneo in 1865, relates that he himself was warned not to touch a certain house which was inhabited by *antus* or spirits, otherwise evil would befall him. Prompted by curiosity, he disregarded native fears and made an examination. The same evening, to the satisfaction of the offended people, he had a sharp attack of fever.

Lumholtz tells us that while traveling in Mexico, a Huichol shaman prophesied that within four days his dog would die, and die that dog did.

An African necromancer once informed Sir Harry Johnston that the steamer for which he was waiting had run aground and that another steamer would call for him, and this information turned out to be quite correct.

Travelers who relate these stories are unable to account for them or find any satisfactory explanation. But coincidences like those narrated continually occur and make one think that there must exist a side to savage superstition which requires further elucidation and which the white man has been unable to fathom.

Europeans frequently make practical use of native credulity. Uncivilized man holds that a part of anything possesses the same power as the whole. This belief was once utilized by an English overseer in the following amusing manner. He found that the gang of laborers of which he had charge constantly took a rest whenever his eyes were turned away. So he procured an artificial glass eye and placed it upon a stone where the men could see it,

with the result that during his absence the men worked as hard as if he himself had been present!

Savages do not believe in a personal omnipotent God, nor in the Devil; but they do believe in the existence of ghosts or souls, and in a multitude of good and evil spirits. While they make unto themselves images of wood and of stone and bow down to them they never worship the image itself, but the spirit which is supposed to reside therein. Savages are not such fools as some think. Many of their supposed idols or gods are really scarecrows or spirit-



Fig. 24. WOODEN FIGURE SET UP BY THE NICOBAR ISLANDERS TO SCARE AWAY EVIL SPIRITS.

British Museum. (Photo, reproduced by permission of the Trustees.)

frighteners, intended to drive or frighten away evil spirits (Fig. 24).

No bad spirit dare enter any dwelling upon which such an image has been fixed. In England and elsewhere, spirit-frighteners are still in use, but their original significance has been forgotten. The familiar horseshoe is an example; to the modern idea it means "good luck"; to our ancestors it meant that no evil being in shape of a witch could enter the place protected by it.

Everything in nature has its spiritual as well as its physical side. Thus the natives of Guiana consider that men and animals,

the heavenly bodies and all inanimate objects are alike composed of body and soul and differ only as to their powers.

The spiritual essence or soul of all human beings has the power of leaving the body and returning again at will. A native Australian on being asked whether his soul could leave his body replied: "It must be so; for when I sleep, I go to distant places, I see distant people, I even see and speak with them who are dead." Likewise, a man's soul can occupy the roof of his hut while he himself in bodily form remains below.

When the man dies, his spirit hovers near its old haunts, where offerings of food are made to it from time to time. Out of this custom has grown that great system known as "ancestor-worship," a worship which has reached its highest development in the religious system of the Chinese.

A clear distinction appears to be drawn between two classes of spiritual beings—between the disembodied spirits of the dead and other spiritual beings who have apparently never been men at all.

The spirit of a dead person is frequently regarded with a certain amount of fear. Unless well treated, it may return and cause a great deal of mischief. It not infrequently happens that a dying man will threaten to return as a spirit in order to take vengeance on his living enemies! At Accra, on the Gold Coast, a fetishman was put to death for murder. Before his execution he vowed that he would come back in spirit form and haunt those who were the cause of his destruction, and many natives believe that he did return.

In South Africa, women are sometimes accused of possessing a certain dangerous spirit (*iere*), which is capable of killing any person; the possessor is therefore dissected alive so that this evil spirit may escape!

On Penrhyn Atoll, in the South Seas, a certain chief died and was buried. Soon afterward, the village was troubled by his ghost. A council of head-men was held, which resolved to take the body from its "resting"-place, and reinter it face downward, in order that it may not see its way back to the village, and thus to prevent its visits!

In Uganda, East Africa, special precautions were taken to prevent the spirits' return to take vengeance on the living. When men were about to be put to death, a magical draught, consisting of beer mixed with certain medicines, was administered to them. This potion was supposed to kill their souls. It was administered from a

pot especially made for the purpose and known as the "slaughter pot" (Fig. 25). It consists of a bulb with three mouthpieces; the center one was for the use of princes, another for the use of chiefs, and the third one for the common people. After taking the draught, the victims were made to smoke a mixture of tobacco and medicine; they were then taken to the place of execution and cut into pieces, with the exception of one man who was allowed to escape. Their remains were afterward thrown upon a framework and burnt. Both the pot and the pipe are now in the British Museum.

Our first impression of these customs may be that they are very cruel ones; but second thoughts will make it obvious that they

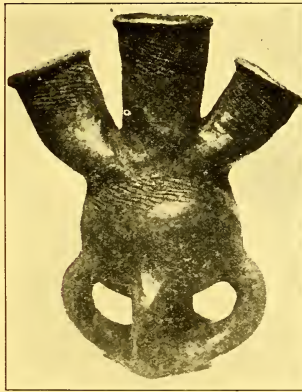


Fig. 25. UGANDA SLAUGHTER POT FOR KILLING SOULS.  
British Museum. (Photo, reproduced by permission of the Trustees.)

make for good order by creating a desire to live at peace with all men; for not only in this life but in the future, vengeance may in some way or other overtake any one who commits a wrong.

In many places, as in Celebes and parts of Melanesia, elaborate "ghost houses" are erected in the enclosures of secret societies (Fig. 26). No uninitiated man, nor any woman or child, is allowed to enter the sacred precincts where the spirits reside.

Witchcraft and witch-doctors—male and female—play a most important part in the life of our savage. It is they who hold an intermediate place between ordinary mortals and the spirits in the unseen world and who have intimate converse with those spirits.



Fig. 26. HOUSE OF GHOSTS, BERLIN HARBOUR, NEW GUINEA.

The spirits ruling fate live in these houses. There are carefully executed paintings on the gable ends and walls, and remarkable carvings on the balustrades.

(From Meyer's and Parkinson's *Album von Papua-Typen*.)

At every death that takes place they are called in to discover the cause, it is they who track the thief and who cast the evil spirits from men, which cause disease.

As I have said, the idea of nature and natural causes is altogether foreign to the savage mind. Nature, as we understand it, is to them not physical, but spiritual in essence. Everything has a "magical" origin or cause, instead of a "natural" one. Death itself is seldom natural; man apparently would continue to live were he not



Fig. 27. LADY WITCH-DOCTOR AND HER ATTENDANT DANCING WOMEN, UPOTO, UPPER CONGO.

Note the elaborate beads and brass ornaments which show how profitable their spiritual service proves.

(Photo, by the courtesy of the Baptist Missionary Society, London.)

killed either in war or by magical means. Therefore when death occurs it must be some enemy or ill-wisher that has caused it, and the business of the witch-doctor is to discover the guilty party. To accomplish this, he works himself into a state of frenzy by whirling his body round and round on his toes; he is then seized with terrible convulsions, foams at the mouth, and finally falls down in a state of complete collapse. It is while in this state that the name of the culprit is revealed by the spirits. Nearly every tribe possesses at least one doctor.

King James I of England, in his famous book on demonology, explained to his lawful subjects that "the Devil teacheth to make pictures of wax or clay that by roasting thereof, the persons that they bear the name of may be continually melted or dried away by continual sickness." This is known to us to-day as "sympathetic magic."

Among the savage Malays of Malacca, the sorcerer takes a little wax, and muttering over it a spell, awaits his opportunity to perform his deadly work. He waits until a strong wind is blowing toward the house of his intended victim; then, taking the wax, he places before him a vessel of water, with a couple of lighted candles, mutters another incantation and then fixes his eyes intently on the water till he discerns therein the image of his intended victim; he then throws the wax into the air. Caught by the wind it is transported to the victim who immediately feels a blow, sickens, and eventually dies.

In the Upper Congo, when a Bushongo has lost anything he goes to the medicine-man, pays him a fee, and requests him to discover the thief. The doctor produces a divining instrument made of a piece of wood shaped like a crocodile. He commences to rub the back of this with a small wooden disk, repeating as he does so the names of any person likely to be suspected of the theft. When the name of the guilty is mentioned the disk refuses to move again, and the suspected person is then made to submit to the ordeal of poison.

After many years' close study of savage life, I cannot help thinking that there must be some quite unknown factor at work behind all this superstition. It not infrequently happens that the sorcerer does actually discover the thief by his methods, and instances might be readily quoted from happenings in civilized life where some such unknown factor appears to have been at work.

Captain Creagh, late of the 1st Royals, gives an instance where an Irish gentleman was fired at and mortally wounded, but who was quite unable to cast the least suspicion upon any one. Shortly before his death, however, he solemnly and formally declared, as a dying man, that a certain peasant had been the cause of his death. The man was arrested on suspicion but discharged for want of proof. Many years afterward, on his own death-bed, he actually confessed to the crime of which he had been accused.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]