

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CURSING

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CURSING, like many another ostracized practice of the present day, once served a legitimate social function. With the passing of a vivid supernaturalism, however, the potency of the curse vanished. Without that potency, the curse was no longer effective as an instrument of social control and consequently degenerated into a social outcast. At one time it commanded the awe of assembled multitudes, accompanied wedding feasts, the season's sowing, hunting, fishing, and all high functions of human society; but today, the curse wanders the streets of cities and towns, lurking among *comrades-in-harm*, intoning the uncensored enthusiasms of prairie base-ball games and college dormitories—only a vestige of its bygone self.

To relate the story of the curse fully would require observing the cultural evolutions of every land, for what people have not been given to cursing? Like the blessing, the curse found its way into the social customs of every level of civilization from primitive to modern man. Perhaps no custom has persisted more successfully through these changing stages of social evolution than the curse. A glance at its development will help to understand why.

### I. CURSING AMONG PRIMITIVES

Our study is an adventure, for to find the thread roots of the practice of cursing we shall have to grope our way back into the bewitching wonder-world of the primitive—the land of thrill and terror. His was a hard, treacherous world: thunderstorms with their deafening blasts and crackling streaks of fire; the dark, threatening, funnel clouds of tornadoes; roaring winds; rushing waters; hungry beasts in deep, dense forests! These were the headlines of the primitive man's work-a-day world. And he had to live amid them, for they were the normal happenings within his immediate environment. Yet, not all was terror: The thrill of the dawn! The sun! The captured prey! These warmed his spirit and strengthened his eagerness to fight on and to conquer the terrors. But always he was facing tension; and tension will find release in excited movements. Consequently his life was hiding, peering, jumping, running, shouting, struggling! Sometimes death! But often victory. Then it was leaping, dancing, shouting for joy! What we need to see here is

that primitive man was extremely sensitive to his surroundings: consequently, whenever he came into contact with that environment he was forced into emotional outbursts. Right here is how and where cursing began.

The Australian savage returned from a successful hunt, only to find his quarters ravaged, his wife and children murdered. In frenzy and grief he clenched his fists and exploded with sounds that were meant to threaten whoever brought him this tragedy. It may have been sheer emotional outburst, but it gave release, and relief, to the wronged primitive.

Now carrying these same outer conditions into the social environment of the group where tragedies such as we have related occur and recur, we may imagine such outbursts taking place simultaneously with a fatal happening in the enemy's camp toward which the outburst had been directed. An epidemic of disease may have set in, or the chief might have died of appendicitis. Immediately the outburst of cursing became correlated with the doom of the ones accursed. This was especially true in a conflict between warring tribes, when cursing and disaster were most likely to occur simultaneously. Inevitably the two were believed to be related, and the sensitive savage mind caught the significance.

This marks an interesting transition, for once the curse became recognized as an instrument of power, it passed into a new period of development. We, of course, would be "sophisticating" primitive man too much if we imagined that he sat down to philosophize about how the curse might have this objective effect. His response was simply *mana!* Living amidst so uncanny and threatening an environment, primitive folk were constantly made aware of the "mysterium tremendum" about them. And always this potency—incarnated in the objects of nature: the moving clouds, the wind, the rain, the waterfall, the beast—seemed to be directing itself against man. It was power that at once roused him to fear, yet thrilled him! They were danger! They were *mana!*

Similarly, certain men within the group disclosed this supernatural power. Mingling together in tribal association, individuals manifested varying degrees of impressiveness. Certain ones *commanded* or *aroused* attention. In some way they impressed themselves upon the group's consciousness. To the primitive man the experience of personality was *mana!* Every man came to have some

degree of that potency: leaders more than followers, parents more than children, and so on.

In the primitive man's experience, this mana-power was thought to be transmissible. By a thought or a word one was able to project his wish. Frazer writes:

Among the aborigines of Australia, the rudest savages, as to whom we possess accurate information, magic is universally practiced. . . . Roughly speaking, all men in Australia are magicians. . . . Everybody fancies he can influence his fellows or the course of events by sympathetic magic.

So established was this belief in the power of projected mana that cases were known where men, when they learned that they were cursed, died of sheer fright.

#### II. CURSING IN ITS ORGANIZED STAGE

Once the objective power of the curse became recognized, the next step of utilization followed. The curse then passed from a mere outburst of emotion in its organized stage where both the individual and the group appropriated it as a weapon against enemies. Primitive man made ready use of the curse for avenging wrongs imposed upon him. Associated with this use of the curse was the belief that the property of a person was, in effect, the person himself. Consequently, to abuse his property, or an image of his likeness, was to impose the curse effectively upon the person himself. Here the curse assumed a ritualistic form. In addition to projecting the potency by way of thought or word, the physical experience of abuse was pantomimed. The Maori, for example, may call any object by the name of his enemy, and then proceed to abuse it. In so doing, he believes, he effects the curse upon that enemy. A Malay charm runs as follows:

Take parings of nails, hair, eyebrows, spittle, etc., of your intended victim, enough to represent every part of his person and then make them up into his likeness with wax from a deserted bees' comb. Scorch the figure slowly by holding it over a lamp every night for seven nights, and say: "It is not wax that I am scorching, it is the liver, heart, and spleen of So-and-So that I scorch." After the seventh time burn the figure, and your victim will die.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the curse involved an elaborate ceremony such as the Malay charm just quoted, but frequently it was more direct. The Evil Eye illustrates this form. Tremearne has recorded a rather

<sup>1</sup>Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Third Edition, I, p. 57.

late development of this tendency among the Hausa Colonies.<sup>2</sup> The Hausa Colonies, he says, have an elaborate collection of charms and devices for breaking the curse of an ill-wisher. The great causes of fear to the Hausa in Tunis are the Evil Eye (*mugun ido*) and the Evil Mouth (*mugun baki*). Each of these is regarded as an occult force residing in an evil wisher. He relates the following story:

Khadejia. . . was one of the priestesses of the Gidan Yara (House of the Young Spirits), and as she had had a bad attack of fever—for which I was giving her quinine—she had not been out for several days. She had a gold fish (of which she was very fond) in a glass bowl upon a chest of drawers. One afternoon, one of the other priestesses, Araba, came to call, and said, "Why do you not come up to the temple, do you expect everyone to come down to you?"

This was all that passed, for I saw them meet and part, apparently good friends. But it was quite enough. When I came the next day, the gold-fish was dead, and that was a clear case of *mugun baki*.<sup>3</sup>

Any number of charms against evil-wishing are obtainable in Tunis: a string of cowries around the arm wards off the evil eye, for the glance is thought to be lost amongst the shells. A piece of string (generally double) tied around the wrist or ankle is believed to be a charm against pain. Henna is regarded as a powerful preventative against evil: likewise paint on the face. Tremearne records the following formula for counteracting an evil-wish:

If you know that you have been affected by an evil-wisher, take a piece of the root of the jiga tree, pound it up, and then mix with water, knead into a lump and eat it.

Another excellent method is to touch the naked body, especially that of a child, with a red-hot iron. Numerous other formulas are given by Tremearne.<sup>4</sup>

The individual use of the curse soon incurred the taboo of the group, for as social organization perfected its control in the group, it tended to regard all such uncontrolled practices as possible dangers to group life, and consequently as anti-social. The positive basis for discountenancing the private use of the curse, however, centered in the development of social morality. As the group came to locate justice objectively in its gods, the effectiveness of the curse likewise came to be dependent upon the verdict of just gods. That is to say,

<sup>2</sup>A. J. N. Tremearne, *Hausa Superstitions and Customs*.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* p. 173ff.

<sup>4</sup>Tremearne, *The Ban of the Bori*, Chapter XIII.

the power of the curse, instead of residing, as a magical automaton, in the spoken curse, capable of effecting its own folly, now became a current of thought directed toward the gods, persuading them to effect harm toward the enemy.

But at this point the social conscience interfered to save the gods from conspiring with evil-wishers. Social justice reversed the boomerang and made the curser accursed. Consequently when the code of social morality was written, the curser became an offender of group morality, and was, in turn, subjected to the curse ceremony of society. The condemning of sorcery and witchcraft illustrate this development.

### III. THE CURSE AS A BLESSING

Society made ready use of the curse. The notion that one was able to project a certain helpful or harmful potency by cursing stimulated interest in formulating cursing ceremonies for specified occasions. Strange to say, in earlier societies the curse ceremony served a beneficent function. It was regarded as extremely useful to the farmer as a means of compelling rain to come. In the Shalpur district of the Punjab, Frazer reports that it is customary in time of draught to spill a pot of filth on the threshold of a notorious old shrew, in order that the fluent streams of foul language in which she vents her feelings may accelerate the lingering rain.<sup>5</sup> In Dubrajpur, a village in the Birbhum district of Bengal, when rain has been looked for in vain, people will throw dirt or filth on the houses of their neighbors, who, in turn, will abuse them for doing so.

Cursing was also thought to be essential to the growing of crops. When a Greek farmer sowed cummin, he had to curse and swear, or the crop would not turn out well.<sup>6</sup> A similar custom was observed by Roman farmers when sowing rue and basil.<sup>7</sup> And hedge doctors in ancient Greece prescribed the rule that when one cut black hellebore, he should face eastward and curse.<sup>8</sup> At Lindus, Frazer writes, it was customary to sacrifice one or two plough oxen to Hercules "with curses and imprecations." This custom had good mythological explanation. The legend is told that Hercules one day seized the oxen of a ploughman and roasted it for his own delicious use. The owner, unable to defend his beast, stood afar off and "vented his

<sup>5</sup>Frazer, *Golden Bough I*, p. 278.

<sup>6</sup>Frazer, *op. cit.* III, p. 281.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

anger in a torrent of abuse and execration." Hercules received the cursing with a roar of laughter, and thereupon appointed him his priest and commanded him always to sacrifice with the very same execrations for "he had never dined better in his life."<sup>9</sup>

The curse was used ceremonially for other occasional purposes, such as hunting, fishing, and even in formal ceremonies such as marriage. Here the curse was believed to have been an effective means of bestowing good luck. Frazer tells of the custom in the Indian district of Behar:

People who accompany a marriage procession to the bride's house are often foully abused by the women of the bride's family in the belief that this contributes to the good fortune of the newly married pair.

Numerous other incidents might be cited to illustrate how widespread the curse served as a blessing.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. THE CURSE AS A DEFENSE TECHNIQUE

At ceremonies preceding a battle among primitive groups, a spear was pointed toward the enemy while a curse was sung. In this manner the curse was projected against the expectant foe. As the warriors went out to battle, the women-folk carried on a long distant attack by continually cursing the enemy.

An interesting account of a similar technique is recorded in Hebrew history: When Israel was fighting with Amalek in Rephidim, Moses stood upon the top of the hill with the rod of God in his hand. When Moses held up his hands, Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed.<sup>11</sup> The technique worked so effectively, the story tells us, that they seated Moses upon a stone and had Aaron and Hur stand by, one on each side of him, to hold up his hands. They continued in that posture "until the going down of the sun. . . . And Joshua discomfited Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword."<sup>12</sup>

These incidents represent the *organized control* of this projected mana. The early curses had the "savage heartiness"<sup>13</sup>—the emotional force or outburst was the projection of the mana. In that case, the

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 281-82.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 278ff.

<sup>11</sup>*Exodus* 17:11.

<sup>12</sup>*Exodus* 17:12-13.

<sup>13</sup>Grimm, *Teut. Myth.* IV. 1690.

mere expression of the curse or wish carried the potency and the effect. When it became ceremonialized, however, the *form* was everything.<sup>14</sup> Hence the importance of holding up Moses' hands.

#### V. THE CURSE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL CONTROL

The group appropriated the curse most readily and completely as a means of penalizing and thus controlling its offenders. This development came about very naturally. We noted above how primitive man recognized the mana power in his fellow associates—how in varying degrees, different persons impressed him with the power of their personality. The relation of the curse-power to the status of the curser is significant in the development of the curse as a social control, for it was through the overhead organization of the group that cursing became formalized into an effective technique. Among primitive folk, group status increased mana power; hence the tribe leaders were more effective and more dangerous cursers than the average group member. Likewise, on the basis of status, the elders' curses were more efficacious than the youth's. Among the Tongans, if the one cursed is superior to the one who curses, the curse has no effect.<sup>15</sup> Among the Hebrews, "Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long" had a very practical significance, for to evoke the parental curse might have meant fatal consequences.

The *blessing* of the father likewise imparted the highest potency. The familiar story of Isaac blessing Jacob instead of Esau illustrates this custom among the Hebrews. It is to be noted that the blessing was automatic and irrevocable. Once it had been bestowed it could not be recalled. This belief has been current among other tribes and peoples as well. A legend is told regarding the origin of the Hausa states that closely resembles the biblical story:

Bawo (from Bornu), after having killed the snake which prevented the people drinking, had married Umma (or Daura) the queen of the city of Daura, and had had a son, (called Kachi in one version, Bawo in another) by her, and other children by a concubine, namely Kano, Daure, and Yabuwu. When they had grown up, Bawo summoned them to bless them, and he told Kachi to come in the evening, intending to give him the "bottle of dyeing" (i.e., the magic flask containing the charm of blessing which would make him supreme in that handicraft). But Kano, who was hiding, heard this, and came first, and said "Here I am Father." So Bawo, who was blind, took the bottle of dyeing, and gave it to him, and that is

<sup>14</sup>*E.R.E.* art. by E. Crawley.

<sup>15</sup>Mariner, *Tonga Islands*, ii.238.

the reason why Kano dyes are so much better than those of any other city. Then Kachi arrived and said to his father, "Here I am," and Bawo said, "What! was it not you to whom I gave the bottle? Kano has already been here," and he gave him (not being able to recall the bottle of dyeing) fire in order that he might set alight to the bush, his country to extend over all the space which the fire burnt, and all this became Katsina.<sup>16</sup>

The Scots have a proverb: "A faither's blessin bigs the toun; a mither's curse can ding it down."<sup>17</sup> In Greece, Plato says that "the curses of parents are as they ought to be, mighty against their children as no others are."<sup>18</sup> The Koreans hold that the curses and disgrace in this life and the hottest in hell are penalties of the disobedient child.

The official power of public cursing fell to certain appointed authorities, who by virtue of their position, were supposedly endowed with more mana. Thus, among the Bororos, the blessing of maize, game, and fish was believed most effective when made by the medicine man.<sup>19</sup> Shel'a in Arabia had priestly kings who were the "Blessers" at all public functions. Their blessings provided for a proper regulation of the weather, abundance of fruits, etc.<sup>20</sup>

Interesting accounts are given illustrating the use of the curse as an instrument of social control. For example:

A Sema village curses a man by calling out his name before the assembly of the villagers, and then they all spit in unison. This constitutes an effective curse.<sup>21</sup>

The Angami Nagas have a special service which is called the Commination service on the day of penna.

This service is held to curse some unfortunate who has given offence. The Kemova gets up before the assembled clan, all the children being present, and announces that So-and-So has done such and such a deed, whereon the people answer, "Sa! Sa! Let him die! Let him die!" This curse is believed to be a powerful one, and to strengthen it further a branch of green leaves is put up to represent the person cursed and everyone hurls spears of wood or bamboo at the bough with such expressions as Let him die—Kill so-and-so, and every

<sup>16</sup>A.J.N. Tremearne, *op. cit.* pp. 140-41.

<sup>17</sup>Grimm, iv. 1690.

<sup>18</sup>Laws ix. 881 (copied from *E.R.E.*).

<sup>19</sup>Frazer, *Golden Bough* VIII, 71.

<sup>20</sup>Frazer, *op. cit.* III.125.

<sup>21</sup>J. H. Hutton, *The Sema Nagas*, p. 216.

sort of abuse. The spears are left where they lie, the bough withers and the subject of the curse dies likewise.<sup>22</sup>

This performance is also held to be effective even when the name of the culprit is unknown. Hutton indicates that he has known it resorted to "in a case where a man of Cheswezuma was thought to have died as a result of poison administered by someone unknown. So too a ceremony of this sort, sometimes spoken of as the Cat Gen-na, is observed among Chakrima."<sup>23</sup>

Public cursing was a recognized ceremony among the Hebrews. As may be observed in the biblical record, complete provisions were made by Moses for the public cursing of offenders:

And Moses charged the people. . . . saying, These shall stand upon Mount Gerizim to bless the people, when ye are passed over the Jordan: Simeon, and Levi, and Juda, and Issachar, and Joseph, and Benjamin. And these shall stand upon Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, and Asher, and Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. And the Levites shall answer, "Cursed be the man."<sup>24</sup>

and there follows a list of a dozen curses.

In the hands of the state official, cursing became an effective instrument of the state for controlling the populace. Gradually it was taken over by law and became the form of retribution. Likewise, in the hands of the priest, cursing came to be an effective instrument of the church for controlling its people, viz, excommunication and papal bulls.

The oath is a direct development of the conditional curse. Each of the bargaining parties invoked upon himself a curse that should befall him if he failed to carry out his part of the transaction. The law court soon found it useful for compelling criminals and witnesses to "tell the truth and nothing but the truth." Originally the power of the self-invoked curse was sufficient in and of itself to produce the penalizing effect. But when cursing lost its charm, the law had to reinforce the so-help-me-God ritual with a penalty for perjury. The mysterious mana potency of the curse is gone; yet the form remains, and it, in turn becomes significant.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*