ART. XV.—*Customs and Superstitions connected with the Cultivation of Rice in the Southern Province of Ceylon.* By C. J. R. LE MESURIER, Ceylon Civil Service, M.R.A.S., F.G.S., etc.

THERE are few Oriental races more superstitious than the Sinhalese of Ceylon. Omens, charms, divinations, etc., are as much sought after by them as by any other Indian people, and no undertaking of any importance is commenced without a previous consultation with the Neket Kórayá, the astrologer of the village. He is supposed to be acquainted with the temper, habits and movements of the planet gods, and to be able to prescribe offerings for their propitiation; while the Kapurála or Giganarála, the minister of the gods, the Kattadiya or devil charmer, and the Yakkadura or devil dancer, are scarcely less important personages when it becomes necessary to perform the ceremonies prescribed by the astrologer.

I propose in this paper to describe a few of the customs and ceremonies connected with the cultivation of rice in the district in which I am at present stationed,¹ merely premising that although many of them are only observed in full in the more out-of-the-way, and therefore less civilized parts, they are all very generally regarded as absolutely essential to a successful harvest.

When it is intended to commence the work of cultivation, the astrologer is consulted, and he selects a lucky moment (nekata) for the beginning of the work. He also prescribes the food to be eaten and the dress to be worn at the time, and the direction facing which the first sod is to be turned. Above all, if the cultivator wishes to obtain an abundant crop, he must be free of uncleanness of any sort. He should be

careful to turn the sod at the exact moment appointed for it, and he should, at the same time, offer up a short prayer to the Alutnuwara¹ or the Kataragam,² the God for a good yield.

When it is time to soak the seed, another lucky moment is obtained, a bow is made to the corn before it is removed to the water, and nothing unclean or impure is admitted into the cultivator's house during the process of germination. A nekata is again required at which to sow the seed, and the manner of performing this work is minutely set out by the astrologer. It often happens that the lucky moment is in advance of the time appointed by the village committee for the sowing of the tract of fields in the village, in which case the cultivator prepares a few inches of ground in a corner of his own field, and sows a few seeds in it at the right moment. At the first sowing of the year he places a flower of the areca-nut palm and a branch of bamboo or a ginger plant over this spot; and, at the sowing in the latter portion of the year, a flower of the cocoa-nut palm or of the Rat Koralheba (a species of the *Achyranthes aspera*), and a leaf of the Haborala (*Alocasia Macrorhiza*) plant, while he offers up a prayer that the blades of the rice plants may resemble the broad and green leaves of the Haborala, Bamboo, or Ginger Plant, and that the yield on each ear may be as numerous as the flowers of the cocoa-nut, areca-nut, or Koralheba.

After a tract has been sown, and the plants begin to be attacked by grubs, or are likely to suffer from drought, the cultivators get up what is called a Parapolyehūna (a cocoa-nut fight), one of the favourite games of the goddess Pattini; the scarcity of water or the grubs being ascribed to her anger, and the game being intended to appease her. Each cultivator subscribes a measure or two of unhusked rice to pay expenses, and then, with alms in the shape of fruit and flowers, they wait on the minister of the goddess, the Giganarála or Kapurála, and entreat his services. At the same time the spot is prepared for the game, the cocoa-nuts collected, and the opposing teams are chosen. The Kapurála

¹ The son of Siva Rama.

² The son of Siva.

or Giganarála then proceeds to invoke the goddess, explaining, amid the beating of drums and the burning of resin, the object of the meeting, and then the game commences.

The two captains stand about thirty yards apart, and one of them throws a cocoa-nut at the other, who strikes it while in the air with another cocoa-nut held in his hand. Should the thrown cocoa-nut be broken, the sender repeats the throw, until the nut in his antagonist's hand is broken, and then the process is reversed. The game is continued in this manner for several days, until a large number of cocoa-nuts have been broken. Each day a procession is formed and the cocoa-nuts that have been broken are carried in triumph round the fields whose crops are in danger; and every night the kernels of the cracked nuts are crushed, and the oil extracted therefrom is used to light up the play-ground. On the last night a feast is prepared, and, after the Kapurála or Giganarála has offered up a dish containing a small portion of each of the different curries, on an elevated platform, for the use of the gods, the assembled villagers sit round and eat the rest of the food towards the early part of the morning. This brings the ceremony to a close. Should the drought continue or the grubs remain, the evil is attributed to the devils and not to the gods, and the devil-dancers are sent for. A grand dancing (Garayakun-netúva) is begun in the evening and continued until the following morning, offerings being made in the meantime to the Garayakshayo—the house devils.¹

A platform is also put up by the side of the field, on which, at certain stages of the ceremony, one or more of the dancers perform, and on which, after certain charms are repeated, some resin is burnt.

This devil-dancing is also sometimes performed when flies attack the blossom of the rice plants, the flies being considered due to the agency of the devils or of the evil eye or of the evil month.

¹ These devils are supposed to haunt the house of the cultivator and to be always on the look-out to injure him.

In the Mátora district the plague of flies is, as a rule, met by a ceremony called the Kenkeriwa. This is performed by the Kattadiya or devil charmer, who repeats certain charms over some cocoa-nut milk or powdered resin and then scatters the milk or burns the resin at different places in the field. The field itself is marked out by a line of tender cocoa-nut leaves tied all round it. A platform is erected close by, and offerings made on it to the Mangala, Hurriyam, or Riri¹ devils. There is another form of the ceremony, and a very effectual one it is considered to be, in which a brazen vessel, with the figure of the devil drawn on it, is carried round the field and beaten with a Ranawara (*Cassia auriculata*) stick.

The services of the astrologer are again sought for at the reaping of the corn. He selects the lucky moment, and at the appointed time the cultivator, with a low bow to the standing corn, and a short prayer for a good crop, commences the work; the astrologer's directions as to the quarter to be faced, the dress to be worn, and the food to be eaten having been in the meantime most strictly observed.

Another nekata is required for the threshing, and another for the measuring of the corn. On both occasions the bow and the prayer for plenty are never omitted. The bow is an acknowledgment of the great number of uses to which the corn can be applied; the Sinhalese believing that everything of great service to them is entitled to respect.²

When the corn is removed from the threshing floor to the house, a nekata is obtained to place it in the garner. This is a precaution against rats and insects, while it is also believed that, if stored at the right moment, it will increase in quantity under the watchful eye of the planet gods. Often, too, a nekata is obtained for the first time the corn is taken from the granary, or when it is required for seed purposes.

¹ Devils in the retinue of Vesamuri, the chief of the devils, noted for their mischievousness.

² As, for instance, they take particular care at home not to trample on grains of boiled rice, or to leave them where they are liable to be trampled on.

Uncleanliness excites the anger of the gods, and defilement of any sort is carefully avoided during the cultivation of the rice fields. A birth, a death, the eating of pork, and of certain kinds of oily fish, a womans courses, etc., all cause defilement, and no person who has been rendered unclean from any one of these causes is allowed, if possible, to pass through a field of standing corn or a threshing floor. Empty vessels or dried firewood, especially if carried by women, are forbidden in a rice field; in fact, anything which has a tendency to emptiness, lifelessness, or barrenness, is most studiously kept away from the crop.

The roasting or pounding of rice near a field is supposed to have an injurious effect on the quantity and quality of the crop, and, curiously enough, the stealing of unripe corn, by persons who live on the border of rice fields, is commoner in places where this belief is weak than elsewhere. It is thought that the devils, to whom an offering of roasted or fried rice-flour cakes is always made after the crop has been garnered, will be angry because the cultivator has, they will imagine, commenced to enjoy the raw rice without the usual public offering to them.

When the corn is in blossom, no grass can be cut in the field,¹ indeed, the cutting of anything in the field is believed to have a pernicious effect on it.

No account of income and expenditure is ever kept, it being considered most unlucky to do so. The gods, it is thought, dislike it as being a check on their benevolence, and would be certain to punish such presumption.²

The mystic number nine is always omitted when corn is measured. In its stead the previous number is repeated with the addition of the word "hondai" (it is good). Thus they say "eight hondai" instead of "nine," "twenty-eight hondai" instead of "twenty-nine," etc. It is believed that the mention of the number enrages the planet gods who are

¹ There is sound practical wisdom in this. The grass at the sides of the ridges, etc., protects the blossom from the wind and from injury by the passers-by.

² The fisher people will never count the number of fish they catch, or a large cattle proprietor the number of head he possesses.

nine in number. In some places the odd numbers are omitted, and the word “lábai” (gain) substituted.

When measuring the corn the measurer generally faces the east. He may, however, face any direction but the west, *i.e.* that of the setting sun.

At the threshing-floor empty vessels are always kept upside down, and the language used there is peculiar and not easily understood. All indecent words or words of evil import are carefully avoided, and the threshers behave as if they were in a temple of the gods when they put the corn into the bags.

There is a curious custom of the threshing-floor called the “Goigote”—the tying of the cultivator’s knot. When a sheaf of corn has been threshed out, before it is removed the grain is heaped up and the threshers, generally six in number, sit round it, and taking a few stalks, with the ears of corn attached, jointly tie a knot and bury it in the heap. It is left there until all the sheaves have been threshed and the corn is winnowed and measured. The object of this ceremony is to prevent the devils from diminishing the quantity of corn in the heap, which it is believed they would otherwise most certainly do, if the performance were omitted.

Soon after the corn is threshed, winnowed and measured, a “merit-giving” entertainment is held. This takes place either at the cultivator’s house or at the threshing-floor, before the corn is removed from the field, and generally in the early morning.

The preparations are completed on the preceding night. One among the many dishes is made of seven different kinds of vegetables, while the dessert is composed of ripe plantains and cakes made of the new rice. In some parts of the country guests are verbally invited, in others a conch is blown to assemble the friends and neighbours, and elsewhere they come without invitation after the day and hour have been publicly notified.

On this occasion the Kapurála or Giganárala erects a platform close to the field and places a dish on it containing

a small quantity of all the different kinds of food prepared as a thank-offering to the gods. The guests then sit round on mats, and rice is served out to them on pieces of plantain leaves, but they do not begin the meal until all are helped and the Kapurála or Giganárála has proposed prosperity to the cultivator, and invoked the blessing of the Kataragawa, Paltina or Alutnuvara gods conjointly with the other deities on him. After this ceremony the corn is taken home.

Next, the cultivator pounds out a few measures of the new rice, cooks it and takes it with some highly seasoned curries to the nearest temple, to be offered to the priests, in consideration of which, a short benediction, with a promise of Nirvána, is pronounced upon him. On his return home he takes another supply of uncooked rice to the village headman, who gives him in return for this favour, a cup of coffee and a chew of betel.

As a general rule, the Kapurala, Giganarála, Kathádiya, and Neket Kárayá are paid for their services in kind at the harvest, together with the washerman, the tomtom-beater, the blacksmith and the devil dancer. These present their "little bill" in due course, and are cheerfully and generously requited for their services at the different stages of the cultivation of the field during the preceding months.