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VIII. *Some Observations on Witchcraft in Basutoland*:—
By Charles Griffith, Governor's Agent.

[Read 25th September, 1878, by J. X. Merriman, Esq.]

The whole system and institution of witchcraft plays such an important part in the scheme of savage society, and its influence over the minds and action of the natives of Africa is so debasing, that a study of all its variations and peculiarities ought to be of much interest to the ethnologist, the missionary, and the statesman. The witch doctor may be said to be the great foe of civilization and good Government, and unfortunately he is almost universal throughout Africa. Appearing as the blood-stained fetish worshipper in the equatorial regions, whence he was imported into Jamaica and our West India possessions in the shape of the Obeah man, countless victims almost daily mark the force of terror which stands in those dark regions in the place of all the elaborate systems of art, science, government, and religion which in other climates the imagination of more favoured races has developed. The intellect of Caliban, in these dark rites, which would be awful if they were not grotesque, finds means to satisfy the craving for the supernatural, and gives expression to the first glimmerings of those feelings to the outcome of which we owe a great part of that complex civilization which surrounds us. Towards the eastern and south-eastern parts of the continent, the terrorism of witchcraft has developed into an important engine of statecraft, but in its social aspect it is decidedly milder than in the equatorial belt, while among the Hottentots, and as far as we are able to learn among the scattered fragments of the Bushman race, witchcraft is mixed up with observances and beliefs, such, for instance, as those connected with animal worship and with respect paid to the heavenly bodies which seems to point to a different origin for the supernaturalism of these races, and perhaps indicates the decaying

remains of an earlier and higher state of society scarcely to be traced in any other particular among these beings who are generally regarded as belonging to the typical lowest depth of humanity.

The form of witchcraft with which we are most intimately acquainted in South Africa, is connected with that branch of Animism, to use Mr. Tylor's word, which is founded on a belief in and a respect paid to, the *manes* of deceased ancestors. This appears to be the governing idea, and is, I need scarcely point out, similar to that to which among other races we owe so many beautiful myths which have for thousands of years delighted alike the school-boy and the man of letters.

This culture of the *manes* is, however, more or less completely obscured, and the various ramifications which it has assumed among the daily life of the different tribes has caused the underlying idea to be in many cases entirely lost sight of. The principal branches of the supernatural profession among the Bantu tribes are rain-making, the cure of diseases, and the providing of charms or medicine to ensure the recipient success in his undertaking, while again the cure of diseases has developed into what is now the most important branch of this superstition, the indication by the wizard of the person or things who have caused either sickness or other misfortune, a gift of discovery which has been diverted into a horrible engine of wrong-doing and oppression. The details of witchcraft differ, as might be expected, among the several tribes who have severed from the parent stock, though in all it is presumed that they start from the original *manes* worship above alluded to. Most interesting particulars regarding our frontier Kafirs have been published by the Revs. Dugmore and Holden, and a wide field still remains to which I venture to call the attention of the ethnological section of this society, for research as to the origin and development of many of the facts collected by these gentlemen and others which, if more fully studied, might tend to throw much light on some of the problems which are engaging the attention of our more advanced thinkers. The following notes were kindly supplied by Mr. Griffith, the Governor's Agent in Basutoland, and they will, I believe, indicate the existence among that people of a milder form of superstition such, as we might have looked for among the

less savage Bechuana race, as well as in some respects a greater play of fancy which theorists may perhaps trace to the different character of the locality which forms the country of the tribe.

Notes on Witchcraft, Basutoland.

The Basutos make a marked distinction between witchcraft (*boloi* in *Sisuto*), and doctoring (*bongaka*), at the same time many *Dingaka* (doctors) are also *baloi* (witches), yet most *baloi* are not doctors.

A man becomes a doctor (*ngaka*) by education; he generally learns to know medicines and their uses from his father, who communicates all his medical knowledge to him as a legacy, but before the *ngaka* can practise, his father or master must *phatsa* (innoculate) him, or the medicines will not take effect,—this prevents outsiders from practising without a licence. If the young *ngaka* is enterprising he finds out other medicines from other *dingaka*, the fee usually paid being an ox for each medicine pointed out to him. The *ngaka* does not profess to cure all diseases, only a certain number; if he undertakes a case he is supposed to know the disease and to profess that he is able to cure it; he is only paid if a cure takes place, but any sheep or cattle slaughtered during the treatment for the purpose of purification do not count as payment, although all the flesh may be given to the doctor; they can only count as compensation for his medicines and for the trouble he has had in digging for them and cooking them.

As most diseases are supposed to be caused by a spell cast over the patient it is necessary for the doctor (*ngaka*) to know something about charms, so as to break the spell; a notable step toward breaking the spell is the discovery of the witch, which is made by the "bones" (*ditaola*), the doctor is therefore required to be a "*Senoke*" (diviner) though all doctors are not. By throwing the divining bones or *ditaola* he finds out who is the witch, and what must be exacted from the witch, either in the shape of payment or punishment or by the performance of some act in order that the spell may be removed; of course if the patient is a chief or influential person the witch indicated by the divining bones has a bad time of it.

The witch (*Moloi*) is supposed to become one by inoculation, a witch possessing magical powers communicates them to a disciple by making an incision in a part of the body into which the magic medicine is poured. Like the *Ngaka* the *Moloi* has medicines, those of the former are medicines proper (*dihlare*), those of the latter are called *bolao* (charms); the *Moloi* can give his *bolao* to any applicant with directions how to use it, and besides this he (or she) has many methods of procedure for the purpose of witchcraft. *Bolao* may be buried near the victim's house, scattered over it, tied to the top of the house, or anywhere, it may be thrown into food or water, or a man may be bewitched by obtaining some of his hair or portions of his dress through operating on which the bewitching takes place. Witches also run about naked at night, alone or in companies, and accompanied by a familiar in the shape of a monkey; they climb upon horses, spill drops of blood about and cast their spells over men and animals. In such cases counter charms are obtained from the *Ngaka*, one of which is potent enough to fix the night witch ('Ma-Mpete) immovable where he or she stands, and the unfortunate wretch is discovered in the morning standing naked at the door of the *Scherm* which was to have been bewitched. One is said to have been lately so discovered at the village of a headman named "Nkau." In the olden time witches when so caught used to be put to death.

Besides the *Ngaka* and *Moloi* there is the professional *Senoke*, or diviner, now (since the introduction of christianity) more commonly called a prophet (*Moprofeta*). These prophets are generally dreamers or visionaries; they may be *dingaka* but not necessarily so, they are often women as well as men; these profess to have dreams and revelations from God, and are the only ones who obtain to any political importance; they are supposed to be inspired, and their popularity depends on their own cleverness and on the countenance they may receive from the chief, as well as in the success of their predictions. Anybody without previous training may set up as a prophet; the prophet's mission is spiritual and political, and has nothing to do with witchcraft.

Besides the above there is the Rain-doctor (*Ngaka ea*

pula), whose sole profession is to cause rain, any *Ngaka* may take this up as a "speciality," and any *Ngaka* may also profess to have medicines to drive away hail, locusts, or birds from the cornlands; this is generally done by medicines buried, so to bury is to *upella*, and the doctor is called "*Moupeldi*." If supported by the chief rain-doctors may become important and may be made to order acts of political significance; there are besides a number of acts and observances common to the whole tribe and which are connected with witchcraft. Most of them are of a petty character, but one of these observances, however, affects the civil rights and personal liberty of the people, and that is the custom called "*ho ila*" (to avoid). When hail has fallen, or the death of a chief occurs, the following day is "*avoided*" i.e., no man does, or is allowed to do, any out-door work, especially gardening. Chiefs and *dingaka* also order certain days to be "*avoided*" for various reasons, and any one going to the gardens on such a day is assaulted and fined. Cases of this sort still occur sometimes; the object of "*ho ila*" is to prevent the evil, hail, death, or storm, from occurring again.

From the above it will be seen that the only persons who can become politically important and mischievous are the prophets and the rain-doctors. As droughts are frequent the services of the latter are frequently called into requisition, and it would be possible for them to order an act, say, a murder, or an attack, or an insurrection, in order to cause rain, provided that their reputation were sufficiently established. Happily the missionaries have now, with the majority of the Basutos, the reputation of being the best rain-doctors. The moment rain falls the rain-doctor's occupation is of course gone.

I can myself testify to the truth of Mr. Griffith's description of the avocations of the doctor, and have indeed on more than one occasion encountered him in the exercise of this vocation. During the famine in Basutoland which followed the first Free State campaign I recollect a Basuto neighbour of mine who suffered from a stomach ache which was entirely cured by one of these gentlemen who professed to discover a mouse in the rock on which his patient's hut was built; the slaughter of a goat in payment for the advice had, however, I am disposed to think, a greater share in the cure than the pretended removal of the alleged cause of complaint,

The same doctor was good enough to throw the bones (*dolosi*) at my request to indicate the whereabouts of some missing oxen. Possibly, however, the fee which was contingent on the success of his predictions was not tempting enough, for the oxen were never recovered, though in many cases I was informed that a magic consultation with the doctor, who generally has a shrewd idea of how the world wags, leads to a recovery of stolen property. I have also heard of white people who go further and employ them as Europeans do gipsies in an avowedly supernatural capacity. Truly between the ragged dirty witch doctor throwing his bones and the inspired priestess of the Pythian Apollo, giving her oracles to embassies sent by states who represented the civilization and culture of the world, there is a sufficiently wide interval, and yet perhaps not so wide as at first sight might appear. The degrading and incomprehensible phenomenon of spiritualism flourishing side by side with the most advanced theories of science seems to shew that our African witchcraft is only a branch of a world-wide error, if it does not indeed indicate the melancholy truth that fetishism of some kind or another is a craving of humanity ; and that refine and civilize as we will, the terrorism of the supernatural is one of those dark facts of our nature akin to our passions themselves, the inheritance perhaps of some brute ancestor, which neither civilization, education, nor even a higher faith itself, is wholly able to subdue.