PREHISTORY AND RELIGION IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

By

H. G. QUARITCH WALES, Ph.D., Litt.D.

LONDON

BERNARD QUARITCH, LTD.

11 GRAFTON STREET, NEW BOND STREET

1957

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

BEFEO : Bulletin de L'École Française d'Extrême Orient.

Bijdragen : Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indie.

JASB : Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

JRASMB : Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Malayan Branch.

Tijdschrift : Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The present work is neither a treatise on the prehistory of South-east Asia nor on its religion. Yet the title is intended to be taken literally. The book deals with the prehistory of South-east Asia in so far as this has affected the development of religion, and with the religion of South-east Asia in so far as this has been influenced by prehistoric cultures.

Now prehistory as it concerns religion necessarily must invoke the use of ethnological evidence just as much as, if not more than, it relies on archaeological data. The foremost exponent of modern archaeological technique, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, has recently reminded us that, for the understanding of the religion of a preliterate people, archaeology is " of necessity an insensitive medium ". He speaks of " the notorious incapacity of material symbols to represent the true content and affinity of a religion or belief . . . a symbol of a mother and child may range through a whole gamut of ideas from the simplest physical to the most transcendentally metaphysical ".[1]

These words serve to stress the point of view that we should be wrong to await the possibly unsatisfying results of a highly problematical archaeologists' " golden age " in the South-east Asia of the future, when we have at our disposal a line of inquiry that is likely to prove far more fruitful: the properly controlled interpretation of the evidence of ethnology, this being anchored wherever possible to such framework as archaeology can provide.

Another dictum that is worth quoting, though it may not be wholly applicable to South-east Asia, if indeed

[1] Sir Mortimer Wheeler, *The Indus Civilization*, Cambridge, 1953, pp. 82, 95.

it is to anywhere, runs as follows: "It is part of the value of the oral traditions and culture of the communities on the outer edge of the world that they have preserved for us, not the primitive experiments of early man, but reflections of the long forgotten spiritual life and art of the great civilizations of the past." [1] What makes it not wholly true is that it is quite a long time since the great civilizations of the ancient world were actively influencing South-east Asia. In the meantime, where there has not been conversion to Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam, there has been a steady loss of older influences with a reversion in the religious sphere to cults which, if not strictly speaking primitive, are in many cases as near to primitive animism and ancestor worship as we can at the present day expect to find. Nevertheless there is so much truth in the above quoted passage that it should be constantly borne in mind. To do so will save us from producing more of *The Golden Bough* type of literature, or rather the treatises on primitive religion which follow the master's model though lacking his literary graces.

The reports of the field anthropologists must be examined stratum by stratum with all the care of a prehistoric excavation. The object is to discover the survivals which are not explainable in terms of the primitive, but are rather the type fossils which yield their secret to comparative study, in conjunction with ancient civilizations that are historically documented, or perhaps in another quarter of the world are still alive. When it comes to the later prehistoric strata, the South-east Asian Bronze Age in particular, the "survivals" form such a large part of the living religion despite the effects of cultural loss, that it must be only the failure to apply adequate comparative principles of study that has failed to reveal more of the development of religion

[1] N. Kershaw Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy*, Cambridge, 1942, p. xv.

in South-east Asia ere now. An example of such work, which to a great extent forms a valuable mine of information concerning the by no means undeveloped religious concepts introduced during the Bronze Age, and not a study of primitive animism as the author supposes, would be A. C. Kruyt's *Het Animisme in den Indischen Archipel* (The Hague, 1906). But the important thing when he wrote was to place the fast disappearing facts on record. The premature fancies of Elliot Smith and Perry, undertaken before even the existence of a Bronze Age in South-east Asia was known, are enough to show that no analysis of the anthropological data could have been productive before prehistory had provided us with an elementary archaeological framework.

Primarily the present work is intended to offer a first attempt at reconstruction of the earlier religious phases in South-east Asia, resulting mainly from my own comparative researches. I have felt it no part of my task to embark on discussion of such apparently basic concepts as animatism, animism, etc., to which I have no contribution to make and which do not appear to offer any contribution to my study of the post-embryonic phases of the subject. I am content to accept a background of various forms of universal animism ; and these seem to me to be typical of those simple cultural phenomena which could well have come into existence independently both as regards time and place.

The Palaeolithic, the Neolithic and the Bronze Age, form the natural strata in the prehistoric religion of the area, as they do in its prehistoric culture generally, and these I try to characterize in the first three chapters. The rest of the book is the outcome of the results obtained in these first three chapters : the logical working out of what is envisaged in my undertaking to study the religion of South-east Asia in so far as this has been influenced by prehistoric cultures. So here there is a continuation, made possible by the accession of rein-

forcements of evidence, of my endeavours to explain and interpret the differentiation of the Indianized cultures of South-east Asia, or rather of the Khmer, Cham and Indo-Javanese cultures. My theory, then based mainly on the evidence of art, appeared in my book *The Making of Greater India* (1951), and I believe that it is now fairly well known to students of the area. The opportunity has been taken in Chapter IV to answer some objections that were raised against this theory in certain quarters. I then pass on to a new demonstration of the validity of my theory, based on the evidence of religion. Part of the material—that which concerns those peoples having a chthonic bias in their religious evolution—was made available in my book *The Mountain of God* (1953), and in so far as this concerns us here is outlined in Chapter V. But only now, as a result of my researches on the Bronze Age religion, is it possible to show a direct contrast to the above in those Indianized cultures in which the trend is towards sky religion, over and above what was inculcated by the Indian sky influences. The contrast is demonstrated, and shown to be due to a specific prehistoric religion, in the concluding chapter of the book.

CHAPTER I

PALAEOLITHIC PROBABILITIES

I shall not attempt to do more than offer a tentative reconstruction of the broad features of the religious background immediately preceding the coming of the "neolithic revolution". It was the latter event that formed the real basis of the whole series of religious developments in South-east Asia with which this book as a whole will be concerned. The shadowy background is the period of the late Palaeolithic cultures, nowadays technically known as "Mesolithic", which appear to have occupied the South-east Asian stage for let us say five thousand years prior to the arrival of the Neolithic agriculturists not later than the third millennium B.C.

Prehistoric research in South-east Asia, though still young, has advanced sufficiently to give us some reliable information as to the hunters and food-gatherers responsible for the Mesolithic. This term, it must be mentioned, is used because during their later phases the Palaeolithic cultures were to some extent changed by the Neolithic influences arriving from the north, and it does not imply that any genetic development took place from Palaeolithic to Neolithic in South-east Asia.[1]

The oldest established inhabitants during the Mesolithic were Australoids. Indeed the two Wadjak (Java) skulls found in 1889 and 1890 have now been confirmed as going back to the late Pleistocene age (perhaps 15,000 B.C.) by the discovery of closely similar skulls at Keilor near Melbourne, in geological conditions enabling them to be dated, it would seem, from the last

[1] R. Heine-Geldern, *Prehistoric Research in the Netherlands Indies*, New York, 1945, p. 130.

Inter-glacial.[1] But the type must have continued into our period: At Mesolithic sites in Tonkin (Hoabinh and Bacson) the remains of Australoids were found in the oldest Bacsonian strata, though Melanesian types were more common.[2] Hoabinhian period shell-heaps in Sumatra have produced human remains indicative of a long-headed race with Melanesian affinities. In eastern Java a number of Mesolithic sites have been discovered with human remains apparently of Melanesian or Australian type.[3] In Malaya the human remains associated with Mesolithic hand-axe cultures are largely attributable to the Papua-Melanesoid racial group; and it has been concluded that at least part of the peoples who brought the Mesolithic cultures into Indonesia were the ancestors of present-day Papuans and Melanesians.[4] Equally Heine-Geldern has emphasized "the important fact that the present forms of indigenous Australian culture must largely derive from the prehistoric Bacson-Hoabinhian civilizations of Further India and Indonesia. The similarity of the stone tools is such as to preclude all doubt".[5]

There is little evidence from the burials of these human remains that can be considered to throw any light on religious beliefs. If the finding of small non-articulated aggregations of bones in the Malayan midden deposits could be accepted as evidence of secondary burial,[6] one might interpret this as possible evidence of the practice of exposure in trees such as is often a feature of shamanism. Then there is the association of powdered

[1] ibid., p. 154; M. W. F. Tweedie, "The Stone Age in Malaya", *JRASMB*, XXVI, ii, 1953, p. 74.

[2] Tweedie, loc. cit., p. 74. [3] ibid., p. 75.

[4] ibid., pp. 17, 18; Heine-Geldern, loc. cit., p. 130.

[5] R. Heine-Geldern, *Annual Bibliography of Indian Archaeology*, 1934, p. 30. But this applies only to Eastern Australia, according to F. D. McCarthy, "Comparison of the Prehistory of Australia with that of Indochina," *Proc. Third Congress of Prehistorians of Far East*, Singapore, 1940, p. 37.

[6] Tweedie, loc. cit., p. 16,

red haematite with burials, which by analogy with what has been found at Palaeolithic sites in Europe and the practices of some aborigines has been thought to be a blood symbol.[1] If, as Gordon Childe suggests,[2] the object was to restore to the corpse the missing life symbolized by the red colour this would not be a religious rite but one of sympathetic magic. This is primitive science, not religion, though of course the two are often closely interwoven.

We must therefore turn to the evidence of comparative ethnology. This means the Australian aborigines since, though the modern Melanesians have a culture basically related to that of the Australians, they have been too much exposed to Polynesian and other influences to afford trustworthy evidence as to the religion of their South-east Asian ancestors. It is the natives of South-east Australia, that is to say those tribes who were driven to the furthest extremities of the southern continent, who may be supposed to have preserved most nearly the character of the ancient religion of South-east Asia. Representing as they do survivals of the original Australians, their culture is likely to have changed relatively little from that of their ancestors inhabiting South-east Asia.

The religion of the natives of South-east Australia, as it existed until recently, was a primitive shamanism. This religion seems to have pivoted round an "All-Father", variously known as Baiame, Daramulun or Bundjil by the different tribes. It is almost only in the south-east of the continent that this deity retains his religious importance in association with the rites of initiation, while among the tribes of Central Australia (where the immense development of totemism has supplanted the ouranic cult) he survives only in myth. Credited with omnipresence, omniscience, and eternity,

[1] ibid., p. 14.
[2] V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, p. 40.

regarded as the creator of all things and the guardian of morality, the All-Father nevertheless exhibits an overwhelming connection with the sky. There he is considered to live, though once he visited the earth as creator and revealer of custom. Besides manifesting in thunder, lightning, wind and rainbow, his home is traversed by the Milky Way, the stars are his camp fires, etc. Furthermore it is noteworthy that it is just in those parts of Australia where the All-Father belief is most active that the home of the dead is believed to be in the sky, whereas in Central Australia it is supposed that the dead inhabit a land towards the west.[1]

Looking thus to the sky deity for protection and guidance, it was natural that the Australians would wish to establish communication with him, to restore in fact a closer relationship which according to the myths had formerly existed. This need called for the aid of a specialized intermediary, the medicine-man or shaman, to adopt at once a term which identifies this particular type. In Chapter III we shall have to go more thoroughly into shamanism and to note its distinction from the more widespread " possession " by spirits and ancestors, which here need not detain us. The Australian shaman must first undergo an initiation, which includes a symbolic death and resurrection, with a visit to the realm of the All-Father. This, though difficult of access, is reached by means of the rainbow, a suspended cord, a tree or a spiral stair. There the shaman is given crystals (sky symbols) which enable him thenceforth to revisit the sky and obtain information from the dead by means of which he can injure or protect men.[2]

There are good grounds for believing that the earliest historical civilization arose in large measure as a result of differences in environment, meaning at first a physical

[1] M. Eliade, *Le Chamanisme*, Paris, 1951, p. 427.
[2] ibid., pp. 131–135.

environment.[1] There is certainly no reason to doubt that this held good in prehistoric times also, in view of the known need of every organism to become adapted to its environment. With the Palaeolithic food-gatherers an impressive feature of the environment could hardly fail to have been the omnipresent sky, in due course personified as Father Sky, whose varying moods so dominated their chances of obtaining food and their need for shelter. As Sir James Frazer remarked of the sky: "No wonder that a phenomenon so universal and so impressive should at an early date have inspired men with wonder and awe and found a place in their religion."[2] As we shall see later, that does not mean that more immediate conditions for maintaining life might not previously have called forth a religious response and consequently been deified. But there is little room to doubt that earth spirits never meant much to nomads (and Palaeolithic female figurines relate to the magic of inducing the fertility of game not to any cult of the soil). Again, stream, rock and tree were too impermanent features of the nomads' landscape, the dead, though early recognized as heirs to an afterlife, were too soon left behind and forgotten, to be endowed with major cults.

The Australian All-Father, and his South-east Asian prototype, may thus be classified as a Supreme Being provided we recognize the concept as an outgrowth of animism, and so avoid the mistake of Father Wm. Schmidt who saw it as a primitive monotheism. "The theory of primitive monotheism" writes Professor R. Pettazzoni in his recent valuable work on sky-religion[3] "is founded on an equivocation and on an error. The equivocation consists in calling by the name of mono-

[1] H. Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*, pp. 4–44, 49–52.
[2] Sir James Frazer, *The Worship of Nature*, Vol. I, p. 19.
[3] R. Pettazzoni, *The All-knowing God*, Methuen, 1956, pp. 2, 370.

theism what is nothing of the kind, in mistaking for true monotheism the savage peoples' idea of Supreme Beings. The error consists in supposing that to be primitive which is not so, in transferring to the most archaic culture the idea of God which properly belongs to our Western civilization, that which found its way from the Old Testament into the New and was then elaborated by Christianity. Monotheism, in its concrete historical reality, is belief in a single God and the denial of all other gods. As such, it presupposes polytheism, and consequently cannot be the earliest form of religion. This is not to say that monotheism is derived from polytheism by a gradual and inevitable development, as the evolutionist theory would have it. It derives from it, if at all, by revolution, by a radical religious upheaval, the work of some great personality, the herald of a new world . . . ' Primordial monotheism ' (of Father Schmidt) is the monotheistic idea torn from the concrete world of its historical growth and arbitrarily projected into an abstract world of origin ".

Pettazzoni then proceeds to show from a wide range of evidence the ouranic character and origin of the primitive Supreme Beings whose basic attribute of omniscience is due to their being luminous and hence *all-seeing*, only secondarily all-knowing. Moreover this omniscience is only relative, being concerned with the bad actions and thoughts of mankind, which are punished by means of the weather. The further attributes of creativity, eternity and omnipotence follow naturally from the basic one of omniscience.[1]

Turning now to the existing aborigines of South-east Asia we might hope to find some confirmation of our characterization of the religion of the upper Palaeolithic inhabitants of the sub-continent. After much consideration of the confused mass of evidence I feel that in a general way we do. In Malaya the Sakai (or Senoi)

[1] ibid., pp. 5–26.

and the Jakun (Proto-Malays) have a definite Australo-Melanesoid racial substratum, some individuals being long-headed and with other physical features corresponding to the Mesolithic human remains of Perak, Pahang and Perlis.[1] It can thus be claimed that a certain proportion of their ancestry derives from peoples whose culture was that of the Australo-Melanesoids, however much their descendants' culture has since been changed. With the Negritos (Semang) the position is different. Of an entirely different broad-headed racial type, no skeletal remains of them have yet come to light prior to the late Neolithic. But I cannot believe that these primitive savages made their way not only into Malaya but also to the Andamans and Philippines after the arrival of the Neolithic agriculturists ; and I take them to have been an element in the population during at least part of the period we are considering. Heine-Geldern has expressed the opinion that the late Palaeolithic flake cultures of Indonesia, as distinct from the hand-axe cultures of the Papua-Melanesoids, are perhaps partly attributable to the Negritos.[2]

The Sakai have a Supreme Being named Karei, a sky-god whose voice is the thunder, and their religion seems basically to have been a simple form of shamanism. The Semang have lived so long in symbiosis with the Sakai that they have the sky-god Karei or Ta Pedn, and a similarly shamanic religion. In fact they appear to preserve some ancient religious features that have been lost by the Sakai or have not been recorded from them. So also the Negritos of the Andamans have a Supreme Being named Puluga, who is omniscient (though only in the day-time, i.e. all-seeing), and who well illustrates the character of such deities by the fact that " the

[1] Tweedie, loc. cit., p. 17.
[2] R. Heine-Geldern, *Annual Bibliography of Indian Archaeology*, 1934, p. 32.