

NOTES AND QUERIES.

ARE CERTAIN INDIAN RITES OF MELANESIAN ORIGIN ?

The rite of "wien thien," or passing the lighted tapers in a circle, is a well-known and integral part of several important ceremonies in Siam. It is used both in purely Brahmanical and purely Buddhist ceremonies. It may be used in case of persons, of certain objects or even buildings which it is desired to protect against evil influences. We encounter this rite as a part of the Tonsure ceremony; at the former annual oath-taking with drinking of consecrated water—Tu'nam; at the blessing of the nine-tiered royal umbrella in the Chatr Mongkol ceremony; and even in such a purely Buddhist ceremony as that of "buat nāk", the ordination of a layman and his reception into the brotherhood of the yellow-robed monks. Here the candidate is placed on the floor in the upasada or bôt, and lighted tapers are passed round him, each of the assisting persons fanning the smoke of the tapers towards the candidate. A building may also be the object of such a ceremony, which is sometimes the case with Wat Phra Kaeo, the national sanctuary of the Siamese. Here the assisting persons walk round the building with lighted tapers in their hands, fanning the smoke towards the sacred building. Dr. Quaritch Wales, in his meritorious pioneer work called "Siamese State Ceremonies," says that this rite is a form of pradaksina intended to ward off evil influence and that it is well known in India, being first mentioned in the Satapatha Brahmana.

Professor P. S. Sastri, of the National Library, Bangkok, writes kindly as follows:— "A rite exactly similar to "Wien Thien" is still observed in the temples of Malabar (a district on the West Coast of Southern India). They call it "Talappili". This word "Talappili" is compounded of two words: — Talam = plate (cf. the Siamese

word *Kongadai* *) and *pili* = hold (verb). The rite is named thus because young unmarried girls who do the Indian "Wien Thien" carry a lighted lamp on a plate in their hands. I have seen the rite myself, and when I saw the "Wien Thien" here I was very much struck by the similarity between the two. The object of the rite is to remove the bad effects of the "evil eye" and it is therefore performed in India when an image of a deity which has been taken out on a ceremonial procession has returned to the temple".

In a recent book called "Sex and temperament in three primitive societies", the authoress, Miss Margaret Mead, says, on p. 94, that the girls of the Arapesh tribe in Northern New Guinea, after their first menstruation, are placed in the agehu or village feast place, where they are encircled with fires. When asked the reason for this custom, the natives replied that they did not know! There can, however, be no doubt that this ceremony is meant as a purifying and protective rite and as such it recalls strikingly the rite of "Wien Thien", as performed both in Siam and in India.

The rite of piercing the earlobe is also found among certain tribes in New Guinea, which ceremony in Burma takes the place of the "kon chuk" or Tonsure ceremony in Siam.

As will be known, recent researches in India tend to prove that the Melanesians came from that country.† It therefore seems not unreasonable to assume that the rites of "Wien Thien" and the piercing of the earlobe are both of Melanesian origin. To assume the opposite, namely, that the Melanesians got these rites from the Aryan Brahmans is not likely, as the ancestors of the Melanesians of New Guinea must have left India long before the Aryan invasion took place. A second alternative would be that the Melanesians could have received these rites from the city building people of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa in the Indus valley (C^o 3,000 B. C.) but this solution must also be rejected as the Melanesians' departure from India must have been prior to the building of the cities in N.W. India by many thousands of years. At what time the Melanesians left India to migrate via the Malay Peninsula and Insulinde to New

* The Siamese word is *กึ่งศตาด*—E. S.

† See the writer's review of Sir R. O. Winstedt's "A history of Malaya." *J. S. S.*, vol. XXIX, Part 2, p. 154.

Guinea and Melanesia we shall perhaps know when Dr. van Stein Callenfels, in a near future, will have finished his work on the discovery of Melanesian skeletons made on the mainland opposite Penang a few years ago.

In this connection it may be useful to point out that for the time being quite a number of European and American students of anthropology and sociology are doing useful research work in Melanesia, and as it becomes more and more an accepted fact that the Melanesians were immigrants from the west the work of these students should be followed closely by all students of the same matter in Hither and Further India. It is very likely that many ancient and obscure beliefs, traditions and customs in both of the Indies, which hitherto seemed inexplicable, may find their explanation in corresponding ones still alive among the Melanesians of New Guinea and the other Pacific islands.

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ERIK SEIDENFADEN.

