

The Battahs of Sumatra. A New Chapter in Missionary Annals.

III

John T. Beighton

[490]



Rajah of Munto Ranei, A Cannibal Chief.¹

During the years of my companionship with the Battah friend of my youth he was under the full spell of the superstitions of his race. I sometimes met in the hut, within our grounds, occupied by him, a short man much darker than himself, who was evidently regarded by him as a sorcerer or wizard, in whose judgment and "occult powers" he had unbounded confidence. I remember my friend becoming lame, and his telling me that this man had discovered that it was through a malignant charm, and that he had found the bones of a fowl buried at the door of my friend's hut; that these bones were impregnated with subtle virulence, and that by his constantly passing over them he had become lame. The man undertook to counteract the influence and discover the enemy who had buried the fowl, but I recollect that my friend continued lame to the end of our days of intercourse. I also remember that he told me that this man was in constant communication with spirits, and that if I was willing to approach these spirits and gain their favour, the man would guide me at night into a jungle, light a fire, perform certain incantations, and that these spirits would so breathe upon me that no sword or bullet could ever penetrate my flesh. 'My friend became a Mohammedan after I left him, and eventually, as I have stated, a Christian, but probably to the last he never altogether escaped from the appalling superstitions of his people.'²

¹ We are indebted for several of our engravings to illustrations drawn by a Chinese artist, in John Anderson's "Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra" (1823). The figures in this first engraving represent: (1) Battah fiddle; (2) kalapan or sword; (3) opium pipe; (4) lamp to light it; (5) handkerchief; (6) box with chunam, &c.; (7) pigdanay or spitting pot; (8) knives, used for cutting human flesh, &c.; (9) pillow for reclining upon after smoking opium.

² See the volumes of "The Society for Psychical Research."

John T. Beighton, "The Battahs of Sumatra. A New Chapter in Missionary Annals, III," *Sunday at Home* No. 1840 (August 3rd 1889): 490-494.

The general prevalence of belief in the human control over unseen spiritual existences can only be accounted for by the positive possession by certain men of extraordinary and occult energies. In no tribe of our race are beliefs in unseen spirits and the possible control of them by gifted then, more general than among the Battahs; and this control, apart from all interposition, whether sought or not, of Divine power. Nor does there exist any definite idea of personal immortality. Burton, as we have seen, declares: "During my whole journey, I saw nothing like religion." Anderson also could find no traces of adoration or petition towards any fetish or other supposed deity, and states: "Their only mode of worship is beating the drum." In Marsden's days carved images of a horse's head were sometimes called "Battah gods," but they were really the usual standards of war, consisting of a pole with a horse's head cut out at the top from which hung down a long tail of horse's hair. Some, again, have regarded as idols certain rude representations of human heads and arms at the top of sticks covered with real or imitated human hair; these are occasionally found over the doors of houses and at the entrance gates of the villages. Again, oaths are administered among the graves of the village ancestors, and offerings of food presented on the appearance of signs that the graves have been disturbed.

In the 1887 Report of the Rhenish Missionary Society, it is stated that two months before a bough had broken and dropped from the "sacred

[p.491]

tree" (I suppose a variety of the religious tree of India—the pepal), which stands in the midst of a village which is named, under which the recognised ancestor of the community is buried. Then all the people said, "The ancestor wants a victim; "the chief thereupon had the grave opened, and a victim "brought." The victim is not specified, nor is it stated that there was any slaughter; but the missionary evidently regarded the transaction as seriously wrong, for he adds: " I spoke about that evil deed, in which all took part, except the 'elder Daniel' (the native teacher) and his Christians, but they would not listen, nor say they were sorry, so I excluded them from the community, and the chief besides lost his place; then he came with his people and declared his repentance, but I told him that he should not be received again until by his deeds he had proved his repentance."

Great efficacy is ascribed to the offering of slaughtered animals. When these are buffaloes, cows, or goats, the best pieces often are placed for a time on the ancestral graves, with special ceremonies, including a peculiar dance, and invocations made to their spirits, and afterwards the pieces presented are consumed by those who offered them. All this looks like belief in personal immortality, but if the people are questioned the replies show only a dim sense of a kind of immortalised mass of humanity, without individual identity, reminding us of the deified humanity of the Positive Philosophy.

Authorities have been quoted to show that the people are without any religion; and yet as in reference to the question of immortality there seem to exist facts which to some degree contradict so absolute a statement. Even Burton himself says, "At the first village we entered we found the people performing some act of religious worship in the open air before the *balli* or town-hall. I believe their object was to inquire of their deity the proper time and best mode to make an attack upon an enemy. Their offering was a young plantain tree with a chicken tied to the longest leaf, and an old piece of wood, about a yard long, with some gewgaw tied to its head. Over these they were beating several gongs and drums. After continuing these for some time, the man who fills

John T. Beighton, "The Battahs of Sumatra. A New Chapter in Missionary Annals, III," *Sunday at Home* No. 1840 (August 3rd 1889): 490-494.

the double office of doctor and soothsayer, or priest, pretends to discover from one of their books on war which will be the most successful mode of annoying the enemy."

Certainly there are no temples, no idols, no priests, no rites of intelligent worship; and yet, could we get at the heart of the chief leaders in such ceremonies as have been described, we should find vestiges of a practically defunct religious faith. Undoubtedly, if the men do not now, they will tell you that their fathers believed in a mighty unseen being who had to do with the creation of the world, and strange to say with him are connected two other beings holding, however, a very subordinate place to him. Their names are still preserved—*Batara-guru*, *Sori-pada*, and *Mangala-bulan*—in which may be recognised Sanscrit and Malay roots. These beings, if now at all realised, are regarded as in effect superior human beings like those in their tribe who have attained important rank as chiefs. The first of them is in their estimation very far ahead of the other two in power and position. He rules in heaven, the second in the air between heaven and earth, and the third on earth. No doubt there are traces of the notion of a supreme divinity, and at the same time of this divinity in a triad form; but the whole idea is a mere theory, and practically a dead letter.



A Battah Warrior

Not so the belief in the evil and other spirits. It is almost impossible to get any clear statement as to who they are or whence they emanate. Some of them appear to be regarded as representing departed heroes, but though in these respects the floating notions are but as shadows, there is stern and terrible reality about the influence which the belief exerts. And here again, strangely enough, we have three orders of being: the superior, the middle, and the inferior: occupying, as stated by those who speak with authority, three different floors of one house, spirits above the earth, upon the earth, and under the earth. Such is the deep and powerful and constant and universal conviction about the presence and activity of those spirits, almost all of whom are regarded as malignant, that the people live under a reign of terror, and are continually driven in self-defence to deeds of horrible savageness.

In the absence of any realisation of a supreme deity, this belief becomes an organised system with its accepted officials; there are two orders of such officials, the *Datu* and the *Sibaso*.³

Let us look at the *Datu*. He is the professed

[p.492]

master of all the arts belonging to magic and sorcery and fortune telling and the curing of disease. Often he is this, as descended from famous men of his profession, or through special and well

³ *Datu* is a well-known Malay word, but its meaning varies with different circumstances and in different places. It may simply mean, as on the East coast of Sumatra, a man of authority and influence, but with the Battahs of the West coast it seems to be limited to a particular class of these who deal with evil spirits. *Sibaso* as it seems nothing to do with the Malay word *baso*, to wash or bathe; and even the renowned Battah scholar, Dr. Van der Tuck, cannot translate it. I presume *Si* is the common prefix to proper nouns.

remunerated teaching from long-established and celebrated professors of these arts. From them he not only receives instruction as to the various methods of manipulation, but books of direction, which, if ancient, are written on bambu and bark of trees, and if modern on paper. (The Battah literature seems to consist chiefly of such books, but it also contains songs and legends and fables.) If he be a renowned man, he may in grave emergencies be sent for from a great distance, but unlike the magicians of other races who take care to be well paid before they begin their operations, he is at any rate, as it respects the cure of disease, not paid unless his services prove successful. Is the birth of a child expected, he is summoned to perform certain enchantments by which a strong and healthy and prosperous life shall be secured for the unborn infant. If already born, he must study the day of birth in the light of his books, and say whether it was a lucky day or not. On the other hand, are there signs of unrest and displeasure among ancestral or other surrounding spirits (as in the case of the fallen bough which has been cited), he is called for by the entire community affected, and must settle what is to be done, and if victims are to be offered he slays and presents them. At the funerals of magnates and at village festivals and sometimes before the tilling of fields, he officiates. Is there to be a battle, each side sends for a famous *Data* who shall settle the time and method of conflict. But especially is it when disease is present and death is threatened that all his arts are called into requisition.

There is no doubt that these men, possessed of knowledge accumulated through many generations are acquainted with the medicinal properties of the numerous plants about them and use this knowledge with effect. It is certain that they are familiar with certain terrible poisons, and also the antidotes for them. But the universal belief is that every kind of disease, physical or mental, is the work of some evil spirit, and according to the kind of disease and the inferred character of the spirit are the materials and methods adopted by the *Datu*. The designation which seems best to describe the man in his chief functions is Exorcist.

The *Sibas* is a person of much humbler rank, and receives but small recompense for what he may effect. Every village has in it one or more men or women who act in this capacity. They do not seem to profess any knowledge of the arts and materials presented in the books on Magic, but to depend on communications made to them in moments of rhapsodic inspiration. Like the *Datu*, however, they are consulted as to proceedings at a festivity, or means of recovery for the sick. Call for the *Sibas* and he appears on the scene with a drum, and begins to dance in rhythm with the sounds he makes upon it. His dancing and drumming increase in vehemence, till at last he is worked to the excitement of frenzy. Now he is regarded as possessed of a spirit. Every ear is intent on



A Battah from the Great Lake

catching his impassioned utterances. Whatever he declares or prescribes, comes as the prompting of the spirit within him.

The knowledge and authority with which he speaks is superhuman. The sound of the drum gathers the entire village around him. One and another and another is irresistibly thrilled into sympathy with him, and rushes to his side dancing as wildly as himself to the beat of his drum. So powerful is the contagion of the raging excitement, that sometimes even the Christian converts lose all self-control and dash into the scene, dance like madmen, and becoming similarly frantic, echo the wild rhapsodies of the chief actor. Soothsayer seems to be practically the nearest

equivalent to his designation.

It is easy to imagine the puerilities which characterise the utterances of both classes of professed dealers with the spirit world. Unfortunately these are also full of cruelty. The methods prescribed for the cure of the sick are often nothing less than prolonged torture for the wretched sufferer, rousing him it may be out of a merciful unconsciousness into smarting pain or violent agitation, and changing what would have been a sleep into death to the agony of a desperate and mortal struggle. And again, when the slaughter of victims is directed, it is often so prescribed as to multiply the torments attending their destruction.

Nor is this all. Extraordinary as is the settled conviction, that human beings, without any Divine aid, can control the dire operations of invisible demons and even crush them in their power and compel their flight—still more extraordinary and far more terrifying is the conviction that the same beings can entice and concentrate the fury of evil spirits on their fellow men. Pay the *Datu* well and he will by his power over malignant spirits, inflict calamities and miseries on your enemy. One instance will suffice. A missionary in the report for 1887, referring to a native preacher called Laban, writes: "Laban's father was years ago cursed by a priest for having stolen rice.

[p.493]



Battah Woman

Shortly afterwards he was seized with a dreadful disease, and for many years dragged on a miserable existence in the fields. He often said to Laban: My boy, whatever you suffer, do not steal; it is dreadful to die as I am dying.' Laban himself lost two fine boys in 1885, and last year his sister hung herself because she had been driven away by her husband on account of disease. Laban took care of her two children though he is very poor." How full of horror and terror must life be when actually a series of dread calamities proceeding from father to children and children's children are traced to the curse of a man!

Dark, however, as this picture is, yet blacker colours must be added. In our first chapter we saw that the Battah was comparatively comely in appearance, dwelling in fixed homesteads, industrious in his habits, cultivating the natural affinities, observant of the proprieties of domestic life, treating woman better than his surrounding neighbours, superior, too, as to truthfulness and honesty, affectionate to his children, hospitable to strangers, desiring firm government and peaceful times, with a copious written language and an ancient literature of his own, and yet the Battah is a cannibal. Or, to return to my "Cannibal Friend" (Chapter iii. "Betel-nut Island"), he was naturally amiable, obedient, patient, and affectionate;⁴ but he had tasted human flesh and relished it. No doubt there has been exaggeration on the subject,⁵ but the

⁴ Let me refer the reader to the letter thrilling with tender emotion which he will find in "Betel-nut Island," p. 33. How I teased him about his lame foot and his cannibalism, and yet he was always ready with smiles and sweetmeats for "Baba Johnny."

⁵ I was misled by Madame Pfeiffer ("A Lady's Second Journey Round the World," 1855) to some exaggeration in my book (p. 28) as to the number of Europeans murdered and eaten by the Battahs.

John T. Beighton, "The Battahs of Sumatra. A New Chapter in Missionary Annals, III," *Sunday at Home* No. 1840 (August 3rd 1889): 490-494.

evidence is certain that he has a craving for human flesh and eagerly avails himself of every ostensible excuse or pretext for indulging it. He is abundantly supplied not only with vegetable but with animal food, and he probably always was ashamed of his propensity, and yet human flesh was the choicest meal that he could partake. Of course the Dutch government forbids it on the direst penalties, but missionaries tell us that even those who are under this rule by their own choice, and accept its authority as wise and good, have been known to confess that but for the restraints of the government they sometimes, at least, would gladly revert to a cannibal feast.

Marsden quotes from the accounts of the earliest travellers, statements which show that the people have been known to be cannibals from the very commencement of European acquaintanceship with them. Moor, in his "Notices of the Indian Archipelago" (page 114, &c.), supplies abundant and appalling evidence on the subject. John Anderson's book, "Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra," is full of very shocking details, accompanied by portraits of the most notorious of the man-eaters.

It is a rule that every prisoner of war is to be eaten. Anderson met a man who had become a hired soldier for the purpose of eating human flesh; it is also a rule that any man guilty of any crime for which the recognised penalty is death (such as adultery or robbery with violence), shall be killed and eaten. Because of these quasi legal enactments Marsden declares not only that "they do not eat human flesh as a means of satisfying the cravings of nature owing to a deficiency of other food," but adds, "nor is it sought after as a gluttonous delicacy as it would seem among the New Zealanders."⁶ "They eat it," he says, "as a species of ceremony," to show, in reference to one class of their victims, their detestation of crime, and, as to the other, the completeness of their revenge on their conquered enemies. He is certainly right in saying of the first that they may escape by paying a heavy fine, and of the second that they may escape by ransom or exchange. In accordance with this idea the Battah custom has been called "cannibalism by law."

In the "Asiatic Researches" will be found a paper of John Leyden, M.D., which contains substantially the same account of Battahs feeding on their aged relatives, as is given by me in "Betel Nut Island," p. 29.⁷

⁶ But compare this remark with his own description of this "species of ceremony," Ed. 1783, p. 302, ending with the exclamation, "To such a depth of depravity may man be plunged when neither religion nor philosophy enlightens his steps!"

⁷ He states that "when a man becomes infirm and weary of the world, he is said to invite his own children to eat him in the season when salt and limes are cheapest. He then ascends a tree, round which his friends and offspring assemble, and as they shake the tree, join in a funeral dirge, the import of which is 'The season is come, the fruit is ripe, and it must descend.' The victim descends, and those that are nearest and dearest to him, deprive him of life and devour his remains in a solemn banquet." (He then refers to a similar practice among ancient nations mentioned by Herodotus). Dr. Leyden's paper was written while he was at Penang on sick leave. The account has all the appearance of truth. It is so minutely circumstantial and so shockingly harmonises with what we have seen of the people as closely bound together by family relationship. No doubt at Penang he would hear the story from Battahs themselves and Malays who knew them well, and indeed he remarks: "This account is certainly more likely to excite incredulity than the account of Marsden, but it is the account of some of the Battahs themselves, as well as that of the Malays in their vicinity."

It has been observed that the race is divided into three sections by distinct dialects, and also that they dwell in separate communities, so that what may be true in one part of the country may not be true of another. May not this circumstance, and also that the account belongs to a period now long past [1808], when the people scarcely felt anything of outside influence, explain the absence of its confirmation by more recent authorities?

[p.494]

But there is one form of the revolting practice which is reported by the missionaries as still to be found among the independent Battahs which is nearly as astonishing. It is said that sometimes as the result of the gambling mania a man not only loses all he has, but is overwhelmed with debt which neither he nor his relations can ever discharge. The debtor is then kept in ward for some twelve months, during which interest so accumulates as, it may be, to double the debt, and then when it is clear that the money cannot be raised, he is actually fed for slaughter, and finally eaten at one of the festivals of the community to which the winner of the stakes belongs!

My readers may naturally exclaim with horror: Such enormities belong to the past; it cannot be that, with all the civilising influences which must now have reached every nook and corner of Sumatra, cannibal feasts ever take place among this extraordinary people. I will therefore conclude my chapter with the translation of a statement by a missionary in the Report of the Rhenish Missionary Society for 1887.



A BATAH COTTAGE.

“About five weeks ago I went again to Si-Gumpar in order to save a girl, about twenty years of age, whom the people had taken prisoner, and had tied to the stake, in order to kill her a few days later on occasion of a festival. [In another document, a second missionary says of this missionary: “In Si-Gumpar he saved a girl from the most dreadful death (she was to have been eaten), and brought her back to Parsenbilan, which deed opened to him many hearts in Si-Gumpar.”] The poor girl had stood in the open air for two days and a night when I heard of the case. Immediately I sent to Balige for Ompubatu-tahan, a Christian chief. He came, and I sent him to prevent the murder, if possible, and he succeeded in delivering her, after promising a buffalo and 160 marks. The poor creature had already had her two ears cut off, and a piece cut out of her cheek, and it was high time to rescue her, for the people had the firebrands to commit the fearful deed. After I had nursed the girl for a week we took her to her parents at Parsenbilan, who paid back the 160 marks.”

Can we wonder that as Burton, the first missionary who went among the people, saw them in the midst of all their pristine savageness, he should write: “One is ready to exclaim, Is there really any power by which these tigers may be transformed to lambs—these vultures to doves?”