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IV.

An Account of the Funeral Ceremonies of a Burman Priest.

COMMUNICATED

BY WM. CAREY, D. D.

THE manner in which different nations dispose of their dead is one of those circumstances which have been thought worthy of peculiar notice by all who have studied the history of man, as it is in most instances connected with the idea which they entertain respecting a future state.

Those nations, who believe in the doctrine of the resurrection, practise inhumation. The *Hindoos* and other nations who believe the doctrine of the metempsychosis, and consider fire as the element which purifies all things, usually burn their dead, with a variety of ceremonies suited to those religious notions which are peculiar to the different sects. The inhabitants of *Thibet*, differing from most other nations, either totally neglect the bodies of their dead, or treat them in a manner which to us appears highly barbarous.

The *Burmans* burn their dead like the *Hindoos*, though with a great difference in the method and the attendant ceremonies. With them, the wood of the coffin

(which is made larger and stronger than with us) is nearly all the fuel used to consume the bodies of the common people. The priests, or *Poongees*, are, like them, burnt by the wood of their own coffins; but the fire is communicated by means of rockets. As this is a very singular practice, and has not been noticed by any writer which I have met with, I take the liberty to communicate to the *Asiatick Society* the following account of the funeral ceremonies of a *Poongee* or *Burman* priest, as communicated by my son, Mr. FELIX CAREY, who resides at *Rangoon*, and was an eye-witness thereto.

“ The man whose funeral ceremonies I am going to describe died about two years ago. After the death of a *Poongee*, the body is embalmed in the following manner : First, the intestines are taken out; after which the body is filled with spices of different kinds, and the opening sewed up. A layer of wax is then laid all over the body, so as to prevent the admission of air; upon that is put a layer composed of *lac* and some other ingredients, and the whole covered over with leaf-gold. The body of this person was stretched out at full length, with the arms laid over the breast. When one of these people dies, the body is thus prepared at the house where he died. After about twelve months the corpse is removed to a house built for that purpose, where it is kept a year or two longer, till the *Poongees* order it to be burnt. At one of these places I saw the body of this man, about a month before it was taken out for the purpose of being destroyed. It was then placed upon a stage, which was in a house made like one of their *Kuims**, rising in a conical form, and about thirty feet in height. The stage

* This is the name of the buildings occupied by the *Burman* priests, who live in societies subject to the chief of the *Kuim*, who is distinguished by his age or learning. The *Kuims* are a sort of colleges, where instruction is given to any one who wishes for it; but the members are subject to a discipline not very different from that of a monastery.

was made of bamboos and wood, and the house which contained it was covered with paper, and overlaid with leaf-gold. By the side of this stage lay the coffin in which the body was to be carried out; this also was overlaid with gold, and ornamented with several figures, designed to represent death in a variety of forms. In the courtyard two large four-wheeled carriages were preparing, one to carry the coffin, and the other the stage with its apparatus. The carriage in which the corpse was to be drawn had another stage built upon it, similar to the one in the house, only it was larger, and fixed upon an elephant, made in a kneeling posture.

When the time for the ceremony approached, the principal people of every street were commanded each to prepare a rocket, and an image (the shape of some animal), to which the rocket was to be fixed. Besides these large rockets, a great number of smaller ones were also prepared, as well as other fireworks. The *Burman* new year began either on the 13th or 14th of April (I do not exactly remember which), when the festival celebrated by sprinkling of water commenced, which would have continued six or seven days, had not the viceroy put a stop to it, to admit of the burning of this *Telapoy*. On the 17th, the figures to which the rockets were to be fastened were drawn in procession round the town; and from this day to the end of the ceremony, all the people of the town and its vicinity, both male and female, were compelled to assist. The figures were drawn in procession, one after another, in the following order: First, six or eight flags were carried; these were followed by a number of dancing boys and girls; then the carriages with the figures, some drawn by boys, and others by bullocks, followed; and after them went a number of young women, dancing and singing, with an older woman between each row, to keep them in order. Women were never known to attend such processions before, but this was done in consequence of a particular order from

the viceroy. On this occasion even the wives and daughters of the principal officers of government were obliged to dance, some with umbrellas held over them, and others under an awning large enough to shade forty or fifty persons, and supported by six or eight men; last of all followed the men in like manner, singing, clapping their hands, and dancing, with two men between each row to keep them in order.

The people of each street attended their own carriages, and in this manner proceeded round the town, one company after another. The figures were very large, much larger than the animals they were intended to represent. Some of them were representations of buffaloes, others of bulls, lions, bears, elephants, horses, or men. There were not less than thirty, of a very large size, about thirty feet in height, and a great number of smaller ones.

The next day was spent in drawing the body of the *Poongee* in his carriage, backwards and forwards, or rather in pulling against each other. All the people, being divided into two parties, drew the corpse, from the place where it formerly was, to an extensive valley, near the hill where it was to be burnt. In the front of the valley the viceroy had a temporary house erected, from which he could view the whole show. Four cables were fastened to the axletree of the carriage, two each way; these were held by the people, who every now and then uttered a loud shout, and pulled both ways at the same time. That day neither party gained any advantage over the other, till near evening, when one of the cables broke, and the opposite party gained the victory.

The following day they discharged the large rockets. Early in the morning they carried all the figures and their rockets from the town, and each of these figures was fixed upon a carriage of four wheels, and the rockets were secured, by rattan loops, to strong ropes, which passed

between the feet of the animal, so that, when discharged, they, sliding on the ropes, ran along the ground. Some of these rockets were from seven to eight feet in length, and from three to four in circumference, made of strong timber, and secured by iron hoops, and rattan lashings. The last of them, when discharged, ran over a boy of ten or twelve years old, who died in a few minutes; three or four grown-up persons were also much hurt. Towards evening a great number of fireworks were discharged, which made a very fine appearance.

The next day was the time appointed for blowing up the corpse. On this occasion, a quarrel arose between the two parties who had pulled the former day, the party which had been unsuccessful insisting that the cables had been cut, and not broken, by the opposite party; they therefore presented a petition to the viceroy, requesting that they might have another trial at pulling. This was granted; upon which, having procured four new *European* cables from the ships in the harbour, they recommenced their trial of strength; however, the party which had been victorious before won again, and broke the cables of the other. The unsuccessful party was not yet satisfied, but insisted on another trial of strength the following day. That day neither party obtained the victory, upon which the viceroy issued an order to stop the contest, and to burn the *Telapoy* the next day, which was accordingly done.

That day the corpse was burnt in a temporary house, erected for that purpose, in the shape of a *Kuim*, with a stage in it upon which the coffin was set to be burnt. This was performed with small rockets, fixed upon ropes with rings of rattan, so as to slide along them, from the top of a hill, to the coffin, which was placed on the top of another hill. The rockets, being discharged, slid along the ropes, over the intermediate valley, to the coffin, which was set on fire by them, and, with its contents, quickly consumed.