

## SOME CUSTOMS OF THE MACHEYENGAS.

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What I shall say will be appropriate in an Antiquarian Society if we bear in mind the fact that the customs which I describe have come down from a more or less remote antiquity.

Primitive man—not earliest man, but man in a low stage of cultural development—is to so large an extent a creature of his environment that any study of his customs must be preceded by some account of the conditions under which he has lived and developed these particular customs.

The Macheyengas, of whose customs I wish to speak, inhabit the greater part of the region lying between the foot-hills of the Cordillera and the upper Ucayali and Urubamba rivers, in Eastern Peru, from latitude 11° to 13° south. A country covered with dense forests and traversed by many rapid rivers, which are navigated by balsa and canoe with considerable difficulty. Where it is not possible to travel by canoe, trails follow the rivers, crossing and recrossing from sand-bar to sand-bar, never leaving the river to any great distance.

Their houses are built along these rivers where there is fertile land for cultivation. There are no villages or towns, but often three or four families build their houses in a group, a few hundred yards apart. About each house is a small *chacara*, or clearing, where plantains, yuca, etc., grow from year to year. Wild game and fish are plentiful and add substantially to the food supply. The climate is so warm

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that little or no clothing is needed. Wants are few and so easily supplied that the daily routine of life requires very little thought. The view is limited to the size of the chacara. They can travel in but two directions—up and down river. There is plenty of room and food for all, so there is practically no warfare. Having no tribal organization, the people are never brought together in large groups. Hence there is no contact, no rivalries, no contests, no stimulus to thought or action. They live out their simple easy lives and die, but are not buried.

By many authorities, it is believed that religion first manifested itself in the care of the dead—that religion was born at the grave. If so, then the very first traces of religion are found near the end of the Paleolithic period, for here we discover some evidence of the burial of the dead.

It is quite probable that the religious consciousness was a very slow development, and that even these earliest burials had no religious significance but were for the mere purpose of disposing of the offensive body from which they had no other easy escape. The attitude towards the dead was not that of terror as was true later on when belief in souls and ghosts had arisen. Then, in order to care for these souls, there grew up in many parts of the world elaborate funeral rites. Among many peoples the whole life is one round of religious observances which end only when the body has been disposed of and offerings made to the souls of the dead.

The Macheyengas are singularly free from these religious ceremonies. They have no fear of the dead, even handle the body with impunity and dispose of it without ceremony. When one of their number dies, they make a litter of two long poles with cross sticks. Two men take the body by the head and the feet and place it on the litter. Then they carry it upon their shoulders to the river and throw it in. The body is dressed as in life, with nothing but the *cushma*, a sleeveless, shirt-like, cotton garment which reaches below the knees. No weights are used to sink the body, so the rapid current carries it away to be eaten by the fish or buried in the sands.

There is no ceremony whatsoever in connection with the dead,—at the house or at the river. When friends happen to be present they usually carry away the body as an act of courtesy. If no one else is there, two members of the family do it. No one accompanies the two men to the river and no ceremony is performed while they are gone. There is no reverence for the body. It is thrown into the river just as a dead dog or kitchen refuse is thrown in, at the same place and apparently for the same reason. It is the most convenient and at the same time the most hygienic method of disposing of the dead.

When one member of the family dies the others desert the home and build another some distance away. They never return to the house, but if they have no other chacara they may return for food until the new chacara is ready to use—a period of eight or ten months. After that time another family may take possession of the chacara and live in the house. When a small child dies they throw the corpse into the river, but do not leave the house. In order to end the sufferings of helpless old persons and those about to die of some incurable disease, they throw them into the river while they are yet alive. However, they take very good care of their sick and infirm so long as there is any hope of recovery.

They leave the house because they are afraid of the disease that took away the other member of the family, and for no other reason. The case of the child would seem to be an exception, but the adults have no fear of children's diseases. No ceremonies are performed when leaving the old home or when building the new one. As they have no belief in ghosts or in the return of the soul, there is no reason to fear the soul of the departed. Aside from their positive statements, the fact that others may and do live in the same house after a short time is evidence that they have no fear of the house or of spirits about the house.

Among some branches of the tribe those killed in warfare are buried, while the common people are thrown into the river. A grave four or five feet deep is dug near the place where the man fell. The body, dressed in the cushma,

is laid on its back at full length and covered with leaves, poles, and earth. Nothing is placed in the grave with the body. No marker is used and no mound is heaped over the grave.

Again, among some branches the small children are carried up into the hills and buried among the rocks while all others are thrown into the river. They were unable to give any explanation for these two exceptions to the general rule.

They have a tradition, that a long time ago the body of a Macheyenga was buried and watch kept to see if there was a soul and if so what became of it. In the morning of the eighth day they saw a red deer jump up from the grave and run away into the forest. Since then they have believed that the souls of Macheyengas always enter the red deer. They do not know what becomes of the souls of other men, but they do not enter the red deer.

They never eat the flesh of the deer but have no objection to others doing so. They even kill it themselves and give it to others to eat. It is in no way treated as a sacred animal. When the cooked flesh is offered to a Macheyenga he makes signs as though the thought of eating it made him sick.

From the tradition it would seem that they should believe the soul becomes a red deer—that man lives again in the form of a deer. They did not see the soul enter the deer but saw the deer rise from the grave. On this point they are quite clear. The man dies, and it makes no difference whether his body is buried or is thrown into the river, his soul enters the deer and that is the end of all. Neither the soul nor the body ever lives again. It does not become the deer, neither is it the soul of the deer, for it has a soul of its own. Asked what becomes of the soul, an Indian answers, "It goes into 'mān'ro', the red deer." Asked what then becomes of it, he answers, "Nothing, that is the end of it when it enters the deer."

They have no conception of the origin of "sēlē'tcē", the soul, nor any very definite idea of what it is. It is something besides "Isē'dē", or life, that animals have in common with men and that rivers do not have. It is never seen and

has nothing to do with life, sleep, disease or death. It is an intangible something that leaves the body at death and enters the deer.

They believe in "Idŏ'ci", the big man in "eng'ta", the sky. He made man, the sun, the moon, etc., in some way, they know not how nor when. At present he has very little to do with the world except to thunder at the beginning and the end of the seasons, and to send the rain. He takes no more care of men than of the animals. He does not reward the good or punish the evil, consequently he is neither adored nor propitiated. Their attitude towards him is much the same as his towards them—one of indifference. They make no offerings nor prayers and have no ceremonies, no feasts, no sacred dances, no ceremonial objects, no charms, no fetishes. There is no communion between themselves and any spirit. They are uncontrolled in the slightest degree by any power or influence outside of themselves. Thus they live, remarkably free from the conventions and restraints of custom and religion.

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