

CORRESPONDENCE.

1. THE AŚOKĀṢṬAMI FESTIVAL.

SIR,—Captain Gurdon, in his interesting account of the Aśwagrānta shrine near Gauhati (not Ganhati, as printed), writes of the Aśokāṣṭami festival as if it were peculiar to that shrine, and indeed attributes the origin of the festival to the legend that it was there that Rukminī bathed. But on the Aśokāṣṭami day (the day before the Ramnavami) people bathe in the Brahmāputra all along the north bank. The correct procedure is to stand up to your waist in the water, holding in your hand eight buds (why eight, I know not) of the Aśoka. You recite the following mantra:—

“Yam aṣokaṃ harabhiṣṭam madhu māmsam samudbhavet
Pibāmi ṣokasantāptam mām aṣokaṃ sadā kuru.”

You then swallow the buds, and obtain all the benefits you might have got by bathing in the sacred Ganges itself.

The legend of the festival's origin told me differs from Captain Gurdon's version, and is interesting as an instance of a Hindu story growing out of a pre-Hindu belief. The name Brahmāputra is no doubt a translation of the primitive Assamese name of the river, just as the Khyendwin in Burma is said to mean “Son of God.” Given the name Brahmāputra, required to find an etymological explanation. The explanation is found in a local variant of the Paraśurām mythus. The sons of Brahmā figure largely in Assamese mythology. The fire sacrifice of Daksha, for instance, is thought to be reproduced every year in the cressets of jungle fire which create pillars of smoke by day and of fire

by night along the summits of the northern hills. I do not remember who it was that bore Brahmāputra to Brahmā, but

“ His daughter she : in Saturn’s reign
Such mixture was not held a stain.”

For long years she bore her son in her womb, and only obtained delivery by visiting the sacred spring of Brahma Kunda far in the Mishmi hills. But Brahmāputra was still only a pool, and not yet one of the mightiest of Indian rivers. Here comes in the Paraśurām legend. The Mahābhārata tells how Paraśurām alone of his brothers obeyed the command of his father and cut off the head of his mother Reṇukā. The epic says that his obedience so pleased his father that he was told to ask a boon. He begged that his mother might be restored pure to life, and that he himself might be invincible in single combat and enjoy length of days. The Assamese version is that he received the curse that his great axe should cleave to his hand till he should set free the son of Brahmā by cleaving the Brahma Kunda gorge. This reminds one (as Assamese versions of Hindu stories frequently do) of the Madras story, that Paraśurām “drove back the ocean, and cut fissures in the Ghāts with blows of his axe.” Doubtless the Aṣokāṣṭami is the survival of some primitive prehistoric bathing festival, adopted in the usual catholic fashion of Hinduism, and explained at Gauhati, as Captain Gurdon suggests, by the legend of the fair Rukmini’s bathing. It is sad to think that we shall never know the real, the primeval reason why the bathing is confined to the north bank.

Even more interesting than the Aśwagrānta shrine are the wonderful ruins at Singri parvat and at Tezpur in the Darrang district, to which I hope the Assam Director of Ethnography may be able to turn his attention. At both these places are heaped vast blocks of carved granite, volutes, pilasters, and images, some of the blocks covered with a curious conventional ornament which the modern Assamese calls “Daffla writing.” The Singri ruins are visited in the cold weather by pilgrims from the Daffla

hills, who maintain that they are relics of the Daffla rule in the plains in bygone days. They have doubtless been wrecked by some tremendous earthquake, though there is a story that they were blown up with gunpowder by "Kālā pahār," the Mahomedan general. But assuredly no Mahomedan gunpowder could work such havoc in buildings constructed solely of huge square blocks of granite such as modern engineers would find it hard to move with all their appliances. I know of no Hindu legend which has attached itself to the Singri ruins, which lie in dense forests and far from human habitation. The Tezpur ruins, however, are in the heart of the modern civil station, and (I shudder to tell it) the plinth of the Deputy Commissioner's cutcherry is largely composed of carved granite blocks. About these ruins has grown the pretty story of the princess Ūshā and her handmaiden Chitralkhā, and the Assamese believe that Tezpur was once Mahābalipura, the capital of her grandfather. This is another instance of a legend borrowed from Southern India, as are many of those connected with the great Tantric shrine of Kāmākhshyā at Gauhati, of which Captain Gurdon has probably much that is interesting to tell. The chief interest of these borrowed legends lies in their adaptation to local conditions, and especially to the primitive local beliefs. We shall soon have from the pen of Mr. E. A. Gait a History of Hindu Assam, and, as far as can be gathered from scanty records, of the Assam of pre-Hindu days. It is a pity that so much of ancient belief and history has been obliterated by Hindu legend, so that, for instance, it is only due to the comparatively recent conversion of Manipur to Hinduism that we happen to know by how quaint a fiction the Manipuris, the Nāga folk of Imphal, became "sons of Arjun." The local legends of Assam, as containing traces of prehistoric belief, are well worth studying, and we must hope that Captain Gurdon's paper in the Journal is a foretaste of further investigations into shrines even more interesting.—Yours faithfully,

J. D. ANDERSON.

P.S.—Professor Barnett has been so good as to write the following note on the *çloka* quoted above :—“ This mantra is apparently to be spoken in drinking the sacred waters. The text may be rendered : ‘ May that which (men call) the Açoka, sweetmeat, agreeable to Hara (Çiva), grow up ! I drink. Make thou me, who am oppressed with grief, to be ever griefless.’ The difficulty is in the first half of the stanza. There is a play on the word *açoka*, which signifies both ‘ sorrowless ’ and the tree *Jonesia Açoka*, branches of the latter being used in this ceremony ; and, further, *madhu* may also mean this tree, though usually signifying nectareous liquid (butter, honey, etc.), or simply ‘ sweet.’ Thus, we might take *madhu mamsam* as a compound adjective qualifying *açokam*, and meaning ‘ sweet of flesh,’ or as a compound noun, ‘ butter and meat.’ In any case, the prayer means that food is to rise to the worshipper, as the Açoka grows, in some causal connection with the latter. I strongly suspect that the masculine *yam* should be altered to the neuter *yad*. In that case it would be best to take *açokam* as adjective, rendering ‘ I drink that which (I pray) may rise as sorrowless food (or the like),’ etc. Water is the source of vegetable and other life.”

July 14, 1900.

2. END OF THE WORLD.

24, Buckingham Gate, S.W.

Aug. 4th, 1900.

DEAR PROFESSOR RHYS DAVIDS,—A very widely spread belief that the end of the world would take place on the night of the 13th November prevailed last year in Egypt. This was no doubt connected with the shower of Leonids which was expected by the European papers to be especially brilliant about then, and the native newspapers started reports which were the cause of the idea referred to.

I have heard that in some of the balads of Gizeh the inhabitants camped out in the desert, I suppose with a vague