

## On Cults or Sects of Religion as practised by Natives of the Northern Division of the Territory of Papua.

By Henry Holland.

Baigona Cult.—My first acquaintance with the cult known as the Baigona Cult was in the year 1911, when I joined the late Rev. Copland King at Ambasi. It was there in the village I saw two men elaborately dressed—as the natives of those parts dress—with a headpiece bonnet-shape, decorated with an array of various coloured bird feathers, excessive ear-rings, armlets and leg-bands. Their belts also were good. Their dress included long streamers of fur (strips of the cuscus skin) hanging lightly from the armlets near the elbows, and from the armlets hung a few small, hollow, dry nuts which dangled and rattled as the wearer walked or swanned on his way. The whole of their faces were painted in the brightest red; they each carried a small string bag on the arm, in which (I learned afterwards) was supposed to be carried the magic medicine used to cure the sick. We may call them medicine-men for the time being, as they were often called upon to cure the sick, and when they did perform over the sick, they did so with great importance and gusto.

I learned from Mr. King that these men were a sect of sorcerers. It was understood that the cult originated near Cape Nelson, about one hundred miles from Ambasi.

A native man living in that region professed to have been on a visit to the spirits of the dead on Mt. Victory, and claimed that a very important spirit had given him a commission. He was also given a snake spirit, by which he became in league with all the snakes and crocodiles along the coast, and in addition was given the magic contents of his small bag. This man initiated others into his creed. The scholar, during his probation, would abstain from certain kinds of food, would drink no water save the coconut milk; again he would neither wash nor swim, though he might anoint his body with coconut-oil. In addition to this, during the period of training he had to practice trembling and the taking of fits, which began by the man standing erect and trembling, the tremble becoming more violent until it developed into a fit to which the performer would fall to the ground.

After falling and shivering on the ground he began speaking or incanting in a language unknown to the people. Some of the village people would stand around him beating their drums until he would rise up again. After a period of training for six weeks or more, village people were told by the sorcerers to bring food from the gardens, also pigs were killed and a feast made at which the candidate would be fully initiated. A ceremony would take place, the candidate would wash in the sea, the leaders would impart to him the magic snake; but no matter how many he initiated into the cult and gave the snake, he always (as Mr. King told me) kept a snake for himself.

The word "Baigona" was a name originated with the cult. This cult spread up and down the coast, and one or two, or even more, in almost every village, adopted it, going through the usual training and admission. The initiating business was not confined to the originator, but other men also initiated new converts until they became a dominating power in the community, making themselves the big men of the village, demanding food for their snake spirits as well as payments for their supposed cures.

It may be well here to explain that the people as a whole are animists: believing in the life hereafter of their deceased ancestors. So much do they live (as it were) on the border of the spirit world that they attribute much of the happenings in their world to the agency of these spirits. We do well to take into account that they have no knowledge of the natural laws of the universe nor of hygiene nor of the natural causes of sickness. Thus they attribute sickness or accident, or even death in most instances, to the agency of the spirits. Therefore, when men seem to have got an inspiration and (according to their ideas) get into league with the other world of spirits, they have little or no difficulty in asserting their authority. Again, when people become ill it is taken for granted that the sorcerer has been at work and therefore the sorcerer is called to take out what he or some other sorcerer has already put in. Who would know more about it than the sorcerer? There-

fore, send for the sorcerer rather than the white missionary. What could the white man know about the secrets of magic poison?

These men of the Baigona cult made themselves so officious that the Government had to take a strong hand and put a stop to it. One village man complained that one of these cult men had taken several pigs and dogs from his village as payment for supposed cures. Later on, when the Government police had arrested some of these cult men, the police asked permission to camp on the mission station. They had settled down for the night when one of the prisoners whom they had arrested began to shake and fell down in the usual fit. His friends wished to beat the drums and bring

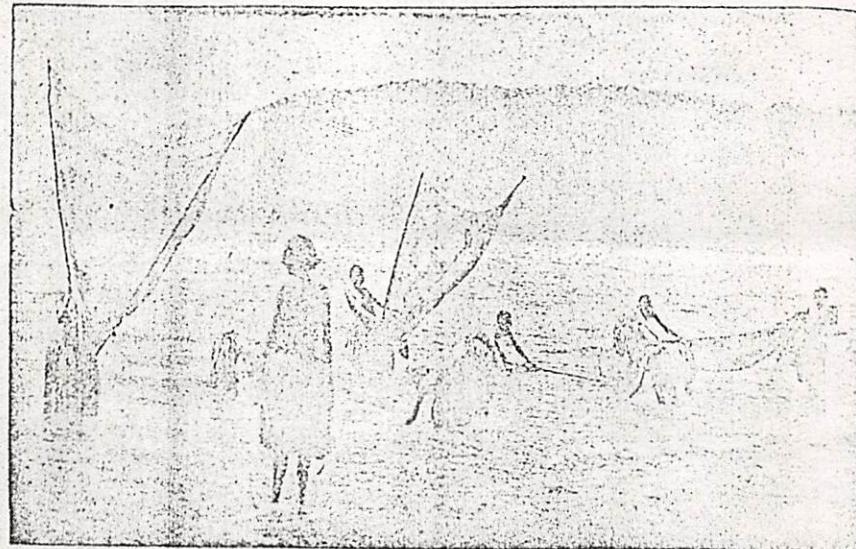
him to, and asked permission to take him to the village. The constable sought the advice of the white missionary, saying he thought the prisoner might escape. The Rev. Copland King undertook to bring him to. We took with us a bottle of Scrubbs' ammonia, which Mr. King put close to the patient's nose as he lay on his back. Instead of jumping up suddenly as we had expected, he went into a violent fit of shaking, so much so that he shook the whole of the

#### THE CONVERTER

An interesting and unusual story of work among Moslems comes to us from South Africa.

A Dutch Christian came into touch with a Turk who had married an Arab woman of Mohammed's own tribe, and tried to persuade him to become a Christian. The result of the intercourse between the two men was, however, the conversion of the Dutchman to Islam! The Moslem who had effected the conversion then confiscated the Christian's Bible and read it

narrow palm floor on which he was lying. His friends pleaded for Mr. King not to repeat the effort. We left him lying there. I afterwards expressed my opinion to Mr. King that the man was a good pretender, to which Mr. King answered, "No." Then in answer to me



Women fishing at Wamira.

he said, "Put yourself into possession and you will become possessed." After several months of imprisonment, however, many of these cult men returned to their village and, by order of the Government, no longer pursued their profession as sorcerers. There were also a number of cult men overlooked by the police, but fearing they might be imprisoned, they gave up their profession, putting their magic bags into the ocean.

(To be continued.)

#### CONVERTED.

with so much profit that he was convinced of the truth of Christianity, and he and his wife asked for baptism. In spite of persecution they persevered and eventually went to Capetown, where the man continued his studies. But the climax of the story is to be found in the fact that on his way south the Turk broke his journey in order to re-visit his Dutch friend, and was successful in bringing him back to Christianity!

--"Mission Field."

8 MAY 1933



# A.S.S.M. Review

A publication of the Church of England, issued by the Australian Board of Missions, 242 Pitt Street, Sydney.

Registered at the General Post Office, Sydney, for transmission by post as a newspaper.

Vol. 20.—No. 1.

MAY 1, 1933.

Twopence

## Papuan Cults.

### THE BEGINNING OF TARO WORSHIP.

By Henry Holland.

Two leading personalities on the Mamba River were Buninia, who lived in a village seven miles up the river, and Iaviriba, who lived on the coast. The story of the beginning of the Taro cult, as told by one, reads:—

Buninia's father had been killed some years ago by the Kumusi district people; his spirit, however, came back along the coast in search of his son, Buninia. On arriving at Mitre Rock and on the shore opposite where all the spirits of the Ambasi dead go, he saw a cus-cus (a species of opossum); he, being hungry, killed the cus-cus. The spirits heard the cry of the cus-cus and came to see who was interfering with their supply of meat. They asked him what he was doing. He told them, in reply, he was looking for his son Buninia. They said, "We know him and will take you to him," but first they invited him to the spirits' place, and gave him food, after which they took him in a canoe along the coast and up the river to Tauatutu village, the home of Buninia. Buninia was aroused in the night by his father calling him. "I am your father," he said, "I have come all the way up the coast looking for you. I am hungry, cook me some food." Buninia said afterwards, "I did not get up and cook

the food then, but the next day I did cook food and put it out on the 'garger'" (a small platform on which food is placed for the souls of the dead. These can be seen in many villages to-day; fresh food is placed there continually by the relations).

The next night Buninia was again visited by his father, who told him he had come to him for a purpose. He wanted him to teach the people a new song. It was to be sung by the people. It began with "ba-Kasumba"—"ba" is the native word meaning taro, which is the staple vegetable food of the people. They were to respect the taro and not leave any peelings about. They were to leave off the old custom of paring bark into the plant roots for manure and just plant them plainly, but also place a scented citronella herb among the taro plants.

Buninia did not at first tell anyone of his secret, but kept it to himself for several days. However, one day Iaviriba's wife was ill and Iaviriba tried, in the way of their fathers, to cure her. Seeing a cure was not effected his near relation, Buninia, was called. When he had come he asked what had been done, and on learning that previous attempts had failed he stamped his foot, saying, "This fashion is

not that of our fathers," and as he did so the sick woman rose up. A young woman was found to be out of her mind in the garden ; she was singing a strange song. She was taken home to her village but did not improve. Buninia was consulted ; he enquired where she was taken ill and when they told him he said, "Take her back to the garden and she will get better." They did so, and the girl became normal again. The people than concluded that Buninia had a secret to unfold. Iaviriba and others came from their village to Buninia, and he told them the story about the visit of his father and the commission he had given him. The news was passed around and the people of the neighbouring villages came to hear the new teaching.

Buninia became the leader. He taught them the new taro song and delivered his message concerning the treatment and planting of taro. When they had taken their drums they began to dance; singing the new taro song. One person after another was overcome (or they imagined they were) and fell to the ground, some rolling about. It is possible they gave way to hysteria. However, this developed into a powerful sect or cult. Unlike the Baigona cult, in which a single man was initiated, the taro cult would initiate a whole village at once, including men, women and children of all ages. I have heard of whole families taking part in the dance and becoming possessed, falling to the ground and laying out as in a trance. Buninia and Iaviriba became very important. In one village in the Ambasi district a teacher watched the performance of introduction. The village women each held a cooking pot in which they had brought a single taro ; they were standing in one line. Iaviriba went forward, took the taro out of each pot and placed in each a bunch of the scented herb which he instructed was to be taken by the people and part of it planted in the garden and part to be worn hanging in their armlets. The taro was all gathered into one pot to be cooked and eaten. All was done with an air of great importance. Village people took on the cult wherever it was introduced and payments were made for its introduction.

On the Mamba I saw a procession on two occasions from the village to the gardens. Men were decorated out with plumage of birds,

young men and boys painted themselves. They each carried a drum and beat as they marched. One or two carried decorated spears. Two women danced before them, and as they reached the growing taro in the garden they anointed the leaves by dipping a bunch of the herb into the water in which portion of the herb had been boiled and sprinkled it over the growing taro, moving about the garden as they did so. I saw one garden in that district utterly spoiled by planting overmuch of the scented her. It had grown as a weed.



Papuan in Mourning.

When this cult was being introduced into villages near the Ambasi mission station it was met with some objection from the few Christian people there, and in two villages the Christian boys succeeded in keeping it away.

Some of the peculiar features of the cult were :—

(1) They invented a word of greeting. The spirit was supposed to come to their meetings, and they greeted it with exclamations of "Oro-da, oro-da, oro-da"—their usual greeting of welcome to visitors previous to this being "Oro,

oro, oro," the "da" being an addition. The new code of greeting was carried and introduced with the cult.

(2) A code of time beaten on the drum. At intervals during each night, sounding at evening, midnight, and in the early hours of the morning, by means of the drum, signals went on from house to house.

With regard to persons becoming possessed, it is interesting to recall that I once stood over a young man who had fallen while dancing: he was motionless and looked a little pale. The people sitting around him told me they put small pieces of taro into his mouth and they listened to what he said. One man standing by explained that each time the young man seemed to speak it was not the form which lay before them who was speaking, "but," he said, "it is the spirit of my father who is speaking." When I asked him who his father was he replied, "My father died long before you came here." It was evident he believed the young man in a trance was acting as a medium for the spirit of one who was dead.

Another case I met with was at Sangara, inland twenty-six miles from Buna. We had only begun mission work there in 1921. A school had been opened and we had done a little itinerating work in the village. We had taken services in the village and had only been at work there for a few months. The people were very primitive. One night my native teachers woke me up saying the people had come and wanted us to go to a man who had gone out of his mind. I told the teachers not to go, but to wait until the morning. The next morning we heard again of him and they said he was talking the same as the missionary. I asked "How?" and they answered, "He is pointing to the sky and using the word God." When a third request came to me I went to see if I could do anything for him. I asked on the way if the man had been taking part in a taro dance. They denied that he had, but when we reached the village I could see that they had been dancing. The patient was brought to me supported between his wife on one side and a man who held him up on the other. A crowd of young people were hanging round and following him. He himself looked fagged and worn, and was

calling out something to me which I failed to understand. He pointed to the sky and again to his throat and kept on trying to explain, though his mouth was open and his voice unintelligible. I asked those standing by what he was saying. They said, "He says that God put a rope round his neck and pulled him up, and he cannot speak as the rope has choked him."

His mention of God was strange. I wondered all along if this man was really possessed with an evil spirit. His sister, standing by, begged me to give him medicine to open his throat. I told her medicine would be no good. I asked him what he knew about God, but he still went on bellowing out and trying to explain. I then told him to stand still, and pointing up I said, "Think of God." We all knelt down, though some around us stood looking on. I prayed for a brief moment and then, rising up, I put my hands on his head and in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost I commanded the evil spirit to depart from him and never more return. I then stood back and to those few still kneeling I said, "That will do." As I said so the patient, still on his knees, spoke out plainly and asked what was the matter. Everyone was astonished. One man exclaimed, "Stand up, man; you have been mad all night." He again asked what it was all about, and standing up without support, he stood looking round on the many who came up gazing at him. There were questions put to him, and when he had beckoned to the people to be quiet he turned to me and explained that he had served in the Government police force for a number of years, that he had never taken part in the taro-dance before, and had never previously been like this. Beckoning for his drum to be brought and a piece of taro and a junk of meat, he put the drum under one arm and the meat and taro in his hand and showed how in that position he was dancing and beating his drum. Then he explained how he saw a rope come over his head and pull him round the neck. He said he saw men push him back again and he fell to the ground. The onlookers were still putting questions when I asked them to kneel again and thank God, which we did. I was awestricken myself and felt ashamed that we do not trust God more. I was thankful for his witness in helping us. The man has often told his experience since.