

THE LADY'S GEOGRAPHY.

[Kelly Plante](#) August 30, 2021

The MANNERS and CUSTOMS of the Inhabitants of AMBOYNA concluded.

THE People who were looked on as the Origines of these islands, but which it is probable came thither from other countries, were reckoned by the antient writers, who however knew very little of them, amongst the Anthropophagi, or devourers of human flesh; and indeed some recent examples seem to confirm that idea of them. The grossness of their manners was perfectly correspondent with their simplicity and their ignorance, which has however often been favourable to strangers, still is apparent in the fabulous and absurd relation, which the Amboynians themselves give in regard to their origin. Some of them claim descent from a crocodile, some from a serpent, and others from an eel, a tortoise, or even the old trunk of a tree; on which account they still respect their ancestors, in the creature from whom they pretend to have sprung; and if any one happens to kill one of these animals, they consider themselves in duty bound to avenge their deaths.

Ignorance, in all ages the mother of idolatry and

superstition, has introduced into the worship and manner of living of these islanders, an infinity of customs as whimsical as their prejudices are ridiculous. Demons partake of their principal cares, and are the continual objects of their inquietude. The meeting of a dead body going to the grave, or of a lame, or old man, if it happens to be the first live object seen in the day; the cry of night birds, or the flight of a crow over their houses, are with them so many fatal presages, whose effects they think themselves enabled to prevent, by instantly returning back, and making use of certain precautions. A few cloves of garlic, some little bits of pointed wood, and a knife, put into the hand or laid under the pillow of a child in the night time, are by them imagined a sufficient security against evil spirits. They never sell the first fish which they catch in new nets, being well persuaded that it is unlucky so to do, but either eat it themselves or else present it to some one. The women who go to market in the morning with certain commodities, always give the first piece for whatever price is offered them; without which they imagine they should have no business for the whole day after: also, whenever they have sold any thing, they immediately strike on their basket, crying out as loud as they can, "that's well."

It gives these people no kind of pleasure to commend their children; for on these occasions they are always apprehensive of some design to bewitch them, unless such

commendations are joined with certain expressions which may dispel all kind of diffidence. When a child sneezes, they make use of a sort of imprecation, by way of conjuring the evil spirit which is waiting for its life; and the least thing which ails a child they attribute to the power of witchcraft.

These ideas are so deeply rooted among the people of this nation, that it would be in vain to attempt destroying them. Even those who have embraced christianity are not exempt from them, although they are more circumspect on this head than the others. They will not admit into a sick person's room any one who has been before where there was a corpse. The women of the country will not eat a double pisang, nor any other double fruit; nor will a slave present her mistress with any such, for fear that afterwards, when she shall lie in, she should bring twins into the world, which would be an increase of domestic trouble.

When a woman dies either pregnant or in childbed, the Amboynians believe that she is changed into a daemon, of which they tell stories as absurd as the precautions which they take on such occasions to prevent this imaginary misfortune. Persons attacked by the small pox, would, according to them, run a very great risk, if not narrowly and closely watched, of being carried away on a branch of sagu, by the demon who communicated the distemper to them.

In short it would be endless to enter into a detail of all the

singular opinions of these people, with respect to an infinity of other things: but the most remarkable one, and which shews what an imagination once led to a wrong bias is capable of, is the notion they have formed to themselves concerning their hair, to which they attribute the hidden virtue of supporting a malefactor amidst the most cruel tortures, without a possibility of forcing a confession of his crime, unless by shaving him, which never fails instantly to produce that effect.

With so strong an inclination for superstition there can be no difficulty in conceiving that they should have a fondness for necromancy. This science resides in certain particular families who are in high renown amongst them; and although the rest hate them mortally, because they look on them as capable of doing them a great deal of mischief, yet they all have recourse to sorcery on every occasion where they think it can procure them any information which may favour their loves or aid any of their designs. This vice reigns principally among the women, who talk the most of it, and who are also the most credulous; but if their magic is more deeply examined it will be found that it most frequently consists only in the fatal art of subtilly preparing poison; and that every thing also in it is no more than a texture of skilful impostures.

Inconstancy, and a love of novelty, are the characteristics of

this people, in whom, therefore, there is no placing any great confidence. The Dutch have frequently experienced the necessity of depriving them of the means of following their natural bent, which incessantly leads them to form plots against them, and execute them with as much steadiness as secrecy whenever they find a favourable opportunity.

Too much severity, however, towards them would be equally dangerous: sensible of injuries, and vexations, vindictive and implacable, it is ever, better to please them by fair, than to enrage them by harsh treatment. Such moderation therefore is ever strongly recommended in the instructions which the company sends to its officers; and it were to be wished for their own sakes that they conformed thereto with more exactness than they generally do.