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VIEWS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

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VIEWS
IN
ETHNOGRAPHY, THE CLASSIFICATION OF LAN-
GUAGES, THE PROGRESS OF CIVILIZATION,
AND
THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MAN.*

Little

By CHARLES T. BEKE, Esq. F. S. A. Pk. O.

From the Edin. New Phil. Jour. for April 1835.

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In the remarks which will be offered in the present paper, it is not intended to enter upon the question, which has so often and so ably been discussed by physiologists and natural historians, as to whether the numerous and strongly marked diversities in the human race have proceeded from distinct stocks, or whether they are derived from a common origin, and are consequently to be regarded as forming merely varieties of one and the same species: it is sufficient to state, that, for the purposes of this disquisition, the latter hypothesis is adopted, as being that which appears to be the more in accordance with reason, and to have on its side the greater weight of authority.

It is also scarcely necessary to do more than allude to the opinion generally entertained by physiologists, historians, jurists, political economists, and others, who have investigated and treated of the subject of the primitive condition of man, and the rise and progress of society; that, in the first ages, the human race existed in the lowest state of civilization; namely, that of the mere consumer of the spontaneous productions of nature; and that mankind thence progressively advanced through the

~~This paper was to have been read at the meeting of the British Association, at Edinburgh, last September, but did not reach the Secretary in time.~~



several conditions of the hunter, the herdsman, and the agriculturist; or through states nearly corresponding with them;—until, in this last state, an absolute property having been acquired in the land, which was then first subjected to cultivation, the residences of mankind became fixed and permanent; whilst, by the same progressive advancement, societies were formed, which at first were simply patriarchal, but which, from their subsequent increase and union, required the institution of laws for their government and mutual protection; whence ultimately resulted the establishment of the various forms and conditions of civil rule.

This opinion of the gradual progress of civilization, whatever ground it may have gained, is, at the best, purely hypothetical. So far, indeed, is it from being borne out by facts, that it is actually at variance with the evidence of all history and experience; for in the early historical remains, whether real or fabulous, of all nations,—with the remarkable exception of those of the progenitors of the Israelites,—we find that instruction and improvement are considered to have been introduced from an extrinsic source, by individuals possessed of a higher degree of culture; whilst among those savage people with whom civilization may be said not to exist, there is not manifested even the remotest tendency towards progressive improvement, from the exercise of that unaided reason, which, as the characteristic of the human race, has been deemed to be entirely sufficient for that purpose.

It is to be considered, then, whether the direct converse of the hypothesis here adverted to ought not rather to be maintained; and whether, in fact, it will not be more in accordance with the truth to assert, that the savage and uncultivated condition of mankind, which has usually been designated *the state of nature*, is, in reality, nothing else than a degeneration from a previous social state, in which a high degree of culture and of artificial attainments were possessed; and that, consequently, this latter condition (and not the former,) ought to be regarded as the primitive condition of the present human race.

However paradoxical such an hypothesis may at first sight appear, there is, in reality, nothing unreasonable in it. If we consider the history of the European settlements in the New

World, and especially in North America, we find the fact to be, that some of the members of a previous social state, which had existed in a highly civilized condition during several ages, arrived in that continent; where their descendants, and especially those who spread themselves most widely over the newly settled countries, speedily degenerated from the cultivation of the parent stock. Could it so have happened, that all further communication with the Old World had ceased, the deterioration which had commenced would unquestionably have proceeded still farther; but this process has been checked by the continual arrivals of fresh settlers from the mother country, and the constant communications between the two continents, which have, in a great measure, maintained an equality between their respective inhabitants. But let it be supposed that these European settlers in North America had been the only remains of a former race of mankind: it is evident that, whatever in the course of ages might be the character and condition of their descendants,—even if some of them in the extreme western provinces of America, or in other countries into which they might have spread, had become so debased and brutalized as not to be recognised as belonging to the same race,—still, in the consideration of their history, and in the endeavour to trace to their pristine state, their laws, their customs, and their religion, however altered, however perverted or corrupted they might become, it would be utterly inconsistent that reference should (in the first instance at least,) be made to any other stock than the European colonists from whom they had sprung, or to any other condition of society than that previous *artificial* one of which those Europeans themselves had been members.

May not, then, the history of the whole human race be considered in a similar point of view to that in which the history of the North American colonists has thus hypothetically been regarded? If we look to the histories, traditions, and fables, of all nations, we find that they all coincide in expressly recording or in alluding to a cataclysm,—the particulars of which are the most fully and circumstantially detailed in the Sacred Writings of the Israelitish nation,—which overwhelmed the whole of mankind, with the exception of a few favoured individuals, who became the founders of the subsequent human race: and if, therefore,

we only admit the fact of the occurrence of such an event, we can at once understand how the condition of the first ancestors of the present race of mankind was not a natural but an artificial one, derived from the previous social state of the antediluvian world. Hence we can have no difficulty in conceiving how the social condition of man may have fallen from the culture of that artificial primitive state to the condition of the uncultivated savage, through all those intermediate stages of civilization which, according to the contrary hypothesis, have been regarded as the steps by which man has progressed upwards.

The process of this declension in civilization may be thus briefly stated. When mankind first began to separate, and to be "scattered abroad upon the face of all the earth," it is manifest that the amount of knowledge in every department of pursuit must have diminished at every step that was taken from the centre, unless each tribe could have ensured to itself (which would have scarcely been possible) the possession of individuals imbued with the *aggregate* of the acquirements of the parent society. Knowledge can in no case remain perfectly stationary: it must either advance or recede: and the latter must universally have been the case in the first instance, and must have continued to be so, until the numbers of mankind had sufficiently increased to allow them again to begin to accumulate—each nation in its own particular sphere of acquirements—the knowledge which had been retained by direct transmission from the common centre, or which had subsequently been derived from the circumstances in which they had respectively been placed.

Subsequently to the dispersion of mankind from Shinar, the pressure of population would doubtless have been the primary cause of the general distribution of the human race over the earth, and of their consequent descent in the scale of civilization. To this, however, are to be added disputes among neighbouring people, too often ending in warfare; the dislike of some races to the countries in which they had voluntarily settled, or into which they had been compelled to migrate; and the desire, or probably the necessity, of obtaining possessions more suited to their inclinations or their requirements. As the social tie gradually became weaker, the growth of erratic habits, and the consequent rapid declension in civilization which universally attends the settling of new lands, would operate; leading at

length to a confirmed nomadic state. In any of these intermediate stages of degradation, however, further deterioration may have been prevented, and an impulse may indeed have been given to a progressive state of improvement, by any causes, whether natural or artificial, which would prevent the further disintegration of society, and bring its members into more intimate connexion, so as to preserve the means for the mutual importation of knowledge. Thus, in maritime countries, where the further progress and dispersion of mankind has been stopped by the ocean ;—in islands ;—in cities, where men have been congregated together for the purposes of commerce ;—and even in rich alluvial countries, of which, by means of agricultural knowledge, the products have afforded subsistence to a dense population ;—civilization, so far from remaining stationary, has generally continued to advance : whilst in champaign, barren, and desert countries, on the contrary, where nomadic habits have been induced, the people have descended in the scale of civilization in an equal ratio to the quality of the country, and its means of affording subsistence, operating conjointly with its extent, and the consequent absence of the necessity for its inhabitants to adopt any means of support, beyond those which have spontaneously presented themselves, and which have thence become congenial to them ; such as the pasturing of their flocks in countries sufficiently fertile for that purpose, and the hunting of wild animals, where the physical condition of the country has not been adapted to the support of tame ones.

From this last state,—in which, owing to the loss of the knowledge of accumulating capital, whether in the form of money or of merchandize, and ultimately even in that of cattle, a large tract of country would become necessary for the support of a much smaller number of persons ; and in which also, from the disintegration of society, the traditive knowledge of each successive generation would become less and less,—the progress to the condition of the mere savage, or man in the lowest state of cultivation, is easy to be traced. In cold and inhospitable countries, however, where the uncivilized races inhabiting them would be compelled to use every exertion in order to procure a scanty and precarious subsistence, the lowest mechanical arts would still be retained, until the inclemencies and privations to which those

racés were subjected had caused their extinction (a result which there is good reason to believe has in many instances taken place); whilst in more genial climates, where the spontaneous productions of nature were sufficient for the support of mankind, the absence of motives for exertion would lead to the total declension of their debased inhabitants, so that at length they would become almost assimilated with the brute creation.

The hypothesis which is thus advocated removes very many of the difficulties which, under the opposite one, have attended the consideration of primeval history; and it more especially accounts for the existence, in the earliest ages, of nations whose civilization and power, even allowing to them the utmost precocity, were always incompatible with what was conceived to have been at the same periods the state of society generally.

A still more important result is, that we have afforded to us a satisfactory means of explaining the existence of the various diversities in the human species; which diversities, so far from being referrible to any permanent distinctive characters, or even to the action of climate and other physical causes alone, must principally be derived from the operation of changes in the moral and intellectual state of the various races. Indeed, it must never be lost sight of, that man is a reasonable being, and not a mere animal; and that consequently it is absolutely necessary, in all investigations of his natural history, to consider him not *physically* only, but also *psychologically*. *See the Index of vol. 3, p. 10*

Upon the hypothesis, then, that the origin of the numerous and widely differing races of man, is to be referred to a single parent stock possessed of a high degree of cultivation, the following principle presents itself, namely, That (allowing for circumstances by which the progress of deterioration may have been accelerated or retarded, or otherwise modified,) the culture or the degradation of an aboriginal race * will be in proportion to the geographical distance of its residence from the common centre of dispersion. For example, if we take the primitive residence of the post-diluvian race to have been in the north-western portion of Mesopotamia—the reasons for which location

* By the term "aboriginal race" is simply meant the people who were the earliest inhabitants of any country.

are given at length in (the work,* of which this paper is designed to make known the principal conclusions with respect to philology, ethnography, and the natural history of man, — it will be seen that the countries more immediately surrounding that central point, namely, Assyria, Chaldea, Egypt, Phœnicia, and Asia Minor, are those whose inhabitants were in the earliest ages possessed of the highest degree of culture; whilst, on the other hand, at the points most distant from the same centre, the Papuans, the Hottentots, the Esquimaux, and other savage races, have degenerated almost to the lowest state compatible with the retention of rational endowments.

A second principle resulting from the same hypothesis is, that (except where invasions have introduced foreign tribes, as in the case of the Hindoos in India,) the more degenerate races whose positions are considerably removed from the centre, must have derived their origin from that centre through the medium of the more civilized people geographically situate between it and them, and must consequently have received from them their languages, their religion, and their customs; although, in consequence of the recession from the centre of these more degenerate races, and their gradual corruption and debasement, the changes in all those particulars, as well as in their physical structure and appearance, may have become such as to render it a task of the utmost difficulty to trace the resemblance and the connexion between them and their more civilized ancestors. Thus the primitive inhabitants of the whole of Southern and Eastern Asia must have sprung from ancestors who originally occupied the countries situate to the northward of the Persian Gulf; so the aborigines of Africa must be descended from the earliest settlers of Arabia, Ethiopia, and Egypt; whilst the tribes who peopled the islands and continent of Europe, and who from thence also spread themselves eastward into the northern portions of Asia, must have had their origin in Asia Minor.

It is also to be inferred, that, where different races have, in their corresponding removal from the centre, undergone a corresponding degradation, at the same time that they have been subjected to the operation of similar physical conditions, the results will be analogous in those races, both with respect to

let * *Origines Biblicæ, or Researches in Primeval History, vol. i. London, 1834.*

their physical conformation, and as regards their moral and intellectual character. This is remarkably exemplified in the separate existence of the Hottentots of the south of Africa, and of the Papuans or Asiatic Negroes; which two races—in spite even of the authority of Cuvier himself—cannot, without violating the most obvious principles of science and of history, be referred to the same class, but must be regarded as “deviations from the type of the species by different routes, in *parallel* extreme states of degradation.”

I will now attempt briefly to trace the outline of a classification of the various races of mankind, in accordance with the principles which have thus been enunciated. In doing so, I shall avail myself of the aid afforded by the numerous additions which, during the last few years, have been made to our philological knowledge, arising principally and more especially from the improvements which have taken place in the science of philology itself. It may indeed be asserted, that, in the present condition of physiology and of the natural history of man, the affinities of languages, if they be not the sole guides which we possess for enabling us to arrange the varieties of the human species in an order at all approximating to the truth, must at least be regarded as the only one upon which any real dependence is to be placed.*

With the assistance, then, of this guide, we may divide the races of mankind into the following principal classes. The first is that which is composed of the nations to whom belong the various languages of cognate origin, distinguished by the common designation of Indo-Germanic, or Indo-European. These consist of the Sanscrit, the Zend or ancient Persic, the Phrygian, the Lydian, the Greek, the Latin and its derivations, the lan-

* The importance of this guide has recently been most ably exemplified by two distinguished ethnographers, namely, Dr Prichard and M. A. W. de Schlegel: by the former in a “Comparative Review of Philological and Physical Researches, as applied to the History of the Human Species,” read before the British Association for the Advancement of Science, at the meeting at Oxford in 1832, an abstract of which is printed in the Report of the First and Second Meetings of the Association, pp. 529–544; and by the latter in a paper entitled “De l’Origine des Hindous,” read before the Royal Society of Literature on the 20th November 1833, and published in the Transactions of that Society, vol. ii. pp. 405–446.

guages of the great Germanic family, the Celtic, and the Slavonian.

Of these, the various languages of Europe and Asia-Minor may be regarded as aboriginal; that is to say, as having been spoken by the people who were the first inhabitants of those portions of the globe. On the other hand, the Sanscrit is admitted to be the language, not of the aborigines, but of a race of conquerors, who entered the Indian peninsula from the north-west, and extirpated or drove southward before them the native races. In like manner must it be considered that the Zend (the intimate connexion of which language with the Sanscrit is well established,) was not the primitive language of Persia, but was introduced into that country also by the same exotic race, whose original seat must be looked for in the mountainous country to the *west* of the Caspian.

To this class of languages, and to the people among whom the various dialects of them are spoken,—which people are, in the present day, spread not only over Europe and a considerable portion of Asia, but, by means of European settlements and conquests, over the vast continent of America also, and who have likewise taken root in what may be regarded as a fifth quarter of the globe, namely, Australia,—the designation of Japetic or Japhthitish may, with the strictest propriety, be applied.

The next grand division of mankind is composed (in part) of the nations to whom belong the so-called Semitic or Aramean languages; namely, the Hebrew, the Arabic, the Chaldee, and the Syriac.

The reason of this nomenclature is, that the Hebrew and the Arabic are the languages spoken by the people who are regarded as the descendants of Abraham; whilst the Chaldee and Syriac are considered to have been vernacular in Mesopotamia and Syria among the descendants of Aram; both those patriarchs being of the posterity of Shem, the eldest son of Noah. Philologists have already discovered, however, that affinities exist between these so-called Semitic tongues and other languages, such as the Phœnician, the Coptic, the Geez, and the Amharic(?) of Abyssinia, and the Berber of Northern Africa, to which the same designation cannot, with any correctness of nomenclature,

be applied, and which are, in reality, entitled to the appellation of *Hamitish* alone.

Since then the languages spoken by the descendants of Isaac and of Ishmael, the sons of Abraham,—namely, the Hebrew and the Arabic,—are thus found to be cognate with those which are so widely spread among the descendants of Ham, it would seem most reasonable to imagine that the former languages, instead of being the representatives of the Shemitish tongue which was spoken by Abraham either in Chaldea or Aram, are the Hamitish languages which were vernacular in the countries in which that patriarch and his descendants took up their residence, and were, in fact, acquired by them during their residence therein, to the exclusion of their paternal tongue. This hypothesis has been advocated at length in the *Origines Biblicæ*. In the same work it has also been attempted to be shewn that the so-called Chaldee is merely a corruption of the Hebrew spoken by the Jews during their captivity in Babylon, and not the native language which at that epoch was vernacular in Babylon itself; which language, from the few proper names met with in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the remains of it preserved in the cuneiform characters (if rightly interpreted), was of Japhthitish origin, and closely related to, if not identical with, the Zend. In like manner is the Syriac to be regarded as only a further degradation and corruption of the Hebrew. Under no circumstances, indeed, can it claim to be the primitive native tongue of the countries in which it was spoken about the period of the commencement of the Christian era; for, subjected as they had been to repeated and continued foreign invasion and occupation, it is impossible that any native language should, during more than twenty centuries, have continued to exist without very considerable alterations, if, indeed, it must not have been altogether extirpated.

The appellation of Semitic or Shemitish, as applied to these languages, must therefore be superseded by that of Hamitish; under which designation will have to be comprised not only the Canaanitish, Arabian, and African languages which have been enumerated, but also the whole of the native dialects spoken throughout the continent of Africa; all the inhabitants of which continent must, agreeably to the hypothesis advocated in this

paper, have derived their origin from the centre, through the medium of the more civilized countries of Arabia and Egypt. ~~To the same source is probably to be referred the Basque language, which may readily be conceived to have been introduced into Spain by an aboriginal people, from the northern coast of Africa; and should any other dialects, spoken along the western shores of Europe, be found to be cognate with the Basque, to them also must the like origin be attributed.~~

The remaining class of mankind which will here be mentioned, is that of which the Chinese, and the various Indo-Chinese nations, may in the present day be regarded as the principal representatives.

In tracing back these people to their common origin with the rest of mankind, in accordance with the foregoing hypothesis, it is manifest that their progenitors must, in the earliest ages, have occupied the more western portions of Asia, and that they were, in fact, of like origin with the aborigines of the Peninsula of India, of whom traces are yet left, in the Bheels and other savage races scattered over various portions of that peninsula, and in the people found in greater numbers towards its southern extremity; whose languages, of a totally distinct character from the Sanscrit and its derivative dialects, plainly point to the separate origin of those people from that of the Japhthitish Hindoos.

It is to this division of mankind that I conceive the designation of Semitic or Shemitish ought properly to be applied; and within this division must also be comprised the whole of the aboriginal inhabitants of the Indian Archipelago, of Polynesia, and likewise of America, ~~excepting probably the tribes who inhabit the extreme north of that continent;~~ but upon the subject of these people I will refrain from enlarging, as the grounds upon which the classification of the varieties of the human species has been attempted in this paper are intended to be essentially philological, and that department of knowledge does not (as far as I am acquainted with it,) afford sufficient data upon which the proposed classification should be thus far extended.*

* I am happy in meeting with a remarkable confirmation of my views respecting the connection between the languages of Eastern Asia and America, (and also upon many other important subjects,) in Dr Lang's *View of the Origin and Migrations of the Polynesian Nation*, which work was published almost simultaneously with my *Origines Biblicæ*. February 19. 1835.

When, however, our philological knowledge shall become yet further enlarged, it will be seen whether or not all the languages of the earth, and the people speaking them, are referrible to the three distinct divisions which have thus been enumerated; and it will also be definitely ascertained, whether these divisions of languages are, like the distinct races of mankind to whom they belong, reducible to one common source. With respect to the former of these questions, there is good reason to believe that, sooner or later, it will be determined in the affirmative; but, with regard to the latter of them, the opinion of philologists is already very decidedly in the negative. Speaking of the so-called Semitic (Hamitish) languages, M. de Schlegel remarks, "Elles sont à part de la famille Indo-Germanique. Aucun tour de force étymologique ne peut les ramener à une origine commune; les vains efforts des Hellénistes Hébraïsans sont condamnés pour toujours."* If the truth of this representation be established, we shall be compelled to have recourse to an original formation of more than one primitive tongue; an hypothesis which, in reality, is attended with no greater difficulty than that of the original formation of a single language.

LONDON, 30th August 1834.

* "De l'Origine des Hindous."

