

MASSAQUOI AND THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA.

AN ECHO OF THE PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS.

BY C. O. BORING.

A RECENT series of experiences has brought to mind one of the signal events of the Parliament of Religions in 1893. Those familiar with the addresses of notables on that occasion will probably recall Momolu Massaquoi who represented Liberia. This young man appeared in the robes of an African chieftain and was not only spectacular but attracted attention by his figure and intelligence.

A brief history of Massaquoi might be interesting at this time. His mother was chieftainess, or as we say queen, of the Vai tribes consisting of several associated tribes situated about five days journey east of Freetown. When twelve years of age he had his choice of accepting his mother's religion, Voodooism, or his father's religion, Mohammedanism. However, he had met a lady missionary of the established Church of England and had been warmly attracted to Christianity, and therefore at this crisis chose to abandon his country for the time being. He made his way through the desperate forests (and Sir Samuel Baker says they are indeed desperate) which lie between his country and the coast. There he succeeded in reaching an American vessel whose captain took pity on him and at his earnest request carried him to America.

The captain brought him to the Bishop of Baltimore of the Episcopal Church, who sent him to the Gammon School at Nashville, Tenn., a Methodist institution for colored students, where he received a liberal education.

While attending the Parliament of Religions he was a guest at my home for a time and I enjoyed my association with him. He gave me a number of illustrations of their life and manners and among other incidents related one which I believe worth repeating.



MOMOLU MASSAQUOI.
From a recent photograph.

The Voodoo doctors were greatly perplexed and angered by the impression Christianity was making upon their people. Three of these wise men met by appointment and told the people that it had been stated by the missionaries that Jesus was three days in the grave and then arose from the dead. They would demonstrate that they were more powerful than Jesus for one of their number would be forty days in the grave and would then rise from the dead. After a series of incantations and ceremonials one of their number was selected and was put into a deep sleep. His tongue was turned back in his mouth, and the body being now in a perfectly rigid and apparently lifeless condition, he was placed in a box. The people were requested to bring stones to cover this box and then to set a guard so that there might be no deception. At the end of forty days the stones were removed, the box opened, and the Voodoo priest taken from it. Various incantations were resorted to, and then one blew into his nostrils and commanded him to return to life. To the great surprise and terror of the natives he did so.

When this anecdote was reported to Professor Starr he stated that he had heard similar stories regarding India and that in every case the tongue was always reported as being turned back in the throat.¹

During the Parliament of Religions, the Liberian government cabled Massaquoi that his mother had been killed and it was necessary for him to return. I received one letter from him after he had

¹ The experiment of burying people alive in a state of stupor is founded on a principle similar to the hibernation of bears and other animals during winter; but it is difficult to perform in so far as this state is not a state of life but of suspension of life which has been called lifeless, but not dead. This suspension of the vital functions is not absolutely complete but nearly so. The history of fakirs, by no means religious or even pious men, has been repeated on good evidence, and many of their tricks have been reviewed in detail in a former number of *The Monist* (X, p. 481) by the German Sanskritist, Dr. Richard von Garbe, in an article "On the Voluntary Trance of Indian Fakirs." These fakirs who allowed themselves to be buried for a money consideration, after fasting for a time, would subject their bowels to a rigorous expurgation so as not to leave the slightest vestige of material that could cause putrefaction, and then would cause all the openings of the body to be closed with wax and finally the tongue to be put back in the mouth, so as even to cut off the air supply from the windpipe. In this state the man was put into a coffin, buried, and grass was sown over the grave. Sentinels were kept at the grave day and night, and among the witnesses of one case in particular there were British officers and magistrates of high standing. After a fortnight, or even longer, the fakir was exhumed, and the resuscitation to life began with gentle massage and warming the body. The first symptom of returning life appeared when the wax stoppers blew out of the ears with a slight explosion and the tongue regained its natural position, whereupon the lifeless fakir began to breathe again. Nourishment was given carefully, beginning with very small doses, and the buried man would live many years and never show signs of having received any injury.—ED.

returned to his tribe, which was to the effect that the people had been greatly broken up by the inroads of savage tribes. He had been furnished firearms by the Liberian government and was drilling his people in their use with the hope of repelling invaders.

We heard nothing from him after that letter until this winter. When Prof. Frederick Starr of the University of Chicago started for Africa I wrote him urging that he attempt to find Massaquoi, and by a curious accident he did so just as he was about to leave Liberia. The following letter relates the incident:

“Freetown, S. L., Oct. 31, 1912.

“My dear Mr. Boring:

“Just by chance, the last day I was in Liberia, I had a long talk with Mr. Massaquoi—Prince M. of whom you wrote me. Depending upon the information I had, I wrote discouragingly to you in June. Prince Massaquoi is all right, although he does not use his title. He ruled his people for quite ten years after you knew of him as Paramount Chief. He now lives in Monrovia, and is the second man in the Department of the Interior—well known as a faithful, hard working and reliable official. He is a man of great influence with his people, the Vai, and the government depends much upon him. When I realized who he was, I got out your letter and read it to him to his sincere pleasure.

“Very truly yours,

FREDERICK STARR.”

Two months later I received a letter from Massaquoi himself, written from the office of the Interior Department of the Republic of Liberia:

“Monrovia, December 31, 1912.

“Dear Mr. Boring:

“I was much pleased when calling upon Professor Starr, to be handed a letter written by you in which you inquired of me! I have felt all along that some of my American friends still remember me but not knowing their addresses I could not write them.

“Since I left Chicago many changes have taken place. I succeeded both my mother and father in different chiefdoms—my father’s country being the largest. I removed there (in the British Protectorate) but for what Great Britain calls “political reasons” I was deposed by the British Government in 1906.

“I am now in Liberia where my late mother ruled a (native)

tribe, and his Excellency the President has appointed me a native expert and Assistant Secretary of the Interior.

"When I hear from you, I shall write again. Professor Starr will show you a letter on some business which I trust you will find time to help attend.² I am trying to turn many people to America if possible, and this is one of the ways to do it.

"With kind regards to self and family, I am, dear Mr. Boring,
 "Yours sincerely,
 "M. MASSAQUOI."

Upon Professor Starr's return to Chicago I met him by appointment and we reviewed many incidents. He has also furnished me with an interesting communication by Massaquoi to the *Journal of the African Society* with reference to the character writing of the Vai tribes.

The Vai characters which they use in writing are phonetic and extremely characteristic. Massaquoi informed Professor Starr that the people generally were well acquainted with these characters and read the Koran and the Bible readily in them. He tells an interesting anecdote of Dassia, a chieftain of the Tama country in Liberia, who once visited a school at Cape Mount where Massaquoi was teaching a Vai class. A copy of a portion of the Iliad was handed to Dassia which he readily perused and was greatly affected by it. The tears rolled down his cheeks while he turned to the teacher and made the inquiry which thousands of students of all languages have asked: "And where were Helen and Paris all of this time?"

The family of Massaquoi inherited the chieftainship and were an old family who had been long upon the ground. In explaining the classification of his country Massaquoi tells the story of the Maui tribes (Mandingo) who once occupied the plain from Tuba to Wasara and beyond. They were a tall, handsome and enterprising race of people with a knowledge of agriculture, cattle raising etc. They heard stories about the great body of salt water and started an emigration to it. On the way the tribes divided and one portion found the sea. One of these thrust his spear into it and said, *Mausa*

² It seems that in Liberia there is a species of pygmy hippopotamus weighing only about 400 pounds, though otherwise identical in character with the larger form. It is therefore a real curiosity that would be appreciated in menageries connected with circuses and municipal parks. These animals are easily cared for and readily domesticated when they become tame. They were formerly very difficult to capture, but Massaquoi has learned an easier method and would therefore undertake to furnish one to any city or firm that would desire it. He estimates that the cost of procuring and transporting one animal to New York would be about \$8000.

mu ila goi, "Truly thou art a ruler." This was the founder of the family which afterward was known as "Massaquoi" and which became the ruling dynasty of the northern part of the Vai territory known as the Galinois country. Other branches settled elsewhere but they have all remained acquainted with one another.

When Professor Starr met Massaquoi in Monrovia he learned much that was of great interest to me and will probably be to others at this time. In Monrovia they are much alarmed over the possibility that the government of the United States under the new administration may practically abandon Liberia to its fate. This Massaquoi states would not only be a great wrong in itself but would result in much harm to that country.

In order to comprehend the situation it must be understood that there are now living in Liberia about 12,000 fairly educated persons who are descendants of the original American negroes sent to Liberia. In addition there are about 30,000 Africans who have been affected by the outside world, making in all about 42,000 persons who form the ruling and advanced class in that country. Behind these are about 1,000,000 natives who look to Liberia for their protection, for *Liberia is the lone star of liberty in Africa*. If it were understood that the United States had withdrawn its protection, either Germany, France or England would certainly make some excuse to intervene and possibly to take possession of that land.

* * *

Since writing the above, a significant despatch from Monrovia under date of February 5, informs us that the Liberian troops under the command of Major Ballard, a United States officer loaned to the Liberian government, defeated the Kroo natives at Rock Call. The same despatch states that "the recalcitrant Kroos were responsible for the recent arrival of the German gunboats Panther and Eber, to defend German colonists who had informed the German government of their danger."

In all probability another and more important reason for the presence of gunboats at this time is the anticipated change in the attitude of the new administration of our government upon the question of defence of Liberia from so-called civilized nations. Let us remember that England has a force on the east, France on the north in Niger and on the south in Sierra Leone. Not alone to save Liberia from annihilation, but also possibly to save a war of nations our policy should be a determined stand for the little republic of black men.

A word of warning at this time may be very valuable, and this Professor Starr is giving to all he can reach. We sincerely hope that what he says may be heard and that our nation may find it possible to protect this country from invasion in the future better than it has in the past.