

XVIII. *Account of a Flag representing the Introduction of the Caste of Chalias or Cinnamon-peelers, into Ceylon. By Sir ALEXANDER JOHNSTON, Vice-President R.A.S., F.R.S.*

To GRAVES C. HAUGHTON, Esq. M.A., F.R.S., *Honorary Secretary to the Royal Asiatic Society.*

SIR:

I beg leave to send you an account of the painting upon cloth which I presented to the Society some time ago,* and which is a *fac-simile* of a very ancient banner of the caste of *Chalias*, or cinnamon-peelers, on the island of Ceylon.

The present numbers and importance of these people, render their history a subject of curious research. As the Cingalese inhabitants of Ceylon were, previous to the thirteenth century, ignorant of the art of weaving fine cloth, which was then known to the Hindu inhabitants of the peninsula of India, the kings of Kandy offered great rewards to any of their subjects who would bring over from the peninsula some weavers for the purpose of introducing that art into Ceylon.

Early in the thirteenth century, a Mahommedan merchant of Barbareen, a port between Colombo and Point de Galle, on the south-west coast of the island, induced by the offer, brought over eight weavers from the peninsula in one of his trading vessels, and landed them at Barbareen. On their arrival, the then king of Kandy received them with great kindness, had them married to women of distinction, gave them houses and lands, established a manufactory for them in the vicinity of his palace, and conferred the highest honours upon their chief.

The descendants of these persons, who were called by the other natives of the country *Chalias*, having in the course of two centuries become numerous and powerful, excited the jealousy of the Kandian government, and were compelled by the king of the country, as a punishment for some alleged

* This painting was presented to the Society at the general meeting on the 17th of November 1827. A reduced *fac-simile* of it in lithography was delivered with the 1st Part of the 3d volume of the *Transactions*.

offence against his authority, to quit the interior, and settle near the southwest coast of the island, in the district where cinnamon grows to perfection; and there, as the condition upon which they were allowed some government lands, to peel and prepare for the government, without pay, as much cinnamon annually as it might require.

The kings of Kandy, so long as they retained the sovereignty of the country, exacted rigidly this severe duty from the *Chalias*: the Portuguese, Dutch, and British Governments, as they severally succeeded to that sovereignty, continued to require the same duty from them. In 1809, on being appointed Chief Justice and President of his Majesty's Council on Ceylon, I felt it to be my duty to point out to the late Marquis of Londonderry, the then Secretary of State for the Colonies, the injustice and impolicy of this system; and urged his Lordship to instruct the local Government of Ceylon, instead of exacting forced labour from the *Chalias*, to pay them as they did other free labourers for their labour. Lord Londonderry agreed perfectly with me upon the subject, but his resignation of office shortly after, prevented him from carrying my proposal into effect. Lately, however, in consequence of a representation from the Commissioners of Inquiry, his Majesty has made an Order in Council, prohibiting the local Government of Ceylon from exacting forced labour from the *Chalias*, and directing it to pay them as other free labourers are paid, for any service which the Government may require from them.

This painting on cloth forms part of a collection which I made while I was on Ceylon, of historical materials for illustrating the history of the different castes, and of the different arts which prevail amongst the natives of the island. RÁJÁ PAXIE, the late *Mudeliar*, or native chief of the *Chalias*, who was one of the best-informed men in Ceylon, and who gave me the painting, told me that he believed the original to be the most ancient painting in the island, and to represent the three following events which occurred on the arrival of the eight weavers, the ancestors of the *Chalias*, on Ceylon. The first, that of one of the eight having been killed with an arrow by a soldier of the king of Kandy as he was in the act of jumping out of the vessel into the sea to make his escape, in consequence of his being panic-struck at the novel appearance of the Cingalese inhabitants of the island, who were standing on the beach. The second, that of the peculiar manner in which the seven remaining weavers were, as a mark of respect, brought on shore, according to the custom of the country, upon

the backs of the sailors; and the third, that of the public procession which took place when the king of Kandy conferred upon the chief of the weavers some houses, lands, and a manufactory for the use of himself and his countrymen in the neighbourhood of the royal palace; and the honours of wearing a gold chain, travelling in a palanqueen, and having an umbrella and a *talpát* leaf carried over his head whenever he appeared in public.

Such a painting is an object of curiosity to the orientalist, because it shews him the state of the art of painting amongst the Cingalese in the thirteenth century; the manner in which they availed themselves of that art in recording events of importance to their country and to their caste; the form and rigging of the vessels which were built by the natives of India in a remote age; the time at which, the country from whence, and the persons by whom, the ancestors of the *Chalias* and the art of weaving fine cloth were introduced into Ceylon; the importance attached to this event by the kings of Kandy; the ceremonies which were observed by them in granting honours and distinctions to any of their subjects; and the costume worn at that period by natives of different castes at all public processions.

I have the honour to be,

SIR,

Your most obedient and faithful servant,

ALEXANDER JOHNSTON.