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Author(s): A. L. Kroeber

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TOTEM AND TABOO: AN ETHNOLOGIC PSYCHOANALYSIS

By A. L. KROEBER

THE recent translation into English of Freud's interpretation of a number of ethnic phenomena¹ offers an occasion to review the startling series of essays which first appeared in *Imago* a number of years ago. There is the more reason for this because, little as this particular work of Freud has been noticed by anthropologists, the vogue of the psychoanalytic movement founded by him is now so strong that the book is certain to make an impression in many intelligent circles.

Freud's principal thesis emerges formally only toward the end of his book, but evidently has controlled his reasoning from the beginning, although perhaps unconsciously. This thesis is (p. 258) "that the beginnings of religion, ethics, society, and art meet in the Oedipus complex." He commences with the inference of Darwin, developed farther by Atkinson, that at a very early period man lived in small communities consisting of an adult male and a number of females and immature individuals, the males among the latter being driven off by the head of the group as they became old enough to evoke his jealousy. To this Freud adds the Robertson Smith theory that sacrifice at the altar is the essential element in every ancient cult, and that such sacrifice goes back to a killing and eating by the clan of its totem animal, which was regarded as of kin with the clan and its god, and whose killing at ordinary times was therefore strictly forbidden. The Oedipus complex directed upon these two hypotheses welds them into a mechanism with which it is possible to explain most of the essentials of human civilization, as follows. The expelled sons of the primal horde finally banded

¹ *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Life of Savages and Neurotics*, by Sigmund Freud. Authorized English Translation, with Introduction, by A. A. Brill. New York, Moffat Yard & Co., 1918.

together and slew their father, ate him, and appropriated the females. In this they satisfied the same hate impulse that is a normal infantile trait and the basis of most neuroses, but which often leads to unconscious "displacement" of feelings, especially upon animals. At this point, however, the ambivalence of emotions proved decisive. The tender feelings which had always persisted by the side of the brothers' hate for their father, gained the upper hand as soon as this hate was satisfied, and took the form of remorse and sense of guilt. "What the father's presence had formerly prevented they themselves now prohibited in the psychic situation of 'subsequent obedience' which we know so well from psychoanalysis. They undid their deed by declaring that the killing of the father substitute, the totem, was not allowed, and renounced the fruits of their deed by denying themselves the liberated women. Thus they created the two fundamental taboos of totemism" (p. 236). These are "the oldest and most important taboos" of mankind: "namely not to kill the totem animal and to avoid sexual intercourse with totem companions of the other sex" (p. 53), alongside which many if not all other taboos are "secondary, displaced and distorted." The renunciation of the women or incest prohibition had also this practical foundation: that any attempt to divide the spoils, when each member of the band really wished to emulate the father and possess all the women, would have disrupted the organization which had made the brothers strong (p. 237). The totem sacrifice and feast reflected the killing and eating of the father, assuaged "the burning sense of guilt," and brought about "a kind of reconciliation" or agreement by which the father-totem granted all wishes of his sons in return for their pledge to honor his life (p. 238). "All later religions prove to be . . . reactions aiming at the same great event with which culture began and which ever since has not let mankind come to rest" (p. 239).

This mere extrication and presentation of the framework of the Freudian hypothesis on the origin of socio-religious civilization is probably sufficient to prevent its acceptance; but a formal examination is only just.

First, the Darwin-Atkinson supposition is of course only hypo-

thetical. It is a mere guess that the earliest organization of man resembled that of the gorilla rather than that of trooping monkeys.

Second, Robertson Smith's allegation that blood sacrifice is central in ancient cult holds chiefly or only for the Mediterranean cultures of a certain period—say the last two thousand years B.C.—and cultures then or subsequently influenced by them. It does not apply to regions outside the sphere of affection by these cultures.

Third, it is at best problematical whether blood sacrifice goes back to a totemic observance. It is not established that totemism is an original possession of Semitic culture.

Fourth, coming to the Freudian theory proper, it is only conjecture that the sons would kill, let alone devour, the father.

Fifth, the fact that a child sometimes displaces its father-hatred upon an animal—we are not told in what percentage of cases—is no proof that the sons did so.

Sixth, if they "displaced," would they retain enough of the original hate impulse to slay the father; and if so, would the slaying not resolve and evaporate the displacements? Psychoanalysts may affirm both questions; others will require more examination before they accept the affirmation.

Seventh, granting the sons' remorse and resolve no longer to kill the father-displacement-totem, it seems exceedingly dubious whether this resolve could be powerful and enduring enough to suppress permanently the gratification of the sexual impulses which was now possible. Again there may be psychoanalytic evidence sufficient to allay the doubt; but it will take a deal of evidence to convince "unanalytic" psychologists, ethnologists, and laymen.

Eighth, if the band of brothers allowed strangers—perhaps expelled by their jealous fathers—to have access to the women whom they had renounced, and matrilinear or matriarchal institutions thus came into existence, what would be left for the brothers (unless they were able to be content with life-long celibacy or homosexuality), other than individual attachments to other clans; which would mean the disintegration of the very solidarity that they are pictured as so anxious to preserve, even by denying their physiological instincts?

Ninth, it is far from established that exogamy and totem abstinence are the two fundamental prohibitions of totemism. Freud refers (p. 180) to Goldenweiser's study of the subject, which is certainly both analytical and conducted from a psychological point of view even though not psychoanalytical; but he fails to either accept or refute this author's carefully substantiated finding that these two features cannot be designated as primary in the totemic complex.

Tenth, that these two totemic taboos are the oldest of all taboos is pure assertion. If all other taboos are derived from them by displacement or distortion, some presentation of the nature and operation and sequence of these displacements is in order. An astronomer who casually said that he believed Sirius to be the center of the stellar universe and then proceeded to weave this opinion into the fabric of a still broader hypothesis, would get little hearing from other astronomers.

A final criticism—that the persistence into modern society and religion of this first “great event with which culture began” is an unexplained process—will not be pressed here, because Freud has anticipated it with a *tu quoque* (pp. 259–261): social psychologists assume a “continuity in the psychic life of succeeding generations” without in general concerning themselves much with the manner in which this continuity is established.

No doubt still other challenges of fact or interpretation will occur to every careful reader of the book. The above enumeration has been compiled only far enough to prove the essential method of the work; which is to evade the painful process of arriving at a large certainty by the positive determination of smaller certainties and their unwavering addition irrespective of whether each augments or diminishes the sum total of conclusion arrived at. For this method the author substitutes a plan of multiplying into one another, as it were, fractional certainties—that is, more or less remote possibilities—without recognition that the multiplicity of factors must successively decrease the probability of their product. It is the old expedient of pyramiding hypotheses; which, if theories had to be paid for like stocks or gaming cards, would be less fre-

quently indulged in. Lest this criticism be construed as unnecessarily harsh upon a gallant and stimulating adventurer into ethnology, let it be added that it applies with equal stricture upon the majority of ethnologists from whom Freud has drawn on account of the renown or interest of their books: Reinach, Wundt, Spencer and Gillen, Lang, Robertson Smith, Durkheim and his school, Keane, Spencer, Avebury; and his special *vademecum* Frazer.

There is another criticism that can be leveled against the plan of Freud's book: that of insidiousness, though evidently only as the result of the gradual growth of his thesis during its writing. The first chapter or essay, on the Savage's Dread of Incest, merely makes a case for the applicability of psychoanalysis to certain special social phenomena, such as the mother-in-law taboo. In the second, the psychoanalytic doctrine of the ambivalence of emotions is very neatly and it seems justly brought to bear on the dual nature of taboo as at once holy and defiling. Concurrently a foundation is laid, though not revealed, for the push to the ultimate thesis. The third chapter on Animism, Magic, and the Omnipotence of Thought refrains from directly advancing the argument, but strengthens its future hold on the reader by emphasizing the parallelism between the thought systems of savages and neurotics. The last chapter is not, in the main, a discussion of the Infantile Recurrence of Totemism, as it is designated, but an analysis of current ethnological theories as to the origin of totemism in society and the presentation of the theory of the author. This hypothesis, toward which everything has been tending, does not however begin to be divulged until page 233; after which, except for tentative claims to a wide extensibility of the principle arrived at and some distinctly fair admissions of weakness, the book promptly closes without any reëxamination or testing of its proposition. The explanation of taboo on pages 52-58 is an essential part of the theory developed on pages 233 *seq.*, without any indication being given that it is so. Then, when the parallelism of savage and neurotic thought has been driven home by material largely irrelevant to the final and quite specific thesis, this is suddenly sprung. Freud cannot be charged with more than a propagandist's zeal and perhaps

haste of composition; but the consequence is that this book is keen without orderliness, intricately rather than closely reasoned, and endowed with an unsubstantiated convincingness. The critical reader will ascertain these qualities; but the book will fall into the hands of many who are lacking either in care or independence of judgment and who, under the influence of a great name and in the presence of a bewilderingly fertile imagination, will be carried into an illusory belief. Again there is palliation—but nothing more—in the fact that the literature of theoretical anthropology consists largely of bad precedent.

But, with all the essential failure of its finally avowed purpose, the book is an important and valuable contribution. However much cultural anthropology may come to lean more on the historical instead of the psychological method, it can never ultimately free itself, nor should it wish to, from the psychology that underlies it. To this psychology the psychoanalytic movement initiated by Freud has made an indubitably significant contribution, which every ethnologist must sooner or later take into consideration. For instance, the correspondences between taboo customs and “compulsion neuroses” as developed on pages 43–48 are unquestionable, as also the parallelism between the two aspects of taboo and the ambivalence of emotions under an accepted prohibition (p. 112). Again the strange combination of mourning for the dead with the fear of them and taboos against them is certainly illumined if not explained by this theory of ambivalence (pp. 87–107).

It is even possible to extend Freud's point of view. Where the taboo on the name of the dead is in force we find not only the fear that utterance will recall the soul to the hurt of the living, but also actual shock at the utterance as a slight or manifestation of hostility to the dead. It is a fair question whether this shock may not be construed as a reaction from the unconscious hate carried toward the dead during their life, as if speaking of them were an admission of satisfaction at their going. The shock is certainly greatest where affection was deepest; persons who were indifferent are mentioned without emotional reluctance if circumstances permit, whereas enemies, that is individuals toward whom hate was

avowed instead of repressed, may have the utterance of their names gloated over.

Of very broad interest is the problem raised by Freud's conjecture that the psychic impulses of primitive people possessed more ambivalence than our own except in the case of neurotics; that their mental life, like that of neurotics, is more sexualized and contains fewer social components than ours (pp. 111, 121, 148). Neurosis would therefore usually represent an atavistic constitution. Whatever its complete significance, there exists no doubt a remarkable similarity between the phenomena of magic, taboo, animism and primitive religion in general, and neurotic manifestations. In both a creation that has only psychic validity is given greater or less preference over reality. As Freud says, the two are of course not the same, and the ultimate difference lies in the fact that neuroses are asocial creations due to a flight from dissatisfying reality (p. 123). This is certainly not to be denied on any ethnological grounds; yet the implication that savages are essentially more neurotic than civilized men may well be challenged, although it cannot be dismissed offhand.

The experience of first-hand observers will probably be unanimous that primitive communities, like peasant populations, contain very few individuals that can be put into a class with the numerous neurotics of our civilization. The reason seems to be that primitive societies have institutionalized such impulses as with us lead to neuroses. The individual of neurotic tendency finds an approved and therefore harmless outlet in taboo, magic, myth, and the like, whereas the non-neurotic, who at heart remains attached to reality, accepts these activities as forms which do not seriously disturb him. In accord with this interpretation is the fact that neurotics appear to become numerous and characteristic in populations among whom religion has become decadent and "enlightenment" active, as in the Hellenistic, Roman Imperial, and recent eras; whereas in the Middle Ages, when "superstition" and taboo were firmly established, there were social aberrations indeed, like the flagellants and children's crusade, but few neurotics. Much the same with homosexuality, which the North American and Siberian natives have socialized. Its acceptance as

an institution may be a departure from normality, but has certainly saved countless individuals from the heavy strain which definite homosexuals undergo in our civilization. It would be unfitting to go into these matters further here: they are mentioned as an illustration of the importance of the problems which Freud raises. However precipitate his entry into anthropology and however flimsy some of his syntheses, he brings to bear keen insight, a fecund imagination, and above all a point of view which henceforth can never be ignored without stultification.

While the book thus is one that no ethnologist can afford to neglect, one remark may be extended to psychologists of the unconscious who propose to follow in Freud's footsteps: there really is a great deal of ethnology not at all represented by the authors whom Freud discusses. To students of this side of the science the line of work initiated by Tylor and developed and most notably represented among the living by Frazer, is not so much ethnology as an attempt to psychologize with ethnological data. The cause of Freud's leaning so heavily on Frazer is clear. The latter knows nothing of psychoanalysis and with all acumen his efforts are prevailingly a dilettantish playing; but in the last analysis they are psychology, and as history only a pleasing fabrication. If psychoanalysts wish to establish serious contacts with historical ethnology, they must first learn to know that such an ethnology exists. It is easy enough to say, as Freud does on page 179, that the nature of totemism and exogamy could be most readily grasped if we could get into closer touch with their origins, but that as we cannot we must depend on hypotheses. Such a remark rings a bit naive to students who have long since made up their minds that ethnology, like every other branch of science, is work and not a game in which lucky guesses score; and who therefore hold that since we know nothing directly about the origin of totemism or other social phenomena but have information on these phenomena as they exist at present, our business is first to understand as thoroughly as possible the nature of these existing phenomena; in the hope that such understanding may gradually lead to a partial reconstruction of origins—without undue guessing.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA,