

Shame vs guilt culture



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In order to understand the concept of a “shame-culture” brought forth in Dodds’ article *Agamemnon’s Apology*, we must first establish an accurate view of Greek culture thousands of years ago. In particular we must focus on the differences in mentality between the Greeks of the Homeric era, the Greeks of the post Homeric era and the modern mentality of today. Most importantly we must recognize the influence of the Gods in ancient Greek life.

Without an accurate perception of the above there is little hope in our grasping Dodds’ concept of a “shame-culture”. However, as we gradually piece together the puzzle of Homeric Greek life naturally the concept of a “shame culture” will appear in full form before our eyes. We will start by examining two concepts which are imbedded in the era of Homeric Greece, *ate* and *menos*. The core of both of these concepts has to do with a communication, of some sort, between the Gods and mortal humans. Dodd classifies them both as “psychic interventions” Throughout the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the characters are commonly described as entering states of “temporary clouding or bewildering of the normal consciousness” This state of temporary loss of control is what Dodds means by the term *ate*. An example of this divine intervention is demonstrated when, in the *Iliad*, Agamemnon, to compensate for the loss of his own mistress, steals Achilles’ mistress.

In his defence, instead of taking responsibility for his actions, Agamemnon points to Zeus and the Erinyes and says, “They it was who in the assembly put wild *ate* in my understanding, on that day when I arbitrarily took Achilles’ prize from him. So what could I do?” Agamemnon’s excuse could be interpreted as a weak attempt to avoid responsibility however Dodd makes

the strong assertion that this is not the case. He backs up this assertion by pointing to the fact that when Achillis is explaining the events he also attributes Agamemnon's unjust action to his *ate*. Either way, assertion or no assertion, Agamemnon would not have benefited because Greek justice "cared nothing for intent – it was the act that mattered." (p.

3) This is one example of an instance where *ate* plays a role in the Iliad, there are many more. Another common occurrence of god-to-human communication is seen in the form of *menos*. *Menos*, like *ate*, is a state on mind which is instilled in the individual by the Gods. *Menos* however comes in the form of a "mysterious access of energy" (p. 8) and brings "a new confidence and eagerness" (p. 8).

In Homer's writings *menos* often enters an individual in the midst of battle and results in an ease of performing difficult tasks. Both of these ideas, *ate* and *menos*, can appear far fetched in our modern world understanding and can easily be pushed into the category of fiction, however Dodds believes that these seemingly absurd ideas do indeed explain a great deal about the mentality of the time. He proposes that within Greek society mortals and Gods existed in the same realm. In other words the Gods, which in societies today are seen as being otherworldly, existed in and influenced the sphere of everyday Greek life. He also suggests that in ancient Greek culture "whenever someone has a particularly brilliant or a particularly foolish idea; when he suddenly recognises another person's identity or sees a flash the meaning of an omen" (p.

11) this event was attributed to the psychic intervention of a spiritual being. In ancient Greek life any behaviour that departed from the norm, just like the weather and the seasons were attributed to the actions of the Gods. Being a society which regarded all out of the ordinary activities as the intent of the Gods, the Homeric Greeks did not believe in the idea of an individual ego or of free will. Theirs was a culture which had “ no unified concept of what we call ‘ soul’ or ‘ personality” (p. 15) The closest concept which the Homeric Greeks had to a soul was their concept of thumos. Dodds roughly defines thumos as “ the organ of feeling” (p.

6) and he defines its role: “ a man’s thumos tells him that he must now eat or drink or slay an enemy, it advises him on his course of action, it puts words in his mouth” (p. 16). Essentially the thumos is everything ordinary and instinctual that the Greeks would do, and anything which fell out of this category would be accredited to the will of the Gods. Along with the idea of thumos Dodd also found another interesting attribute of the Homeric Greek culture. This was the Greek’s peculiar “ habit of explaining character or behaviour in terms of knowledge” (p. 6).

What this means is that what was not knowledge was not part of the character. “ In other words, unsystematised, non-rational impulses, and the acts resulting from them, tend to be excluded from the self and ascribed to an alien origin” (p. 17). This unique cultural characteristic further adds to both, the lack of individualism and the considerable communality of their social system. The puzzle of the Homeric Greek culture is now set up enough to decipher what Dodds means by a “ shame culture”. Read shame by Gregory questions and answers Within the Homeric Greek system nothing

was left to the devices of personal determinism, free will or accident because these notions simply did not exist for the Greeks.

Rather, all the occurrences within the system were accounted for by either the thumos or superhuman intervention. Because there was no concept of an ego or a personality there was no possible way guilt could exist, because guilt requires an ego and a concept of the individual. If a Greek citizen were to commit a crime they would not feel guilt because it was not them committing the crime but rather a “psychic intervention”(p.) of the Gods. However the citizen, instead of guilt, would feel shame because “the strongest moral force which Homeric man knows is not the fear of god, but respect for public opinion”(p.

18) These feelings of shame, which were strong and unbearable for the Greeks, would then be projected in the direction of the entity which was responsible for the unacceptable deed. This is what Dodds means by the “shame culture” of the Homeric Greeks. As time progressed beyond the Homeric Greek period the Gods began to gain more power within the society and the people began to become more individualized. The result of this was, over time, a shift from the “shame culture” to the “guilt culture” of the Archaic era. Today Western societies are “guilt cultures”, mainly because we are so individualized. Also the popular belief in a higher spiritual God or Gods produces within many of us a direction in which our guilt can be projected.

As if feeling inner guilt is not enough we also are often faced with feeling guilt at the hands of the greater society as well as the ‘higher powers’. The

concept of a “shame culture” is a hard concept to grasp for modern minds because it takes an untainted mind to comprehend such a different social system. The Homeric Greek paradigm is one which at its very foundations is dissimilar to our individualistic system, so from the start comprehension is problematic. However if an understanding is achieved, the benefits are numerable, because one begins to see that modern culture, just like Homeric Greek culture is enshrouded in a framework of socially constructed morality and is in essence an evolved form of the same myth.