

Theories of the totemism belief system



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Anthropology is crucial for understanding the contemporary world.

Anthropology offers both things to think about and things to think with.

Anthropologists would be interested in Totemism because they study people throughout the world, investigating their history, behaviour, how they adapt to different environments, communicate and socialise with each other, along with examining the biological characteristics that make us human, our physiology, genetic make-up, nutritional history and evolution along with social features like language, culture, politics, family and religion.

Totemism is a belief system where humans are believed to have kinship or a mystical relationship with a spirit-being such as an animal or plant. The totem is thought to interact with a given kin group or individual and serve as their emblem or symbol. Totemism has been described as ‘ a cluster of traits in religious and in the social organisation of populates’ (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, 2013). Totemism originates in populations whose traditional economies relied on hunting, gathering and mixed farming with the emphasis on rearing cattle. Totemism is a multifaceted set of ideas and ways of behaviour built on a worldview drawn from nature. There are ideological, mystical, emotional, reverential, genealogical relationships of social groups or specific persons with animal or natural objects, the totem. There is a difference between group and individual Totemism although they share a few basic characteristics; they happen with different emphasis and in specific forms. Generally societies have special names and emblems to relate to the totem, and those it sponsors engage in partial identification with the totem or symbolic integration to it. Usually, there is a taboo against people killing, eating, or touching the totem.

Individual Totemism is articulated in an intimate relationship of friendship, respect and protection between a person and a particular species of animal; the natural object can grant special power to its owner. However, this relationship, in the case of the individual totem, begins and ends with the individual man, and is not, like the clan totem, transmitted by inheritance.

An individual totem in America is:

“ Usually the first animal of which a youth dreams during the long and generally solitary fasts which American Indians observe at puberty. He kills the animal or bird of which he dreams, and henceforward wears its skin or feathers, or some part of them, as an amulet, especially on the war-path and in hunting” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013)

Individual totems among the Slave, Hare and Dogrib Indians will always be a carnivorous animal, and must not be skinned, eaten or killed. A man will always carry a photograph of his totem; if they are unsuccessful in a chase he will smoke to it and make a speech.

Group Totemism is the most widespread belief system. The totem is often an animal or plant that is respected by all members of the social group, because of a mystical or ritual relationship between the group, the spirit which embodies the totem represents the bond of unity within the tribe or clan. The group believe they are descended from a totem ancestor or that they and the totem are brothers. The totem can be viewed a group symbol and the protector of all members of the group. The animal or plant totem is the object of a taboo, just as the individual totem it is forbidden to kill or eat the sacred animal. It is possible for the totem symbol to be tattooed on the body,

engraved on weapons or carved on totem poles. Males and females in some cultures have their own totem; however, typically Totemism is connected with clans or blood relatives. Marriage between members of the same totemic clan is totally forbidden. Group Totemism is usually associated with people in Africa, India, Oceania, North America and some parts of South America.

The first theory on Totemism was conducted by McLennan (1869) who searched for the origins of totemism, he believed that:

“ The ancient nations came, in prehistoric times, through the totem stage, having animals and plants, and the heavenly bodies conceived as animals, for gods before the anthropomorphic gods appeared” (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, p. 18)

Many scholars believed this theory and set out with the assumption that ‘ some type of UR-totemism has existed, and that its faint contours could be discerned behind the left-over totemic systems fragments of present day’ (ibid, 18). McLennan’s theory was criticised by Taylor (1899) who discarded the confusion of Totemism with simple worship of animals and plants, and viewed Totemism as a relationship between one type of animal and a clan but he did argue with the idea that totems were the basis of religion.

Franz Boas (1916) research was based on North West American Indians and he found a society employing a visual form of Totemism in the form of totem poles. The totem pole was made up of mystical characters from the tribes ancestral past. Items were chosen from nature and used for cultural purposes. Totem poles functioned as an emblem of a clan or family, showing its unity

and the rights which each clan were entitled to, and as a reminder of each clan's link to a spirit ancestor. Totems were also a form of communication as tribes had no written language, so the totem poles were used to tell their stories, legends and events. Totems could not only be for clans they could also be individual however, only the most affluent tribe members could afford to have their own totem carved. Boas (1916) argued against a psychological or historical origin of totemism because its characters could be linked with individuals, and are in every social organisation, appearing in various cultural contexts and would not be possible to fit all totemistic phenomena into one classification.

The first complete work on totemism was conducted by Sir James Frazer (1919) who developed several theories in regard to the origin of totemism. The first theory suggested that men have totems because they expect benefits from them:

“ The connection between a man and his totem is mutually beneficent; the totem protects the man, and the man shows his respect for the totem in various ways, by not killing it if it be an animal, and not cutting or gathering it if it be a plant” (Frazer, 1887, p. 3)

His second theory was that ‘ totemism was a system of magic intended to provide a supply of food for someone else’ (Hopkins, 1918, p. 153), this was disregarded in place his final theory which was more radical than the others and based on the fact that:

“ Some savages believe their offspring comes not from intercourse between man and woman, but from the spirits of animals or quasi-animals seen by

the woman or from the food she eats. They think that the spirits which thus become their children are really the animals they have seen or whose flesh they have eaten before conceiving (ibid, p. 153)

This is what Frazer called the conceptional theory.

Totemism at this point had come under attack from American anthropologist Goldenweiser (1910) who began by listing five key characteristics believed to be symptomatic of totemism, ' an exogamous clan (people marry outside of their own social group), the name of the clan derived from the totem, a religious attitude toward the totem; as a " friend" or " brother" or " protector", taboo's or restrictions against the killing and eating of the totem, a belief in the decent from the totem' (ibid, p. 182-83). Goldenweiser (1910) concluded that:

" Each of these traits.. displays more or less a striking independence in its distribution; and most of them can be shown to be widely-spread ethnic phenomena, diverse in origin not necessarily coordinated in development, and displaying a rich variability of psychological make-up" (ibid, p. 266)

Although not willing to give up the idea totally he proposed an alternative definition of totemism in terms of the association between " definite social units " and " objects and symbols of emotional value" (ibid, p. 275). Lowie (2009) was more radical arguing that totemism did not exist and for all intense and purpose was an invention of anthropologists.

Durkheim in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915) presented the most influential interpretation of religion from a functionalist

perspective stating society was the soul of religion and was the foundation of all religious beliefs. Durkheim (1961) said all societies divide the world into two categories: the sacred and the profane. Religion is centred on this division; it is a ' unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, things which are set apart and forbidden' (Haralambos, 2001, p. 432). Thus to comprehend the role of religion in society, the connection concerning sacred symbols and what they signify must be determined.

Durkheim used the religion of Australian aborigines in order to explain his theory. Durkheim referred to their religion as totemism stating it was the most basic and simplest form of religion. Aboriginal civilisations were divided into numerous clans each having duties and obligations towards their members, one of which is exogamy, where members are not allowed to marry within their clan. Each clan has a totem usually that of an animal or plant which is the emblem of the clan, a sign where each clan can distinguish itself from the others. The totem is the most sacred object in aborigine ritual. The totem is ' the outward and visible form of the totemic principle of god' (ibid, p. 432). Durkheim argued ' if the totem is the symbol of god and society, therefore society and god are one. So people who are worshipping god are in fact worshipping society therefore, society is the real object of religious worship. Sacred things are ' considered superior in dignity and power to the profane and particularly to man, thus, in relation to sacred things individuals are inferior and dependent' (p. 432).

Durkheim said primitive man came to view society as something sacred because he is totally dependent on it. Furthermore, Durkheim argued ' the reason why society invents a sacred symbol like a totem is because it is

easier for a person to visualise and direct his feelings of awe toward a symbol than towards so complex a thing as a clan' (ibid, p. 433). Durkheim believed in the collective conscience a set of shared values and moral beliefs, religion reinforces the collective conscience. The worship of society strengthens the values and moral beliefs that form the basis of social life. However, Goldenweiser (1910) said:

“ The appearance of Durkheim’s brilliant but unconvincing treatise on religion brings home the fact that one of the phases of socio-religious thought, namely the problem of totemism, remains as replete with vagueness and misunderstanding as ever” (ibid, p. 288)

Boas (1916) ‘ aiming at Durkheim as much as Frazer, denied that cultural phenomena could be brought together into a unity’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, p. 79).

British anthropologists were less ready to give up on the concept of totemism. Malinowski (1925) gives an uncomplicated analysis of totemism relating to the function it has in a given society. Totemism plays a significant role in the ‘ ordering and control of nature by man’ (ibid, p. 22-23). The kind of man’s attention in the totemic species ‘ shows also the kind of belief and cult to be there expected. Since it is the desire to control the species, dangerous, useful or edible, this desire must lead to a belief in special power over the species, affinity with it, a common essence between man and beast or plant’ (Malinowski, 1954, p. 45). Totemism as a style of social organisation maintains the status quo in society while at the same time serving as man’s interests in a much deeper way:

“ From the survival point of view, it is vital that man’s interest in the practically indispensable species should never abate, that his belief in his capacity to control them should give him strength and endurance in his pursuits and stimulate his observations and knowledge of the habits and natures of animals and plants” (ibid, p. 46)

A criticism of Malinowski is ‘ he is guilty of operating entirely within the world of nature and his theory leaves us to explain why totemism, if it responds to human needs is not universal (Leach, 1969, p. 130). Evans-Pritchard (1951) said, ‘ Malinowski’s theoretical conclusions are no more than descriptions in more abstract language’ (p. 95).

Radcliffe- Brown (1929) explored totemism from a structural functionalist perspective; he did not attempt to understand totemism in terms of beliefs, but as a collection of practices that serve to uphold the solidarity and equilibrium of the social group. Radcliffe- Brown described totemism as that circumstance whereupon:

“ Society is divided into groups and there is a special relation between each group and one or more classes of objects that are usually natural species of animals and plants but may occasionally be artificial objects or parts of an animal” (Radcliffe-Brown 1965, p. 117).

Radcliffe-Brown (1965) said totemic objects are objects which have been accorded ritual value (ibid, p. 123) and he argues that:

“ Any object or event which has important effects upon the well-being (material or spiritual) of a society, or anything which stands for or represents

any such object or event, tends to become an object of the ritual attitude” (Radcliffe-Brown 1965, p. 129).

Here, Radcliffe-Brown comes really near to the utilitarian theories offered by Frazer and Malinowski however; this hypothesis does little to the general understanding of why particular plants and animal species have such a high ritual significance. In a further essay Radcliffe-Brown (1956) highlighted the significance of the conclusions about the relations between humans and animals. Moreover, after listening and examining stories told about animals by Australian aborigines, Radcliffe-Brown concluded they had one theme, and added ‘ the resemblances and differences of animal species are translated into terms of friendship and conflict, solidarity and opposition’ (Radcliffe-Brown, 1958, p. 116). Overall concluding, ‘ the world of animal life is represented in terms of social relations similar to those of human society’ (Radcliffe-Brown, 1958, p. 116). Radcliffe-Brown proposed the central terms in his version of totemism are opposition and integration adding Totemism stopped being a type of religion but was instead a mode of thought where nature had become an ‘ object of contemplation for the expression of socio-cultural differences’ (Tremlett, 2008, p. 47). Radcliffe-brown’s previous idea that ‘ objects become totems because they are of ritual interest to society can be turned around: why are they not of ritual interest because they have been designated as totems?’ (ibid, p. 130). Questions have been asked about the integrity of his studies because some anthropologists have accused him of appropriating other people’s research and passing it off as his own.

The Australian anthropologist Elkin (1933) said there are many forms of totemism in Australia specifically:

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“ Individual, sex, moiety, section, subsection, matrilineal and patrilineal social clans, localised cult clan and dream-totemism. Elkin denied the unity of totemism but sought to preserve its reality on the condition that he might trace it back to a multiplicity of types he stated there is no longer ‘ one totemism but many totemisms, each in itself a single irreducible whole” (p. 113).

Elkin (1933) denied ‘ the unity in totemism as if he thought it possible to preserve the reality of totemism on condition that it be reduced to a multiplicity of heterogeneous forms’ (Levi-Strauss, 1969, p. 35). For Elkin (1933) there is no longer one totemism but many totemisms, each in itself a single complex whole. Lévi-Strauss (1962a) says Elkin ‘ instead of helping to slay the hydra (of totemism) has dismembered it and made peace with the bits’ (ibid, p. 66).

Evans Pritchard in his book on Nuer religion (1956) regarded totemism as ‘ a symbolic formulation of intellectually constructed relationships, (Strauss, 1962. p. 27). He wanted to comprehend totemism in terms of extensive Nuer Beliefs about Kwoth which stands for “ God” or “ Spirit”; there were two manifestations of spirit, higher and lower, with the totemic spirit being the ‘ spirit of the below’. Evans Pritchard noted that Nuer totems were not symbols of linages, because some linages had none and other linages shared the same totem but did not otherwise acknowledge kinship with each-other. Nor did the totems signify Spirit as such, but rather the connection between God and a specific lineage. So, such a study fixed totemism within the religious beliefs and practices of a particular society.

Levi-Strauss was very critical of the reality of totemism for him ‘ the ‘ totemic illusion’ is the product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century effort by scientists to relegate the primitive outside the realm of culture’ (Leach, 1962, p. 127) because they wanted to ‘ protect the Victorian world-view by maintaining the Christian distinction between man and nature, thus, by failing to recognise the similarities between Western and primitive codes, scholars created false taxonomies and blurred the universal logic behind all so-called totemic phenomena’ (ibid, p. 127). Levi-Strauss was inspired by Radcliffe-Brown, whose analyses he attempted to expand upon. Lévi-Strauss was ‘ the leading academic in contemporary structuralism believing human minds have certain universal characteristics which originate in the common feature of the homo-sapiens brain’ (Haralambos, 2001, p. 910). These common mental structures lead people everywhere to think similarly regardless of their society or cultural background. Lévi-Strauss developed a system to show the abstract divisions that he saw in totemism as a phenomenon in human nature. His system was implemented in a table of oppositions or mutual relationships. The basic relationship was between the binary opposites such as nature and culture. On one side there were in nature certain realities such as species of animal, or plants and specific animals and plants. On the other side, there was in culture various groups and individuals who identify themselves with particular species or with specific animal and plants. Lévi-Strauss (1962a) noticed four types of relationship between nature and culture within totemism:

“ A species of animal or plant identified with a certain group; a species identified with an individual and finally a particular animal or plant identified

with a group of animal or plant identified with an individual, a particular animal or plant' (p. 18).

Lévi-Strauss (1969) stated each of these four groupings ' correspond to the phenomena that are to be seen in one people to another' (ibid. 84). For the first grouping he suggested the Australians, for whom ' natural entities are linked with cultural groups (p. 84); the second grouping was ' the individual totemism of North American Indians where an individual is linked with a species of nature' (p. 84). The third grouping the ' Mota people from the Bank Irelands of Melanesia named: a child is thought to be the incarnation of a specific animal, plant or creature which was found and eaten by the mother when she first found out she was pregnant(p. 84). The final groupings were from ' Polynesia or Africa where fixed individual animals formed the groups support and worshbluefrost13ip' (p. 84). In conclusion Lévi-Strauss stated the difference between the classes of man and animal serves as the conceptual basis for social differences. Thus, for Lévi-Strauss totemism is an ' illusion' and a logic that ' classifies'- a post hoc explanation in which the structure of social relations is projected onto the natural phenomena, not taken from it.

In conclusion, totemism is a belief system where the traits in the social organisation of people are believed to have kinship or a mystical relationship with a spirit-being such as an animal or plant which serves as the group or individual's emblem or symbol. As anthropology tries to understand different cultures and provides knowledge about cultural variation in the world through details studies anthropologist would find totemism an interesting topic which has been proved by the number of studies which have been

discussed. The first study on totemism was undertaken by McLennan in (1889) who explored the origin of totemism. Boas (1916) studied American Indians and their totem poles, concluding the totem poles functioned as the emblem of the clan showing unity and the rights each clan was entitled to. Frazer (1919) gave the first comprehensive work on totemism; he came up with three theories the final of which saw the origin of totemism as an interpretation of the conception and birth of children a belief he called conceptionalism. Durkheim (1915) hoped to discover a pure religion in a very ancient form and claimed to see the origin of religion in totemism. In 1925 Malinowski explored totemism as a function in a given society. Radcliffe-Brown (1929) researched from a structural functionalist perspective explored how totemism upheld the solidarity of the social group. Elkin (1933) explored numerous forms of totemism. Evans-Pritchard (1956) explored Nuer religion and the symbolic nature of totemism. The final theory discussed on totemism was by Levi-Strauss (1962a/1969) who explored totemism from a structuralist perspective. He gave the most incisive critique of totemism by denying its reality stating totemism is an illusion. Investigations of totemism has decline in recent times, those which have been undertaken have moved away from its universality toward explorations which consider totem structures in a more precise context.