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The Totemic Illusion*

Claude Lévi-Strauss pioneered the structural study of anthropology, in which cultural activities such as rituals, food preparation, and entertainment are examined to discover the deep structures that produce meaning in a culture. Lévi-Strauss argues that all cultures have a system of symbolic communication that produce ways of thinking which are similar for all humans and which organize and categorize their worlds. Lévi-Strauss rejects the notion that modern or “civilized” societies are more advanced than “primitive” societies, thus also rejecting one of the most widely known classification systems known to anthropologists – totemism, the tradition of associating, through metaphor, a human group or clan with an animal (and less frequently with a plant, an object, or a natural phenomenon). In this extract from his classic essay, Lévi-Strauss discusses the origin of the word “totem” (which means “a relative of mine”) and argues that totemism represents a unique relationship between a human clan and its specific natural environment and is expressed as a metaphor that groups use to classify themselves from other groups. He famously observes that animal-eating prohibitions are not totemic, and that beliefs and prohibitions about animal or plant species exist independently of the species’ relationship to the human clan. Humans have opposite attitudes toward plants and animals; relations with plant species are symbolic, and relations with animals are real. Thus, food taboos apply to animals not plants, with “marked” plants always edible but “marked” animals never edible. Lévi-Strauss advances his well-known criticism of the traditional anthropologists’ view that an animal only becomes totemic if it is first good to eat, with the argument that species are chosen as totems “not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think’.”

It is well known that the word totem is taken from the Ojibwa, an Algonquin language of the region to the north of the Great Lakes of North America. The expression *ototeman*, which means roughly, “he is a relative of mine,” is composed of: initial *o-*, third-person prefix; *-t-*, epenthesis

serving to prevent the coalescence of vowels; *-m-*, possessive; *-an*, third-person suffix; and, lastly, *-ote*, which expresses the relationship between Ego and a male or female relative, thus defining the exogamous group at the level of the generation of the subject. It was in this way that clan

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membership was expressed: *makwa nindotem*, "my clan is the bear"; *pindiken nindotem*, "come in, clan-brother," etc. The Ojibwa clans mostly have animal names, a fact which Thavenet – a French missionary who lived in Canada at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth – explained by the memory preserved by each clan of an animal in its country of origin, as the most handsome, most friendly, most fearsome, or most common, or else the animal usually hunted.¹

This collective naming system is not to be confused with the belief, held by the same Ojibwa, that an individual may enter into a relationship with an animal which will be his guardian spirit. The only known term designating this individual guardian spirit was transcribed by a traveler in the middle of the nineteenth century as *nigouimes*, and thus has nothing to do with the word "totem" or any other term of the same type. Researches on the Ojibwa show that the first description of the supposed institution of "totemism" – due to the English trader and interpreter Long, at the end of the eighteenth century – resulted from a confusion between clan-names (in which the names of animals correspond to collective appellations) and beliefs concerning guardian spirits (which are individual protectors).² This is more clearly seen from an analysis of Ojibwa society.

These Indians were, it seems, organized into some dozens of patrilineal and patrilocal clans, of which five may have been older than the others, or, at any rate, enjoyed a particular prestige.

A myth explains that these five "original" clans are descended from six anthropomorphic supernatural beings who emerged from the ocean to mingle with human beings. One of them had his eyes covered and dared not look at the Indians, though he showed the greatest anxiety to do so. At last he could no longer restrain his curiosity, and on one occasion he partially lifted his veil, and his eye fell on the form of a human being, who instantly fell dead "as if struck by one of the thunderers." Though the intentions of this dread being were friendly to men, yet the glance of his eye was too strong, and it inflicted certain

death. His fellows therefore caused him to return to the bosom of the great water. The five others remained among the Indians, and "became a blessing to them." From them originate the five great clans or totems: catfish, crane, loon, bear, and marten.³

In spite of the mutilated form in which it has been handed down to us, this myth is of considerable interest. It affirms, to begin with, that there can be no direct relationship, based on contiguity, between man and totem. The only possible relationship must be "masked," and thus metaphorical, as is confirmed by the fact, reported from Australia and America, that the totemic animal is sometimes designated by another name than that applied to the real animal, to the extent that the clan name does not immediately and normally arouse a zoological or botanical association in the native mind.

In the second place, the myth establishes another opposition, between personal relation and collective relation. The Indian does not die just because he is looked at, but also because of the singular behavior of one of the supernatural beings, whereas the others act with more discretion, and as a group.

In this double sense the totemic relationship is implicitly distinguished from that with the guardian spirit, which involves a direct contact crowning an individual and solitary quest. It is thus native theory itself, as it is expressed in the myth, which invites us to separate collective totems from individual guardian spirits, and to stress the mediating and metaphorical character of the relationship between man and the eponym of his clan. Lastly, it puts us on our guard against the temptation to construct a totemic system by accumulating relationships taken one by one, and uniting in each case *one* group of men to *one* animal species, whereas the primitive relation is between two systems: one based on distinction between groups, the other on distinction between species, in such a fashion that a plurality of groups on the one hand, and a plurality of species on the other, are placed directly in correlation and in opposition.

According to the reports by Warren, who was himself an Ojibwa, the principal clans gave birth to others:

Catfish: merman, sturgeon, pike, whitefish,
sucker
Crane: eagle
Loon: cormorant, goose
Bear: ———
Marten: moose, reindeer

In 1925 Michelson recorded the following clans: marten, loon, eagle, bull-head salmon, bear, sturgeon, great lynx, lynx, crane, chicken. Some years later, and in another region (Old Desert Lake), Kinietz found six clans: water-spirit, bear, cat-fish, eagle, marten, chicken. He added to this list two more clans which had recently disappeared: crane, and an undetermined bird.

Among the eastern Ojibwa of Parry Island (in Georgian Bay, part of Lake Huron), Jenness compiled in 1929 a series of “bird” clans: crane, loon, eagle, gull, sparrowhawk, crow; a series of “animal” clans: bear, caribou, moose, wolf, beaver, otter, raccoon, skunk; a series of “fish” clans: sturgeon, pike, cat-fish. There was also another clan, waxing moon, and a whole list of names of clans which were hypothetical or which had disappeared from the region: squirrel, tortoise, marten, fisher, mink, birch-bark. The still existing clans were reduced to six: reindeer, beaver, otter, loon, falcon, and sparrowhawk.

It is also possible that the division was into five groups, by sub-division of the birds into “celestial” (eagle, sparrowhawk) and “aquatic” (all the others), and the mammals into “terrestrial” and “aquatic” (those inhabiting swampy zones, such as the cervidae of Canada, or which live on fish, such as the fisher, mink, etc.)

However this may be, it has never been reported of the Ojibwa that they believe members of a clan to be descended from the totemic animal; and, the latter was not the object of a cult. Thus Landes remarks that although the caribou has completely disappeared from southern Canada, this fact did not at all worry the members of the clan named after it: “It’s only a name,” they said

to the investigator. The totem was freely killed and eaten, with certain ritual precautions, viz., that permission had first to be asked of the animal, and apologies be made to it afterward. The Ojibwa even said that the animal offered itself more willingly to the arrows of hunters of its own clan, and that it paid therefore to call out the name of the “totem” before shooting at it.

The chicken and the pig – creatures of European importation – were used in order to attribute a conventional clan to the half-caste offspring of Indian women and white men (because the rule of patrilineal descent would otherwise have deprived them of a clan). Sometimes such persons were also assigned to the eagle clan, because this bird figures on the arms of the United States, well known from its currency. The clans were themselves divided into bands designated by the parts of the clan animal, e.g., head, hindquarters, subcutaneous fat, etc.

In thus assembling and comparing the evidence from several regions (each of which furnishes only a partial list, since the clans are not equally represented everywhere), we may discern a tripartite division: *water* (water spirit, cat-fish, pike, sucker, sturgeon, salmonidae, and so on, i.e., all the “fish” clans); *air* (eagle, sparrowhawk, then crane, loon, gull, cormorant, goose, etc.); *earth* (first the group consisting of caribou, moose, reindeer, marten, beaver, raccoon, then that of fisher, mink, skunk, squirrel, and lastly bear, wolf, and lynx). The place of the snake and of the tortoise is uncertain.

Entirely distinct from the system of totemic names, which is governed by a principle of equivalence, there is that of the “spirits” or *manido*, which are ordered in a hierarchized pantheon. There was certainly a hierarchy of clans among the Algonquin, but this did not rest on a superiority or inferiority attributed to the eponymous animals other than in jokes such as, “My totem is the wolf, yours is the pig . . . Take care! Wolves eat pigs!”⁴ At most there were reported hints of physical and moral distinctions, conceived of as specific properties. The system of “spirits,” to the contrary, was plainly ordered along two axes: that of greater and lesser spirits, and that of

beneficent and maleficent spirits. At the summit, the great spirit; then his servants; then, in descending order – both morally and physically – the sun and moon, forty-eight thunderers opposed to mythical snakes, “little invisible Indians,” male and female water spirits, the four cardinal points, and finally hordes of *manido*, named and unnamed, which haunt the sky, the earth, the waters, and the chthonian world. In a sense, therefore, the two systems – “totems” and *manido* – are at right angles to each other, one being approximately horizontal, the other vertical, and they coincide at only one point, since the water spirits alone are unambiguously present in both the one and the other. This may perhaps explain why the supernatural spirits in the myth related above, who are responsible for the totemic names and for the division into clans, are described as emerging from the ocean.

All the food tabus reported from the Ojibwa derive from the *manido* system, and they are all explained in the same way, viz., as prohibitions communicated to the individual in dreams, on the part of particular spirits, against eating a certain meat or a certain part of the body of an animal, e.g., the flesh of the porcupine, the tongue of the moose, etc. The animal concerned does not necessarily figure in the list of clan names.

	<i>MANIDO</i>	<i>SYSTEM</i>
	great	spirit
	sun	moon
	thun-	derers
	cardinal	points
“TOTEMIC” SYSTEM	eagle, goose, water	spirits, pike, sturgeon, etc.
	chthonian	snakes et c.

Similarly, the acquisition of a guardian spirit came as the consummation of a strictly individual enterprise which girls and boys were encouraged to undertake when they approached puberty. If they succeeded they gained a supernatural protector whose characteristics and circumstances of appearance were signs informing the candidates of their aptitudes and their vocations. These favors were only granted, however, on condition of behaving with obedience and considerateness

toward the protector. In spite of all these differences, the confusion between totem and guardian spirit into which Long fell may be explained in part by the fact that the latter was never “a particular mammal or bird, such as one might see by day around the wigwam, but a supernatural being which represented the entire species.”⁵

Let us now look at another part of the world, described by Raymond Firth in accounts which have contributed greatly to the exposure of the extreme complexity and heterogeneous character of beliefs and customs too hastily lumped together under the label of totemism. These analyses are all the more illuminating in that they concern a region – Tikopia – which Rivers thought to furnish the best proof of the existence of totemism in Polynesia.

But, says Firth, before advancing such a view:

... it is essential to know whether on the human side the relation [with the species or natural object] is one in which people are involved as a group or only as individuals, and, as regards the animal or plant, whether each species is concerned as a whole or single members of it alone are considered; whether the natural object is regarded as a representative or emblem of the human group; whether there is any idea of identity between a person and the creature or object and of descent of one from the other; and whether the interest of the people is focused on the animal or plant *per se*, or it is of importance primarily through a belief in its association with ancestral spirits or other deities. And in the latter event it is very necessary to understand something of the native concept of the relation between the species and the supernatural being.⁶

This suggests that to the two axes which we have distinguished, viz., *group-individual* and *nature-culture*, a third should be added on which should be arranged the different conceivable types of relation between the extreme terms of the first two axes: emblematic, relations of identity, descent, or interest, direct, indirect, etc.

Tikopia society is composed of four patrilineal but not necessarily exogamous groups

called *kainanga*, each headed by a chief (*ariki*) who stands in a special relationship to the *atua*. This latter term designates gods properly speaking, as well as ancestral spirits, the souls of former chiefs, etc. As for the native conception of nature, this is dominated by a fundamental distinction between “edible things” (*e kai*) and “inedible things” (*sise e kai*).

The “edible things” consist mainly of vegetables and fish. Among the vegetables, four species are of first importance in that each has a particular affinity with one of the four clans: the yam “listens to” or “obeys” *sa Kafika*; and the same relation obtains between the coconut and the clan *sa Tafua*, the taro and the clan *sa Taumako*, the breadfruit and the clan *sa Fangarere*. In fact, the vegetable is thought to belong directly, as in the Marquesas, to the clan god (incarnated in one of the numerous varieties of freshwater eels or those of the coastal reefs), and the agricultural rite primarily takes the form of a solicitation of the god. The role of a clan chief is thus above all to “control” a vegetable species. A further distinction between species is necessary: the planting and harvesting of the yam or taro, and the harvest of the breadfruit tree, are of a seasonal nature. This is not the case with coconut palms, which reproduce spontaneously, and the nuts of which ripen all year round. This difference may perhaps correspond to that between the respective forms of control: everybody possesses, cultivates, and harvests the first three species, and prepares and consumes their products, while only the clan in charge of them performs the ritual. But there is no special ritual for coconut palms, and the clan which controls them, *Tafua*, is subject to only a few tabus; in order to drink the milk, its members have to pierce the shell instead of breaking it; and in order to open the nuts and extract the flesh they may use only a stone, and no other tool.

These differential modes of conduct are not interesting solely because of the correlation they suggest between rites and beliefs on the one hand and certain objective conditions on the other. They also support the criticism advanced above against the rule of homology formulated by Boas,

since three clans express their relationship to the natural species through ritual, and the fourth through prohibitions and prescriptions. The homology, therefore, if it has, has to be sought at a deeper level.

However this may be, it is clear that the relationship of men to certain vegetable species is expressed under two aspects, sociological and religious. As among the Ojibwa, a myth is resorted to in order to unify them:

A long time ago the gods were no different from mortals, and the gods were the direct representatives of the clans in the land. It came about that a god from foreign parts, *Tikarau*, paid a visit to *Tikopia*, and the gods of the land prepared a splendid feast for him, but first they organized trials of strength or speed, to see whether their guest or they would win. During a race, the stranger slipped and declared that he was injured. Suddenly, however, while he was pretending to limp, he made a dash for the provisions for the least, grabbed up the heap, and fled for the hills. The family of gods set off in pursuit; *Tikarau* slipped and fell again, so that the clan gods were able to retrieve some of the provisions, one a coconut, another a taro, another a breadfruit, and others a yam. *Tikarau* succeeded in reaching the sky with most of the foodstuffs for the feast, but these four vegetable foods had been saved for men.⁷

Different though it is from that of the Ojibwa, this myth has several points in common with it which need to be emphasized. First, the same opposition will be noted between individual and collective conduct, the former being negatively regarded and the latter positively in relation to totemism. In the myths, the individual and maleficent conduct is that of a greedy and inconsiderate god (a point on which there are resemblances with *Loki* of Scandinavia, of whom a masterly study has been made by *Georges Dumézil*). In both cases, totemism as a system is introduced as *what remains* of a diminished totality, a fact which may be a way of expressing that the terms of the system are significant only if they are *separated* from each other, since they alone remain to equip a semantic field which

was previously better supplied and into which a discontinuity has been introduced. Finally, the two myths suggest that direct contact (between totemic gods and men in one case; gods in the form of men and totems in the other), i.e., a relation of contiguity, is contrary to the spirit of the institution: the totem becomes such only on condition that it first be set apart.

On Tikopia, the category of “edible things” also includes fish. However, there is no direct association at all between the clans and edible fish. The question is complicated when the gods are brought into the picture. On the one hand, the four vegetable foods are held to be sacred because they “represent” the gods – the yam is the “body” of the deity Kafika, the taro is that of Taumako; the breadfruit and coconut are respectively the “head” of Fangarere and of Tafua – but, on the other hand, the gods “are” fish, particularly eels. We thus rediscover, in a transposed form, the distinction between totemism and religion which has already been discerned in the opposition between resemblance and contiguity. As among the Ojibwa, Tikopian totemism is expressed by means of metaphorical relations.

On the religious plane, however, the relation between god and animal is of a metonymic order, first because the *atua* is believed to *enter* the animal, but does not change into it; secondly because it is never the *totality* of the species that is in question but only a single animal (therefore a *part* of the species) which is recognized, by its unusual behavior, as being the vehicle of a god; lastly because this kind of occurrence takes place only intermittently and even exceptionally, while the more distant relation between vegetable species and god is of a more permanent nature. From this last point of view, one might almost say that metonymy corresponds to the order of events, metaphor to the order of structure.^{8**}

That the plants and edible animals are not themselves gods is confirmed by another

fundamental opposition, that between *atua* and food. It is in fact inedible fish, insects, and reptiles that are called *atua*, probably, as Firth suggests, because “creatures which are unfit for human consumption are not of the normal order of nature ... [In the case of animals] it is not the edible, but the inedible elements which are associated with supernatural beings.” If, then, Firth continues, “we are to speak ... of these phenomena as constituting totemism it must be acknowledged that there are in Tikopia two distinct types of the institution – the positive, relating to plant food-stuffs, with emphasis on fertility; the negative, relating to animals, with emphasis on unsuitability for food.”⁹

The ambivalence attributed to animals appears even greater in that the gods assume many forms of animal incarnation. For the *sa Tafua*, the clan god is an eel which causes the coconuts of its adherents to ripen; but he can also change into a bat, and as such destroy the palm plantations of other clans. Hence the prohibition on eating bats, as well as water hens and other birds, and also fish, which stand in a particularly close relationship to certain deities. These prohibitions, which may be either general or limited to a clan or lineage, are not, however, of a totemic character: the pigeon, which is closely connected with Taumako clan, is not eaten, but there are no scruples against killing it, because it plunders the gardens. Moreover, the prohibition is restricted to the first-born.

Behind the particular beliefs and prohibitions there is a fundamental scheme, the formal properties of which exist independently of the relations between a certain animal or vegetable species and a certain clan, sub-clan or lineage, through which it may be discerned.

Thus the dolphin has a special affinity for the Korokoro lineage of Tafua clan. When it is stranded on the beach, members of this kin group make it an offering of fresh vegetable foodstuffs called *putu*, “offering on the grave of a person

** Seen in this perspective, the two myths of the origin of totemism which we have summarized and compared may also be considered, as myths concerning the origin of metaphor. And as a metaphorical structure is, in general, characteristic of myths, they therefore constitute in themselves metaphors of the second degree.

recently deceased.” The meat is then cooked and shared between the clans, with the exception of the kin group in question, for which it is *tapu* because the dolphin is the preferred form of incarnation of their *atua*.

The rules of distribution assign the head to the Fangarere, the tail to the Tafua, the forepart of the body to the Taumako, and the hindpart to the Kafika. The two clans whose vegetable species (yam and taro) is a god’s “body” are thus entitled to “body” parts, and the two whose species (coconut, breadfruit) is a god’s “head” receive the extremities (head and tail). The form of a system of relations is thus extended, in a coherent fashion, to a situation which at first sight might appear quite foreign to it. And, as among the Ojibwa, a second system of relations with the supernatural world, entailing food prohibitions, is combined with a formal structure while at the same time remaining clearly distinct from it, though the totemic hypothesis would incline one to confuse them. The divinized species which are the objects of the prohibitions constitute a separate system from that of clan functions which are themselves related to plant foodstuffs: e.g., the octopus, which is assimilated to a mountain, the streams of which are like its tentacles, and, for the same reason, to the sun and its rays; and eels, both fresh-water and marine, which are objects of a food tabu so strong that even to see them may cause vomiting.

We may thus conclude, with Firth, that in Tikopia the animal is conceived neither as an emblem, nor as an ancestor, nor as a relative. The respect and the prohibitions connected with certain animals are explained, in a complex fashion, by the triad of ideas that the group is descended from an ancestor, that the god is incarnated in an animal, and that in mythical times there existed a relation of alliance between ancestor and god. The respect observed toward the animal is thus accorded to it indirectly.

On the other hand, attitudes toward plants and toward animals are opposed to each other. There are agricultural rites, but none for fishing or hunting. The *atua* appear to men in the form of animals, never of plants. Food tabus, when they

exist apply to animals, not plants. The relation of the gods to vegetable species is symbolic, that to animal species is real; in the case of plants it is established at the level of the species, whereas an animal species is never in itself *atua*, but only a particular animal in certain circumstances. Finally, the plants which are “marked” by differential behavior are always edible; in the case of animals the reverse obtains. Firth, in a brief comparison of Tikopian facts with the generality of Polynesian reports, expresses almost word for word the formula of Boas, drawing the lesson that totemism does not constitute a phenomenon *sui generis* but a specific instance in the general field of relations between man and the objects of his natural environment.¹⁰

[...]

Radcliffe-Brown’s demonstration ends decisively the dilemma in which the adversaries as well as the proponents of totemism have been trapped because they could assign only two roles to living species, viz., that of a natural stimulus, or that of an arbitrary pretext. The animals in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired, or envied: their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen not because they are “good to eat” but because they are “good to think.”

NOTES

1. See Cuoq, J. A. *Lexique de la langue algonquienne*. Montreal, 1886, pp. 312–313.
2. *Handbook of North American Indians North of Mexico*. Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, *Bulletin* 30, 2 vols. Washington, 1907–1910. “Totemism.”
3. Warren, W., “History of Ojibways,” *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, Vol. V. Saint Paul, Minn., 1885, pp. 43–44.
4. Hilger, M. I., “Some Early Customs of the Menomini Indians,” *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, Vol. XLIX (n.s.), 1960, p. 60.

5. Jenness, D., "The Ojibwa Indians of Parry Island: Their Social and Religious Life," *Bulletin of the Canadian Department of Mines*, No. 78. Ottawa, 1935, p. 54.
6. Firth, R., "Totemism in Polynesia," *Oceania*, Vol. I, No. 3, 1930-31, p. 292.
7. Firth, R., "Totemism in Polynesia," *Oceania*, Vol. I, No. 3, 1930-31, p. 296. This book was already in proof when there came into our hands a very recent work by Firth (1961) in which other versions of the same myth are to be found.
8. Jakobson, R. and Halle, M., *Fundamentals of Language*. s-Gravenhage, 1956, Chap. V.
9. Firth, R., "Totemism in Polynesia," *Oceania*, Vol. I, No. 3, 1930-31, pp. 300, 301.
10. Firth, R., "Totemism in Polynesia," *Oceania*, Vol. I, No. 4, 1930-31, p. 398.