

Totem and Sacrifice

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Summary

An understanding of the meaning of sacrifice is crucial in clinical work, above all in working with migrants and refugees. Sacrifice implies that people put aside h/er personal goals and private life, in favor of the family, the community or the nation's interests. The sacrificing of Isaac and Iphigenie are the mythological expression of social supremacy upon the subject.

The authors compare the notion of sacrifice with that of the Totem, because in the totemic cultures, like the Australian aboriginal, there is no trace of sacrifice. Totem, a very important quality of living systems declared by ancestors, became a fundamental aspect of social organisation. Every person is equally essential in the living system as well every quality, law or rule. Totemic belonging is the historical evolution and affirmation of subjectivity.

Further, the authors connect totemic identity with the psychological concept of personal identity. In the modern world, the subject has to cope on his or her own with dangerous intrusions by kinship or any other, small or large, social organisation. Migrants or refugees have many other losses, including the sense of the value of the community, and so it is more difficult for them to cope with personal needs. This encourages us to reevaluate the idea of totemic belonging in the modern world.

The sacrifice

We start telling a history of everyday life, reported by a local newspaper, The Advertiser, Adelaide, Monday, February 7, 2000, at the bottom of the cover, titled: '*Public Sacrifice*'.

"Just moment after taking a baby goat from a pet nursery at a family day in Elder Park yesterday, this man killed the animal next to the Torrens Lake. The 27-years-old allegedly told police he slaughtered the goat in observance of a religious rite. ... There were children everywhere, playing with the animals. ... The man has arrested a short time later after a member of the public who saw the slaughter contacted police ... the man was charged with offensive behavior. ... There were a lot of people upset. ... You don't expect to see something like that in a civilised place like Adelaide"

This is the fact, but, at page 14, sacrifice reappears: “*Native vegetation to be sacrificed for new salt drainage channel*” titles a reporter and quotes: “*We think sacrificing 200ha out of a block of scrub is the best decision...*”(for the Government). Why sacrifice is *the best decision* in one way and *offensive behavior* in another way? Why this happens in Australia that “*is a multicultural society, essentially pluralistic*” (*Opinion, in National Geographic, n.57, pg. 31, Jan. 2000*) and where “*We are all environmentalists now*”? (*Editorial, The Advertiser, pg. 16, Monday, February. 7, 2000*)

What means sacrifice?

People seem to be frightened by sacrifice: “ You don’t expect to see something like that” where “children are playing with the animals”. People contacted police and spoke with journalist, but they “did not wish to be identified”. In this avoiding of responsibility, you can perceive a sense of mystery: Sacrifice has to be out of our “civilised place”. In the countries where sacrifice is a part of everyday life, children play and know more about animals, not only pets, than in civilized societies. Adults, awarded of a sense of superstition present in their behavior, preferred to project their incongruent behavior on children.

It is very interesting to observe, as the newspaper reported, the behavior of the young man who went along the river and sacrificed his goat near to the bridge. According with classical mythology, the river and water represent the life and the process of life, while the bridge represents the connection between the earth and the heaven. The sacrifice, as a renouncing to some personal pleasures, thanks God for his help. Blood cleans the promise and the water cleans the blood, so a new life can start as well the good relationship with a protective God.

But why sacrifice is perceived so dangerous? Where come from these powerful fantasies?

Sacrifice means that a powerful man, frequently very close to you, will kill or abuse you in order to achieve more power. This echo of mythological histories, like the Isaac and Iphigenie's sacrifice, is yet alive in our fantasies or dreams, because sacrifice was "*the best decision*" for the authority, from father to king. But it wasn't always the same.

Originally, during the matriarchal age, the king was killed at the end of his 100 months, about 8 year, of kingdom, when the moon calendar meets again the solar calendar. Later on, to survive and make more power, kings started to eliminate the sons, in this way he showed his fidelity to the Mother (Nation) and her unique son, the people: "my people".

The "*Patria potestas*", that represented, during Roman Empire, the total power of father upon the sons, was been the highest expression of this historic development of human traditions. A strong power of father upon the sons and, above all upon the daughters, is till alive in many countries. These traditional histories became part, via cultural organization, of our unconscious fantasies.

There is a phase, in child development, in which almost all children believe that their parents refused them and the real parents are only adoptive parents. Recently, a nine-year-old girl, who frequently look at her birth in the movie recorded by her father, said to him that she had a strange thought: father and mother were not the real parents, even if, she added: "I know that is not true".

Sacrifice appears at the beginning of agricultural societies, when populations were passing from the nomadic to residential stage. Stationary society requires boundaries, defenses, increasing abilities in managing, etc., and all these things introduced the sense of power and domination. People started to become totally

part of the clan, losing their personal identity, the totemic belonging, and identifying themselves with the clan's boundaries

The totemic belonging

In the hunting-gathering societies of Upper Paleolithic the subject was part of the clan as well part of the totemic ancestors. Totem is an important quality for surviving that is common to animals, plants and humans. At that time nature was perceived as a whole and the struggle for surviving was a law of life both for animals and humans: man wasn't the king of living realm and the relationships between a person and an animal, a plant or a natural manifestation were different. Most of these relationships, hidden inside mythological knowledge, are quite obscure to our understanding, while they were clear to people sharing everything with animals and who were dependent on the environment. For example, we do not depend on water hole or we do not provide food, hunting like animals, so we have not the same perception of relationships between we/men and the others inhabitants of the natural domain.

In a world where qualities of each we/man were indispensable to the life of the group, totemising these qualities underlining their relationship with others aspects of the global environment could be the only way to protect and save both the contents and method of progress of human knowledge, so thinking absorbed and mixed the laws of nature as well as the rules of kinship and social life. The same terms Totemism, in its original etymology, indicates that sister and brother do not have any sexual relationship. To understand that it was dangerous for human development has been a great discovery like the DNA in modern society and it needs to be clear for all people, in order to protect the quality of life.

Mythological narration was the collector of these 'scientific' discoveries, its protective code, the way by which they were transmitted to generations. Probably the laws and rules of these domains shaped each other, thanks to narrative description or ceremonies and songs of the features of correspondent events in nature and time, as well as in human life. What today is seen as a holistic theory, the wholeness was simply everyday life.

So, totemism became one of these great ideas of Mythology, which reassumes, under well-known and defined shapes of natural life, lots of analogies between we/men and nature, which helps the human mind to manage and balance its evolution. These totemic configurations were established on their perception of strong similarities between all entities present in their world.

This knowledge of the common features-laws of all beings living in the natural world required a kind of mental organisation to memorise all collected information inside a corpus of shared convictions. One of the most important features of Totemism was the idea of organizing and hence preserving this corpus of knowledge. Organizing all that needs to survive and their rules with some visual, narrative and everyday presence has become the most important task of indigenous people and the ancestors were the we/men who encoded these rules. I think that Totemism has been the first unwritten corpus of rules, the first social organization of life that humans, living together for thousands of years, experienced as a need.

If we like to go on within this knowledge, we have to leave our "*European, Christian, classical, caste, imperialistic, superiority sentiments*". We have to try to identify ourselves as living in a desert land, arid environment, enduring struggle for survival, but very close to each other, sharing time and food, paying gratitude to the Great Spirit of Life. Unfortunately many mythologists and anthropologists

made their conclusion driven by some personal obsessive intellectual framework.

Human knowledge evolved by crossing punctuated boundaries or by bifurcation like a tree branches. All pictures of the human evolution as well of the mathematical models show this image. Some of the totemic and hunting-gathering societies evolved thanks to mutated events as, for example, those listed by Frankel, while some others maintained their characteristics, like the Australian aboriginal. The biblical tower of Babel could represent the definitive passage to the residential standing agricultural. Changing similarities and relationships with nature, mean changing totems. This means, probably, the confusion of languages.

Following the biblical mythology, Isaac's sacrifice is the symbolic birth of the people in search of the Promised Land. It is the passage from the organization of knowledge and life mainly based on totem to one based on life's clan and the identity of a people, the birth of nations and religions. But this implies the sacrifice of personal links with ancestors, which nowadays we call personal identity. Now, sacrificing personal identity in the name of the family, state or religion became a dominant characteristic of residential societies.

Fortunately, it is quite interesting to observe that in modern life people are looking again, in many even if confused ways, for a personal link with life without imposed boundaries, with life as a whole. They select some aspect, which they feel as the new totems. For example, in my country every year people from all Europe come for a special event related to a historical motorbike, the Moto Guzzi. The ceremonies of this new totem include many of the features of antique totems described by anthropologists.

But the contrast between totem and sacrifice is still in favor of the prevalence of sacrifice. In our therapeutic work we look at both of them: where, why and how we/man had to sacrifice the personal

totemic belonging in order to accomplish the destiny of family or clan or nationality. Our clinical experience is full of these sacrifices. Let me illustrate a simple clinical vignette.

An old lady came to the consulting room because, after six months from her newborn niece death, she was still thinking to her, day and night. She felt uncomfortable, so her daughter, the newborn's mother, suggested her to consult a psychologist. She told me a sequence of losses, but only after some sessions she said that her mother abandoned her after the birth.

After this announcement she spoke a lot. Few session later she arrived with a picture of the little baby and showed it to me. She said that she had another thought she had never shared. She felt the death of the newborn as if she had been killed by doctors. She added that she understood there was any possibility of living and the cost for maintaining an artificial life was very high, both in money and parents pain, but she had those feelings.

I suggested that she was perceiving that her niece had been sacrificed as she had been sacrificed by her mother's parents who, many years ago, in a Catholic country like Italy, couldn't be capable of tolerate a dishonor of having a baby before the marriage. She was silent for a few minutes and after said: "Now, that you show me, it seems to me true. Both we have been sacrificed." She started to cry. The week after she came and said that she would like to tell to her daughters the history of her life, asking me to help her.

Sacrifice today

Sacrifice is a component of everyday life and what is really sacrificed is the belonging to, the link with the flow of nature that must protect the life of everybody. Missing a totemic belonging, that is the sacred unchangeable right to a best life as a part of the whole supported by

the community/clan, the society and its rules become the arbiter of life. Probably, we have to rethink the importance of totemic belonging.

We have to look at these similarities not in terms of modern classification of things, as some anthropologist have done, but try to attend to the historical situation.

But humans were developing new useful skills and, probably during the last glaciation era, they started to pass from a hunting-gathering society to a pastoral nomadic and, later on, agricultural society.

There are no tracks of sacrifice in the aboriginal, that is hunting-gathering, culture. Following Confucius: *“When the root is neglected, that which springs from it, cannot be ordered.* We try to suggest a route toward the roots.

We have already met the Totemism as an idea strongly connected with analogy. Totem is an acquired knowledge of a very important similarity that, in order to survive, hunting-gathering we/men transformed into a rule, which is not abstract or purely symbolic.

After a brief introduction of the principle of correspondence, recently reintroduced by E. O. Wilson as Consilience, the authors discuss the idea of duality of nature within indigenous cultures. This dual organisation involves the entire activity of thinking and living. A subject is part of the kinship as well of his own Totem and this belonging promotes personal growth and protects h/er from social intrusions.