

Review of: "Intersecting Realms of Totemism and Spiritual Uniqueness: A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Mystical Experiences"

Carles Salazar¹

¹ Universitat de Lleida

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Are totems 'good to worship' or 'good to think' (or both)?

This is a well-argued and scholarly survey of totemic cults with interesting insights into their significance for a broader reflection on human religiosity and mysticism. In this brief comment, I would like only to mention what strikes me as a conspicuous absence in their overview of the extant literature. This is the classic work by Lévi-Strauss, *Le totemisme aujourd'hui* (1962). This work turns out to be particularly relevant to two main issues dealt with by the authors: the quasi-universality of totemism among tribal societies and the totems' symbolic power, namely, their capacity to operate as a language of sorts or, in Lévi-Strauss's words, to be 'good to think'. Certainly, in many respects, Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach differs significantly from the authors' in so far as he explicitly denied the definition of totemism as a form of religion or worship while he emphasized its semiotic function. However, taking into account that maybe worship and symbolization do not need to be mutually exclusive, it might have been useful to consider Lévi-Strauss's work. In what concerns the quasi-universality of totemic systems, note that this happens overwhelmingly among tribal societies, that is, societies with a social structure based on unilineal descent groups or 'clans', and correspondingly, it is nearly absent among societies with different forms of social organization. This is not a coincidence, for the symbolic power of totems, i.e., their capacity to stand for something different from themselves, is closely related to the thing that they stand for. The kind of social epistemology that totemic classifications are meant to solve, according to Lévi-Strauss, would be the perception of social groups as discrete units, whose members are equal to each other within the group and different from the members of all other groups. This is a clearly counterintuitive representation of society, which can only be seen as a collection of individuals who are either similar to each other as humans or different from each other as individual subjects. Totemic classifications are capable of representing the social world of discrete units by postulating a homology with the division of the natural world into separate species. It is important in this sense to point out that totems are considered as mythical ancestors of the group (hence the original meaning of the word 'totem' in the Ojibwe language as 'relative' or 'brother', as the authors rightly indicate). This does not mean, as the authors seem to imply, a perceived similarity between humans and animals, or between the humans of a particular clan and their totemic species (i.e., 'ontological unity between the individual and the totemic entity', p. 8). Rather, it means that the members of a particular clan see themselves as equal to each other *in the same way* as animals of a particular species are effectively equal to each other and members of a particular clan see themselves as different from the members of other clans as the animals of that particular

species are different from the animals of all other species. In Lévi-Strauss's own words: 'If we may be allowed the expression, *it is not the resemblances, but the differences which resemble each other*. This is an important point that accounts both for the existence of totemism in societies with a particular kind of social structure and for the symbolic power of totemic classifications. Furthermore, as this might be more akin to the authors' approach in this text, the fact that totems are 'good to think' should not be in contradiction with their mystical qualities, in so far as they 'operate as epistemological conduits, bridging the empirical with the ineffable' (p. 16). To conclude, despite this minor criticism, I think this is a thought-provoking and insightful essay.