

Review of: "Mystical Totems: Unveiling Mysticism in the Realms of Art and Faith"

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Mystical Totems: Unveiling Mysticism in the Realms of Art and Faith

By

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This paper aims to reframe the animal or plant niche in human perception and cognition of the world. I'd like to look at this subject from socio-cultural and anthropological angles and dwell on some points that provide a better insight into human-animal links. The authors have the intention to move away from the conventional ideas approved in academic science, in which animal and human beings, spiritual and bodily dimensions, mystical and rational-empirical experiences are demarcated. Using a phenomenological approach to interpret mystical practices, they recreate a multi-dimensional reality in which corporeal (physical) existences and primary meaning-making substances intersect. Relying on mythical stories, we can see the world created by demiurges in bygone times is eternal and super-real. Totemic cults are rooted in rebirthing those legendary events using ceremonial practices and narratives that enable the sacramental participants to be close to their ancestral creators embodied in animals. It should be noticed that the process of recreating the world through mystical practices relying on legendary stories has both a macrocosmic significance – it stems from the desire to strengthen social cohesion and bring cosmic order into people's lives – and a microcosmic one. Individuals' adherence to the rules governing their relationships with totems serves as a basis for their internal balance and health.

The specificity of this work is to make a shift away from anthropocentric concepts, with the point of departure being the Cartesian view on human-animal relations. According to Descartes' system of natural philosophy, personhood is restricted to human beings, and animal entities are treated as inferior "wordless" creations (see, T. Ingold. 1988, 1994. *What is an animal?*). Recent sociobiological evidence proves that all organisms receive signs from their environments, converting them into outputs consisting of further signs; but human and animal sign processes – or semiosis – may be radically different. Still, moving beyond Western perceptions of animals is debatable. In any case, human beings, as members of their own species, cognize animal entities within their own semiotic systems. It becomes necessary to outline cultural matrices and behavioral patterns corresponding to different human societies for identifying contours of human-animal interactions.

Hunter-gatherer-fisher communities deserve special attention in this regard; their contacts with wildlife fit into the authors' concept. Researching the funeral complexes and ceremonial practices of tribal peoples has enabled researchers to

conclude that those communities viewed animals as equal to humans and endowed them with personality. Their discoveries have shown that the people buried wild animals as humans and that they treated them in ritual performances like relatives or “other-than-human persons” (see, N. “Bird-David. 1999. “Animism” Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology”. *Current Anthropology* 40 (1); E. Hill. 2010. “Animals as Agents: Hunting Ritual and Relational Ontologies in Prehistoric Alaska and Chukotka”. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*. 21 (3); M. Lien, and G. Pálsson. 2019. “Ethnography beyond the human: the ‘other-than-human’ in ethnographic work”. *Ethnos. Journal of Anthropology*. 86 (3)). A careful analysis of such funerary complexes and ceremonials provides evidence for aiming the animal veneration to conclude the social contract between humans and “other-than-human beings,” providing mutual safety and giving gifts. The same rituals may be interpreted as an act of gift exchange - we give you sacrificial food, and you give us vital products, i.e., hunting prey, fish.

There is another aspect of this phenomenon; the cosmic order clearly appears in the arrangement of human-animal figures. Unlike solid philosophical systems introducing the Cosmos as the Supreme Being and the Absolute Spirit, hunters and fishermen have cosmic images copying their natural landscapes. It is worth noting that in such societies, along with cultural ubiquity, when spiritual realms pervade all spheres of their lives, there may be cultural selectivity. This is manifested in identifying objects: some are endowed with a purely utilitarian function and may be used in everyday life; others receive semiotic content, bodily and spiritual extensions. For example, the Amur River peoples (Eastern Russia) assigned a special social role to predators such - tigers, bears - as forebears, relatives, and other peoples having their own social organizations; assistants in hunting, malevolent and benevolent entities.

It is also paying attention to the next aspect of corporeality, when we emphasize not so much the human body as an instrument of penetration into the spiritual sphere, but the animal body. Many spiritual practices had an obligatory ceremonial act of eating the sacred animal to gain its power and ultimate wisdom. Siberian peoples made extensive use of killing, stripping, and eating bears, which meant ridding them of their physical shells and returning them to their kin as “bear-humans,” messengers from the human world. It is noteworthy that there were no such ceremonials for tigers.

There is another side to these actions related to the correlation of physical (bodily) and metaphysical realities. Drawing on some narrative plots, we discover the sacred animals that are not analogous to entities of the perceptual visible world. They may be larger than their natural prototypes, have pronounced appearance features - golden, fiery plumage; powerful fangs; or a gaze that sizzles any mortal. The whole point of totemic mysticism is to merge with these demonic beings. The analysis of shamanic experience shows that shamans during the *kamlanie* processes not just penetrate into spiritual spheres, but the whole sequence of their acts is conceptualized as a way to transform their bodies – they gain the ability to soar above the ground like birds; the power of predators to banish hostile spirits.

Accordingly, the question arises as to where the boundaries of totemism lie. In some folk traditions, we can see threads linking people to particular animals: they represent legendary storylines concerning the origin of clans or communities through the copulation of humans with those animals. Other peoples began to venerate supreme entities like chimeras combining traits of birds, predators, and reptiles. These creatures' lives are pictured in narratives in which the characters' life-cycles set event lines in – they are born, commit actions, and die. This formula is also represented in clan ceremonial

processes; their actors repeat and experience the lives not so much of cultural archetypes constituting fantasy animals as of their own ancestors, who acquired power and super-abilities through connection with divine creations.

I regard this manuscript as a challenge to the conventional worldview system and as an attempt to combine artistic and scientific outlooks. In this endeavor to look at the problem from all angles, sometimes the research subject itself is getting lost. Nevertheless, it does not diminish the importance of this work.

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