

An Anthropological Perspective: Totems in the Lives of the Persians

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to explain totems and their roles in the lives of the Persians. The method used for gathering data was based on field research and library reference. Totemism is one of the main forms of the preliminary religions that manifested itself in the development of human mind and belief. The ancient man used to enjoy the language of nature, and he responded to the world through his dreams or totems. The ancient man knew that he was beyond human being. For instance, he believed that his ancestor was an animal that could die and then return to the life once again. In its old form, the human societies used to worship the animal's dead body or a plant that manifested that society's nature of existence. This is what anthropology intended to discuss throughout history. A totem is a sacred object or symbol that represents a group of people or a clan. In the Iranian culture and mythology, the evidence of totemism is present. Thus, such signs appeared in the epics of the nation, and on this basis, an attempt is made in the current paper to study animal and plant totems and the role they have played in the lives and cultures of ancient Iranian people.

INTRODUCTION

Totemism refers to the main forms of the ancient religions, leading to the evolution of human beliefs. The ancient man knew that he was a human being and even beyond that he believed that his ancestor was an animal. Various sciences including anthropology, archeology, history of religions, mythology, religious sociology, and religious psychology have emphasized the importance of these issues among humanity. Scientists have discussed the most primitive forms of religion as well as beliefs of man. They have introduced two types of religions as totemism and animism.

A totem is a spirit, sacred object, or symbol that represents a group of people or a clan. Iranian culture and mythology have paid special attention to totemism. Durkheim considers totemism to be "the most ancient form of religion among the nations" (Azadeghan 1993). These religions played important roles in the history and culture of each nation. The reflections of these religions can be found even in the manuscripts remaining from these nations or the nations following them. Today one cannot find the reflections of ancient

religions such as totemism in the manuscripts in a pure form. Based on the comparative anthropology, one can assume that people in the ancient times used to think that the spirits of the powerful dead members of tribe as sacred (Farshidnik 2015).

The word "totem" was first used by the English writer J. Long in 1971. He adopted the term from the North American Indians (Freud 1913). Samadi defined "Totemism" as "the particular respect or belief that all members of the tribe express toward some animals or plants, and consider the spirit of the animal as their particular guard." She further adds:

Totem is the one that is respected. Indians called the animal that they were frightened of as totem because of the latter's strengths. Anthropologists used the act of worship of materials as "totemism". In the primitive tribes, the totem was considered as the ancestor of the tribe. The members of these tribes used to tattoo the symbol of the totem on their body and believed that in this way the characteristics of the totem would be transferred to them. Therefore, they considered themselves as a human being as well as they identified themselves with the totem they

used to worship. Sometimes, they changed their appearance so that they could resemble the concerned totem. For instance, the tribe who considered a buffalo as the totem made their hairs as a horn (Samadi 1987).

The primitive man believed that totem would keep their enemies off, predict the future, heal the patients, and above all, serve as the carrier of the spirit of each person. Totem considered as man's guard, and thus the latter used to respect the totem in different ways (Azadegan 1993). Fylysyn Shalh believed that in most communities, "the child inherits the name of totem from his/her mother," (Shalh 1976) but Freud believed that in the maternal and also paternal pedigree, "totem is inherited" (Freud 1913).

Theoretical Framework

Freud proposed a new theory on the origin of totemism. He explained it from the psychoanalytic perspective. In his book, *Totem and Taboo*, he clearly manifested the inspiration he had received from Darwin's evolution theory and other scholars, such as Robertson Smith. This way he was able to propose a theory on "totemism". In brief, the theory states that:

A jealous and violent father kept all women for himself, and as his sons grew older, he drove the latter away. One day, the brothers gathered and killed the father and ate him. By eating him, they fulfilled their unification with him and each inherited a part of his power. However, after a short while, they started having a sense of guilt. Thus, to compensate for the sin, they had the plant or animal mingled with their father's remaining parts of the body and made it as the totem. Therefore, they decided not to kill the totem and withhold themselves from intercourse with the tribe's women, who were in the possession of their father prior to his death. That is why exogamy and totemism are concomitant (Azadegan 1993).

Consequently, according to Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, totem turns into taboos in a society. Freud defines the term "taboo," as "ritual prohibitions of a different nature". For Freud, "it might be argued that the term should be extended to embrace cases in which the sanction of the prohibition is the creation of a god or spirit...to religious interdictions as distinguished from magical, but there is neither automatic action

nor contagion in such a case, and a better term for it is religious interdiction" (Freud 1913). He further elaborates on the objects of taboos and classifies them as direct taboos, and those that serve as protection against thieves. Direct taboos do various functions like, protecting important people against dangers, protecting women and children against "the magical influences of chiefs and leaders, protecting people against corpses, preventing people from interfering in private affairs of others, guarding people against the "power of gods and spirits," and keeping weak and children from dangers. (Freud 1913) According to Freud, the term "taboo" refers to all persons, objects and temporary conditions that are sources of this mysterious attribute. This attitude results in prohibition caused by taboo, as a taboo, includes everything that is sacred, beyond human being, and at the same time dangerous, and mysterious. "The totemic character," for Freud, "is inherent not in some individual animal or entity, but in all individuals of a given class." There used to be festivals where the clansmen represented the attributes of their totem in ceremonial dances.

Freud introduces 12 canons of "totemism" in the book, *Totem and Taboo*. Based on these canons people should avoid killing and eating certain animals, mourn for the animals considered sacred by the tribe, and people might also use the skin and even the names of the animal totems. Some men of the tribe draw figures of totem animals on their body for protection against evils powers (Freud 1913).

Freud goes further to introduce three different totems. The first one is the tribal totem, shared by which a whole tribe, inherited from one generation to another, the second totem is the sex totem that belongs to all masculine and feminine members, and finally, the third totem is the individual totem that belongs to individuals. Pointing out to the relationship between totems and individuals, Freud states:

There exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether special relation. The connection between a person and his totem is mutually beneficent, the totem protects the man and shows his respect for the totem in various ways, by not killing it if I [am] an animal, and not cutting or gathering it if it [is] a plant. As distinguished from a fetish, a totem is never an isolated individual but always a class of objects, generally a species of animals

or of plants more rarely a class of inanimate natural objects, very rarely a class artificial objects. (Freud 1913)

The last two types of totems are not as important as the tribal totem. They seem to be of recent formations and of little importance. Furthermore, the ancient man used to perform magic rites, because he believed in it. The art of healing related to the professional magic. The primary tribes used to mix spirituality, magic, and medicine, and these were effective in bringing about superior power for men and even women, who used to deal with such issues. In magic rites, the primitive man believed in a mixture of the magic ruler with the tribe's totem (Mokhtari 1989).

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this paper is a field-based research and for this purpose, the author has raised questions and interviewed people. The author has also made use of library data and documented theories of relevant and reliable critics.

DISCUSSION

Totemism in Iran

As some manuscripts show, "totemism," or at least its signs, existed in ancient Iran. It was a part of cultural heritage, and it was not merely displayed orally from one generation to another, but also in other written and had dramatic forms. Like other nations, the Persians possessed two kinds of totems, that is, animal totems and plant totems, and these two kinds of totems have appeared in the great Persian epic, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.

The primitive man has been somehow dependent on nature. It has been the nature, which has fed and protected man from his enemies. The earth has served as a mother, who has played important roles in the cultures of different people. At the age of hunting and food gathering, when the fresh meat of animals considered as man's main food, every tribe used to turn to and pay respect to a certain animal that was considered as the progenitors of the great powers in man's life. As George Thomson has pointed out, the animal totem was considered as a way of worshipping certain animals as ancestors

of the tribe, and it was during this period that animal totemism started (Aryanpore 1974).

As mentioned earlier, the stories of these animal totems have come about through different Persian narrative sources. Based on these narratives *Keykhosrow*¹, owned and trained a dog, *Ardehsir*² used to feed a goat, and *Achaemenid* trained an eagle. Based on Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, it was believed that *Zal*, *Rustam*'s father³ was born with a body covered with white hairs, *Zal*'s father, Sam, who was excessively annoyed, decided to kill his newly born baby, but the latter was saved and trained by the *Simorgh*⁴. At the time of *Rustam*'s birth, the *Simorgh* played the role of a physician and helped *Rudabeh*⁵ in childbearing, because *Rustam* was so big that his mother had some problem bearing him. Apart from being a supporter of *Zal*, the *Simorgh* believed to be quite wise. People believed that it possessed a spiritual power that would lead to its veneration.

Another narrative related to the *Simorgh* in *Shahnameh* is its role in saving *Rustam* and *Rakhsh*⁶ in their fight against the invulnerable *Esfandiar*, where both the former were severely hurt and no one hoped they would survive. People believed that *Simorgh* possessed a healing power. All these stories lead to the conclusion that the people in *Zal*'s tribe considered the *Simorgh* as their totem.

As mentioned earlier, a totem protected the members of the tribe, and this feature is applicable to the *Simorgh*. The totem animal used to predict the future events, and the *Simorgh* predicted the birth of *Rustam*, the invulnerability of *Esfandiar*, and the unlucky fate awaiting them if fighting. Meanwhile, it solved the problem of invulnerability of *Esfandiar* and guided *Rostam* to make use of *Gaz* wood. Both the totem animal and the individual possessed by the totem were of the same ancestors, having the same characteristics. According to *Shahnameh*, once *Rustam* met the King, *Keikhosrow*, the latter called him the guard of Iran. Whenever *Rustam* was needed, he would appear and help the King with his problems. The King used to identify him with the *Simorgh*.

The other animal considered as totem by the ancient Iranian people is a snake or dragon. In some cultures, the snake is considered as the symbol of healing. Medicine still has "the sym-

bol of two snakes coiling around a stick or cup" (Yahaghi 1996). It seems that the fear of large prehistoric animals, like reptiles and snakes, have formed the frightening images of dragons in people's minds. Jung considered a dragon as the symbol of "devil powers" in the thoughts of primitive men (Jung 1961). Animals appear in many contemporary Persian stories, and these stories are mostly in the forms of fables and narratives dealing with the coexistence of men and animals, and finally narratives where the narrations are done through the animal's point of view (Mirabedini 2014).

In *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi has introduced a character named *Zahak*. The latter is the famous dragon-type man, whose name denotes "*Dragon*" to the extent that people consider him the dragon itself. *Avesta*, the ancient religious book of the Iranian people, refers to him as a dragon with three muzzles, six eyes, and three heads, as the thunder dragon that "fights with the light godhead" (Yahaghi 1996). He is portrayed in the form of a man on whose shoulders are grown the heads of the two snakes and thus he is called the three-headed in Iranian stories. In the book, *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Gustav Jung refer to certain ceremonies when men and in most cases the head of the tribe used to wear the skin of an animal and in that moment became one with that animal. Then in this way, the spirit of the tribe's totem is incarnated. These men then used masks to play the role of animals. It was through these masks that the totemic animals were displayed (Jung 1961). The shape of the mask perhaps led to the introduction of *Zahak*, as the three-headed. *Zahak* is endowed with both human and animal traits, and he represents his totemic animal, dragon. The name of *Zahak*, and therefore the dragon, was associated with power.

Plant Totemism

At the time of agriculture, earth, water and plants play important roles in the lives of humankind. It is during such events that a unity and identification between man and plants take place. These identifications appeared in ceremonies and feasts.

Throughout history, man has given proper respect to plants, and there have been some instances in the past when a man used to worship trees, as these trees seem to be sacred.

As far as the ancient Persians believe, *Zoroaster* has brought the cedar tree to Earth from heaven. The Iranian people and many other people from different countries attribute great powers to trees. It was believed in the past that any women not capable of bearing a baby should refer to trees. The plant represents the mythological ancestor.

The Iranian mythology considered *Kiomar-th*⁷ as the first man created by God. It has been pointed out that this man stood for man's potency, and lived for a period of thirty years. When he died, his buried body gave birth to two plants that looked like rhubarb, and since then the relationship between man and rhubarb has a historical root in the neo-Paleolithic era. It was believed that they were originated from rhubarb and the plant was their totem. Later, the ancient myth turned out into a common totem among the Iranian. The plant then evolved into a man. Today, this plant is called "*Mehr giah*"⁸. The root of this plant looks like the face of a man and a woman who are united. One is a male and the other a female, and these would marry after 50 years. These two are associated with Adam and Eve for the Iranian people.

In *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi has pointed out to *Syavosh*, beheaded by *Afrasyab*. The ancient Iranian people believed that in the place where the blood of *Syavosh* was shed, a flower grew, and they called this flower, the flower of *Syavosh* Blood.

Therefore, the totemic animals and plants have played important roles in the culture of the ancient Iranian people.

CONCLUSION

A totem is the common ancestor of a clan, and at the same time, it serves as people's guardian spirit. The totemic character is not identified with some individual animal or object, but it is inherent in all individuals of a given class. A totem stands for a sacred object or symbol that represents a group of people. Totemism is a part of the Iranian culture and mythology. The ancestor of the pre-historic man was an animal. The former could die and then return to life. Various sciences including anthropology, archeology, history of religions, mythology, religious sociology, and religious psychology have emphasized the importance of these issues among humanity. The stories of animal totems have

come about through different Persian narrative sources including Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. The ancient Persian people were especially attracted by these concepts, considering those animals and plants as sacred totems. It is evident in the way such animals like the *Simorgh* and *Dragon* are displayed in *Shahnameh*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are different nations with different cultures in the world. Each nation possesses a particular set of beliefs and totems, which manifest themselves in different ways, that is, either through symbols, other spiritual entities or totems. Thus, the research on these nations, their totems, sacred beliefs, and the way they manifest themselves for the future generation can be helpful. On the other hand, these totemic symbols belonging to different nations in the world are so extensive that they cannot be underestimated. These issues can be applicable to different nations in the world.

NOTES

- 1 A Persian Legendary King
- 2 A Persian legendary king
- 3 *Rustam* was a heroic legendary character in old Persia; Ferdowsi created him as a central figure in *Shahnameh*
- 4 A legendary bird

- 5 *Rustam's* mother
- 6 *Rustam's* horse
- 7 The word originated in *Pahlavi* language, meaning "life" and "death".
- 8 *Mehrgiah* was a plant produced by an innocent man who was killed. There was a belief that the women in old Tehran had their husband eat a little *Mehrgiah*, so that the latter would be obedient to their wives.

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