

## THE BACKGROUND OF THE RELIGIOUS FEELING IN A PRIMITIVE TRIBE

By JAIME DE ANGULO

OUR attention has been recently called again to the theory that monotheism is the basis of the religion of the primitives.

In this connection it may be of interest to note that I have never been able to find the slightest trace of even the vaguest conception of Godhead among the Pit River Indians of north-eastern California. The Pit River tribe, of which the Adzumawi and the Atsuge are two of the local groups, are an extremely primitive people. Indeed, the most salient characteristic of their culture is the absence of nearly everything: no totemism, no social organization, no secret societies, no religious ceremonies of any kind, no priesthood, no real tabus. This is an imposing array of negative traits. On the material side their culture is almost as bare; a bow and arrows, a flint knife and a rabbit-skin blanket, basketry of medium quality, but no pottery; for clothes, in winter, mere pieces of fur wrapped and tied around the body or very coarsely sewn into a semblance of shape, and in summer, none; no weaving; no sense of decoration and no development of any art technique; no agriculture. They lived in winter shut up in enormous communal houses holding as many as ten families, and in summer they roamed around. They were communal hunters, using the system of battues and pits, rather than individual still-hunting. Although they had no agriculture, they developed to a high point what may be termed the "digging-stick culture"; this implies a vast lore and knowledge of edible roots, seeds, and wild vegetables, in what places they grow best and sweetest, at what precise time they are ripe in each particular meadow or hillside, and then of how to half-cook and cure large provisions of them for the winter.

These few remarks will be enough to give the reader the feeling of the life of these people. If anybody is to be called primitive, they are. Indeed, looked at superficially, they must have appeared

to the first white men like a horde of beasts. And were it not for the pejorative implication of such a statement by people as contemptuously ignorant of all the rest of creation as we white men are, I would not at all object to their being called animals. For they are very close to the animal stage, the pre-human, pre-rational stage, in the sense that human may be taken as synonym of the concretion of the superorganic into more and more organized forms of culture. Animals are not imbeciles. There is in the life of wild things in a wild setting a multitude of interactions to which the mind of civilized man is not attuned because it is of necessity oriented to another aspect of mental energy, namely the rational. To understand the psychology of the Pit River people, it is necessary to visualize their extremely intimate contact with the trees, the rocks, the weather and the delicate changes in the atmosphere, with the shape of every natural object, and, of course, with the habits not only of every species of animal but of many individuals. It is almost impossible for a civilized man to form any conception of the degree of intimacy with nature this represents. No civilized man would ever have the patience and energy to loaf in a wild place long enough to catch this subtle rhythm of interactions.

I have said that the Pit River were extremely primitive; I might have said that they still are. For though in the fifty or so years they have been in contact with the whites they have adapted themselves amazingly well to all the material aspects of civilization so that today they dress in overalls, use gasoline engines to saw wood, and ride in Fords, on the spiritual side they have not amalgamated a single one of the white man's values. But, the reader will ask, if they have no religious ceremonies, no priesthood, no ritual of any kind, and not the slightest approach to any conception of Godhead, how can one speak of their having any spiritual or religious values? I grant that it may sound somewhat paradoxical, but I must answer that on the contrary the life of these Indians is nothing but a continuous religious experience. To me, the essential of religion is not a more or less rationalized conceptual system of explanations of reality, but rather the "spirit of wonder," or as Lowie puts it: the recognition of the

awe-inspiring, extraordinary manifestations of reality. The difference between the two attitudes is essential. The one leads ultimately from humble origins in explanatory myths and stories of creation to a scientific discipline. The other is the mystical attitude, sufficient unto itself for those who happen to possess it, but an eternal puzzle and source of annoyance to the others because it stubbornly resists all attempts at rationalization.

Therefore, it is logically impossible for the rational man to understand the religious feeling of the primitives, and this is the probable cause of the failure of orthodox scientific ethnology in this field. To try to derive philosophical concepts and systems from the belief in spirits, the recognition of the self in dreams, errors in causal thinking about the phenomena of reality, or any of the other attempts at deriving the religious spirit from something else than itself, will always appear as utterly futile to anyone with a modicum of that spirit of wonder in himself. Unfortunately the man who does not possess it finds himself of necessity driven to explain in terms of his own thinking a phenomenon which he observes in others but which he does not experience himself, a phenomenon, at that, which is essentially subjective but which he endeavors to apprehend by purely objective means. I think this is not only poor philosophy but poor science.

The spirit of wonder, the *recognition of life as power*, as a mysterious, ubiquitous, concentrated form of non-material energy, of something loose about the world and contained in a more or less condensed degree by every object,—that is the credo of the Pit River Indian. Of course he would not put it in precisely this way. The phraseology is mine, but it is not far from their own. Power, power, power, this is the burden of the song of everyday life among these people. Without power you cannot do anything out of the ordinary. With power you can do anything. This power is the same thing as *luck*. The primitive conception of luck is not at all the same as ours. For us luck is fortuitousness. For them, it is the highest expression of the energy back of life. Hence the sacred character of all forms of gambling in primitive life.

There, in gambling, in the "hand-game," you will find the true expression of religious feeling in form, if you are looking for

religious form. Watch the fervor of the two teams as they sing the rhythmic songs of power for a whole night and you cannot escape the feeling that gambling here is a religious experience. "My son was a fine boy," said Fighting-in-the-Brush to me once, "he was a steady fellow, a good worker, a good gambler!" And again, here is Likely Ike explaining to me the theology of the so-called Shaker religion of the Klamath Indians among whom he has resided for the last thirty years, although himself a Pit River:

" . . . and then Jesus Himself and his wife, her name was Mary, they went traveling all over the world but their little boy got sick and they had to come back to Lutuam Lake. . This here Jesus he was a great doctor, he had lots of power, I guess he was the best gambler in the United States."

I could quote many other such expressions revealing the sacred character of gambling and the mystic nature of luck.

The other form of religious expression most nearly approaching a ritual among these people is in connection with shamanistic experience. Now this is the country of shamans par excellence. There are, at present, about a score of them, which is eight per cent of the tribe. You hear little else talked about except doctors and poisonings. But the most extraordinary part is the freedom with which they speak about it, provided of course that you are an Indian yourself or are being taken for one. We always think of poisoning by magic as a dark, shadowy and secret affair. And probably it is so at a later stage of culture, when the differentiation into white and black magic has already taken place. That later stage is also the stage when *supercherie* and hoodwinking make their appearance. But here the belief is real and sincere, there can be no question of that. What more proof could be demanded than Sunset-Tracks, a shaman with whom I was living, *doctoring his own self*? He is an old blind man and he was knocked out of his buggy by an auto just as he started on a visit to his brother. He suffered many contusions but nevertheless got back into his buggy with the help of his wife, and they drove on to Hantiyu, a place twenty miles away. When he got there he was feeling pretty sick. That night his *poison* Raven came to see him. It must be explained here that by his "poison" a medicine-man means indifferently his power, his medicine, the poison actual or

magical that he "shoots," the animal from which he derives it. It is all the same thing in Pit River psychology, and is expressed by the word "*damagomi*."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand the poison calls the shaman *itu ai*, my father. So his poison Raven came to see him that night and told him that his shadow had been knocked out of him when he fell out of the buggy

"and it stayed there on the ground while I went on to Hantiyu, and I guess I should have died if I stayed there, if Raven had not come to tell me. That's why I came back. Last night Bull Snake he put him back in my breath, he put my shadow back here in my breath. Bull Snake he is my poison too. He is pretty good poison, he is pretty strong fellow. Raven, he is my poison too. He always see everything. He live on top mountain there, on top Wadaqsudzi. Jim Lizard he is my poison too, but he is pretty mean fellow. He lie all the time. I can't trust him. Sometimes I am doctoring and he tell me that man he going to get all right and then make me ashamed because that man die. Sometime he quarrel with my other poison. I hear him talking out there in the bush. Bull Snake he say: "What you think, Raven, you think our father he cure that man? Then Jim Lizard he say: "Aw! let's go, that man going to die anyway, our father can't do nothing with him." Then Bull Frog he shake his finger at him, he say: "I am not asking *you*, I am asking this man here, I am asking Raven." Well, I am going to ask them tonight, if my *interpreter* comes tonight, Jack Steel he is always my interpreter, I have sent him word to come tonight, if he come I am going doctor myself."

"How can you doctor yourself?" I asked, "you can't suck yourself!"

"No, I can't suck myself. Maybe I get my brother Hantiyu Bill to come and do that. He is Indian doctor too. But tonight I just want to find out how long I am going to be sick. Maybe I am going to be sick a month. Maybe I am going to be sick a long time. Maybe I am going to die. My poison he know. My poison he tell me."

The interpreter did come, and we held the "doctoring" that night. The old doctor got so excited when he heard his poisons coming near in answer to our calls that he danced almost into the fire, and yet his leg was so painfully swollen that he could not move it without groaning. He began to get well rapidly after this. The purpose of the interpreter, by the way, is to serve as a sort of link between the shaman and the world, not only the visible but the invisible world. All that the interpreter does is to repeat every-

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<sup>1</sup> This is a verbal infinitive: *samagoma*, I poison; *kamagoma*, you poison; *yamagoma*, he poisons; *damagomi*, to poison; *itu damagomi*, my poison, etc.

thing that the shaman says, but in a set intonation, and with a formalized ending. For instance, he calls in a loud voice to the poisons to assemble: "Come, Snake, Come, Raven, Come, Lizard, Come, my poison!" Then he repeats the questions which the shaman puts to them. And it is also he who repeats their answers, which the shaman hears subjectively and repeats aloud in a more or less emoted and unintelligible fashion. For one thing the shaman speaks very fast then. But usually the interpreter is pretty well acquainted with his idiosyncrasies in garbling. However, he sometimes has to make him repeat. The exact value of the interpreter, in psychological terms, is not quite clear to me. My feeling is that the shaman is in a somewhat dangerous state of autism during the performance, a state into which he is in danger of sinking more and more, were it not for the precaution of anchoring his self in the outer world by means of the interpreter. Most shamans are markedly neurotic.

However, it must not be understood for a moment that their neurotic temperament is evidenced by the fact of their daily contact in terms of such intimacy with their *damagomis* in the invisible world. For, the very same sort of intimacy marks the relation of any Indian who is not just "a plain common Indian" to his *dinihowi*,<sup>2</sup> his power, his protector, his luck, his medicine, or whatever may be the English word preferred by any individual Indian. Now, the *dinihowi* is absolutely the same thing as the *damagomi* except that the *damagomi* is more powerful and is only "for doctors." In other terms, there is somewhere in the woods some individual animal, some one particular deer, or a certain locust, or a certain weasel, some one individual denizen of the wilds with a particularly strong dose of life-power to his credit, and he is the fellow whose acquaintance you must make and whose friendship you must acquire, cultivate, and keep. Go into the woods and find him. Seek him in the lonely places, about the springs. Call to him. Go again. Starve yourself and go again. Call to him. Sing his song. Try this song, try that song. Maybe

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<sup>2</sup> Also a verbal substantive, from the root  $\sqrt{ho}$ , the exact meaning of which is "to be sacred," "to be non-ordinary."

he used to be somebody else's protector, somebody who died, and now he hears that song and he says: "That's my song, that's my brother's song,<sup>3</sup> it is a little bit different but it is almost like it, it must be somebody very much like my brother, I think I had better go and see." So he will come and take a look at you. He won't come very close because he is kind of wild. He has got to get used to you. But some day, perhaps after you have called him a long time and you feel lonely and you cry and you are all tired out and you fall asleep, that's because you feel him coming and you lose your senses, you are just like dead, then he comes and wakes you up. He will push your head and say: He! wake up! you sleep there long enough, go home now. That's all he will say but you know he is your *dinihowi*, he is your power, he is your medicine. Maybe he is good for hunting. Maybe he is good for gambling. You'll soon find out. You will see him again. You must come and call him again. You must not take him near people's houses. He might smell something bad there, some dead thing, some woman's blood, and then he will run away, and you can't catch him again. The more you chase him the wilder he gets. When you lose your power, you soon know it, your luck is gone, no use gambling, no use hunting, you may even lose your life.

I have unintentionally dropped into the manner of speech of my Pit River friends. What I have just said is not a quotation from any one man but a sort of composite picture of what I have heard from many. I do not want to go into the details of *dinihowi* hunting and visitation by *damagomi*. There are some exceedingly interesting psychological problems connected therewith, as well as with the details of shamanistic performances. It will form part of a detailed ethnographic study of this interesting tribe which I hope to be able to publish in the future. But I think I have said enough to give the feeling of the degree of intimacy and of daily intercourse with these animal protectors, these carriers of the life-power, these *damagomi*'s and *dinihowi*'s who by the way are

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<sup>3</sup> The *damagomi* referring to the shaman says "my father," while the *dinihowi* calls the man he favors "my brother."

not the animal in its generic or specific aspect, but just one certain individual of his species or of his genus. In other terms not Coyote, Deer or Weasel, but rather Mr. Weasel So-and-So, Mr. Deer So-and-so. Or, as one man said to me: "It's the same among the animals as among us, some of us have got power and luck, and others are just common Indians; some deer are just common deer, and others are doctors and chiefs among the deer; that's the ones you talk to."

No one animal is more especially sacred than any other. Silver Fox created the world with the help of Coyote. But neither of them is venerated in any way. There is not the least feeling of making these or any other animals into gods. I cannot insist too much upon that. In other places in California one gets the unmistakable feeling that Marumbda and Kuksu, or whatever their names in the local language, at any rate the Creator and his Counterpart are the lineal descendants of Coyote and Grey Fox. Here again I must forbear going into an exceedingly interesting subject of psychological significance.<sup>4</sup> The Pit River creation myth is one of the most interesting in the California series because it contains a most pure creation of *form* by means of intuitive thought. For Silver Fox made the world "by thinking": *haydutsila*. And every Pit River Indian knows two or three versions of it, and is interested in learning new ones, just as he is interested in learning new stories of the Coyote cycle, the Weasel cycle, or any of the million stories of that time, not so very long ago, when animals were men, or men were animals, whichever way you prefer to put it. For the matter of that, there is no real difference between men and animals from the point of view of the Pit River Indian. We must not forget that to him these stories are not historical narratives but literary dramas. They fascinate him because they embody in excellent artistic form the emotional and

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<sup>4</sup> I cannot help giving a hint of the wealth of material that lies here for the student of analytical psychology. The very much respected Marumbda is the linear descendant of the fool Coyote, while the remote Kuksu with his enigmatic bird head is the introverted Grey Fox. Fox was always chiding Coyote for protean restlessness. But Marumbda could never have created the world unless Kuksu had given him the substance out of his armpits. The whole enigmatic tale needs treatment, and by real scientists.



psychological problems of life, all this of course from the Indian point of view. You can always make a Pit River stop whatever he is doing and sit down, by telling a story, even when he knows it by heart. But he does not get any religious emotion out of it. His religious emotion he gets out of his intimate contact with the life-power that permeates the world.

This contact, this religious experience, is intimate, personal, individual. It is never cast into any prescribed form, much less into any ritual. All that development will come at a further stage in the evolution of the superorganic. But this most primitive stage is marked by extreme looseness and fortuitousness. No two men have the same dreams and one of the most commonly heard remarks about a shaman is: "I have never seen him doctor, I don't know how he works."

I hope I have given somewhat the feeling of the background of religious experience among these very primitive men. It is strongly alive even today and it is absolutely the only form of religion they have. Their conception of the mystical life-power is as decentralized and unorganized as their social organization. But neither in their doctorings, in their relations with *damagomi's* or *dinihowi's*, nor in their myths and tales is there anything which can even remotely be called God or a god.

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA.