CLAUDE LÉVI－STRAUSS

THE SAVAGE MIND

A. R. RADCLIFFE－BROWN

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION IN PRIMITIVE SOCIETY

WITH A FOREWORD BY
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CHINA SOCIAL SCIENCES PUBLISHING HOUSE
CHENGCHENG BOOKS LTD.

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

原始思维:英文/(法)列维-斯特劳斯著. -影印本.
-北京:中国社会科学出版社,1999.12
(西学基本经典·人类学类/西学基本经典工作委员会 编)
ISBN 7-5004-2643-7

Ⅰ.原… Ⅱ.列… Ⅲ.原始思维学-研究-英文 Ⅳ.B80

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(1999)第 68422 号

版权总代理:TAO MEDIA INTERNATIONAL
(2790 19th Avenue, Ste. 20, San Francisco, CA 94132 U.S.A)

西学基本经典·人类学类
西学基本经典工作委员会 编
中国社会科学出版社 出版发行
(北京鼓楼西大街甲 158 号 邮编 100720)
E-mail:5004@Peoplespace.net
诚成图书有限公司制作
中国建筑工业出版社密云印刷厂印刷
新华书店经销
1999 年 12 月第 1 版 1999 年 12 月第 1 次印刷
开本 880×1230 1/32 印张 81.125
人类学类全 4 册 定价:200.00 元

总 策 划　严　平　野　夫
项目策划　张自文　任建成

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SCIENCE OF THE CONCRETE

It has long been the fashion to invoke languages which lack the terms for expressing such a concept as 'tree' or 'animal', even though they contain all the words necessary for a detailed inventory of species and varieties. But, to begin with, while these cases are cited as evidence of the supposed ineptitude of 'primitive people' for abstract thought, other cases are at the same time ignored which make it plain that richness of abstract words is not a monopoly of civilized languages. In Chinook, a language widely spoken in the north-west of North America, to take one example, many properties and qualities are referred to by means of abstract words: 'This method', Boas says, 'is applied to a greater extent than in any other language I know.' The proposition 'The bad man killed the poor child' is rendered in Chinook: 'The man's badness killed the child's poverty'; and for 'The woman used too small a basket' they say: 'She put the potentilla-roots into the smallness of a clam basket' (Boas 2, pp. 657–8).

In every language, moreover, discourse and syntax supply indispensable means of supplementing deficiencies of vocabulary. And the tendentious character of the argument referred to in the last paragraph becomes very apparent when one observes that the opposite state of affairs, that is, where very general terms outweigh specific names, has also been exploited to prove the intellectual poverty of Savages:

> Among plants and animals he [the Indian] designates by name only those which are useful or harmful, all others are included under the classification of bird, weed, etc. (Krause, p. 104).

A more recent observer seems in the same way to believe that the

native gives names and forms concepts solely in accordance with his needs:

> I well remember the hilarity of Marquesian friends . . . over the (to them) fatuous interest of the botanist of our expedition in 1921, who was collecting nameless ('useless') 'weeds' and asking their names (Handy and Pukui, Part VI, p. 127n).

However, Handy compares this indifference to that which specialists in our civilization show towards phenomena which have no immediate bearing on their own field. When his native collaborator stressed the fact that in Hawaii 'every botanical, zoological or inorganic form that is known to have been named (and personalized), was *some thing* . . . used', she is careful to add 'in some way'. She goes on to say that the reason why 'there was an infinite variety of living things in forest and sea, of meteorological or marine phenomena, which were unnamed' was that they were regarded as being of no 'use or interest' – terms which are not equivalent, as 'use' concerns practical, and 'interest' theoretical, matters. What follows confirms this by concentrating on the latter aspect at the expense of the former: 'Living was experience fraught with exact and definite significance' (id., p. 126–7).

In fact, the delimitation of concepts is different in every language, and, as the author of the article 'nom' in the *Encyclopédie* correctly observed in the eighteenth century, the use of more or less abstract terms is a function not of greater or lesser intellectual capacity, but of differences in the interests – in their intensity and attention to detail – of particular social groups within the national society: 'In an observatory a *star* is not simply a star but β of Capricorn or γ of Centaur or ζ of the Great Bear, etc. In stables every *horse* has a proper *name* – *Diamond*, *Sprite*, *Fiery*, etc.' Further, even if the observation about so-called primitive languages referred to at the beginning of the chapter could be accepted as it stands, one would not be able to conclude from this that such languages are deficient in general ideas. Words like 'oak', 'beech', 'birch', etc., are no less entitled to be considered as abstract words than the word 'tree'; and a language possessing only the word 'tree' would be, from this point of view less rich in concepts than one which lacked this term but contained dozens or hundreds for the individual species and varieties.

The proliferation of concepts, as in the case of technical languages, goes with more constant attention to properties of the world,

with an interest that is more alert to possible distinctions which can be introduced between them. This thirst for objective knowledge is one of the most neglected aspects of the thought of people we call 'primitive'. Even if it is rarely directed towards facts of the same level as those with which modern science is concerned, it implies comparable intellectual application and methods of observation. In both cases the universe is an object of thought at least as much as it is a means of satisfying needs.

Every civilization tends to overestimate the objective orientation of its thought and this tendency is never absent. When we make the mistake of thinking that the Savage is governed solely by organic or economic needs, we forget that he levels the same reproach at us, and that to him his own desires for knowledge seems more balanced than ours:

> These native Hawaiians' utilization of their available natural assets was well-nigh complete – infinitely more so than that of the present commercial era which ruthlessly exploits the few things that are financially profitable for the time being, neglecting and often obliterating the rest (Handy and Pukui, Part VIII, p. 62).

Cash-crop agriculture is hardly to be confused with the science of the botanist. But, in ignoring the latter and taking only the former into account, the old Hawaiian aristocrat is simply repeating, and turning to the advantage of a native culture, a mistake of the same kind that Malinowski made when he claimed that primitive peoples' interest in totemic plants and animals was inspired by nothing but the rumbling of their stomachs.

Tessman (Vol. 2, p. 192) mentions 'the accuracy with which (the Fang of the Gabon) identify the slightest differences between species of the same genus'. The two authors quoted above make a similar observation about Oceania:

> The acute faculties of this native folk noted with exactitude the generic characteristics of all species of terrestial and marine life, and the subtlest variations of natural phenomena such as winds, light and colour, ruffling of water and variation in surf, and the currents of water and air (Handy and Pukui, Part VI, p. 126).

Among the Hanunóo of the Philippines a custom as simple as that of betel chewing demands a knowledge of four varieties of areca nut and eight substitutes for them, and of five varieties of betel and five substitutes (Conklin, 3):

Almost all Hanunóo activities require an intimate familiarity with local plants and a precise knowledge of plant classification. Contrary to the assumption that subsistence level groups never use but a small segment of the local flora, ninety-three per cent of the total number of native plant types are recognized by the Hanunóo as culturally significant (Conklin I, p. 249).

This is equally true of fauna:

The Hanunóo classify all forms of the local avifauna into seventy-five categories . . . (they) distinguish about a dozen kinds of snakes . . . sixty-odd types of fish . . . more than a dozen . . . types of fresh and salt water crustaceans . . . a similar number of . . . types of arachnids and myriapods . . . The thousands of insect forms present are grouped by the Hanunóo into a hundred and eight named categories, including thirteen for ants and termites . . . Salt water molluscs . . . of more than sixty classes are recognized by the Hanunóo, while terrestrial and fresh water types number more than twenty-five . . . Four distinct types of bloodsucking leeches are distinguished . . .: altogether 461 animal types are recorded (id., pp. 67–70).

A biologist writes the following about pygmies of the Philippines:

Another characteristic of Negrito life, a characteristic which strikingly demarcates them from the surrounding Christian lowlanders, is their inexhaustible knowledge of the plant and animal kingdoms. This lore includes not only a specific recognition of a phenomenal number of plants, birds, animals, and insects, but also includes a knowledge of the habits and behaviour of each. . . .

The Negrito is an intrinsic part of his environment, and what is still more important, continually studies his surroundings. Many times I have seen a Negrito, who, when not being certain of the identification of a particular plant, will taste the fruit, smell the leaves, break and examine the stem, comment upon its habitat, and only after all of this, pronounce whether he did or did not know the plant.

The natives are also interested in plants which are of no direct use to them, because of their significant links with the animal and insect world, and having shown this, the same author continues:

The acute observation of the pygmies and their awareness of the interrelationships between the plant and animal life . . . is strikingly pointed out by their discussions of the living habits of bats. The *tididin* lives on the dry leaves of palms, the *dikidik* on the underside of the leaves of the wild banana, the *litlit* in bamboo clumps, the *kolumboy* in holes in trees, the *konanaba* in dark thickets, and so forth. In this manner, the Pinatubo Negritos can distinguish the habits of more than fifteen species of bats. Of course, the classification of bats, as well as of insects, birds, animals, fish and plants, is determined primarily by their actual physical differences and/or similarities.

Most Negrito men can with ease enumerate the specific or descriptive

names of at least four hundred and fifty plants, seventy-five birds, most of the snakes, fish, insects, and animals, and of even twenty species of ants . . .* and the botanical knowledge of the *mananambal*, the 'medicine men and women, who use plants constantly in their practice, is truly astounding (R. B. Fox, pp. 187–8).

Of a backward people of the Tyukyu archipelago, we read:

> Even a child can frequently identify the kind of tree from which a tiny wood fragment has come and, furthermore, the sex of that tree, as defined by Kabiran notions of plant sex, by observing the appearance of its wood and bark, its smell, its hardness, and similar characteristics. Fish and shellfish by the dozen are known by individually distinctive terms, and their separate features and habits, as well as the sexual differences within each type, are well recognized (Smith, p. 150).

Several thousand Coahuila Indians never exhausted the natural resources of a desert region in South California, in which today only a handful of white families manage to subsist. They lived in a land of plenty, for in this apparently completely barren territory, they were familiar with no less than sixty kinds of edible plants and twenty-eight others of narcotic, stimulant or medicinal properties (Barrows). A single Seminol informant could identify two hundred and fifty species and varieties of plants (Sturtevant). Three hundred and fifty plants known to the Hopi Indians and more than five hundred to the Navaho have been recorded. The botanical vocabulary of the Subanun of the Southern Philippines greatly exceeds a hundred terms (Frake) and that of the Hanunóo approaches two thousand.† Sillans, working with a single informant in the Gabon, recently published an ethno-botanical list of about eight thousand terms, distributed between the languages or dialects of twelve or thirteen neighbouring tribes (Walker and Sillans). The, for the most part unpublished, results of Marcel Griaule and his co-workers in the Sudan promise to be equally impressive.

Their extreme familiarity with their biological environment, the passionate attention which they pay to it and their precise knowledge of it has often struck inquirers as an indication of attitudes and preoccupations which distinguish the natives from their white visitors. Among the Tewa Indians of New Mexico:

* Also at least forty-five types of edible ground-mushrooms and ear-fungi (l.c., p. 231) and on the technological plane, more than fifty types of arrows (id., pp. 265–8).

† See below, pp. 138, 153.

Small differences are noted . . . they have a name for every one of the coniferous trees of the region; in these cases differences are not conspicuous. The ordinary individual among the whites does not distinguish (them) . . . Indeed, it would be possible to translate a treatise on botany into Tewa . . . (Robbins, Harrington and Freire-Marreco, pp. 9, 12).

E. Smith Bowen scarcely exaggerates in the amusing description she gives of her confusion when, on her arrival in an African tribe, she wanted to begin by learning the language. Her informants found it quite natural, at an elementary stage of their instruction, to collect a large number of botanical specimens, the names of which they told her as they showed them to her. She was unable to identify them, not because of their exotic nature but because she had never taken an interest in the riches and diversities of the plant world. The natives on the other hand took such an interest for granted.

These people are farmers: to them plants are as important and familiar as people. I'd never been on a farm and am not even sure which are begonias, dahlias, or petunias. Plants, like algebra, have a habit of looking alike and being different, or looking different and being alike; consequently mathematics and botany confuse me. For the first time in my life I found myself in a community where ten-year-old children weren't my mathematical superiors. I also found myself in a place where every plant, wild or cultivated, had a name and a use, and where every man, woman and child knew literally hundreds of plants . . . (my instructor) simply could not realize that it was not the words but the plants which baffled me (Smith Bowen, p. 19).

The reaction of a specialist is quite different. In a monograph in which he describes nearly three hundred species or varieties of medicinal or toxic plants used by certain peoples of Northern Rhodesia, Gilges writes:

It has always been a surprise to me to find with what eagerness the people in and around Balovale were ready and willing to talk about their medicines. Was it that they found my interest in their methods pleasing? Was it an exchange of information amongst colleagues? Or was it to show off their knowledge? Whatever the reason, information was readily forthcoming. I remember a wicked old Luchozi who brought bundles of dried leaves, roots and stems and told me about their uses. How far he was a herbalist and how far a witch-doctor I could never fathom, but I regret that I shall never possess his knowledge of African psychology and his art in the treatment of his fellow men, that, coupled with my scientific medical knowledge, might have made a most useful combination (Gilges, p. 20).

Conklin quotes the following extract from his field notes to illustrate the intimate contact between man and his environment which the native is constantly imposing on the ethnologist:

> At 0600 and in a light rain, Langba and I left Parina for Binli . . . At Aresaas, Langba told me to cut off several 10 x 50 cm. strips of bark from an *anapla kilala* tree (*Albizzia procera* (Roxb.) Benth.) for protection against the leeches. By periodically rubbing the cambium side of the strips of sapanceous (and poisonous: Quisumbling, 1947, 148) bark over our ankles and legs – already wet from the rain-soaked vegetation – we produced a most effective leech-repellent lather of pink suds. At one spot along the trail near Aypud, Langba stopped suddenly, jabbed his walking stick sharply into the side of the trail and pulled up a small weed, *tawag kugum buladlad* (*Buchnera urticifolia* R. Br.) which he told me he will use as a lure . . . for a spring-spear boar trap. A few minutes later, and we were going at a good pace, he stopped in a similar manner to dig up a small terrestrial orchid (hardly noticeable beneath the other foliage) known as *liyamliyam* (*Epipogum roseum* (D. Don.) Lindl.). This herb is useful in the magical control of insect pests which destroy cultivated plants. At Binli, Langha was careful not to damage those herbs when searching through the contents of his palm leaf shoulder basket for *apug* 'slaked lime' and *tabaku* (*Nicotiana tabacum* L.) to offer in exchange for other betel ingredients with the Binli folk. After an evaluative discussion about the local forms of betel pepper (*Piper betle* L.) Langba got permission to cut sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas* (L.) Poir.) vines of two vegetatively distinguishable types, *kamuti inaswang* and *kamuti lupaw* . . . In the camote patch, we cut twenty-five vine-tip sections (about 75 cm. long) of each variety, and carefully wrapped them in the broad fresh leaves of the cultivated *saging saba* (*Musa sapientum compressa* (Blco. Teoforo) so that they would remain moist until we reached Langba's place. Along the way we munched on a few stems of *tubu minuma*, a type of sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum* L.), stopped once to gather fallen bunga area nuts (*Areca catechu* L.), and another time to pick and eat the wild cherrylike fruits from some *bugnay* shrubs (*Antidesma brunius* (L.) Spreng). We arrived at the Mararim by mid-afternoon having spent much of our time on the trail discussing changes in the surrounding vegetation in the last few decades! (Conklin I, pp. 15–17).

This knowledge and the linguistic means which it has at its disposal also extend to morphology. In Tewa there are distinct terms for all or almost all the parts of birds and mammals (Henderson and Harrington, p. 9). Forty terms are employed in the morphological description of the leaves of trees or plants, and there are fifteen distinct terms for the different parts of a maize plant.

The Hanunóo have more than a hundred and fifty terms for the parts and properties of plants. These provide categories for the

identification of plants and for 'discussing the hundreds of characteristics which differentiate plant types and often indicate significant features of medicinal or nutritional value' (Conklin I, p. 97). Over six hundred named plants have been recorded among the Pinatubo and 'in addition to having an amazing knowledge of plants and their uses, . . . (they) employ nearly one hundred terms in describing the parts or characteristics of plants' (R. B. Fox, p. 179).

Knowledge as systematically developed as this clearly cannot relate just to practical purposes. The ethnologist who has made the best study of the Indians of the north-eastern United States and Canada (the Montagnais, Naskapi, Micmac, Malecite, Penobscot) emphasizes the wealth and accuracy of their zoological and botanical knowledge and then continues:

> Such knowledge, of course, is to be expected with respect to the habits of the larger animals which furnish food and the materials of industry to primitive man. We expect, for instance, that the Penobscot hunter of Maine will have a somewhat more practical knowledge of the habits and character of the moose than even the expert zoologist. But when we realize how the Indians have taken pains to observe and systematize facts of science in the realm of lower animal life, we may perhaps be pardoned a little surprise.
>
> The whole class of reptiles . . . affords no economic benefit to these Indians; they do not eat the flesh of any snakes or batrachians, nor do they make use of other parts except in a very few cases where they serve in the preparation of charms against sickness or sorcery (Speck I, p. 273).

And nevertheless, as Speck has shown, the north-eastern Indians have developed a positive herpetology, with distinct terms for each genus of reptile and other terms applying to particular species and varieties.

The precise definition of and the specific uses ascribed to the natural products which Siberian peoples use for medicinal purposes illustrate the care and ingeniousness, the attention to detail and concern with distinctions employed by theoretical and practical workers in societies of this kind. We find, for instance: spiders and whiteworms swallowed as a cure for sterility among the Helmene and Iakoute; fat of black beetle (Ossete, hydrophobia); squashed cockroach, chicken's gall (Russians of Sourgout, abscesses and hernias); macerated redworms (Iakoute, rheumatism); pike's gall (Bouriate, eye complaints); loach and crayfish swallowed alive (Russians of Siberia, epilepsy and all diseases); contact with a

woodpecker's beak, blood of a woodpecker, nasal insufflation of the powder of a mummified woodpecker, gobbled egg of the bird *koukcha* (Iakoute, against toothache, scrofula, high fevers and tuberculosis respectively); partridge's blood, horse's sweat (Oïrote, hernias and warts); pigeon broth (Bouriate, coughs); powder made of the crushed feet of the bird *tilegous* (Kazak, bite of mad dog); dried bat worn round the neck (Russians of the Altaï, fever); instillation of water from an icicle hanging on the nest of the bird *remiz* (Oïrote, eye complaints). Taking just the case of bears among the Bouriate: the flesh of bears has seven distinct therapeutic uses, the blood five, the fat nine, the brains twelve, the bile seventeen, the fur two. It is also the bear's frozen excretions which the Kalar collect at the end of the winter season to cure constipation (Zelenine, pp. 47–59). An equally extensive list for an African tribe can be found in a study by Loeb.

Examples like these could be drawn from all parts of the world and one may readily conclude that animals and plants are not known as a result of their usefulness; they are deemed to be useful or interesting because they are first of all known.

It may be objected that science of this kind can scarcely be of much practical effect. The answer to this is that its main purpose is not a practical one. It meets intellectual requirements rather than or instead of satisfying needs.

The real question is not whether the touch of a woodpecker's beak does in fact cure toothache. It is rather whether there is a point of view from which a woodpecker's beak and a man's tooth can be seen as 'going together' (the use of this congruity for therapeutic purposes being only one of its possible uses), and whether some initial order can be introduced into the universe by means of these groupings. Classifying, as opposed to not classifying, has a value of its own, whatever form the classification may take. As a recent theorist of taxonomy writes:

> Scientists do tolerate uncertainty and frustration, because they must. The one thing that they do not and must not tolerate is disorder. The whole aim of theoretical science is to carry to the highest possible and conscious degree the perceptual reduction of chaos that began in so lowly and (in all probability) unconscious a way with the origin of life. In specific instances it can well be questioned whether the order so achieved is an objective characteristic of the phenomena or is an artifact constructed by the scientist. That question comes up time after time in animal

taxonomy . . . Nevertheless, the most basic postulate of science is that nature itself is orderly. . . . All theoretical science is ordering and if, systematics is equated with ordering, then systematics is synonymous with theoretical science (Simpson, p. 5).

The thought we call primitive is founded on this demand for order. This is equally true of all thought but it is through the properties common to all thought that we can most easily begin to understand forms of thought which seem very strange to us.

A native thinker makes the penetrating comment that 'All sacred things must have their place' (Fletcher *2*, p. 34). It could even be said that being in their place is what makes them sacred for if they were taken out of their place, even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed. Sacred objects therefore contribute to the maintenance of order in the universe by occupying the places allocated to them. Examined superficially and from the outside, the refinements of ritual can appear pointless. They are explicable by a concern for what one might call 'micro-adjustment' – the concern to assign every single creature, object or feature to a place within a class. The ceremony of the Hako among the Pawnee is particularly illuminating in this respect, although only because it has been so well analysed. The invocation which accompanies the crossing of a stream of water is divided into several parts, which correspond, respectively, to the moment when the travellers put their feet in water, the moment when they move them and the moment when the water completely covers their feet. The invocation to the wind separates the moment when only the wet parts of the body feel cool: 'Now, we are ready to move forward in safety' (id., pp. 77–8). As the informant explains: 'We must address with song every object we meet, because Tira'wa (the supreme spirit) is in all things, everything we come to as we travel can give us help . . . ' (id., pp. 73, 81).

This preoccupation with exhaustive observation and the systematic cataloguing of relations and connections can sometimes lead to scientifically valid results. The Blackfoot Indians for instance were able to prognosticate the approach of spring by the state of development of the foetus of bison which they took from the uterus of females killed in hunting. These successes cannot of course be isolated from the numerous other associations of the same kind which science condemns as illusory. It may however be the case that magical thought, that 'gigantic variation on the theme of the

principle of Causality' as Hubert and Mauss called it (*2*, p. 61), can be distinguished from science not so much by any ignorance or contempt of determinism but by a more imperious and uncompromising demand for it which can at the most be regarded as unreasonable and precipitate from the scientific point of view.

> As a natural philosophy it (witchcraft) reveals a theory of causation. Misfortune is due to witchcraft co-operating with natural forces. If a buffalo gores a man, or the supports of a granary are undermined by termites so that it falls on his head, or he is infected with cerebro-spinal meningitis, Azande say that the buffalo, the granary, and the disease, are causes which combine with witchcraft to kill a man. Witchcraft does not create the buffalo and the granary and the disease for these exist in their own right, but it is responsible for the particular situation in which they are brought into lethal relations with a particular man. The granary would have fallen in any case, but since there was witchcraft present it fell at the particular moment when a certain man was resting beneath it. Of these causes the only one which permits intervention is witchcraft, for witchcraft emanates from a person. The buffalo and the granary do not allow of intervention and are, therefore, whilst recognized as causes, not considered the socially relevant ones (Evans-Pritchard *1*, p. 418–19).

Seen in this way, the first difference between magic and science is therefore that magic postulates a complete and all-embracing determinism. Science, on the other hand, is based on a distinction between levels: only some of these admit forms of determinism; on others the same forms of determinism are held not to apply. One can go further and think of the rigorous precision of magical thought and ritual practices as an expression of the unconscious apprehension of the *truth of determinism*, the mode in which scientific phenomena exist. In this view, the operations of determinism are divined and made use of in an all-embracing fashion before being known and properly applied, and magical rites and beliefs appear as so many expressions of an act of faith in a science yet to be born.

The nature of these anticipations is such that they may sometimes succeed. Moreover they may anticipate not only science itself but even methods or results which scientific procedure does not incorporate until an advanced stage of its development. For it seems to be the case that man began by applying himself to the most difficult task, that of systematizing what is immediately presented to the senses, on which science for a long time turned its back and which it is only beginning to bring back into its purview. In the history of scientific thought this 'anticipation-effect', has,