

MYTH IN PRIMITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

BY
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Author of

"The Father in Primitive Psychology"



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MYTH IN
PRIMITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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DEDICATION

TO SIR JAMES FRAZER

If I had the power of evoking the past, I should like to lead you back some twenty years to an old Slavonic university town—I mean the town of Cracow, the ancient capital of Poland and the seat of the oldest university in eastern Europe. I could then show you a student leaving the mediæval college buildings, obviously in some distress of mind, hugging, however, under his arm, as the only solace of his troubles, three green volumes with the well-known golden imprint, a beautiful conventionalized design of mistletoe—the symbol of The “Golden Bough.”

I had just then been ordered to abandon for a time my physical and chemical research because of ill-health, but I was allowed to follow up a favourite side-line of study, and I decided to make my first attempt to read an English masterpiece in the original. Perhaps my mental distress would have been lessened, had I been allowed to look into the future and to foresee the present occasion, on which I have the great privilege of delivering an ad-

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dress in honour of Sir James Frazer to a distinguished audience, in the language of The "Golden Bough" itself.

For no sooner had I begun to read this great work, than I became immersed in it and enslaved by it. I realized then that anthropology, as presented, by Sir James Frazer, is a great science, worthy of as much devotion as any of her elder and more exact sister-studies, and I became bound to the service of Frazerian anthropology.

We gathered here to celebrate the annual totemic festival of The "Golden Bough"; to revive and strengthen the bonds of anthropological union; to commune with the source and symbol of our anthropological interest and affection. I am but your humble spokesman, in expressing our joint admiration to the great writer and his classical works; The "Golden Bough," "Totemism and Exogamy," "Folklore in the Old Testament," "Psyche's Task," and The "Belief in Immortality." As a true officiating magician in a savage tribe would have to do, I have to recite the whole list, so that the spirit of the work (their "mana") may dwell among us.

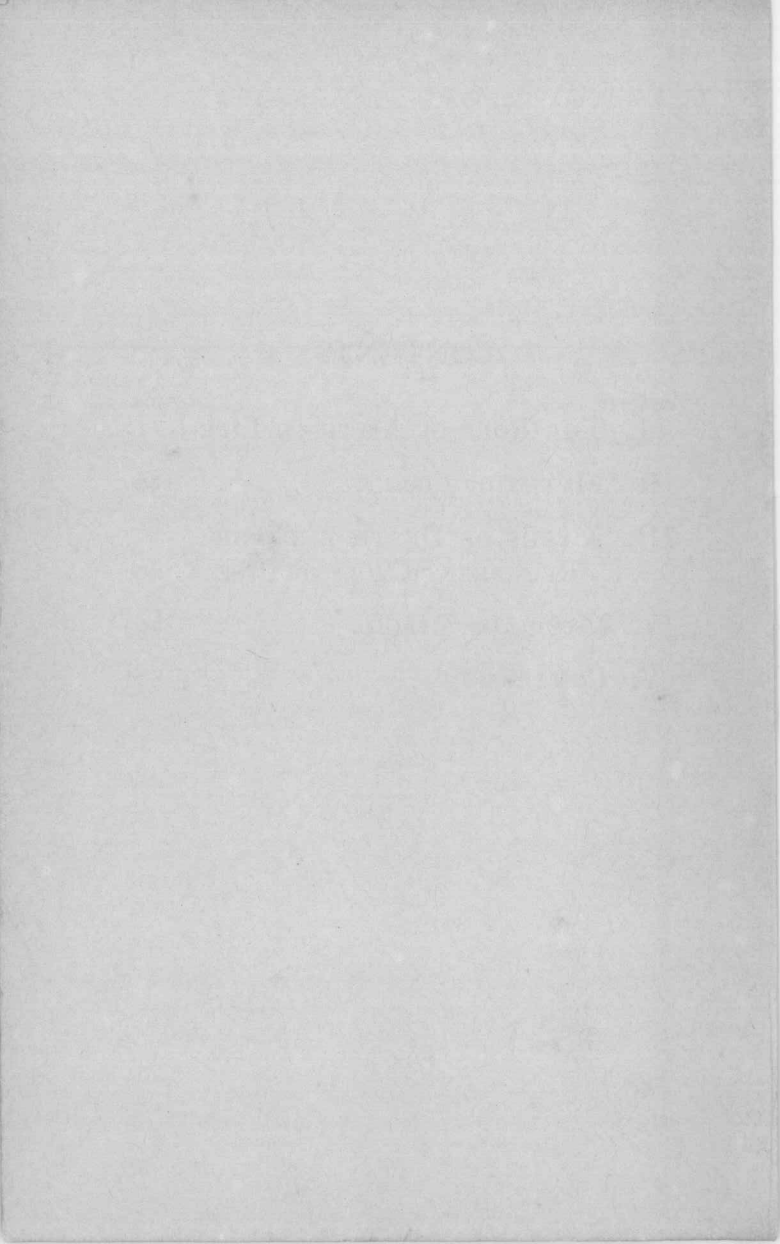
In all this, my task is pleasant and in a way easy, for implicit in whatever I may

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say is a tribute to him, whom I have always regarded as the "Master." On the other hand this very circumstance also makes my task difficult, for having received so much, I fear I may not have enough to show in return. I have therefore decided to keep my peace even while I am addressing you—to let another one speak through my mouth, another one who has been to Sir James Frazer an inspiration and a lifelong friend, as Sir James has been to us. This other one, I need hardly tell you, is the modern representative of primitive man, the contemporary savage, whose thoughts, whose feelings, whose very life-breath pervades all that Frazer has written.

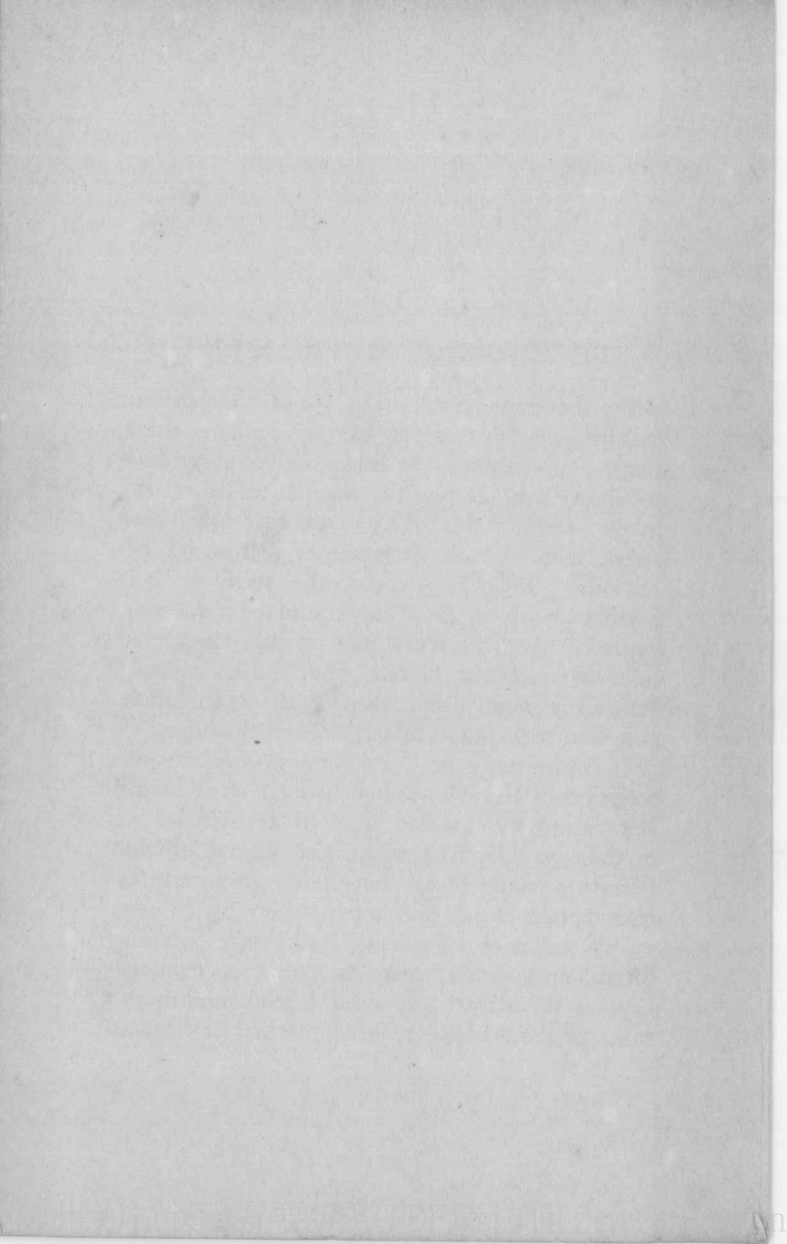
In other words, I shall not try to serve up any theories of my own, but instead I shall lay before you some results of my anthropological field-work, carried out in north-west Melanesia. I shall restrict myself, moreover, to a subject upon which Sir James Frazer has not directly concentrated his attention, but in which, as I shall try to show you, his influence is as fruitful as in those many subjects that he has made his own.

[The above formed the opening passages of an address delivered in honour of Sir James Frazer at the University of Liverpool, in November, 1925.]



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I.

THE ROLE OF MYTH IN LIFE

By the examination of a typical Melanesian culture and by a survey of the opinions, traditions, and behaviour of these natives, I propose to show how deeply the sacred tradition, the myth, enters into their pursuits, and how strongly it controls their moral and social behaviour. In other words, the thesis of the present work is that an intimate connection exists between the word, the mythos, the sacred tales of a tribe on the one hand, and their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organization, and even their practical activities on the other.

In order to gain a background for our description of the Melanesian facts, I shall briefly summarize the present state of the science of mythology. Even a superficial survey of the literature would reveal that there is no monotony to complain of as regards the variety of opinions or the acrimony of polemics. To take only the recent up-to-date-theories advanced in explanation of the nature of myth, legend, and fairy-tale, we should have to head the list, at least as

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regards output and self-assertion, by the so-called school of Nature-mythology which flourishes mainly in Germany. The writers of the school maintain that primitive man is highly interested in natural phenomena, and that his interest is predominantly of a theoretical, contemplative, and poetical character. In trying to express and interpret the phases of the moon, or the regular and yet changing path of the sun across the skies, primitive man constructs symbolic personified rhapsodies. To writers of this school every myth possesses as its kernel or ultimate reality some natural phenomenon or other, elaborately woven into a tale to an extent which sometimes almost masks and obliterates it. There is not much agreement among these students as to what type of natural phenomenon lies at the bottom of most mythological productions. There are extreme lunar mythologists so completely moonstruck with their idea that they will not admit that any other phenomenon could lend itself to a savage rhapsodic interpretation except that of earth's nocturnal satellite. The Society for the Comparative Study of Myth, founded in Berlin in 1906, and counting among its supporters such famous scholars as Ehrenreich, Siecke, Winckler, and many others, carried on their business under the sign of the moon. Others, like Frobenius for instance, regard the sun as the only subject around which primitive man has spun his symbolic tales. Then

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there is the school of meteorological interpreters who regard wind, weather, and colours of the skies as the essence of myth. To this belonged such well-known writers of the older generation as Max Müller and Kuhn. Some of these departmental mythologists fight fiercely for their heavenly body or principle; others have a more catholic taste, and prepare to agree that primeval man has made his mythological brew from all the heavenly bodies taken together.

I have tried to state fairly and plausibly this naturalistic interpretation of myths, but as a matter of fact this theory seems to me to be one of the most extravagant views ever advanced by an anthropologist or humanist—and that means a great deal. It has received an absolutely destructive criticism from the great psychologist Wundt, and appears absolutely untenable in the light of any of Sir James Frazer's writings. From my own study of living myths among savages, I should say that primitive man has to a very limited extent the purely artistic or scientific interest in nature; there is but little room for symbolism in his ideas and tales; and myth, in fact, is not an idle rhapsody, not an aimless outpouring of vain imaginings, but a hard-working, extremely important cultural force. Besides ignoring the cultural function of myth, this theory imputes to primitive man a number of imaginary interests, and it confuses several clearly

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distinguishable types of story, the fairy tale, the legend, the saga, and the sacred tale or myth.

In strong contrast to this theory which makes myth naturalistic, symbolic, and imaginary, stands the theory which regards a sacred tale as a true historical record of the past. This view, recently supported by the so-called Historical School in Germany and America, and represented in England by Dr. Rivers, covers but part of the truth. There is no denying that history, as well as natural environment, must have left a profound imprint on all cultural achievements, hence also on myths. But to take all mythology as mere chronicle is as incorrect as to regard it as the primitive naturalist's musings. It also endows primitive man with a sort of scientific impulse and desire for knowledge. Although the savage has something of the antiquarian as well as of the naturalist in his composition, he is, above all, actively engaged in a number of practical pursuits, and has to struggle with various difficulties; all his interests are tuned up to this general pragmatic outlook. Mythology, the sacred lore of the tribe, is, as we shall see, a powerful means of assisting primitive man, of allowing him to make the two ends of his cultural patrimony meet. We shall see, moreover, that the immense services to primitive culture performed by myth are done in connection with religious ritual, moral influence, and sociological

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principle. Now religion and morals draw only to a very limited extent upon an interest in science or in past history, and myth is thus based upon an entirely different mental attitude.

The close connection between religion and myth which has been overlooked by many students has been recognized by others. Psychologists like Durkheim, Hubert, and Mauss, anthropologists like Crawley, classical scholars like Miss Jane Harrison have all understood the intimate association between myth and ritual, between sacred tradition and the norms of social structure. All of these writers have been to a greater or lesser extent influenced by the work of Sir James Frazer. In spite of the fact that the great British anthropologist, as well as most of his followers, have a clear vision of the sociological and ritual importance of myth, the facts which I shall present will allow us to clarify and formulate more precisely the main principles of a sociological theory of myth.

I might present an even more extensive survey of the opinions, divisions, and controversies of learned mythologists. The science of mythology has been the meeting-point of various scholarships: the classical humanist must decide for himself whether Zeus is the moon, or the sun, or a strictly historical personality; and whether his ox-eyed spouse is the morning star, or a cow, or a personification of the wind—the loquacity

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of wives being proverbial. Then all these questions have to be re-discussed upon the stage of mythology by the various tribes of archæologists, Chaldean and Egyptian, Indian and Chinese, Peruvian and Mayan. The historian and the sociologist, the student of literature, the grammarian, the Germanist and the Romanist, the Celtic scholar and the Slavist discuss, each little crowd among themselves. Nor is mythology quite safe from logicians and psychologists, from the metaphysician and the epistemologist—to say nothing of such visitors as the theosophist, the modern astrologist, and the Christian Scientist. Finally, we have the psycho-analyst who has come at last to teach us that the myth is a day-dream of the race, and that we can only explain it by turning our back upon nature, history, and culture, and diving deep into the dark pools of the sub-conscious, where at the bottom there lie the usual paraphernalia and symbols of psycho-analytic exegesis. So that when at last the poor anthropologist and student of folk-lore come to the feast, there are hardly any crumbs left for them!

If I have conveyed an impression of chaos and confusion, if I have inspired a sinking feeling towards the incredible mythological controversy with all the dust and din which it raises, I have achieved exactly what I wanted. For I shall invite my readers to step outside the closed study