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From Gallatin to Prichard to Grey: The Origin of Totemism as a Cross-Cultural Category

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FOOTNOTES TO THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

FROM GALLATIN TO PRICHARD TO GREY: THE ORIGIN OF TOTEMISM AS A
CROSS-CULTURAL CATEGORY

One interesting aspect of the history of nineteenth century anthropology is the somewhat tenuous nature of the intellectual channels by which ideas were transmitted from one national anthropological tradition to another--particularly when this involved movement between center and periphery. As late as the 1870s it took almost a decade for Lorimer Fison and A. W. Howitt in the Southwest Pacific actually to get a hold of a copy of one of J. F. McLennan's works in order to confront directly his disputes with their mentor Lewis H. Morgan on matters relating to the evolution of human marriage. Four decades before, adherents of an earlier anthropological paradigm--that of linguistic ethnology--faced similar problems of international communication.

Communication networks were established, however, around nodal figures such as J. C. Prichard, whom many regarded as the representative ethnologist of his age. Two years after Albert Gallatin, the doyen of American linguistic ethnologists, published his Synopsis of the Indians . . . East of the Rocky Mountains (1846), he sent Prichard two copies; in return, Prichard offered Gallatin bibliographical suggestions on philological works which might not yet have crossed the Atlantic. From the point of view of the later history of anthropology, the most interesting aspect of the letter is the passage indicating that Prichard donated one of his copies of Gallatin's Synopsis to the Royal Geographical Society. Consulting it several years later in the course of writing his Journal of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-west and Western Australia (London, 1841), Lt. George Grey found in Gallatin's Synopsis descriptions of maternal kinship groups and "totams" that seemed remarkably similar to the "great families" and "kobongs" of the Western Australian aborigines among whom he had traveled in 1837 and 1838. Thus was established a comparative ethnographic linkage which, picked up later by McLennan, has had theoretical reverberations down to the present.

The letter, dated October 26, 1838 is from the uncalendared collection, New York Historical Society (roll 42, frame 782-3), and was called to my attention by Robert Bieder; it is reprinted with the permission of the Society.

(G.W.S.)

Dear Sir:

I beg you to accept my best thanks for the very valuable present of your most interesting and [learned] work on the American nations in which I perceive that you have made most important additions to the stock of information previously obtained respecting those races of men. I have forwarded the duplicate copy to Capt. Washington, R. N., Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society in London (to be presented to the Society in your name) because it will there be more duly appreciated and more read than in any other library in this country, where, to our shame it must be spoken, far less attention is bestowed on [such]

philological and ethnological researches than in some other countries, as in yours and in France and Prussia. Everything connected with the history of the American Aborigines is to me extremely interesting. I fully concur with the opinion you have expressed respecting their languages, viz that grammatical affinity indicates them to have had a common origin and that if this be allowed the want of resemblance in vocables must not, even in other instances, prevent our ascribing a common origin to languages which display the same fundamental laws of structure. It is however difficult to see precisely how far similar habits of thought may have led man, unconnectedly, to form languages of analogous structures. I should think this cannot carry us very far, nor by any means explain the extensive analogies of the American idioms. By some German writers however an attempt has been made to refer to this principle even the resemblances of languages which have a much nearer relation. Niebuhr thought it possible that languages cognate as the Greek and Latin could grow up on opposite sides of the sea which separates their native countries without communication, as analogous species of plants grow on the opposite shores of a lake or inland water or of the Mediterranean, and Gottfried Müller has some conjecture almost equally absurd and of the same kind in his very [learned] and in general very lucid work, entitled "die Etrusken," in which he has thrown more light than any previous writer on the ancient population of Italy. We have had some later works on languages most resembling the American and I think some light begins to dawn on their mutual relations. Ermann, in his Reise um die Erde durch Nord-Asien, promises to give new information respecting the nations on the northwestern coast of America and from observations scattered thru the volumes of his work already published it [appears] that he fancies stories indicative of affinity between the [Koluschians] and some Siberian tribes. In the language of the Ostiaks there are words ending in "atl" like the Aztecs and in some of the Asiatic dialects the personal pronouns . . . correspond . . . with the American. We have seen new works on the grammatical affinities of the Asiatic languages, the general result of which is that the Mandschuor, Tungusian, Mongolian and Turkish in Tartar belong to one family, allied also to the Finnish and Ugrian. One of these books is Versuch über die Tatarischen Sprachen, von D. W. Schott, Berlin 1836, another has the whimsical title of Das Sprachgeschlecht des Tartarien etc. von J. Ritter von Kylunder, Frankfort am Main 1837. There is a Grammaire Mandchoue, by Von der Gabelentz, and a Grammatik der Mongolischen Sprache, by Schmidt. Probably these works are already known to you. By means of these six works some decide the question whether the languages of American are grammatically cognate with the [Eastern] Asiatic, at base with the most extensively spread languages of northern Asia. On the Basque we have a new work (Etudes Grammaticales sur la lanque Euskarienne, Paris, by Abbadie and Chaho) which adds somewhat to our former knowledge.

I must apologize for trespassing so long on your valuable time by this long letter, but I thought it possible that some of the late attempts in philology which have recently come into this country may not yet have reached you tho you are far from being behind us in such

Researches. Believe me, my dear Sir, with sentiments of sincere respect.

Your faithful and obliged servant
J. C. Prichard

CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

THE PROBLEM WITH MR. HEWETT: ACADEMICS AND POPULARIZERS IN AMERICAN ARCHEOLOGY, c. 1910

Curtis Hinsley
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The current PBS television series on anthropology, Odyssey, raises once again the issue of the relationship between professional anthropologists and the American public. Although anthropology irresistibly attracts, and profits from, public interest, the overt popularizer has always drawn suspicion if not outright hostility from those anxious to uphold professional standards and to fix clear boundaries between professional and public. Such lines began to be emphatically drawn around 1900, with the emergence of important anthropology departments at Harvard, Columbia, and Berkeley. Although the role of boundary-maintainer is usually associated with Franz Boas, who sought unsuccessfully to limit the membership of the American Anthropological Association to a professional elite, Boas' concern was shared by others--and not only in relation to "outsiders" like the photographer Edward Curtis, but also in relation to nominally accredited academic anthropologists who, catering to popular interests, threatened to acquire undue influence with politicians and financiers whose decisions could affect the professional development of the discipline.

One such figure was Edgar Lee Hewett (1865-1946), who while serving as administrative head of the New Mexico Normal School, undertook in 1904 a survey of the prehistoric ruins of the Southwest for the General Land Office of the Department of Interior. This brought him to the attention of the community of American anthropologists, who were increasingly involved with national legislation to preserve the ruins. When Robert Lowie in 1906 declined appointment of the Central American Fellowship of the Archaeological Institute of America, the Fellowship Committee (F. W. Putnam, C. P. Bowditch, and Franz Boas) turned--with some trepidation--to Hewett, despite the fact that he had no prior anthropological training. Over the next ten years Hewett, working chiefly through the Institute's young and boisterous western branches, established a power base that left the Harvard-Columbia professionals amazed and enraged. With his School of American Archaeology at Sante Fe, Hewett in effect ran away with the Southwest as an archeological field, dividing the loyalties even of such Harvard-trained men as Sylvanus G. Morley and A. V. Kidder.