

The Role of Totems in Aborigine Culture

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

In his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* Emile Durkheim explores the origin and nature of religion. According to Mark S. Cladis, who wrote the introduction to the book, "To discover the elementary forms of religious life, Durkheim proposed his 'one well-made experiment': a detailed analysis of the simplest well-known religion-Australian totemism. He held that all religions possess a similar character, yet in order to discern clearly these universal religious elements, one must go back behind these centuries of accrued embellishment and variation-diverse theologies and rituals-that mark today's major world religions."

What are totems? The Cambridge International Dictionary of English defines the word totem as "an object which is respected by a group of people, especially for religious reasons." Durkheim writes, "The species that designates the clan collectively is called its totem. The totem of the clan is also that of each of its members." Durkheim goes on to say, "Each clan has its own exclusive totem; two different clans of the same tribe cannot have the same totem. So all those who bear this name are members by the same right; they may be scattered across tribal territory, but they all have the same relations of kinship with one another." Therefore, totems are the things that define the tribe or societal group. They are the name or emblem that bind it and give it commonality. This brings us to the role that totems fulfill in Aborigine culture.

In Aborigine culture totems are not just a name or an emblem. Durkheim writes, "While the totem is a collective label, it also has a religious character, as its use in religious ceremonies attests. Indeed, things are classified as sacred and profane in relation to the totem's religious character. It is the classic example of the sacred thing." The tribes of central Australia use certain objects in their rites. These objects may be pieces of decorated wood or polished stones. Each totemic group has its own collection of these objects and uses them as part of their rituals. The totem usually represents an animal or a plant. The objects are often kept in a special place and are accessible only by certain people at certain times. These objects have come to be sacred in their own right and represent a connection between the totemic group and the power of the sacred item. The items can be used to invoke strength in the face of enemies or as a protection against illness. For the Aboriginal clans, the sacred character of the objects comes from their status as the material representation of the totem. Drawings are often used by the members of the clan to represent the totem. Durkheim suggests that the Australian clans are strongly inclined to represent their totem, not to have a constant reminder of it in the form of a portrait but rather because he feels the need to represent his idea of it by a material and external sign, whatever this may be.

Totemism in the Aborigine culture in a complex religion consisting of three distinct sacred components: the totemic emblem, the plant or animal represented by this emblem, and the members of the clan. Durkheim writes, "For the Australian, things themselves-all things that inhabit the universe-are part of the tribe. They are among its constituent elements and its regular members. They have a definite place in the framework of society, just as men do." In conclusion, in Aborigine culture totemism fulfilled the role of collective religion. It fostered a

collective consciousness that provided the basis for the common welfare of the group. It provided rituals and rites that the clan could rally around. Totemism provided the Aborigine culture a way to see the individual's place within a system of religious things set in the totality of the universe. The clan is united by religious beliefs and practices those beliefs for the good of the clan. Durkheim suggests that without the totem, the clan would not exist, because the totem provides the members of the clan with their name, their identity, and their unity.

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