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Taboo – *bwt*?

Paul John FRANDBSEN

The term 'taboo' is widely used in many European languages, with the meaning of 'prohibition' or 'ban'. This generalized use is accompanied by the tendency to consider the phenomenon it represents as both widespread and universal, with the assumption that a prohibition in one culture is likely to be similarly regarded in another. However, the casual use of the term taboo in modern languages presents an obstacle to understanding cultural phenomena that, when properly contextualized, may be otherwise explained. This observation provided the impetus for an inquiry into the study of taboo in religion and society, with a focus on the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The current paper surveys the views of some of the more influential scholars on the topic.

Tabú – bwt?

El término 'tabú' se usa en numerosas lenguas de origen europeo con el significado de 'prohibición' o 'veto'. Este uso generalizado se acompaña de la tendencia a considerar que el fenómeno que enuncia es amplio y universal, con la asunción de que la prohibición en una cultura es probable que sea observada de forma similar en otra. Sin embargo, el uso informal del término tabú en lenguas modernas presenta un obstáculo para comprender fenómenos culturales que, apropiadamente contextualizados, pueden ser explicados de otro modo. Esta observación motivó al autor para una investigación sobre el estudio del tabú en la religión y la sociedad, con un especial foco en el fin del siglo XIX y el comienzo del XX. El presente artículo estudia las opiniones de algunos de los investigadores más influyentes sobre el tema.

Keywords: cultural evolutionism, W. Robertson Smith, J.G. Frazer, S. Reinach, F. B. Steiner.

Palabras clave: evolucionismo cultural, W. Robertson Smith, J.G. Frazer, S. Reinach, F. B. Steiner.

The author of this paper presented an early version of his study on ancient Egyptian perspective on the menstrual taboo at the 2002 Madrid conference *El Universo Femenino. Vida, cultura y pensamiento* organized by Covadonga Sevilla. It gives me great pleasure to offer the current work as a tribute to the memory of Cova with whom I shared a love of Egyptology and a passion for opera.

The term 'taboo' is widely used in many European languages, with the meaning of 'prohibition' or 'ban'. This generalized use is accompanied by the tendency to accept the phenomenon it represents as both widespread and universal, with the assumption that a prohibition in one culture is likely to be similarly regarded in another. The

problem with this view is illustrated by this author's study of the supposed menstrual taboo in ancient Egypt.¹ Countering a common belief in a universal connection between menses and danger, my suggestion that there was no general 'taboo' on menstruation in Ancient Egypt was met with scepticism. While it is possible, of course, that my arguments were

* I am very grateful to Lana Troy for improving upon my English text.

¹ Later published as Frandsen 2007.

unconvincing, it is also clear that the casual use of the term taboo in modern languages presents an obstacle to understanding cultural phenomena that, when properly contextualized, may be otherwise explained. This observation provided the impetus for an inquiry into the study of taboo in religion and society, with a focus on the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, which proved to be formative for this topic. The first published result of my research was on the Egyptian concept of *bwt* and Durkheim's position on taboo.² An enquiry into his precursors is ongoing. The current paper surveys the views of some of the more influential scholars on the topic.

The term 'taboo' has a Melanesian and Polynesian origin. Since its introduction into the vocabulary of most European languages about two hundred years ago, it has been incorporated into most, if not all, of these languages with meanings such as 'ban' or 'prohibition'. It is attested as a noun, a verb, an adjective, and found in expressions such as 'taboo words'.³ In its anthropological context, a taboo may apply to an entire class, such as the class 'animals', or to specific members of the class, such as spotted dogs. It may be perpetual, as is Judaism's prohibition of pork, or temporary, as is the case with restrictions during the periods of Lent or Passover. It may further be used about the prohibition or ban itself, or about the condition resulting from being under a taboo. A violation of a taboo is said to be dangerous or sacrilegious, and sanctions are

designed to affect the trespasser either directly or indirectly. Taboos may be removed by various rites.⁴

In the Polynesian material, taboos were used to establish and maintain the social hierarchy. Thus, appropriation of property and power was facilitated by the definition of material goods and social actions as taboo to those of a lower social rank. Consequently, taboos expanded political power for those who could determine prohibitions, while excluding those who could not. The invalidation of a taboo required the pronouncement of a counter taboo by someone superior to the instigator of the original taboo.

The Egyptian term often translated 'taboo' is *bwt*. While the Egyptian king, as a god, could make something *bwt*, it was not to enhance his social rank, but rather to re-establish the original—primaeval—order of the world (*maat*). This is one example of the dissonance between the original meaning of taboo and the problem that arises when attempting to equate it with phenomena from another cultural setting.

The literature dealing with taboo is enormous, covering the many iterations of the phenomena represented by the term. This diversity has contributed to making anthropologists somewhat weary of the term—a fate suffered by many other anthropological terms.⁵

The term and the behaviour associated with it was brought to the attention of European educated elite through the published account of Captain Cook's world voyages,⁶ where it

was described in a specific Polynesian context. The interest aroused by this report brought the word taboo quickly into the standard vocabulary of the European language. As a fashionable new word, its original definition was overshadowed by numerous extended meanings.

Thus, its most common extended use is attested as early as 1791, less than a decade after its introduction into English, when the House of Commons was asked to adopt "A plain declaration, that the topick of France is tabooed or forbidden ground to Mr [Edmund] Burke," whose obsession with the situation in France had apparently exhausted the patience of his parliamentary colleagues.⁷ As the many examples found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* show, the extended use of taboo became common during the nineteenth century, and today neither the word taboo nor the phenomena it represents is regarded as exotic.

The term was used to describe restrictive relationships with people, animals, actions or space, to name a few. The relationship with the tabooed object could entail the prohibition of various forms of contact, such as touching, eating, uttering, performing, entering, etc. In attempting to work out a more technical definition of taboo, anthropologists have inevitably watered down the meaning of the term, as each individual case study results in a new tailor-made definition that is likely to be so narrow that it cannot be applied outside the study from which it emanated.

Many discussions of taboos are aware of this problem. The British social anthropologist Robert Ranulph Marett, who was responsible for the teaching of the subject at Oxford from 1908 until 1935, wrote the entry on taboo in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and*

Ethics (ERE) in 1928.⁸ He opens with a general definition:

The word "tabu" is properly an adjective and appears to mean literally "marked off" (perhaps from Polynesian *ta*, "mark", *pu*, "exceedingly"). Applying equally to persons and things, it signifies that casual contact with them is forbidden as being fraught with mystic danger. Custom enjoins a negative or precautionary attitude towards them because of the supernatural influence with which they are temporarily or permanently charged. In short, they are 'not to be lightly approached', and that always for some magico-religious reason. The term is native to the Pacific region, but has been adopted, with some modification of meaning, to designate a fundamental category of comparative religion. Thus, as in regard to the cognate term *mana*, it is advisable to distinguish the local from the generalized sense.

His discussion of the Polynesian phenomenon is followed by a paragraph on the 'scientific meaning of tabu'. This includes the following comment on 'methods of studying tabus in detail'.

This cursory sketch of tabu aims at no more than a generalized version of the institution as it bears on the earlier growth of the spirit of religion. A fuller treatment might be based on the study of the particular systems of tabu native to the various ethnic areas -as have been attempted only in regard to the Pacific region- when many differences of detail and shades of local colour would doubtless come to light. In defence of the present method, however, it can be urged that to deal with tabus on the ethnological principle would well-nigh involve a survey of religions on the same distributive plan, since every savage people has a religion and every savage religion has its tabus. Nay more, savage religion tends to be co-extensive with the social life itself; so that a regu-

2 Frandsen 2010.

3 *Oxford Advanced Learners Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, Oxford, 1993: 927–928.

4 For a useful presentation of the complexities involved in the use of the concept of taboo, see Valeri 2000: XXII–XXIII.

5 See for instance Knight 2000: 543, where he writes that the 'the term "taboo" is no longer fashionable among anthropologists'.

6 Cook 1784, I: 286, 305ff, 338, 350, 410ff; II: 40, 249; III: 10ff, 101, 130, 153, 163ff. Cf. e.g., Steiner 1956: 22–27; Kapteyn 1975.

7 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989, 2nd. ed., XVII, p. 522; also quoted from the *New English Dictionary* by Steiner 1956: 27.

8 Marett 1928.

lar panorama of cultures may seem to be the logical outcome of such a method. Another way of dividing up the subject (but one again that must inevitably lead too far afield) would be that of distinguishing certain departments of activity typical of primitive society as a whole and showing how each is conditioned by its own set of special tabus. The food-interest, *e.g.*, is engirdled by one vast network of ritual controls, the sex-interest by another. Indeed, the critical stages of every vital process are hung about with such customary danger-signals. Sometimes these traditional fears can be shown to correspond to facts; more often they appear arbitrary, sheer aberrations of fancy, due to false analogy or what not, that have been incorporated into the tribal lore by a historical chance. Thus, however detailed our study of tabus, we are not likely to arrive at the explanation of minor features. For these reasons it has seemed preferable here to enlarge on the general principle.⁹

The contrast between the factual and the arbitrary is important, and one which is not, of course, specific to the social sciences. Comparison is probably the principal means by which new insight is gained, and the whole process is closely related to the well-known paradoxical strategies of hermeneutics. An all-embracing, non-differentiating, category becomes analytically useless. In what follows we shall review some of the more influential accounts of taboo, concluding with a comparison of the findings from Egypt with that from other cul-

tures. The framework of this article confines our enquiry to the evolutionist view.

The evolutionists – progress and survivals

The term evolution refers to processes of change over long periods of time. It is used for the development of societies and cultures, as well as for the diversification of life forms during the history of the earth. According to the agenda of some nineteenth century proponents of cultural, social and biological evolution, the current level of civilisation was the outcome of a long process of selection and refinement, ranging from the times of savagery to the capitalist, Christian, and liberal western societies.¹⁰ Over the last two centuries several models of evolution have been put forward. First applied in the eighteenth century to account for the development of the embryo, evolution was seen as an advance from the simple to the complex.¹¹ The British philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) is generally credited with having (1) enunciated the universal character of the evolutionary process, thus also applying the idea of evolution to the phenomena of society; and (2) described progress as an inherently progressive trend toward a higher state, thus being ‘responsible’ for the current view that evolution is always progressive.¹² In this respect he and

9 Marett 1928: 184.

10 For a precise characterization of this attitude, *cf.* Durkheim 1899: 3 = 1975: 75–76.

11 *Cf.* Bowler 1989: 10–11; 2003: 121.

12 *Cf.* Spencer 1967: XVIII: “The advance from the simple to the complex, through a process of successive differentiations, is seen alike in the earliest changes of the Universe to which we can reason our way back; and in the earliest changes which we can inductively establish; it is seen in the geological and climatic evolution of the Earth, and of every single organism on its surface; it is seen in the evolution of Humanity, whether contemplated in the civilized individual, or in the aggregation of races; it is seen in the evolution of Society in respect alike of its political, its religious, and its economical organization; and it is seen in the evolution of all ...[the] endless concrete and abstract products of human activity...”. In his later writings Spencer eschewed the term ‘progress’, which he had used as late as April 1857, in his article “Progress: Its Law and Cause” [from which the first quotation also comes.] Spencer noted that

the early social scientists differed from Darwin who viewed the evolution of biological forms as being devoid of direction.¹³ In the view of the latter, biological evolution was based on a process of natural selection, in which only the most adaptable from among randomly generated variations would survive. Biological evolution had nothing to do with progress but was the outcome of adaptation. Spencer, however, interpreted this to mean ‘the survival of the fittest’,¹⁴ and eventually integrated this principle into *his* ideas about ‘energy’, ‘persistence of force’ or ‘progress through struggle’ as a key to evolution. In the development of complex societies, Survival of the Fittest entailed conflict and war:

For we here see that in the struggle for existence among societies, the survival of the fittest is the

survival of those in which the power of military cooperation is the greatest, and military cooperation is that primary kind of cooperation which prepares the way for other kinds. So that this formation of larger societies by the union of smaller ones in war, and this destruction or absorption of the smaller un-united societies by the united larger ones, is an inevitable process through which the varieties of men most adapted for social life supplant the less adapted varieties.¹⁵

Darwin also assumed that each species developed only once and that this accounted for the hierarchy of classes, with the higher class, ‘families’, including the lower ones, ‘genera’ and ‘species’, as well as for the diversity of evolution (*e.g.* the co-existence of humans and apes) in terms of a branching tree model.

By the late nineteenth century, the impact of evolutionism had spread to all branches of

“‘Progress’ has an anthropocentric meaning, and ...there needed a word free from that”, *op.cit.*, p. XVII. - Spencer was not, of course, the first to account for historical change in terms of progress. For an excellent narrative of the conflict between “the progressionist and the cyclic models of development”, see Bowler 1989; *cf.* also Bowler 2003: 99–106.

13 For an account of the reasons for this ‘discrepancy’, see Hodgen 1936: 38ff; and Bowler 2003, *passim*.

14 First proposed in 1864 in his work *Principles of Biology* 1 (Spencer 1864: 444–445): “This survival of the fittest, which I have here sought to express in mechanical terms, is that which Mr. Darwin has called “natural selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life”.” In Spencer 1967: XX, the editor, Robert L. Carneiro, cites excerpts from a correspondence between Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace who found Spencer’s phrase preferable. “Wallace argued that (...) ‘natural selection’ implied an intelligent agent doing the selecting, and that in fact in *The Origin of the Species* Darwin himself had frequently fallen into the practice of personifying nature as “selecting,” “preferring,” (...). This Wallace decried, and suggested to Darwin “the possibility of entirely avoiding this source of misunderstanding in your great work ...by adopting Spencer’s term...This term is the plain expression of the *fact*. (...) Darwin’s reply was positive: “I fully agree with all that you say on the advantages of H. Spencer’s excellent expression”.” Darwin goes on to say that he wishes he had been able to incorporate the term in the new edition of his book, etc., but as this is too late he fears that his own “Natural Selection has now been so largely used...”. For Wallace and his role in the development of the theory of natural selection, see Bowler 2003: 173–176.

15 Spencer 1967: 78. Spencer continues: “(...) Passing over the multitudinous illustrations among the uncivilized, it will suffice if I refer to those given ...[earlier], and reinforce them by some which historic people have supplied. There is the fact that in primitive Egypt the numerous small societies (...) first united into the two aggregates, Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt...”, *loc.cit.* *Cf.* also Spencer 1895, 2: 240–241: “As carried on throughout the animate world at large, the struggle for existence has been an indispensable means to evolution. (...) Similarly with social organisms. We must recognize the truth that the struggles for existence between societies have been instrumental to their evolution. Neither the consolidation and re-consolidation of small groups into larger ones; nor the organization of such compound and doubly compound groups; nor the concomitant developments of those aids to a higher life which civilization has brought; would have been possible without inter-tribal and inter-national conflicts. Social cooperation is initiated by joint defence and offence; and from the cooperation thus initiated, all kinds of cooperations have arisen.”

knowledge. Since God no longer was thought to be the source of mankind, biologists, palaeontologists, anthropologists, and archaeologists became engaged in the search for human origins. Studies of hominid fossils were paralleled by attempts to reconstruct the social organization of early man through the study of contemporary ‘savages’—thus regarded to be living fossils.¹⁶ However, while a growing number of cultural evolutionary theorists supported the idea of evolution as moving from the ‘worse’ to the ‘better’, they also considered development as a unilinear process towards increasing complexity - often represented by the metaphor of a ladder, rather than a branching tree, where societies and species ascend at differing paces and rise to different levels.¹⁷

The French philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte (1798-1857) had worked out an evolutionary pattern that was to lay the foundation of the intellectualist ‘streak’ of modern scholarship. In his view, human thought passed through three stages. First, theological, in which all phenomena were linked to divine intervention. This stage was subdivided into three phases according to the character of the ‘divine’ involved: fetishism, polytheism, and monotheism. Second, a metaphysical and philosophical stage in which ideas, hidden forces, and personifications such as Reason and

Nature, were held responsible for the world of phenomena. And finally, the ‘positive’ or scientific phase in which scientific laws based on the interplay between observable facts, hypotheses, and the processes of induction and deduction formed the basis of all knowledge.¹⁸ Nineteenth (and most of the twentieth) century archaeology was a typically positivist discipline, and excavations had, early on, undermined earlier beliefs in the relatively short history of mankind. The ‘new’ prehistory gave rise to other evolutionary schemes.¹⁹ Whatever the specific character of the individual models, however, they all shared the idea of an upward movement carrying life to higher levels of organisation. “L’humanité”, wrote the French *savant* Salomon Reinach, “aux yeux de l’évolutionniste – et qui n’est pas évolutionniste aujourd’hui? – est sortie de l’animalité.”²⁰ Psychological evolution went hand in hand with cultural evolution. In the words of the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881), mankind had begun its “career at the bottom of the scale and worked their way up from savagery to civilization.”²¹ In his scheme of development Savagery and Barbarism are each subdivided into three stages. Civilisation begins in the Upper Status of Barbarism and the transition to the actual Status of Civilisation is characterized, i.a., by “the

16 For an instance of an explicit analogy between geology and anthropology, see Tylor 1889: 256.

17 Already in the early eighteenth century the famous French mathematician Bernard le Bouvier de Fontenelle (1657-1757) wrote: “Puisque les Grecs avec tout leur esprit, lorsqu’ils étoient encore un Peuple nouveau, ne pensèrent point plus raisonnablement que les Barbares de l’Amérique, qui étoient, selon toutes les apparences, un Peuple assez nouveau lorsqu’ils furent découverts par les Espagnols, il y a sujet de croire que les Américains seroient venus à la fin à penser aussi raisonnablement que les Grecs, si on leur en avoit laissé le loisir” (Fontenelle 1724: 7). For the opposite view, ‘Degenerationism’, see Hodgen 1936: chapter 1, esp. 28, citing the view of Archbishop Richard Whately (1785-1863): “Could the lowest savages and the most highly civilized specimens of the European races be regarded as members of the same species? Was it conceivable (...) that by the division of labour these shameless peoples could “advance step by step in all the arts of civilized life”?”. Cf. also Bowler 1989: 11.

18 Cf. Pickering 2001.

19 Cf. Bowler 1989: 75 ff and 2003: 285–295.

20 Reinach 1905: I.

21 Morgan 1974 (1877): 3 (11–12).

invention of a phonetic alphabet, and the use of writing in literary composition. (...) As an equivalent hieroglyphical writing upon stone may be admitted.”²²

Darwin’s branching tree model also gave rise to another aspect of evolution, or, to be more precise, to evolutionary ideas that were rather non-Darwinian. Did the great variation found in mankind really comprise a single group that was the outcome of a linear evolution of a single species, which was the prevailing idea during the Enlightenment? Or could the differences in appearance and, by implication, mentality, found between Caucasian, Negroes and Asians (and even within these groups), be attributed to the branching off of mankind into subgroups?

Traditionally, the human race, as a whole, was said to have descended from Adam and Eve, according to the hypothesis of ‘monogenism’. But some scholars had long challenged this hypothesis on the grounds that the few thousand years of history accounted for in Genesis was not enough to allow the differentiation of a single human species into such diverse racial types. The alternative was ‘polygenism’, the claim that the various races were separate creations, with only the whites having descended from Adam and Eve.²³

In England, for instance, the members of the Ethnological Society of London support-

ed the theory of monogeny, while those of the Anthropological Society came out in favour of polygeny.²⁴ During the period of the development of modern social and human sciences, a majority of the cultural evolutionary theorists stressed the unity of mankind, if not as a social being, then as a species (which is defined by the ability of its members to interbreed) and a psychic unity.²⁵ Even many theologians and religious thinkers had come to conceive of evolution as the unfolding of God’s teleological design.²⁶ This gave rise to another problem, namely, how to reconcile the concept of the original sin with the idea of a progressive and purposeful, divine development.

Common to the various theories of the nineteenth century social evolutionists was the idea of survivals. In this view, there were many survivals from earlier stages of the development of mankind that needed to be neutralized in order to serve further progress. Above all, primitive mentality was seen as infested with taboos and fear, and in cases where similar elements manifested in contemporary society, these were regarded as vestiges of earlier times.²⁷

Evolutionist scholars were interested in the nature of taboo itself. Or to be more precise, they were interested in isolating the distinctive features of taboo for the purpose of

22 Morgan 1974 (1877): 11–12.

23 Bowler 2003: 294.

24 For a survey of the debate about these problems in earlier European history, see Leach 1982: chapters 2 and 3. Leach writes that “polygeny, according to which the global category consists of a set of quite separate races of quite distinct historical origin (...), during a critical period between 1850 and 1870 (...) was the dominant orthodoxy in scientific circles throughout Europe and America” (p. 71). For a more detailed account, see Hodgen 1936, the chapter “A Period of Doubt”, esp. p. 19ff. Cf. also Eleanor Burke Leacock in Morgan 1974 (1877): ix; Knight 1991: 9, 51ff and *passim*.

25 For Tylor’s doctrine of psychic unity, cf. Pals 1996: 20. Herbert Spencer was probably the most prominent evolutionist who did not share that view, cf. Spencer 1967: XLVI.

26 This idea has a very long pedigree. Cf. Queen Hatshepsut’s justification for her expedition to Punt (Sethe, *Urk.* IV, 344), or the arguments, in *Wenamun*, presented by the Prince of Byblos in his discourse on the role of Amun in the relationship between Egypt and Phoenicia (Wen. 2,19–22 = Gardiner, *LEG* 68, 15–69,4).

27 Cf. Hodgen 1936: 36ff.

relegating what appeared to be irrational and supernatural to a phase of so-called primitive mentality.²⁸

Although the evolutionary perspective has long since ceased to motivate the research on taboo, some acquaintance with the accomplishments of representatives of this school of thought is useful in order to understand later developments.

Among many scholars, Robertson Smith, James G. Frazer, and Salomon Reinach in particular, made important contributions as they attempted to explicate society's progression to the elevated level of contemporary religion, science and government.

W. Robertson Smith

The evolutionists had several objectives. First of all, they wanted to differentiate between the holy and that which was described as the unclean and forbidden. These were grouped together with taboos and belief in demonic and supernatural forces. The work of the Scottish biblical scholar and Semitist W. Robertson Smith (1846-1894) provides a good example of that aim.

In his chef d'oeuvre on *The Religion of the Semites*, from 1889 (2nd. ed.1894), Robertson Smith was at great pains to separate the notion of taboo from the concept of holiness, the former being nothing but a survival of earlier, and considerably less noble, forms of religious life.

Rules of holiness in the sense just explained, i.e. a system of restrictions on man's arbitrary use of

natural things, enforced by the dread of supernatural penalties [footnote: sometimes by civil penalties also], are found among all primitive peoples. It is convenient to have a distinct name for this primitive institution, to mark it off from the later developments of the idea of holiness in advanced religions, and for this purpose the Polynesian term *taboo* has been selected.²⁹

Two types of taboo can be discerned, one which relates to protection and another associated with the concept of impurity:

Thus alongside of taboos that exactly correspond to rules of holiness, protecting the inviolability of idols and sanctuaries, priests and chiefs, and generally of all persons and things pertaining to the gods and their worship, we find another kind of taboo which in the Semitic field has its parallel in rules of uncleanness.³⁰

As examples, Smith points to the cases of the isolation of women after childbirth and the ban on contact with corpses.

In these cases the person under taboo is not regarded as holy, for he is separated from approach to the sanctuary as well as from contact with men; (...) The fact that all the Semites have rules of uncleanness as well as rules of holiness, that the boundary between the two is often vague, and that the former as well as the latter present the most startling agreement in point of detail with savage *taboos*, leaves no reasonable doubt as to the origin and ultimate relations of the idea of holiness. On the other hand, the fact that the Semites - or at least the northern Semites - distinguish between the holy and the unclean, marks a real advance above savagery. All taboos are inspired by awe of the supernatural, but there is a great moral difference between precautions against the invasion of mysterious hostile powers and precautions founded on respect for the prerogative of a friend-

²⁸ Cf. Webster 1942: VIII: "The customs considered here are mostly of unknown origin and of unknown antiquity. Many of them, particularly those relating to reproduction, death, and the dead, must be very old, reaching back into the childhood of the race. (...) To study them is to gain some comprehension of social evolution through unnumbered centuries; it is to open a window into man's dim and distant past."

²⁹ Smith 1894 (1889): 152.

³⁰ Smith 1894 (1889): 152-153.

ly god. The former belongs to magical superstition - the barrenest of all aberrations of the savage imagination - which, being founded only on fear, acts merely as a bar to progress and impediment to the free use of nature by human energy and industry. But the restrictions on individual licence which are due to respect for a known and friendly power allied to man, however trivial and absurd they may appear to us in their details, contain within them germinant principles of social progress and moral order.³¹

In an additional note Robertson Smith compares these concepts, because holiness and uncleanness were of the same origin. Both restrict "men's use of and contact with them", and violation of these restrictions

involves supernatural dangers. The difference between the two appears, not in their relation to man's ordinary life, but in their relation to the gods. Holy things are not free to man, because they pertain to the gods; uncleanness is shunned, according to the view taken in the higher Semitic religions, because it is hateful to the god.³²

In their proper cultural context, these types of taboos are quite sensible. A recourse to superhuman agencies to prevent the spread of 'mysterious danger' may not have a scientific basis, but

it is perfectly intelligible, and forms the basis of a consistent system of practice; whereas, when the rules of uncleanness are made to rest on the will of the gods, they appear altogether arbitrary and meaningless.³³

Referring to the rules for contact with unclean things in *Leviticus* XI, 32 ff. and similar evidence, Robertson Smith argues that

Rules like this have nothing in common with the spirit of Hebrew religion; they can only be remains of a primitive superstition, (...) The irrationality of laws of uncleanness, from the standpoint of spiritual religion or even of the higher heathenism, is so manifest, that they must necessarily be looked on as having survived from an earlier form of faith and of society. And this being so, I do not see how any historical student can refuse to class them with savage taboos.³⁴

By contrast, as stated above, the taboos that place restrictions on man's behaviour out of respect for, as opposed to fear of, the gods, are subsumed into the category of the holy.

Robertson Smith's evolutionism inscribes itself in the prevailing scholarly paradigm. But he was also a Protestant theologian who ultimately wanted to purge Christianity of any 'survivals'³⁵ in order to establish a more sincere and personal relationship with the holy and with God. The chronological and intellectual framework provided by evolutionism was one of the components in this project, and it is against this background that one must see his ranking of societies, moving through the phases of 'heathen', and 'higher heathenism' to spiritual religion, corresponding to 'paganism', and finally to Judaism and Christianity. The fear-inspired taboos which restrict man and are hateful to god have no place in the two modern religions and were therefore grouped with magical and primitive superstition, or relegated to a sphere that has nothing to do with religion at all.

While Robertson Smith's outline of a development leading to 'proper religion' is clear, his accompanying arguments were found less

³¹ Smith 1894 (1889): 153-154.

³² Smith 1894 (1889): 446.

³³ Smith 1894 (1889): 447.

³⁴ Smith 1894 (1889): 447 and 449.

³⁵ Cf. Steiner 1956: 50-67, esp. 57-58, for Robertson Smith's use of the idea of 'survivals'; Douglas 1966: 13-19; Evans-Pritchard 1965: 52-53.

satisfactory by some. Steiner, for example, claimed that Robertson Smith ‘did not regard Semitic rules of holiness, etc., as *derived* [my emphasis] from primitive taboo concepts’.³⁶ Robertson Smith is however quite clear on this score:

The fact that all the Semites have rules of uncleanness as well as rules of holiness, that the boundary between the two is often vague, and that he former as well as the latter present the most startling agreement in point of detail with savage *taboos*, leaves no reasonable doubt as to the origin and ultimate relations of the idea of holiness.³⁷

The successors and a predecessor

Robertson Smith laid the foundation for some of the fundamental positions of the scholars whose work will be discussed in what follows. His analysis relied, as we have seen, on the existence of two types of restrictions, labelled taboo. One set served to protect the holy, while the purpose of the other was to set apart that which was impure. The holy or pure is that which pertains to the gods, while the impure is that which is hateful to the gods. Durkheim redefined the content of the two categories,³⁸ but together the ‘pure’ or ‘impure’ became the constituent elements of his concept of the ‘sacred’, which, in turn, is one of the elements in his binary opposition: sacred: profane.

Other aspects of Robertson Smith’s thought may also have inspired Durkheim. In contrast to the intellectualist approach of Frazer and his followers, Robertson Smith

thought that the social and institutional aspects of religion were far more important than questions of belief and faith, because the individual does not choose his religion. It comes “to him as part of the general scheme of social obligations” that follows from belonging to a social group.

We have seen that ancient faiths must be looked on as matter of institution rather than of dogma or formulated belief, and that the system of an antique religion was part of the social order under which its adherents lived. (...) Religion did not exist for the saving of souls but for the preservation and welfare of society.³⁹

In the myth vs. ritual discussion Robertson Smith held that rites should be given prominence over myth. “[T]he ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper. (...) The conclusion is, that in the study of ancient religions we must begin, not with myth, but with ritual and traditional usage.”⁴⁰ Frazer accepted that priority, although for different reasons, as will be seen.

The theoretical constructions of that generation of scholars were set within the same scholarly paradigm, and many of them shared the same general perspective, as argued by Evans-Pritchard:

[W]ith one or two exceptions, (...) the persons whose writings have been most influential have been at the time they wrote agnostics or atheists. (...) They sought, and found, in primitive religions a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as

an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social function, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of in the same way.⁴¹

These remarks may not be wholly applicable to Frazer, nor may all of the scathing criticism that his work has suffered, especially from scholars writing in the first part of the twentieth century, be viable. It has, for instance, been argued that Frazer held “the very essence of every taboo [to be] backwardness”, but this is neither correct nor does it judge him in relationship to the scholarly paradigm of his time.⁴² Frazer, and later Reinach, wanted to go further than separating the holy from the forbidden. For them progress implied separating religion from society at large, i.e., creating a civil society, based upon scientific achievements (notably Frazer) and legislation (especially Reinach). They had no doubt as to the role played by customs related to taboo in their evolutionary schemes.

Robertson Smith’s position on religion was different, but his ideas of the double role of taboo were not. In his view, the beneficent taboos, those that imply holiness, protected everything affiliated with the divine and the cult of god. Only the negative ones would act “as a bar to progress and impediment to the free use of nature by human energy and industry”. In the end, Robertson Smith’s view of taboo was therefore not substantially different from that of Frazer and the later evolutionists, even though their stance on religion was very different indeed.

Before turning our attention to Frazer and Reinach, a few words are owed to the pioneering figure Henry Burnett Tylor (1832-1917).⁴³ Tylor is justly credited for having substituted studies based on ethnology for hypotheses derived from etymological philology, but, more importantly, he developed the idea of survivals, and subsequently linked it to his theory of animism, which meant ascribing life and personality to inanimate objects as well as living beings. According to this view people had souls, while spirits or a spiritual principle animated the world at large. Tylor also preceded Frazer in maintaining that magic, or Occult Science, as he called it, was

at the very foundation of human reason, but in no small degree of human unreason also. Man, as yet in a low intellectual condition, having come to associate in thought those things which he found by experience to be connected in fact, proceeded erroneously to invert this action, and to conclude that association in thought must involve similar connexion in reality.⁴⁴

Frazer acknowledged his debt to Tylor on this score. He too held that ideal connexions were mistaken for real ones and vice versa, but he added that Tylor had not analysed “the different kinds of association.”⁴⁵

James G. Frazer

In 1878 James G. Frazer (1854-1941) graduated in classics at Cambridge, but he was soon drawn into social anthropology, a term for

³⁶ Steiner 1956: 55, citing Smith 1894 (1889): 446.

³⁷ Cf. above n. 31.

³⁸ See above n. 2.

³⁹ Smith 1894 (1889): 28–29.

⁴⁰ Smith 1894 (1889): 18.

⁴¹ Evans-Pritchard 1965: 14–15. Cf. however, Morris 1987: 92, who thinks that “it is perhaps unfair to suggest that the studies of Tylor, Durkheim, and Frazer were motivated purely with the negative intent of undermining Christianity.”

⁴² Steiner 1956: 87.

⁴³ Cf. Durkheim 1912: 67–99 = 1995: 45–67; Hodgen 1936: 38–66; and Pals 1996: 16–29.

⁴⁴ Tylor 1871: 104.

⁴⁵ Frazer 1911a: 53 n.1.

which he is partly responsible. Through most of his career he lived the quiet life of a university teacher, devoting a greater part of his life to the industrious, and almost tenacious, study of a very comprehensive range of customs and beliefs, all connected with regicide and slain gods.⁴⁶ The results appeared in what was his *chef d'oeuvre*, the three editions of *The Golden Bough, A Study in Magic and Religion*, the last one comprising no less than twelve volumes. Frazer has exercised an enormous influence on scholarship. Even today, “[t]hrough most anthropologists disagree with him on one point or another, there is hardly anyone so great that he thinks it beneath him or a waste of time to criticize Frazer.”⁴⁷

Frazer’s view of taboo first appeared in the entry he wrote on the subject in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Ninth Edition, published in 1888 at the instigation of the editor of the work, Robertson Smith. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer subsequently went a step further incorporating ‘the system of taboo’ into his wider scheme of how the savage mind worked. According to his mature view, the history of human thought could be divided into three consecutive stages: the magical, the religious, and the scientific stage.⁴⁸ The later stages contain survivals of the earlier ones, but taboo has its roots in the magical stage. Magic, was

analogous to science,⁴⁹ and was in fact a pseudo version of science, and in its pure, original form it was free of supernatural elements.

Wherever sympathetic magic occurs in its pure unadulterated form, it assumes that in nature one event follows another necessarily and invariably without the intervention of any spiritual or personal agency. Thus its fundamental conception is identical with that of modern science; underlying the whole system is a faith, implicit but real and firm, in the order and uniformity of nature. (...) Thus the analogy between the magical and the scientific conceptions of the world is close. In both of them the succession of events is perfectly regular and certain, being determined by immutable laws, the operation of which can be foreseen and calculated precisely; the elements of caprice, of chance, and accident are banished from the course of nature.⁵⁰

In his opinion, magic took two forms, homeopathic magic and contagious magic, each one representing a misapplication of the laws of the association of ideas—at the time regarded as one of the fundamental laws of psychology. The keyword is ‘sympathy’, and “both branches of magic (...) may conveniently be comprehended under the general name of Sympathetic Magic.”⁵¹ The system may be tabulated as follows:

SYMPATHETIC MAGIC		
Homeopathic or Imitative Magic Law of Similarity Association by Similarity		Contagious Magic Law of Contact or Contagion Association by Contiguity
Manifested as		
Like produces or affects like, An effect resembles its cause, Mental or ideal connexions mirror real ones Association through analogy		Things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed, Part affects part, A part stands for the whole Association through contiguity

Of the two principles of magic, homeopathic magic may be practised by itself, while contagious magic usually implies recourse to the principle of imitation. The system as a whole “is not merely composed of positive precepts; it comprises a very large number of negative precepts, that is, prohibitions.” Frazer calls the positive precepts sorcery and the negative ones taboo.

In fact the whole doctrine of taboo, or at all events a large part of it, would seem to be only a special application of sympathetic magic, with its two great laws of similarity and contact. (...) Positive magic or sorcery says, ‘Do this in order that so and so may happen.’ Negative magic or taboo says, ‘Do not do this, lest so and so should happen.’ The aim of positive magic or sorcery is to produce a desired event, the aim of negative magic or taboo is to avoid an undesirable one. But both consequences, the desirable and the undesirable, are supposed to be brought about in accordance with the laws of similarity and contact.⁵²

The point of resemblance between negative magic and taboo is their lack of efficacy:

[J]ust as the desired consequence is not *really* effected by the observance of a magical ceremony, so the dreaded consequence does not *really* result from the violations of a taboo. If the supposed evil necessarily followed a breach of taboo, the taboo would not be a taboo but a precept of morality or common sense. It is not a taboo to say, ‘Do not put your hand in the fire’; it is a rule of common sense, because the forbidden action entails a real, not imaginary evil. In short, those negative precepts which we call taboo are just as vain and futile as those positive precepts which we call sorcery.⁵³

Turning to Frazer’s account of taboo itself, one immediately notes the many points of similarity between Frazer’s and Robertson Smith’s views. They were friends, and it is, in fact, not so easy to discern to whom the credit for their shared views on most aspects of taboo should be given. Later, in the preface to part II of his

46 Cf. the following two recent characterizations: “If ever there was a man who fit the description of an ‘ivory tower’ scholar, it was James Frazer” (Pals 1996: 30); and “If ever a scholar had a one-track mind, it was Frazer” (Douglas 1978: 10). Interesting reviewings of Frazer’s is found in Goldenweiser 1933; Leach 1961; Ackerman 1987 and 1991: esp. 46–66.

47 Douglas 1978: 9. This remark applies to the young Mary Douglas as well, cf. Douglas 1966: 22–24 et *passim*.

48 Cf. e.g., Frazer 1913, II: 307–308, where the three stages are likened “to a web woven of three different threads - the black thread of magic, the red thread of religion, and the white thread of science.”

49 Cf. Frazer 1911a: 52–53: “For the same principles which the magician applies in the practice of his art are implicitly believed by him to regulate the operations of inanimate nature; in other words, he tacitly assumes that the Laws of Similarity and Contact are of universal application and are not limited to human actions. In short, magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as well as an abortive art.”

50 Frazer 1911a: 220–221.

51 Frazer 1911a: 54.

52 Frazer 1911a: 111–112.

53 Frazer 1911a: 112. My emphasis.

chef d'oeuvre, Frazer wrote that “[m]y general views on the subject were accepted by my friend Robertson Smith and applied by him in his celebrated *Lectures*”,⁵⁴ i.e. *The Religion of the Semites*, but it has indeed been argued that “[a]fter Robertson Smith died, Frazer simply went on repeating himself without showing the smallest symptom of originality.”⁵⁵ Be this as it may, in his fundamental article on taboo, Frazer made the interesting statement that taboos cannot be divided into two separate categories –taboos of privilege and taboos of disability– according to whether they make the person who comes into contact with them holy or unclean, because

the rules to be observed [are in any case] identical. On the other hand, it is true that the opposition of sacred and accursed, clean and unclean, which plays so important a part in the later history of religion, did in fact arise by differentiation from the single root idea of taboo, which includes and reconciles them both and by reference to which alone their history and mutual relation are intelligible.⁵⁶

In spite of having classified taboo as negative magic, Frazer was aware of the double-edged character of taboo. Thus, in *Taboo and the Perils of the Soul*, he argues that one of the purposes of taboo is to maintain life by preventing the influence of, say, contagious magic. The king is protected from society at large by taboos because his life is crucial to that of society. Conversely, the very same taboos protect society against the emanations of the king’s power that might have a negative effect on it. The king is ‘regarded by his subjects as a

source both of infinite blessing and of infinite danger.’⁵⁷ In a paragraph entitled *The Meaning of Taboo*, he, finally, elaborated on all this, while at the same time making the lack of differentiation between taboos related to purity and those protecting from uncleanness the very hallmark of savagery:

Thus in primitive society the rules of ceremonial purity observed by divine kings, chiefs, and priests agree in many respects with the rules observed by homicides, mourners, women in child-bed, girls at puberty, hunters and fishermen, and so on. To us these various classes of persons appear to differ totally in character and condition; some of them we should call holy, others we might pronounce unclean and polluted. But the savage makes no such moral distinction between them; the conceptions of holiness and pollution are not yet differentiated in his mind. To him the common feature of all these persons is that they are dangerous and in danger, and the danger in which they stand and to which they expose others is what we should call spiritual or ghostly, and therefore imaginary. The danger, however, is not less real because it is imaginary; imagination acts upon man as really as does gravitation, and may kill him as certainly as a dose of prussic acid. To seclude these persons from the rest of the world so that the dreaded spiritual danger shall neither reach them, nor spread from them, is the object of the taboos which they have to observe. These taboos act, so to say, as electrical insulators to preserve the spiritual force with which these persons are charged from suffering or inflicting harm by contact with the outer world.⁵⁸

This is a phenomenon encountered also in the Egyptian material where for instance

menstruating women are both vulnerable and a menace.

Frazer’s approach to anthropological studies has been severely criticized and branded as ‘intellectual’, referring to his theoretical bias towards substantive definitions. Frazer, and representatives of that school, defines religion in terms of emotive concepts and ideas. Religion is seen as a psychological phenomenon. In the words of one of his harshest critics, Steiner:

Frazer’s approach may be indicated by two words: psychology and logic. All objects under his examination turn into things of the mind; customs, beliefs, rituals and laws are all made of the same stuff. A thing cannot be *in* the mind without being *of* the mind and *vice versa*, and therefore Frazer dealt with it appropriately, with particular double approach: psychology and logic. Here the classical scholar was indebted to a very remarkable historical accident. In the association psychology of the time Frazer found a method and a frame of reference almost predestined to lend an air of scientific inquiry to the discussion of sympathetic magic and the principles of contagion. (...) Frazer [believed] that the purpose of social action and the nature of the social context are self-evident. He knows which means would fit the ends in any situation, because he knows what he would do in the same situation and is thereby provided with a yardstick for measuring the efficacy of means. It is for this reason that the intellectualist approach has been called by a less kind name: the “if-I-were-a-horse” school.⁵⁹

Edmund Leach’s remarks on Frazer’s use of psychology reflects similar remarks by Steiner:

He [Frazer] took over (...) the assumption that the fundamental psychology of human beings will everywhere be reflected by similar customary behaviors, or, conversely, that similar customs always have the same symbolic implications, regardless of the context in which they appear.⁶⁰

For more than a century Frazer has been subjected to all kinds of critiques and assessments, and one or more of the following points of have been made by most of his critics.⁶¹

The general criticisms against Frazer—and many of his contemporaries—are:

- His syntheses were based on evidence haphazardly collected and largely devoid of social context.
- His comparative method lacks value. It consists of analogies, widely separated in time and space, and the comparisons are, moreover, too general, if not indeed trivial.
- Many of his categories are analytically useless: Totemism, vegetation god, etc.
- His interpretation of myths is reflected in statements “supporting at least three different and mutually exclusive theories concerning myth: euhemerism [myths being based on real events in the lives of real kings or heroes], intellectualism [myths as mistaken attempts at scientific explanation resulting in aetiological tales], and ritualism [myth replaces rituals that have fallen into disuse].”⁶²
- He was not interested in rituals as such, but in the associated beliefs and myths. Moreover, he assumed that immediate inferences could be made from the form of an action to the content of the belief. Ritual

54 Frazer 1911b: VI

55 Leach 1961: 374. Cf. also Ackerman 1991: 43ff.

56 Frazer 1888: 16–17.

57 Frazer 1911b: 7.

58 Frazer 1911b: 224. The metaphor of electricity was used earlier by Smith 1894 (1889): 151.

59 Steiner 1956: 94–95.

60 Leach 1961: 377. For the origin of this kind of approach, cf. Ackerman 1991: 50.

61 In addition to the authors already cited, cf. Vickery 1973; Doty 1986: s. 169–171; Morris 1987: 103–106; and Bell 1997: 271 n. 29.

should be studied not because it was antecedent to myth, which it was not, but because rituals are more conservative, change less, and are therefore more reliable.⁶³

- He never explained why people only confused connections in thought with connections in reality when performing magic.
- His analogy between magic and science is absurd.⁶⁴
- Magic cannot be separated from religion, both being linked to the realm of the supernatural.
- Magic, therefore, does not precede religion.

Against his ideas on taboo it has been argued that

- Taboo is not negative magic.⁶⁵
- His intellectualist approach does not take social or communal problems into consideration, and he is therefore blind to the possibility that taboo may have a specific social function, e.g. that of creating social strata, disciplining the young to the benefit of elders, etc.
- Frazer has not given due consideration to the aspect of sanction in the event that a taboo is broken. There is normally no one-to-one relationship between a penalty and the

type of transgression, i.e. no sympathetic relationship.

Frazer was by no means blind to the beneficial aspects of taboo, but his appreciation of the wider - 'civil' - implications of this fact has probably been obscured by his choice of metaphors as well as the general context in which they were set:

The original character of the taboo must be looked for not in its civil but in its religious element. It was not the creation of a legislator but the gradual outgrowth of animistic beliefs, to which the ambition and avarice of chiefs and priests afterwards gave an artificial extension. But in serving the cause of avarice and ambition it subserved the progress of civilization, by fostering conceptions of the right of property and the sanctity of the marriage tie, - conceptions which in time grew strong enough to stand by themselves and to fling away the crutch of superstition which in earlier days had been their sole support. For we shall scarcely err in believing that even in advanced societies the moral sentiments, in so far as they are merely sentiments and are not based on an induction from experience, derive much of their force from an original system of taboo. Thus on taboo were grafted the golden fruits of law and morality, while the parent stem dwindled

62 Ackerman 1987: 231–232, combined with Ackerman 1991: 55, *cf.* also 211–212. *Cf.* also Frazer's later definition of myth (from 1921) cited on p. 59: "By myths I understand mistaken explanations of phenomena, whether of human life or of external nature. Such explanations originate in that instinctive curiosity concerning causes of things which at a more advanced stage of knowledge seeks satisfaction in philosophy and science, but being founded on ignorance and misapprehension they are always false, for were they true, they would cease to be myths."

63 *Cf.* the quotations from the correspondence between Frazer and Marett found in Ackerman 1987: 226: "[I] have always acted on them [the views of Robertson Smith] in my writings, laying more stress on ritual than on myth (dogma) in the study of the history of religion, not because I believe ritual to be historically prior to dogma or myth (that I regard as absolutely false), but because ritual is much more conservative than dogma and far less apt to be falsified consciously or unconsciously, and therefore furnishes a far surer standing-ground for research." *Cf.* also Ackerman 1991: 57 with n. 14.

64 *Cf.* Evans–Pritchard *apud* Steiner 1956: 107: "If he had compared a magical rite in its entirety with a scientific performance in its entirety instead of comparing what he supposes to go on in the brain of a magician with what he supposes to go on in the brain of a scientist, he would have seen the essential difference between science and magic." *Cf.* also Goldenweiser 1933: 170–171.

65 *Cf. e.g.*, Marett 1909: 91 ff; Steiner 1956: 100–105; and Frazer's own rebuttal to his earlier critics, in Frazer 1911a: 111 n. 2.

slowly into the sour crabs and empty husks of popular superstition on which the swine of modern society are still content to feed.⁶⁶

As late as 1956 this provoked a brutal comment from Steiner who asks the question for whom this was written? He identified the audience as those that feed the swine, but even so I am not sure that I understand to whom he is referring. At any rate, this is followed by this broadside:

But the eloquence of this peroration not only made an impression on so discerning a scholar as Robertson Smith, it also set in motion a train of thought which has given us, finally, Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. What else does the great peroration yield? An ill-disguised anti-clerical bias which attacks, *faut de mieux*, the priests of bygone Polynesia; an exhibition of evolutionism at its slickest and least appetising; a justification, *to a point* [my emphasis], of what he regards as the most horrible superstitions, because they produced, according to his belief, a law of property and sexual propriety. All that fear and self-inflicted torture, all that pondering about life and death, all those proud and humble and desperate patterns of obedience in order to produce the *summum bonum* of the late nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.⁶⁷

Salomon Reinach

A similar, and equally ambitious, aspect of the evolutionist agenda, is represented by

the French historian of religion, classical archaeologist and art historian Salomon Reinach (1858-1932). It is no coincidence that Reinach's account of the evolution from taboo to a law-based civil society not only has many points of similarity with Frazer's ideas—he even has recourse to the imagery of grafting. In the 1904 preface to a book in which 35 previously published articles were gathered, Reinach acknowledged his debt to Robertson Smith, to whom the book is dedicated. He then added that he was not quite certain to whom he owed many of his ideas.

Si je les avais formulés le premier, je serais un des plus grands esprits de mon temps et la modestie seule m'empêcherait de le dire tout haut. En réalité, je ne sais pas au juste qui les a découverts, bien que les noms de Mac Lennan, de Tylor, de Lang, de Smith, de Frazer, de Jevons se présentent à ma mémoire; mais je suis bien sûr que ce n'est pas moi.⁶⁸

Reinach's grand idea was to see contemporary society as the result of a rational process of separating law from religion and taboos, eventually establishing a society based on laws and free from superstition.⁶⁹ Of the numerous books written by this productive and versatile writer, his *Orpheus. A History of Religions*, from 1909, had the widest circulation. During his lifetime, the French version was published in at least 38 editions, with the latest English version appearing in 1932.⁷⁰

66 Frazer 1888: 17. *Cf.* Frazer 1911b: VI: "The present volume (...) treats of the principles of taboo in their special application to sacred personages (...). It does not profess to handle the subject as a whole, to pursue it into all its ramifications, to trace the manifold influences which systems of this sort have exercised in moulding the multitudinous forms of human society. (...) For example, I have barely touched in passing on the part which these superstitions have played in shaping the moral ideas and directing the moral practice of mankind, a profound subject fraught perhaps with momentous issues for the time when men shall seriously set themselves to revise their ethical code in the light of its origin."

67 Steiner 1956: 93.

68 Reinach 1905: V.

69 Reinach 1932: 22–23.

70 According to Brinke 1994, he was the author of more than "6000 Aufsätze und mehrere hundert Bücher". The latest French edition of *Orpheus* is from 2017!

Reinach begins his book by defining religion as “a sum of scruples which impede the free exercise of our faculties.”⁷¹ The bibliography to this discussion does not include Robertson Smith, but it is probably more than a coincidence that Reinach’s definition of the subject matter echoes Robertson Smith’s “restrictions on man’s arbitrary use of natural things” (see above). Reinach holds his own ‘minimum definition’ to be

big with consequences, for it eliminates from the fundamental concept of religion, God, spiritual beings, the infinite, in a word, all we are accustomed to consider the true objects of religious sentiment.

The scruples mentioned in the definition

are of a special kind; following the example of many contemporary anthropologists, I will call them *taboos*, (...) This scruple is never inspired by any practical reason, (...) The distinctive mark of

a taboo is that the interdict is quite arbitrary, and that the confirmation presaged, in the event of a violation of the taboo, is not a penalty decreed by the civil law, but a calamity such as death or blindness, falling upon the guilty individual. (...) The idea of the *taboo* is one of the most prolific taught us by the ethnography of the nineteenth century. The transition from the taboo to the reasoned and reasonable interdict is almost a history of the intellectual progress of man.⁷²

Despite his own definition, quoted above, Reinach conceded that there were other essential ‘factors of religion’. These were animism, totemism and magic, the latter two being less primitive than taboo and animism.⁷³ Each of them brought something to bear on religion. Thus, animism was the source of ‘invisible genii’ and spirits in general, while

[t]o the influence of *taboos*, which create (*qui créent*) the ideas of sacred and profane, of things

⁷¹ Reinach 1932: 3. In all the editions of this book this definition remained unaltered. Here is the original version in its proper context; referring to the definition of religion in *L'Irréligion de l'avenir, étude de sociologie* (1887) by Marie-Jean Guyau, Reinach writes: “De toutes les définitions que j’ai citées jusqu’à présent, celle-là est incontestablement la meilleure. On peut pourtant lui en préférer une autre. Le mot de *religion* étant ce que l’a fait l’usage, il est nécessaire qu’une définition *minima*, comme dit Tylor, convienne à toutes les acceptions où on l’entend. Or, les Romains parlaient déjà de la religion du serment, *religio juris jurandi*; nous en parlons à notre tour, ainsi que la religion de la patrie, de la famille de l’honneur. Employé ainsi, le mot de religion ne comporte ni l’idée de l’infini, ni le désir dont parle Feuerbach, ni même de la dépendance à l’égard d’autres volontés dont parle Guyau. En revanche, il implique, sans contrainte matérielle, une limitation de la volonté individuelle, où plutôt de l’activité humaine en tant qu’elle dépend de la volonté. Comme il y a de multiples religions, il y a des limitations multiples, et je propose de définir la religion: *Un ensemble de scrupules qui font obstacle au libre exercice de nos facultés.*” Reinach 1909: 3–4. In light of his ‘dispute’ with Durkheim, as shown below n. 89, it might be noted that in the second and following editions Reinach substituted “Je lui trouve pourtant un grave défaut” for “On peut pourtant lui en préférer une autre,” see Reinach 1909: 3–4 For the path to this definition comparison should be made between two earlier versions from 1900 and 1904, respectively; cf. the article Reinach 1900 and the *Introduction*, p. II ff. in Reinach 1905.

⁷² Reinach 1932: 3–4. One is reminded of Durkheim’s remark in *L’Année sociologique* 2 (1899), p. IV, English version in W.S.F. Pickering 1984: 74–75: “Religion contains in itself from the very beginning, even if in an indistinct state, all the elements which in dissociating themselves from it, articulating themselves, and combining with one another in a thousand ways, have given rise to the various manifestations of collective life. From myths and legends have issued forth science and poetry; from religious ornamentations and cult ceremonials have come the plastic arts; from ritual practice were born law and morals. One cannot understand our perception of the world, our philosophical conceptions of the soul, of immortality, of life, if one does not know the religious beliefs which are their primordial forms.”

⁷³ Reinach 1932: 14.

or actions forbidden or permitted, religious laws and piety are due.⁷⁴

In the evolutionary process, some taboos were gradually transformed; Reinach refers to them as being “the embryo of morality and law.”⁷⁵ “The Jehovah of the rocks and clouds of Sinai is a product of animism; the Decalogue is a revision of an old code of *taboos*.”⁷⁶

In this gradual process of selection and transformation, the first step is due to the “social instinct of primitive man” that enabled him to “enlarge the circle of his real or supposed relations.” This entails animism giving rise to totemism. Animism made him “recognise everywhere spirits similar to his own; he enters into communication with them and makes them his friends and allies.”⁷⁷ They would become members of his social group, become totems.

Totems were protected by taboos. In some dynamic and progressive societies, the further consequence was “domestication of animals and plants, that is to say, agricultural life.” In these societies the totem becomes sacred, “a source of strength and holiness.”⁷⁸ Elsewhere,

in certain conservative centres, the idea that it is necessary to abstain from eating certain *totems* survived the progress of material civilisation. The forbidden animal or vegetable is sometimes regarded as sacred, sometimes as unclean. As a fact, it is neither; it is *taboo*.⁷⁹

The interplay of taboo and totemism “explains many things in religions and mythol-

ogies”, but far from everything. There was even the risk that the ‘white race’ could have remained

imprisoned in a network of *taboos* (...) Happily, among the more energetic and gifted nations, selections take place in the domain of *taboos*. Those of which the experience has shown the social *utility* [our italics] have persisted, sometimes in the form of rules of etiquette, sometimes in the guise of moral precepts and civil laws; the rest have disappeared, or survive only as low superstitions.⁸⁰

In this process of ‘progressive emancipation’, religious authorities would sometimes play a major role by codifying socially useful taboos, and by repressing the most ‘irksome’ and ‘puerile’ ones. In other periods, we find the same religious ‘lawgivers’ playing a less ‘beneficent part’. The selection and transformation of *taboos* was the first important step in ‘taming’ the taboos, but nothing could have been achieved without magic. Calling it the ‘mother of all true sciences’, Reinach defines magic “as the *strategy of animism*”, because it provides man with the means to react so that he “takes the initiative against things, or rather he becomes the conductor in the great concert of spirits which murmur in his ears.” “[I]t is to magic and totemism that the modern world owes the element of its civilisation.”⁸¹

Given this scenario, it is not surprising to learn that the study of the history of religions is the most important of the “tasks incumbent on science”, because such studies “tend not

⁷⁴ Reinach 1932: 7.

⁷⁵ Reinach 1932: 15.

⁷⁶ Reinach 1932: 7.

⁷⁷ Reinach 1932: 15.

⁷⁸ Reinach 1932: 18.

⁷⁹ Reinach 1932: 19.

⁸⁰ Reinach 1932: 21 and 22.

⁸¹ Reinach 1932: 22–24.

only to elevate and instruct, but to liberate the human mind.”⁸²

Religions are not (...) cancers engrafted on the social organism by cupidity and fraud, but the very life of nascent societies. In the course of time, religion gave birth to special branches of human knowledge, to exact sciences, to morality, and to law, which naturally developed at its expense.⁸³

Like Frazer, Reinach also attributed the ‘idea of taboo’ with nothing less than an ennobling and civilizing role. This included the domestication of plants and animals – an idea that was later taken up by scholars such as Marvin Harris.⁸⁴ Unlike Frazer, Reinach, who, together with one his brothers, was also actively engaged in contemporary society,⁸⁵ seems to have given some thought to the practical consequences of treating taboo as a driving force in societal development. He talks about the ‘taming’ of taboos and the role that the various segments of the elite in societies, especially the clergy, have played in this development. “[B]ackwards civilisations, such as that of the Australians of the present day”, played a considerably less progressive role in transforming the taboos that had a proven social utility.

Reinach probably also subscribed to another popular ‘idea’ of the time, the Melanesian concept of *mana*. Evans-Pritchard however,

pointed out the problem with the adoption of concepts from other cultures stating that

anthropologists had adopted [it] into their conceptual vocabulary with, I believe, disastrous results, for, (...), it seems clear that *mana* did not mean to those whose languages the word belonged the impersonal force (...) which Marett and others, for example, King, Preuss, Durkheim, and Hubert and Mauss, following the information they then had, thought it did.⁸⁶

Reinach rarely uses the term *mana*, but recourse to such a force is clearly referred to in his account of how taboos work. One example used is taken from the Biblical story of the transportation of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The story makes it clear that no one except members of a privileged family were allowed to touch the ark. (*Num.* 4:15) En route, the oxen dragging the cart carrying the ark stumbled. As the ark was about to fall a certain Uzzah grabbed it (*2 Samuel* 6:6-8):

In an instant he was struck dead. The ark was taboo, and death is the penalty for violation of a *taboo*. In the form this episode has received in our version of the Bible, it is particularly shocking, for we are told that the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and that he smote him for this sin; now in the light of our modern morality, it was not a sin at all. But eliminate the notion of the Lord, and consider the ark a reservoir full to overflowing of an invisible and redoubtable force; Uzzah, laying hands upon it, expiated his impru-

82 Reinach 1932: 25–26.

83 Reinach 1932: 24. In the French version from 1909, p. 34, this runs: “Avec le temps, la religion a donné naissance à des branches spéciales des connaissances humaines, aux sciences exactes, à la morale, au droit, qui se sont naturellement développés à ses dépens.”

84 E.g., Harris 1977.

85 The three brothers, Joseph (1856-1921), Salomon (1858-1932), and Théodore (1860-1928) were all immensely gifted *savants*. In addition to being a professor at the Collège de France, Théodore was also an active politician. The influence of the three combined gave rise to songs about the Brothers ‘I-know-everything’ (Les frères Je-Sais-Tout [Joseph], S[alomon] T[héodore]).

86 Evans-Pritchard 1965: 33.

dence, like a man killed by touching an electric battery.⁸⁷

In light of this account it is somewhat impressive that Reinach limits reference to *mana* to the less than 10 lines that he devotes to Polynesia. I quote from the second edition of *Orpheus*:

Une idée presque philosophique, celle du *mana*, vient compléter, en Polynésie [my emphasis], la notion si répandue du *tabou*. Le *mana* est le principe de la magie; c’est la puissance latente (...). Si le *tabou* est le principe de la morale et des conventions, le *mana* est celui des sciences appliquées. Respect au *tabou* et au *mana*!⁸⁸

Finally, Durkheim, it may be assumed, was the inspiration for the idea that taboos are the source of the distinction between the *sacred* and the *profane*. He does not, however, mention Durkheim in his book, nor would it be of credit to Durkheim if he were to be cited as the source for Reinach’s formulation of the relationship - not to mention his lack of definition - of the sacred and the profane.⁸⁹

The arguments of Reinach’s book were countered, not entirely unsuccessfully, in

another work published a year later by the founder of the famous *École biblique* in Jerusalem, Marie-Joseph Lagrange (1855-1938). In his, *Quelques Remarques sur l’Orpheus de M. Salomon Reinach*, he noted that the spirit of *Orpheus*

est tout entier dans la devise: *Veniet felicior aetas* (Lucain, VII,869). Il viendra en temps plus heureux, - où les religions, ayant accompli leur oeuvre, laisseront la place à la religion du devoir social. (...) *L’Orpheus* est destiné à frayer les voies à ces heureux temps de laïcisation. (...) L’oeuvre est destinée à la plus grande publicité; on prépare des éditions en anglais, en allemand, en russe, en espagnol, en italien. *C’est donc bien une machine de guerre contre l’Église catholique; la neutralité scolaire a fait son temps.*⁹⁰

Lagrange’s critique is, of course, coloured by “une attaque si passionnée contre ce que nous aimons” (p. 4), but his criticism of Reinach’s definition of taboo and totemism is to the point.⁹¹ For our purposes, there is no need to dwell on the shortcomings and methodological faults of Reinach’s treatment of the subject. His ideas. e.g., of the ‘blood-

87 Reinach 1932: 4.

88 Reinach 1909: 229.

89 Durkheim, in fact, had no sympathy for Reinach’s view on religion. Shortly after the publication of Durkheim’s seminal work, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie*, the book was reviewed by Reinach (Reinach 1912), who declared himself in complete agreement with Durkheim’s definition of religion: “En exprimant ma satisfaction d’être d’accord, sur des questions aussi graves, avec un penseur aussi profond que M. Durkheim, je suppose que s’il n’a pas marqué lui-même ces concordances, c’est qu’il a cru tous ses lecteurs en état de les constater comme moi” (p. 154–155). When the review was brought to the attention of Durkheim, he sent Reinach a letter of thanks in which he further wrote: “Mais je tiens aussi à répondre à une question que vous vous posez à la fin de cet article. Je n’ignorais nullement votre définition de la religion. Si je ne l’ai pas citée, à l’appui de la mienne, c’est que je ne soupçonnais pas que nous fussions d’accord; autrement, j’aurais été heureux de donner à ma thèse plus d’autorité. Vous avez défini la religion en système de scrupules. Or 1° J’ai parlé d’interdits, non de scrupules. Il y a un abîme entre des 2 notions. 2° Je ne crois pas que la religion soit un système d’interdits. L’interdit est le signe extérieur auquel on peut commodément reconnaître la présence de la chose sacrée. Mais ce n’est rien de plus et il y a bien autre chose dans la religion, comme j’ai essayé de le montrer.” See letter of October 26, 1912 from Durkheim to Reinach in Benthien 2010: s. 30.

90 Lagrange 1910: 2–3. My emphasis.

91 Lagrange 1910: 6–18. Lagrange is *very* critical of the book as a whole, but he is always fair and balanced, and ready to give praise where praise is deserved.

scruple[s]’ among certain ‘superior’ animals, and the use to which he puts these and other biological ‘facts’, are factually wrong and methodologically fallacious. Reinach was also, however, very learned as well as entertaining and obviously took great pleasure in relating his work to contemporary life in a vivid style of writing, as even a quick glance in the many editions of *Orpheus* shows.

Franz B. Steiner

This short account of some key concepts, such as holy, unclean and taboo, should make it easier to appreciate the critique of similar studies by another Oxford anthropologist, the German speaking Czech, Franz B. Steiner.⁹² In his seminal book on *Taboo*, published posthumously, Steiner, who had a thorough training in Semitic philology, constantly attacks the unqualified use of European terminology in rendering non-European concepts.

In his view, present-day scholars are generally unaware of the refinements and complexities of concepts in other cultures, such as that of indigenous Australians, because they fail to recognize that it is impossible to translate terms and related concepts exactly from one language to another.

Taboo provides an example of this as, according to Steiner, Polynesian taboo “is a single, not an ‘undifferentiated’, concept. The distinction between prohibition and sacredness is artificially introduced by us and has no

bearing on the concept we are discussing.”⁹³ What happened was this:

The distinction between prohibition and sacredness cannot be expressed in Polynesian terms. Modern European languages on the other hand lack a word with the Polynesian range of meaning; hence Europeans discovered that taboo means both prohibition and sacredness. Once this distinction has been discovered, it can be conveyed within the Polynesian cultural idiom by the citation of examples in which only one of the two European translations would be appropriate.⁹⁴

In other words, in their failure to understand an alien concept, the European scholars Europeanized the Polynesian word.⁹⁵

The evolutionists: summary

If we try to summarize the views of the evolutionist scholars, as represented by the scholarly works described above, a certain number of features stand out. The first of these is the adopted perspective. Phenomena evolve from the simple to the complex, a development paralleled by a progressive movement from various forms of savagery to civilisation.

The economies, technologies, and forms of worship of the primitives were different from those of the European scholars, but they had terms and concepts already in place to describe these peoples. In the course of evolution, man learned to distinguish between the

⁹² Cf. Mack 1996.

⁹³ Steiner 1956: 34.

⁹⁴ Steiner 1956: 33–34. The matter is more complicated because even within the ‘European languages’ there are substantial differences in the semantic fields of ‘similar words’. As pointed out by Marett: “*L’idée du sacré* may be apposite enough in French, since *sacré* can stand either for ‘holy’ or for ‘damned’; but it is an abuse of the English language to speak of the ‘sacredness’ of some accursed wizard” (Marett 1909: 126).

⁹⁵ I owe this phrasing to Mack 1996: 202.

holy and the unclean, the sacred and the profane, religion and science. In the beginning was taboo, which to varying degrees was seen as a source for both barbarism and a growing civilisation. The individual was the focus of study for evolutionist scholars. Social groups—whether they be “a single family, a village, a church, or an entire nation”—were regarded “as little more than a collection of separate persons who happened to be brought together by a common location and shared interests.” Durkheim’s approach, on the other hand,

was decidedly different. (...) Human beings, after all, are never just individuals; they always *belong* to something—to parents or relatives, a town or city, a race, a political party, an ethnic tradition, or some other group. In Durkheim’s view, it is futile to think that we can really comprehend what a person is by appealing only to biological instinct, individual psychology, or isolated self-interest. We must explain individuals in and through society, and we account for society in social terms (...) Today, our instinctively social view of the world is an index of just how thoroughly successful Durkheim’s revolution in thought has turned out to be.⁹⁶

From the very beginning of the history of mankind, people were social beings, born into networks of social groups that provide them with a language and a social identity. The individual, as we think of it, is a modern invention.

Taboo – *bwt*?

The framework described above that posited a progressive evolutionary develop-

ment of a civilisation in which taboo was an active agent is not easily reconciled with the evidence from Ancient Egypt.

The Egyptian term *bwt* is often rendered as taboo. It is first attested in the Pyramid Texts, where it is used in connection with bodily waste. The dead (king) denies that he ever ate faeces or drank urine. This type of contact, for the Egyptians, is the epitome of a primeval form of evil.

In the Egyptian concept of the cosmos, creation came about through the interactive constructive agency of several components. Among these were *maat*—a word that is often rendered as ‘world order’ and ‘truth’ but also implied abundance and plenty⁹⁷—and the forces of chaos and evil. In Egyptian ontology evil takes various forms. Evil can be ‘that which is not’, i.e. disorder, which is the regenerative and productive component of evil as non-existence. This state is not immutable but has the potential of being transformed into the ordered world of existence. The concept of being requires continuous, cyclical contact with non-existence in the form of ‘that which is not’. Evil, defined as *isefet* and subsequently *bwt*, on the other hand, is the non-productive, immutable part of non-existence, a dark and endless realm beyond the boundaries, encompassing all the forces antagonistic to creation. This was a realm of reversals and the habitat of those who, failing the trial before Osiris, died the second death. The evil that emanated from this realm of uncreation was constantly penetrating creation and had to be combated. Some sources see it embedded in the created world in the form of faeces, even as the faeces of the Creator.

Knowledge of what was *bwt* was required for salvation, to be able to avoid contact with

⁹⁶ Pals 1996: 88–89.

⁹⁷ See Assmann 1990.

that which was *bwt* and to be able to attest to this avoidance. This understanding of the cosmos further implied that nothing ever really changed. The world had to be as it had been at the time of creation—the first occasion. It was the principal duty of the king to maintain that state and re-establish the order of the universe if breaches were made. Threats from evil came in the form of the negative components that were *bwt* by virtue of having been thus classified from the beginning. No ordinary person could declare things *bwt*, such as for instance in Polynesia where every person had the power to declare something taboo. Only the king in his capacity as god could make things *bwt*, but could only do so in order to reestablish the primaeval order. *Bwt* is therefore neither a quality, or a temporary property of certain persons, things or phenomena.

However, just as Egypt, as we perceive it, did undergo changes during its more than three thousand years of history, so did the category of *bwt/evil*. With the passage of time, an increasing number of phenomena were subsumed into the category. By the Late Period, it had gradually turned into something that more closely resembles the ‘standard’ use of the word taboo, as ‘prohibition’. But it is also in these late times that we meet the most clear and rigorous formulation of the original status of evil in the form of *bwt*.

In the Graeco-Roman Period the so-called Cult Monographs contain codified descriptions of the world in the form of comprehensive manuals containing lists giving us the essential elements of the many different visions of the compositions of the Egyptian cosmos. Egypt consisted of many small cosmos—more exactly 42. In theory, each of them had

been created by its own creator god, and for each of them extensive cult monographs had been compiled. All of these descriptions had the same basic organization. They included the name of the creator and the names of the gods of the cosmos; the hill on which creation took place; the name of the temple; the names of the priests; of the priestesses; the holy barque (boat); the holy lakes; the holy trees; the festivals; the holy snakes, etc. Most importantly, however, each cosmos also had an identifiable element of evil, defined as the *bwt* of the cosmos. No description of the fundamental components of any cosmos would be possible if it only included ‘good’ phenomena. The very context of these *bwt*—or prohibitions—therefore provides an answer to the primary question raised by such interdictions, namely, whether they are rules prescribing behaviour or pertaining to a system of symbolic classification with cosmological ramifications. The evidence of the cult monographs shows that these prohibitions, by virtue of being classified as *bwt*, formed an essential part of the cosmological framework of the Egyptians. Violating a *bwt* was essentially an act with both cosmological and lethal personal consequences.⁹⁸

Egyptologists have come to realize that it is easier to explain the meaning of certain Egyptian words, and the concepts they represent—than it is to translate them. Thus, the many faceted and complex concept *maat* is now left untranslated. To a certain extent the same goes for words that designate some of the components of the Egyptian concept of persona, such as *ba* and *ka*, that used to be rendered as ‘soul’. It is my firm opinion that *bwt* ought to be included in this class of words that are too complex to be translated rather than being

⁹⁸ In the description of the Cult Monographs I have used formulations found in my paper Frandsen 2007: 87, which also gives a comprehensive bibliography that includes earlier works on the topic of *bwt*. Add to these the papers Frandsen 2011 and 2016.

rendered as is often done—as taboo. Using the translation taboo takes us directly to the very same problems that bedevilled earlier research. If we review the range of *bwt*'s that are attested in the Egyptian material—and this falls outside the present contribution—and try to account for them with terms like holy, unclean, etc., we shall inevitably end up with the dilemma that Meeks described so aptly in a discussion of such an interdiction: “Ou bien l'on veut nous signifier que les animaux nommés sont impurs et qu'il faut se garder de les approcher ou de les manger, ou bien, au contraire, qu'ils sont sacrés dans le nome et qu'il convient de les respecter, de ne pas porter la main sur eux.”⁹⁹

Add to this, the suggestion that hunger and thirst, rather than criminal acts, is what is at the root of *bwt*. Evil defined as reversal implies eating excrement instead of food, drinking urine in place of water, walking upside-down, having an anus as a mouth and a mouth as an anus, and so forth. The concept of evil was rooted in the fear of hunger. This fear, presumably emanating from the first negative experience of the child, was developed by the Egyptians into an ontological category whose content of evil and the negative transcends the polarity of matter and inert matter as well as cutting across the social and cosmological spheres. Food is placed at the centre of ontological concerns. Nourishment was the precondition for life. Food was equated with *maat*. Consequently, it is logical to find “hunger”, “thirst” and “faeces” as prototypes of that which is not *maat*. As *maat* is food and thus life, then *bwt* is excrement and death, the true death of non-existence, known as the second death.

None of this could be deduced by analyzing the Egyptian material in terms of the concept of taboo.

⁹⁹ Meeks 1973: 210.

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Barco en el Nilo. Fernando Guerra-Librero Fernández.

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Prefacio

A Covadonga le gustaba conducir, le apasionaba estar al volante de su coche. “Pareces una chica del futurismo italiano”, le decía un amigo, aunque su primer automóvil fuera pequeño, blanco con un techo amarillo y a veces le costase llegar a su destino. Estuvimos años riendo cuando nos acordábamos del nombre con que habíamos bautizado aquella máquina. En nuestro recuerdo, ella sigue siendo la joven radiante y activa que conocimos a sus veinte años. Y su personalidad permanece entre nosotros como un perfume indeleble, retomando los versos del poeta alejandrino que tanto le gustaba. Quienes asistieron a sus conferencias conocieron la calidez de su voz; sus clases en la universidad crearon vocaciones; son, sin embargo, los que compartieron con ella su amistad quienes disfrutaron de los rasgos más sobresalientes de su personalidad: la generosidad, la entrega desinteresada a los demás. Cova tenía una capacidad excepcional para la empatía hacia los que se le acercaban. Eso le hizo ganar afectos en todos los ámbitos de su vida y conservarlos, desde los compañeros del colegio de la infancia y la pandilla de la juventud a los colegas de la madurez. Este tributo pretende también transmitir a las generaciones futuras el legado de una persona excepcional y la huella que dejó en su generación.

Un grupo de amigos que vivimos con ella sus labores de docencia, investigación o proyectos arqueológicos, decidimos rendirle un homenaje particular, uno más entre los que se le han dedicado desde el momento en que su *ka* voló al cielo. Este volumen es el resultado de esa voluntad de crear nuestro monumento a su memoria, por tantas experiencias inolvidables compartidas. El homenaje ha querido ser un caleidoscopio de miradas desde las que reflejar la personalidad de Covadonga y hemos preferido romper el formato académico tradicional. Los artículos se entrelazan con fotografías, dibujos, semblanzas o poemas que pretenden dejar constancia de la huella que ella legó a sus autores. Es nuestra ofrenda para que su *ba* siga regresando desde donde esté hasta nosotros, cada vez que la nombremos y en cada ocasión en que su recuerdo tome forma en nuestro corazón.

Foreword

Covadonga enjoyed driving; she loved being behind the wheel of her car. A friend used to tell her “you look like a woman of the Italian Futurism,” although her first car was small and white with a yellow roof, and sometimes had difficulties reaching its destination. We laughed for years remembering the name with which we baptized that machine. In our memories, she is still the radiant and active young woman we met in her twenties, and her personality remains among us as an indelible scent, to draw upon the verse of an Alexandrian poet that she loved so much. Those who attended her lectures knew the warmth of her voice, her classes at the university created vocations, however, it is those who shared her friendship who enjoyed the most outstanding features of her personality: generosity, and selfless dedication to others. Cova had an exceptional capacity for empathy toward those who approached her. This allowed her to win affection in all aspects of her life and to retain it, from the classmates of her early schooldays, to the circles of her youth, to the colleagues of her adult years. This tribute will surely be transmitted to future generations as the legacy of an exceptional individual, and the mark she left on her generation.

As a group of friends who lived with her through teaching, research, or archaeological projects, we have decided to pay her a particular tribute; one more among the many that have been dedicated to her from the moment her ka flew to heaven. This volume is the result of our desire to create for her a monument to so many unforgettable shared experiences. We decided that this tribute should be a kaleidoscope, to reflect Covadonga’s personality, and we have thus preferred to break from the traditional academic format. The articles are intertwined with photographs, drawings, sketches, or poems that are intended to record the traces she left with their authors. It is our offering so that her ba keeps coming back to us from where she now is, every time that her memory takes shape in our hearts.

Carta a una hermana en la luz

Son los hermanos y las hermanas quienes le hablan a su hermana en la luz, como el hijo que le habla a su padre, como la hija que le habla a su madre.

¡O Senet, Senet Meret! Que Osiris-Khentamentiú te otorgue millones de años respirando aliento en tu nariz, dándote pan y cerveza junto a Hathor, Señora de la Tierra de Luz.

Tu condición es como la vida millones de veces, por orden de los dioses que están en el cielo y la tierra. Que Ha, Señor de Occidente, actúe en tu favor de acuerdo a sus deseos, que Anubis, Señor del Buen Entierro actúe para ti como él lo quiera. Que pueda levantar una barrera contra los enemigos, hombres y mujeres malvados que se oponen a tu casa, tus hermanos, tus padres, tu memoria y tus obras.

Fuiste excelente en la tierra, por lo que también serás capaz y eficiente en el Más Allá. Que se te hagan ofrendas, que se realice la fiesta Haker para ti, que hagan la fiesta del Wag, que te den pan y cerveza del altar de Khentamentiú. Que puedas viajar río abajo en la Barca del Ocaso y que navegues río arriba en la Barca de la Mañana. Que estés justificada junto a cada dios. Que te conviertas en alguien elogiado por nuestros espíritus masculinos y femeninos.

¿Has visto estos lamentos ahora que estás allí en el Más Allá?

¡Oh, gran dolor! Útil es una queja para hablar de lo que se hace contra nosotros de una manera tan injusta. Aunque no hay nada que hayamos hecho contra los dioses, y aunque no hemos comido de sus ofrendas, ¡sin embargo nos han privado de ti!

Te han traído aquí a la Ciudad de la Eternidad, sin que albergues ira contra nosotros. Pero si hubiera un reproche en tu corazón, olvídale por el bien de tus hermanas y hermanos. Sé misericordiosa, sé misericordiosa, y así todos los dioses del nomo de This serán misericordiosos contigo.

Mantén alejadas todas las aflicciones dirigidas a nosotros, tus hermanas y hermanos, porque tú sabes que tenemos una gran necesidad de esto. Que vivas para nosotros y así el Grande te elogie. Que la cara del gran dios sea gozosa para ti, y que él te dé pan puro con ambas manos.

Todos los sacrificios funerarios se han realizado para la que está en la luz, a fin de que pueda interceder por nosotros, los sobrevivientes en la tierra que han quedado atrás. Por lo tanto, busca que el que causó aquello de lo que estamos sufriendo ahora te dé una explicación, porque necesitamos entender y queremos también ser justificados delante de los dioses como lo eres ahora, entendiendo todo, justificada y transfigurada.

Son los hermanos y hermanas quienes le hablan a su hermana, para quien la luz ya nunca se oscurecerá.

Letter to an enlightened sister

It is the brothers and sisters who are speaking to their sister like the son who is speaking to his father, like the daughter who is speaking to her mother.

O Senet, Senet Meret! May Osiris-Khentamentiu make millions of years for you by breathing breath into your nose, by giving bread and beer beside Hathor, Lady of the Land-of-Light.

Your condition is like life millions of time, by command of the gods who are in heaven and earth. May Ha, Lord of the West, act on your behalf as he wishes, may Anubis, Lord of the Good Burial act for you as he wishes. May you erect a barrier against male and female enemies, male and female evil ones who oppose your house, your brother, your mother, your memory, your deeds.

You are one who was excellent on earth, therefore you will also be capable in the hereafter. May one make offerings to you, may one make the Haker-feast for you, may one make the Wag-feast for you, may one give you bread and beer from the altar of Khentamentiu. You will travel downstream in the Bark-of-the-Evening and sail upstream in the Bark-of-the-Morning. May you be given justification at the side of every god. Make yourself into someone praised by our male and female ghosts.

Have you seen this lamentation now that you are there in the hereafter?

O, great grief! Useful is a complaint to speaking concerning this which is done against us in such an unjust way, although there is nothing that we have done against the gods, and although we have not eaten of his offerings, nevertheless they have deprived us of you!

You have been brought here to the City of Eternity, without you harbouring anger against us. But if there is a reproach in your heart, forget it for the sake of your sisters and brothers. Be merciful, be merciful, then all the gods of the Thinite nome will be merciful towards you.

Keep away all afflictions directed at us, your sisters and brothers, for you know we have a need for this. May you live for us in order for the Great One to praise you. May the face of the great god be joyous because of you, so that he will give you pure bread with both his hands.

All mortuary sacrifices are made for the enlightened one in order to intercede on behalf of the inhabitants of earth. Therefore seek an explanation from him who caused that of which we are suffering now, for we want to be justified in front of the gods same as you are now.

It is the brothers and sisters who are speaking to their sister, she for whom the light will never darken.