

Totemism in the Works of the Orientalist William Robertson Smith

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Abstract

Totemism was one of the prevailing beliefs among the ancient Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula, as no kingdom or state was devoid of this belief. It is a composite religion based on the relationship between a human community and a natural object called the *totem*. It is founded upon the worship of animals and plants. The totem is an animal, plant, or idol adopted by a tribe as its symbol, distinguishing it from other tribes. This belief was widespread among the Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, Arabs, and other nations. All members of the tribe are named after it, believing it to be their sacred ink and protector. They feel a special bond with it, and their beliefs and religious rituals are entirely built upon the sanctification of the totem.

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He defined it as a system or doctrine based on an animal, plant, or inanimate object adopted by the clan as its divine symbol. They believe it to be their creator and that they descend from it; therefore, it is neither eaten, killed, nor harmed. Totemism encompassed beliefs such as faith in the existence of spirits that control nature in one way or another, and it was necessary to gain their favor. From this arose the belief in deities, relying on the worship of manifestations of nature. It is believed that totemism was the earliest form of religion.⁽¹⁾

The believers in totemism see the existence of blood ties among its members, that is, a kinship connection between them, with the bond established through the totem to which the group belongs. The totem thus becomes their protector and defender in times of crisis. In the view of the Arab tribes, totemism is sacred; it must not be hunted, slaughtered, or eaten. At times, its concept expanded to include manifestations of nature such as rain, stars, and planets.⁽²⁾

In ancient times, the Arabs used to hang the remains of animals on people's bodies, believing that such practices would drive away evil spirits. For this reason, they resorted to changing the names of boys to the names of animals that repelled evil forces and protected children. The adherents of the totemic belief held that the totem does not harm its followers, which led the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula in ancient times to adopt idols fashioned in the images of animals. They also hung amulets and threads on trees and plants. The totem was inherited from fathers to sons.⁽³⁾

Smith presented a theory of totemism, which was part of his studies on social anthropology and tribal customs in the Middle East. He considered totemism a social and religious system in which a group of people is connected to a sacred symbol or natural being (animal or plant) that is tied to their collective identity. The totemic tribe is one whose members believe they share a common bloodline. Smith gave an example: if the totem is a bear, the tribe is known as the Bear Tribe, and all its members not only call themselves bears but also believe

⁽¹⁾ Al-Hashimi, History of Religions and Their Philosophy, p. 158.

⁽²⁾ Jawad Ali, Al-Mufasssil, p. 190.

⁽³⁾ Freud, The Totem and the Taboo, p. 24.

that real bears are their brothers. They abstain from eating its meat (except perhaps on special occasions as a sacred ritual). The totemic animal is regarded as sacred and often attributed divine qualities; in such cases, the members of the tribe are considered the children of their god.

Smith further noted that members of totemic tribes in early ages used to mark their bodies with signs indicating their totem. He argued that this is the true explanation not only of tattooing but also of many strange bodily deformations and similar rituals practiced by primitive peoples upon themselves or their children in ancient times. The totem often acquired divine status, and in such cases, the men of the tribe were regarded as the sons of their god. Once again, the totem gave the tribe its name, and the mark or sign of any person belonging to the tribe was to carry this name; thus, two individuals could immediately recognize whether they had kinship obligations toward one another.⁽¹⁾

Smith also pointed out that the ancient Arabs were divided into totemic tribes, and he explained that totemism can be demonstrated in any race through... ⁽²⁾:

1. The existence of tribes named after plants and animals.
2. The spread of the idea that members of the tribe belong to the blood of the animal that serves as their symbol, or that they descend from a plant of the type chosen as their totem.
3. The attribution of sacred qualities to the totem, which may lead to its being regarded as the god of the tribe.

Smith concluded the totemic nature of some Arab tribes from the names they carried, such as Banu Kalb (the Tribe of the Dog), Banu Asad ibn al-Harith—one of the most famous Yemeni tribes—who worshipped the god Yaghuth, mentioned in ancient texts and represented in the form of a lion, signifying the protector. Likewise, Banu Ghatafan, whose name was sometimes translated as gazelle or antelope. These examples reflect a complex interrelationship between animals and humans, and how this cultural and religious fabric was integrated among the Arabs before Islam, in terms of the sanctity of the totem and the abstention from consuming or harming it due to its extraordinary qualities and its association with certain ancient human ancestors.⁽³⁾

Smith continued his discussion of totemism, stating: The totem, for example, may first become an animal deity, and then later a deity embodied with animal attributes or associations. In such cases, it may require an accumulation and sifting of evidence to be convinced that this phenomenon is indeed the product of totemism and not derived from another source. Reference has already been made to the existence of tribes among the Arabs bearing animal names, in the context of the theory that tribes were named after a patriarch or hero. Yet it is harsh to assume that a group of tribesmen who called themselves 'Leopards' or 'Sons of the Leopards' derived their name from a single individual named 'Leopard' in the plural form, as genealogists imagine. We can now go much further and say that the history of fatherhood among the Arabs fully confirms that the names of ancient lineages were not derived from fathers; for the system of lineages already existed, and these lineages must have borne names long before the notion of fatherhood was conceived.⁽⁴⁾

After the establishment of fatherhood, and once the family became the basic model for all tribal units and subsequently for all hereditary communities, groups undoubtedly arose that bore the name of a common father or leader. If the father or leader had the name of an animal,

⁽¹⁾- Kinship and Marriage in Early ArabiaKK, P. 219.

⁽²⁾Ibid., p. 135

⁽³⁾Ibid., 138.

⁽⁴⁾Kinship and Marriage in Early ArabiaKK, P. 220.

then the outward appearance of these new groups would be identical to that of the ancient animal tribes. This observation calls for caution in dealing with tribal names that are not ancient, yet it does not weaken the strong observation that many of the oldest tribal names were derived from animals. Some of these names date back to a time prior to the establishment of the principle of male kinship, and these names are equal to—or even surpass in antiquity—the category of tribal names derived from deities such as Qays or Manat, which are not merely names but gods elevated to divinity in the sense established by the ancient or modern followers of Euhemerism (myth interpretation)⁽¹⁾.

It was assumed that every man in the tribe had the right to call himself 'the little tiger' in the singular form. Thus, when we find a tribe calling itself *Banu Kalb* (Sons of the Dog), and another calling itself *Banu Kilab* (Sons of the Dogs), the two names are in fact one and the same. According to the theory of naming the tribe after a father, the first name is derived from a hero called Kalb, and the other from a man called Kilab. In reality, however, both belong to the tribe of Kalb, and any member of the Kalb tribe had the right, whenever he wished, to call himself 'Kalb,' or 'Son of Kalb,' or 'Brother of Kilab,' or 'Son of Kilab.' Every member of the tribe of Numayr likewise had the right to call himself Numayr, as Mobard observed. This in itself is clear evidence that these names were originally family names and not personal names; for it is unreasonable to claim that every descendant of John has the right to bear the name John. No one has the right to a personal name other than his own. Among the Arabs, when giving personal names to their children, they did not choose the father's name but rather the name of the grandfather or the uncle ⁽²⁾.

I shall now present a list of ancient Arab tribes whose names were derived from animals. I do not claim that this list is exhaustive. There are also some tribes named after plants, though these are relatively few, and I see no necessity to include them here. Because the old genealogical works contain many 'fictitious' names mixed with genuine tribal names, I restrict myself to those names borne by actual tribes or tribal groups in historical times, while at the same time referring to Wüstenfeld's tables or to the original sources wherever necessary. In Wüstenfeld's tables, the tribes of Ma'add are marked with the letters A, B, C, etc., while the Yemeni tribes are numbered 1, 2, 3, etc., so that the reader may quickly see, from the form of the reference, to which of the principal Arab tribes each was assigned by the genealogists. The arrangement of the list follows the Arabic alphabet, though I have grouped together different Arabic names for the same animal, and added notes to some names indicating tribal worship or evidence of superstitions connected with the animal as a type of totem.

Among the most important tribes bearing the name *Asad* are the tribe of Asad ibn Khuzaymah, which belongs to the tribes of Ma'add, as well as Asad ibn Masīl, Banu Asad ibn 'Abd Manāf, and Asad ibn Marr—all of them branches of Madhhij. There is also Asad ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā of Quraysh, and Asad ibn al-Hārith of Azd. According to Ibn Durayd, the names *Azd* and *Asad* go back to the same ancestor or origin, both meaning 'Asadi.' Azd ibn al-Ghawth is considered one of the greatest Yemeni tribes, with several branches. Other Asad tribes include Banu Asad ibn 'Anz and the Hamdānīs, in addition to the Asad clans of Najd such as Banu Azd, Banu Farhūd or Farāhīd—also called Azd Shanūwah. There is also the tribe of Lubwān, a branch of Ma'āfir, which likewise descends from Asad.⁽³⁾

And there is certainly a connection between the deity and the lion. According to al-Zamakhsharī, the Arabs worshipped their god Yaghūth in the form of a lion, and the existence

⁽¹⁾Kinship and Marriage in Early ArabiaKK, P. 221.

⁽²⁾Kinship and Marriage in Early ArabiaKK, P. 222.

⁽³⁾Kinship and Marriage in Early ArabiaKK, P. 223.

of the name ‘Abd al-Asad’ confirms the relationship of Lord-Lion within Quraysh. We also find Quraysh’s worship of Yaghūth reflected in names such as ‘Abd Yaghūth and ‘Ubayd Yaghūth. However, the Meccan religion was syncretic (that is, it comprised a mixture of beliefs, practices, and traditions), in which the worship of all tribes was represented within the ʿaram.⁽¹⁾

The local and tribal center of the worship of Yaghūth was located elsewhere. According to Ibn Hishām, it was worshipped by the tribe of Madhhij and their allies in Jarash, a town in northern Yemen at the head of Wādī Bisha, which in the time of Muhammad was inhabited by various Yemeni tribes. A few years before the date referred to by Ibn Hishām, a major conflict broke out among several Yemeni tribes over possession of this famous idol. The dispute was settled in the Battle of Razm, which took place on the same day as Badr, with Banu al-ʿārith and Hamdān on one side, and the tribe of Murād on the other.⁽²⁾ It appears that the spread of the worship of the Lion God in Najrān and throughout northern Yemen, as this account indicates, allows us to connect his religion not only with the Asad tribes of Madhhij, but also with the names Asad or Azd. As for Azd Shanūwah, the principal branch of these lineages, they inhabited the northern mountains of Yemen near Jarash. In the time of the Hamdānīs, the Azd partially occupied Jarash. Furthermore, Azd is represented by Ibn al-Ghawth, a tribal name sometimes believed to include Azd, and at other times considered a subdivision of them. The term *Ghūth* means ‘protection,’ while *Yaghūth* means ‘the protector,’ and the two cannot be separated. Grammatically, *Ghūth* signifies those who are under the protection of Yaghūth. The name *Ghūth* appears twice in the genealogical chain of the legendary founder of Jarash. It is evident that the Lion God and the Asad clans were closely connected.⁽³⁾

The tribe of al-Badan (the Ibex): that is, the Ibex, a branch of Kal, and also a small clan of Bakr-Wā’il. There is another clan called Wā’ilān among the tribes of Murād. Al-ʿamawī also mentioned a tribe named Wā’ilah, meaning the female ibex. In addition, there was a sacred wild goat opposite the upper Euphrates, associated with the sanctuary of Artemis, the virgin goddess of the Arabs.⁽⁴⁾

Bakr: meaning a young camel. There is considerable evidence that the camel was regarded as a sacred animal in certain cults, yet it seems there was no direct connection between the camel and Bakr as a tribal name. The tribe of Bakr-Wā’il had a deity called ‘Awad, about whom nothing is known. Bakr and Taghlib together worshipped an idol named Awāl, and there appears to be a connection between Wā’il and Awāl: the former, Wā’il, derived from *wa’ala*, meaning ‘to seek refuge,’ and the latter is another form of *wa’al*, meaning ‘sanctuary.’ It was not originally a god but a sacred precinct. The name Banu Mawāl (‘Sons of the Sanctuary’) and Banu Mo’āl lends credibility to this view. The name of the god Fūlas carries a similar meaning. **Tha’labah (Fox):** The name ‘Fox’ gave rise to several tribal names, including three clans called Tha’labah, collectively referred to as the ‘Foxes’ of Ṭayy, the Foxes of Kalb, and Tha’lab Ṭayy, among others.

Thawr (Bull): He was the son of Kalb, or rather the great nation of Kalb was divided into Kalb and Thawr. Ibn Khallikān mentions three other clans of Thawr. The calf gave its name to a clan of Bakr-Wā’il. The wife of this calf was a female dog, showing a fusion between the tribes of Kalb and Thawr. The bull and cow, as sacred animals or divine symbols of the northern Semites, are familiar to us from the Hebrew golden calves. Agatharchides recounts that the

⁽¹⁾Al-Zamakhshari, p. 23.

⁽²⁾Al-Hamawi, vol. 2, 776.

⁽³⁾- Kinship and Marriage in Early ArabiaKK, P. 225.

⁽⁴⁾Al-Hamawi, vol. 1, p. 235

cave-dwellers on the shores of the Red Sea opposite Arabia did not give the title of 'father' to any human, but only to bulls and sheep, which were their sources of food.

✱**anash (Snake):** Banu ʿanash were a branch of al-Aws. Another serpent lineage was Banu al-Af'ā. There were also the spotted snakes, a group of clans in Taghlib. We also find Banu ʿayyah, another serpent lineage, who were rulers of the ʿā' iyyūn in the early Islamic period. There is no doubt about the supernatural qualities attributed by the Arabs to snakes, which Nöldeke discussed in detail.

✱**abb (Lizard):** This name was borne by tribes allied with Rabāb. The diminutive form, ʿubayb, was the name of a clan among Juthām. There is considerable evidence that the lizard was a sacred animal. Its meat supplied the Arabs with medicines and antidotes, while its bones and skin were believed to possess magical virtues—qualities often attributed by primitive peoples to animals not usually eaten. Although the Bedouins are often described as lizard-eaters, the Prophet himself did not eat lizard, saying that no one among his people ate it. One tradition claims that Muhammad explained his abstention by saying that a clan of the Israelites had been transformed into reptiles, and he thought the lizard descended from them. 'This was before it was known that transformed humans leave no offspring.' The idea that lizards were in fact a human clan, and therefore should not be eaten, has a distinctly totemic character.⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾- Kinship and Marriage in Early ArabiaKK, P. 230.