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A Return to Sacred Things: Emblems, Prints, and Fetishes

It is quite difficult to see the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* as being emblematic in a field of study, since this work constitutes such a source of disappointment and misunderstanding in our various traditions. In the case of the sociologists of religion who have an affinity with historical religions and who, following on from Weber, are concerned with the ethical drives behind the evolution of religious forms, what are they to make of the fact that it centers on the rather transient “issue of the totem” and makes a detour via undifferentiated societies where one’s sense of individuality seems not to have been affirmed as yet? How to extract the founding sociological core from this ethnographic, exotic, and particularly outdated gangue? On their part, the anthropologists of the time (from Van Gennep to Malinowski and all the way to Goldenweiser) soon expressed their unease with regard to this incongruous combination between a social metaphysical theory and a monograph meant to illustrate an “exemplary case.” Van Gennep, who did a lot of work on the Australian data, believed that Durkheim, in order to be clearer, should have written two separate works rather than seek to “muddle” questionable data and “lines of reasoning”, which were not, however, without their ingenuity [Van Gennep 1913:389]. What should we make today of this exercise of contradictory exegesis of secondhand documents, which are by definition subject to reexamination in the field and fragile conclusions? The ethnographic dimension of the *Elementary Forms* was, from the very beginning, considered weak or out of date, and only the “sociological metaphysics” of the emergence of religious feeling was able to gain a certain posterity. Nevertheless, we should recall Steven Lukes’s invitation, also quoted by Camille Tarot [1999:210]: “We should read the book not so much as a study of Australian ethnology, or even a general theory of religion, as a reserve of ideas which are worth developing and refining as well as criticizing” [Lukes 1973:482]. It is telling in this sense that, thanks to the importance it placed on collective psychological mechanisms (excitement, contagiousness), a project which had sought to do away with the psychologism of English anthropology could arouse, and still does to this day, continued interest from psychologists and especially anthropologists studying the forms of “mental causation” [Keck 2005].
The Ethnographic Conversion of Religious Sociology

Whether we like it or not, the title and subtitle of the *Elementary Forms* are inseparable: the sociological essay on the “elementary forms” of religious life is inextricably linked to this monographic synthesis on the subject of the “totemic system in Australia” presented as exemplary (even though American sources also played a nonnegligible role in it). Two stories intersect in the development of Durkheim’s thought, namely: 1) 1895, the importance of religious life: “At the beginning there was religion” as a matrix of social life and intellectual life [Pickering 2002:29-30]; 2) 1898, the discovery of the contribution of ethnographic data to “history of religions” theories since, up until then, “totemism” had in a way been a product of the history of religions (from Jevons to Robertson Smith).

We know the boost that the “conversion” of Durkheimians to ethnology gave to the development of their “religious sociology” and the establishment of sociology as an academic subject. Victor Karady [1988] in particular has enlightened us on the academic, political, and epistemological objectives of this other “conversion,” which jointly led the fledgling sociology to form the matrix and crucible of French ethnology. In over twenty years of reviewing and using these ethnographic data, there were also several ethnological reconversions: 1) in 1880, the work of Fison and Howitt on the Kamilaroi and the Kurnai, and 2) in 1899, that of Spencer and Gillen on the Arunta [Rosa 2003]. All Durkheimians (and anti-Durkheimians, from Van Gennep to Loisy and all the way to W. Schmidt) drew collectively on the same documentary sources, following their revivals and successive “revelations.” The history of *L’Année Sociologique* testifies to a veritable laboratory of ethnological documentation all the way to the division of labor through contradictory readings, rereadings, and debates. Durkheim clearly presented the *Elementary Forms* as the synthesis and culmination of the studies carried out on these subjects.

We can, of course, question the meaning that high-school philosophy teachers were able to extract from the ethnographic data and the use to which they were able to put them. Spoilsport Van Gennep, he who had used the same sources for his own *Mythes et légendes d’Australie* [1906], was one of the first ones to question the context in which Durkheim’s interpretations had been formulated and their validity. He also expressed reservations with regard to this “bookish ethnography” which treated documentation in the same way an exegete commented on Greek or Latin texts, or on “sacred texts” [1913]. Nevertheless, this daily immersion in first-hand ethnographic literature, particularly the studies by Spencer and Gillen [1899], led them to present the data as though they had been there: one thinks of the lyrical descriptions of sacred ceremonies and the evocation of the emblem as a “focal point for everyone” present during moments of ceremonial excitement [Durkheim 1994:316]. In his 1902 *Leçon d’ouverture*,
when addressing the gentlemen of the École Pratique, Mauss could talk about religious phenomena which “we are currently observing in Australia,” emphasizing the fact that they were neither simple nor primitive... [Mauss 1968:490].

It must be said that the collage or mixing up of heterogeneous American and Australian data on the strong points of the Durkheimian theories and their demonstration (especially with regard to the emblems) further aroused suspicions about metaphysical overinterpretation and fuelled the reservations of Americanists such as Goldenweiser [1915]. However, the most disconcerting blow for the anthropological tradition, particularly the Anglophone one, was, of course, the way in which, on a subject such as this (which simultaneously involved three “elementary” things: social organization, religious beliefs, and rites), Durkheim began by laying aside the “technical” complexity of totemic social organization forms (classes, phratries, etc.) to retain only the paradigmatic (simple and primitive) form of an undifferentiated clan related through the same name and presented as being directly descended from the primitive horde. In a word, “Let us leave aside all the facts...”

Thus, by clearly laying aside the totemic elements connected to the “sociology of family,” Durkheim gave himself free rein to reconstruct the social and symbolic genesis of the totemic god away from the psychologism of British evolutionism as well as functionalism. This laying aside of the objectives of social organization, as well as of economic cooperation for the management of species, was accompanied by an important shift in the anthropological religious paradigms lying at the very heart of the Durkheimian school. In the Durkheimian conception of 1912, the “religion of blood,” the sacralization of this shared substance which was inherited and must not be spilt, this cult of the “totemic substance” lying at the basis of a clan’s cohesion made way for a religion of an emblematic symbol which was the source of a group’s moral identification.

An Ethnological Blow: From Blood Religion to Image Worship

Thus, in the area of paradigms inherited from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the Elementary Forms represented not so much an ethnological synthesis as an epistemological rupture. Faced with an implosion of the “Arunta system,” which, in a word, forced the conception of totemism outside exogamy to think of it, in particular, as based on a much more complex social organization than one may have imagined, Durkheim’s answers could be considered original (if not conclusive) and, furthermore, they broke with some of his previous writings (including those on emblems). For Frederico Rosa [2003:159], the sociological theory which maintained that religion was fundamentally a “social thing,” and that social feelings, moral obligations, and collective behaviors should be given priority, represented a true revolution. It forced a break with the types of reasoning based on individual intellectualist psychology which lay at the basis of
Anglo-Saxon evolutionism (as seen in the use of oneiric experience in Tylor’s explanation of animism). The evolutionist psychological residues of Durkheim’s argumentation were no doubt linked to the kind of exposition employed in certain crucial passages in the *Elementary Forms*: the chronological presentation of the primitive scene prevailed over the recounting of the “logical mechanisms” of totemic genesis and tended to conceal the sociological essence of the totemic phenomenon. Commentators (from Rosa [2003] to Paoletti [1998]) have laid extra emphasis on this argumentation: on the one hand, the recourse to “known” psychological laws (Ribot’s bad psychology on the transfer of a feeling or emotion spreading from one object to another); and, on the other, the “ontological argument” which confers upon the symbol as a social thing the power to create the collective feeling of a group’s moral unity and to engender, through its mediation, the interaction between members [Paoletti 1998:85]. “For an emblem is not only a convenient process which renders more clearly the way a society feels about itself, it also helps to create this feeling, being a constituent element of it” [Durkheim 1994:329].

As a final blow, the Durkheimian theory of emblems wrong-footed all the theories on the functional primacy of things which had been tabooed, identified with banned species and their food management in terms of reduction, exchange, and cooperation, which naturally coincided with Mauss’s interests and even the Australian readings of a certain Loisy, who contested the religious dimension of the good management of edible things [Loisy 1914]. The process of sacralization of totemic species (animals and plants) or material objects, which were more or less identified with the clan group, came for Durkheim at the end of a circuit race that explained the genesis of sacred things, while these species or things from the environment, which were more or less good enough to eat and to be represented, were recognized *a posteriori* in the totemic symbol. Hence the loss of ethnological and sociological common sense, which had to wait for a Radcliffe-Brown and his reversal of perspective for things to regain their usual place, in short, for them to go in the opposite direction, from the primary relationship of a social group’s ritual control over species (bans and fecundity rites) to the issue of the symbolical pertinence of the choice of emblems.\(^1\)

From 1898 to 1912, the Durkheimian explanation of “sacred things” would progressively, and not without ambivalence, break with the “blood religion” paradigm. The latter had been inherited from Jevons, Smith, and Frazer (in its primary version) and drew on the model of the original unity of a unilinear (initially matrilineal) and exogamous clan, its organization no doubt disturbed by the evolutionary complications of segmentary societies (phratries, moieties, etc.),

\(^1\) We should like to refer here to our presentation of Durkheim’s theory on the genesis of sacred things in Mary 2010, chapter III, “La mort du dieu totémique et la naissance du symbolique” (The Death of the Totemic God and the Birth of Symbols).
but which remained “pure” and original. In this essential paradigm of the religion of blood, the sacred thing was the spilled blood, related blood, and maternal blood, sacrificial blood. From speculations on the impure menstrual blood to the blood of a sacrificed totemic animal, it was always the flowing blood which attested to the sacred tie, the “real” tie between beings (and not some metaphorical or symbolic tie). It must be remembered that the “Catholic” ethnology of Le Roy and Trilles, taught at the Catholic Institute in Paris from 1908, completely adopted this paradigm of the “alliance pact” and of the “blood community,” in which “the totem served the ancestor well, the latter passing on his name, memory, and worship to his descendants, to the family which is an extension of his person” [Le Roy 1910:130-131]. The direct or derived embodiment of the “flesh and blood” ancestor of the family clan, a substantial and paternal substance which potentially contained the parallel genealogy of the species and of the human group derived from it, was supposed to regularly renew itself through the ritual of mixed blood attesting to the tie of totemic brotherhood.

Spencer and Gillen’s Arunta revolution would lead to an implosion of the paradigm: totemism was disconnected from the sacralization of the unilinear parental tie, exogamy, and the genealogy of blood ties. The famous *churinga* introduced a real thought revolution (not only at the level of the theories of “immaculate conception” by child spirits) by deparenting totems and establishing a tie between individuals and an ancestor spirit through their own *churinga*, in a way which was spiritual, material, as well as localized. While we can say that, in the wake of the Arunta revolution, Frazer retreated into a theory of totemism as ritual magic for the cooperative control of the reproduction of species, on the other hand, Durkheim, through his original attachment to the primacy of the emblem and the totemic blazon, embarked on elaborating his theory of the “contagious symbol.”

**The Sacred as a Category and as a Thing**

In a retrospective reading highly influenced by the contribution of the structural theory of the function of symbols, Tarot hints that in Durkheim’s work the “sacred” somehow put the brakes on, came in the way of the promise of an anthropology of the symbolical and symbolization: “…the Durkheimian preoccupation with the sacred would play against the perception of the symbol” [Tarot 1999:218]. It is true that for Lévi-Strauss the sacred confirmed the impasse reached by a substantialist analysis of things symbolized, on the one hand, by its concessions to the way of thinking pertaining to indigenous categories and the “spirit of the thing,” and, on the other hand, by the explanatory recourse to an unexplained totemic principle, an indeterminate matter, an affective and emotional sociality which resulted but explained nothing [Mary 2010:93-105].
Nevertheless, for Durkheim, the “sacred” was firstly a category for understanding religious facts, as part of the primitive forms of classification, and worked, as we know, by way of a structural opposition to an indeterminate profane. This opposition has sustained many readings and counterreadings in the history of religions and of anthropologies (African as well as others), where the question being posed was especially that of its universality in relation to the variability of cultural areas and religious forms. However, for Durkheim, the problem was not at first posed in terms of shared collective representations which could be empirically observed: the categories drew on a transcendental *a priori* in the Kantian sense of the term, they made things (including the sacred things) conceivable and possible, and, thus, they were rarely thoughts as such, whether as products of reflection or theorization. This transcendental apriorism, both a logical necessity and an ethical obligation as Durkheim emphasized [1994:25], lay at the basis of the Kantian problem of objectivity and especially that of the objectivity of moral judgment, of aesthetic judgment, but also of “magical judgment” (see Hubert and Mauss on the *mana* as a principle of *a priori* synthetic judgment [Mauss 1968:28-29]).

Nevertheless, with regard to categories, Durkheim did not stick to the logical priority of an abstract universal. Lying between idealism and relativism, the Durkheimian problem of categories sought to explain the requirement for imperative necessity and objective universality emanating from originally “religious” categories within a given logical and moral world: “It is not my time which is thus organized; it is time such as it is objectively conceptualized by all people of the same civilization” [Durkheim 1994:14]. As noted by Giovanni Paoletti, in the Durkheimian vocabulary the term “civilization” refers to a defined set of symbolic and material conditions pertaining to a moral environment [Paoletti 2002:443]. One recalls the paradox of a categorial universality limited or determined in space and time, not unlike the “symbolic forms” of Ernst Cassirer, less alien to history than the “Kantism without a transcendental subject” of Lévi-Strauss. For Paoletti [1998], it is the “worship of images” which offers a real way out of the impasse reached by the analysis of the status of objectivity and necessity of “collective representations.” We can speak of a transfer from the problem of the transcendental idealism of categories to a description of the reality and objectivity of symbols.

In the *Elementary Forms*, this problem of *a priori* categories and forms for the understanding of “religious things” made way for a problem of the genesis of sacred things, material things, social and moral things. As François-André Isambert has rightly said on the subject of the *mana* as a totemic principle: “…Durkheim, playing with the meaning of the word “principle,” went from the idea of a primary character according to classificatory logic, to that of a primary element according to a causal logic…” [Isambert 1982:240]. In a word, “sacred things” possess a force which seems to emanate from the thing itself, a force
which can be felt and which individuals can experience through the collective feelings to which it gives rise. To the point that we can think – just as Durkheim ended up concluding – that it is the experience of collective excitement to which it gives rise that engenders the force of that thing, this circular line of reasoning (whose secret only Durkheim knew) led Lévi-Strauss to state that it “begged the question” [Lévi-Strauss 1962a].

The causal and dynamic approach challenged the mechanisms of the genesis of a “system of sacred things” and the social conditions of the emergence of a substantial and experiential force of a tangible reality, both subjective and objective, and a force which was perhaps more transcendant than “transcendental.” All commentators agree on this point. Even Van Gennep, who denied any future to Durkheim’s monograph, acknowledged at least one point on which “Mr Durkheim is entirely right. Primitive conceptions are clearly energizing” [Van Gennep 1913:390]. Besides, even Lévi-Strauss himself admitted, in spite of the break (if not the “caesura”) marked by Totémisme aujourd’hui in relation to Durkheimian thought, that there was a good Durkheim and that the latter happened to be “right,” even if, in as much as it was “within” Bergsonian thought, it seemed to him to be even more “right” in spite of itself... [Lévi-Strauss 1962a:142-143].

Germinal and Contagious Things

There have been a lot of discussions on and glossing over of the elementary in the Elementary Forms. The whole problem is that the Durkheimian elementary sought to distinguish itself from the original primitive (Père Schmidt’s original monotheist) but, at this stage, it was not alien to an original religion described as “pre-animist.” Besides, if the elementary dimension designated at a historical level the most “simple” forms currently known in the religious world, this simplicity – which adversaries, especially Catholics, called “rudimentary” – was shown to be a complex simplicity not unlike Mauss’s sacrificial schema. Finally, the “germinal forms” paradigm, inherited from Robertson Smith’s “germinal principles” [Sumpf 1965:67], implied that the elementary dimension contained the germs of the evolved forms, as shown by the example of the mana, the awareness of which could only emerge in tribal societies. However, the philosophical discussion over the elementary dimension of “forms” ended up neglecting the primary observation with regard to the elementary dimension of “things.” Religion was, at first, understood as comprising a set of elements, of separate and dispersed things, of bits and pieces: “it is a whole made up of distinctive and relatively individualized parts” [Durkheim 1994:56]. The right method was to start from the observation of “elementary phenomena” resulting in a religion even if, from an explanatory point of view, we could not draw any conclusions from a part to a whole, from individuated things to a system of sacred things. The relational principle of the
“contagiousness” of the sacred played an “elementary” role here and not just a secondary one in the theory of symbolized things, removing all ambiguity with regard to the principle of a sacrality inherent in the things themselves.

The contagiousness, no doubt, had a troubled relationship with the psychological laws of association and the philosophy of participation. However, as Durkheim stressed, the contagiousness of an “eminently sacred” thing which was the emblem was not just a secondary process which relied on the laws of resemblance and contiguity of associationist psychology. Contagion, its instances of confusion and participation, were part and parcel of the “logical life” of sacrality. Sympathy between sacred things was the expression of a “floating” sacred which could be acquired, become fixed, and be transmitted, but which was not inherent in the things themselves: “Thus, contagion, which is the source of this coming closer and mixing in, has to be characterized by this type of fundamental irrationality which we are at first inclined to ascribe to it. It has opened the way to the scientific explanations of the future” [Durkheim 1994:464]. Lévi-Strauss, who deplored the recourse to the totemic principle as a substantialist principle of indistinctness, would later quote these pages on the logical role of participation which gave rise to “instances of intemperate confusion” and “clashing contrasts” and which were among “the best of Durkheim” [Lévi-Strauss 1962a:142].

Over and above the debate on totemism and closer, on the other hand, to the enigmas of fetishism which were too quickly laid aside by Durkheim, the line of anthropological thought opened by the return to the “thingness” of sacred things, or the “sympathy” of these things rendered taboo, has continued to fuel the contemporary debate within the anthropological world.

**Totemism or Fetishism: Words and Things**

Totem or fetish? The hesitation over which word and which category would be most relevant in discerning the things lying at the basis of elementary religiosity was justifiable. After his first reading of Spencer and Gillen in July 1899, Durkheim wrote to Mauss: “The relationship between totem and things (other than the totemic species) is obvious. There is a fetishism which is indistinguishable from the current fetishism and whose totemic origin and character are indisputable” [Durkheim 1998:224]. The descriptive value which was recognized at that time with regard to ordinary fetishism, including totemic things, could have led to fetishism being made into a kind of embryonic totemism. On the subject of the theoretical edification of totemic religion and the recourse to “this kind of anonymous and impersonal force” of the *mana* in chapter V of the *Elementary Forms*, Van Gennep did not fail to note that: “Nevertheless, this definition applies only to the substratum of totemism; in short, it is to give the word “totemism” the meaning of the word “fetishism” and erase all the difficulties relating to the interpretation of details...” [Van Gennep 1913:390].
We know the extent to which fetishism following the work of Charles de Brosses – the inventor of the word more than of the thing, who took his inspiration mainly from Hume’s writings – was able, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to embody the limit thesis of a primary primitiveness and the “direct worship” by a savage mind of some object or other endowed with power and intelligence. We must remember that for Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology and high priest of the religion of Humanity, fetishism took part in the first theological state of the human mind and offered the illustration of a dream of subjective totalization of reality based on the assimilation of things into the human will. Positivism was meant to take up, in complete affinity with fetishism, this initial intuition of the history of humanity at the level of an “objective synthesis” [Canguilhem 1994].

De Brosses’s essay made the connection between the serpent or crocodile gods of Egypt and the households of black Africa, and in particular, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, the economy of the theology of original revelation in order to found the natural history of religion [Tarot 1999:503]. However, the anti-hermeneutic stance which allowed de Brosses to free himself from the allegorical reading of the symbolic objects in the Hellenistic tradition ended up being confused with the prejudice, if not fantasy, of a savage mind alien to intellect and to symbolism [Pietz 2005:126]. The denouncement of the civilizational misunderstanding between Europe and Africa (“We do not have the right to speak of a negro, Guinean, or Congolese fetish...” [Mauss 1969:245, our emphasis]) and the mistrust of all Africanist, colonial, and missionary ethnography would translate into the surprising injunction, in the case of all the documentation coming from Bantu Africa, to replace the notion of the fetish with that of the mana [Mauss 1968:20]. The hypothesis of the “perhaps necessary error” inevitably gave rise to many questions [Tarot 1999:505]; however, it is certain that, in the next stage of the history of the Elementary Forms, this adoration of pieces of wood and stone in their materiality, this primitiveness of fetish things endowed with “meaningless” passion and emotions could seem obviously too alien to the register of “representation,” and in particular to that of “figurative representation,” to be a germinal form of sacred things.

Nevertheless, the spirit of fetishism was present in Durkheim’s initial analysis of so-called religious phenomena, particularly when he stressed the fact that: “...by sacred things we do not simply mean these personal beings we call gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a stone, a piece of wood, a house, in short, any thing could be sacred” [Durkheim 1994:51]. The quoted work by Schultze, *Der Fetischismus* (1871), closely analyzed the psychological drives of fetishism and made it possible to touch on attitudes far removed from adoration in the ordinary sense of the term: “One beats the fetish one is not happy with, only to reconcile with it if it eventually becomes more docile in the eyes of its adorer” [Durkheim 1994:52]. In the Australian field, some observers considered *churinga*...
a fetish; however, through a reversal of perspective whose secret only he knew, Durkheim freed himself from the primitivism of fetishism by turning it into a derivate of totemism: “The unclear set of rites we call fetishism seems to appear only among those peoples who have reached a high degree of civilization; this type of worship is unknown in Australia” [Durkheim 1994:250].

The **Churinga Revisited**

We know the place that the *churinga*, those objects made of wood or stone – their polished material as much as their engraved lines and the body paintings associated with them – , have in the phenomenography as well as the explanatory theory of the genesis of the sacred things which are the totems. The theory caused a lot of surprise and gave rise to plenty of comments, but the words chosen to formulate it were significant: the *churinga* was “that thing whose essential characteristic is to be sacred” [Durkheim 1994:172], “the very type of sacred things,” or “the most eminently sacred things” [Durkheim 1994:167]. Furthermore, their characteristic in relation to some other objects made of wood or stone was “that the totemic mark is engraved or drawn on them. It is therefore this mark and this mark alone which confers upon them their sacred character” [Durkheim 1994:172].

We could, together with Van Gennep, say that Durkheim took up theories, such as Lang’s nominalism, that he himself had criticized [Van Gennep 1920:78]. We could be ironic about the mystery of this “graphic instinct,” which led to the recognition in a symbolizing symbol of an anteriority in relation to the thing symbolized (a god or a clan). Nevertheless, this theory has given rise to ethnographic debates and anthropological questions which are far from being settled. In any event, this apparent fetishization of the totemic emblem does not lead us to think that we are dealing with a “type of fetish” [Durkheim 1994:173], if by that we mean a tie of filiation with some ancestor or supernatural origin. It is “the thing itself,” not the symbolized thing but the image tattooed on bodies, the mark engraved on a material which is sacred. Besides, and to put a stop to the theory of an original place, the fact that certain *churinga* are made with the full knowledge of everyone, as Durkheim noted, does not detract in any way from their sacrality and effectiveness.

Two highly significant details supported Durkheim’s ethnographic demonstration, knowing that the description anticipated the explanation. Firstly, the ephemeral character of the setup and ceremonial dress for the Arunta’s *nurtunja* and *waninga* (an assembly of spears taking on the appearance of “flags”) and the dispersion of these decorative elements (down and hair) the day after the initiation ceremony thus confirmed that it was “nothing but an image – even a temporary image – of the totem and, consequently, it is in this sense and in this sense alone that it plays a religious role” [Durkheim 1994:177]. Secondly, with
regard to the abstract or figurative character of an emblem, he stressed that “the relationship between representation and the thing represented is so indirect and distant... [that] only members can tell what meaning they attach to such a combination of lines” [Durkheim 1994:179]. These are two lines of enquiry lying at the very heart of the ethnographic extensions contributed by the Australian anthropology of Aborigines.

The setup of the *Elementary Forms* is to this day generally credited with an approach which, far from getting lost in the mythology and status of superior or prodigious beings (the Dream Beings), places the objective of questioning the sacred value of the *churinga* at the heart of the ritual device. The way in which their material is carved and marked, their equally tangible and ephemeral presence, and the gestures which come with them are the keys for understanding this set of ritual things and acts to which the term “*churinga*” in fact refers [Moisseeff 1995:83]. Nevertheless, we must remember, just as Elkin did [1967:248], that the *churinga* have extremely varied social functions and not just “religious” ones: children’s toys such as the rhombuses which are the subject of instruction; magical objects which intervene through their energy in plantations’ fecundity, success in hunting, or in curing illnesses; gift and prestige objects which regulate conflicts and exchanges between totemic groups (a dimension which caught Mauss’s attention); and, naturally, objects of initiatory transmission surrounded by secrecy and bans.

If the methodological audacity of the theory of emblems – manifestly supported by American totemic data and transplanted to the Australian field in order to be checked – already entailed a big risk, the choice of ethnographic material for the *churinga* turns out to be even more problematic. Durkheim did not clearly assess the double nature of these sacred things (or the proper making of these objects): on the one hand, the relatively permanent collective totemic *churinga* attached to a center of territorialized worship, which can serve as media for ephemeral setups for worshipping (such as those crossed lances surrounded by clumps of herbs and hair belts), and, on the other hand, the so-called personal *churinga*. If the former can include some decorative elements, they are mainly characterized by the “nudity” of their raw material and their totemic identity does not include any significant inscription. On the other hand, it is the personal *churinga*, the “veritable prototypes of the whole of *churinga*” [Moisseeff 1995:87], which are ritually carved, dressed, and marked with inscriptions relating to the individual identity of the “child spirits” they are meant to embody. We measure better after the event (even though these details were already perfectly well known and present in the data) the “misappropriation of the content” performed by Durkheim by using the characteristics of personal *churinga* for the purpose of a theory of totemic emblems in general. Thus, he no doubt missed the capital importance of the role of “child spirits” and the mediatory role of the “conception” of the *churinga* in the genesis of individuals’ singular
identities. His hostility toward and rejection of Frazer’s “conceptionist” theory which threw, so to speak, the baby out with the bath water, had its role to play in this blindness. More fundamentally still, how could someone who claimed that all members of a primitive society were undifferentiated imagine the conceptual and ritual importance that the Arunta placed on the meaning of the singular individuality of each human being (and even each thing)?

Images, Prints, and Archi-Traces

The debate around the function of the “figurative” representation of the *churinga* or their value in anticipating an abstract type of primitive art was clearly out of date with regard to the tangible materiality of graphics and reproductions provided especially by Spencer and Gillen in 1927 [Moisseeff 1995:88-89, and also Lévi-Strauss 1962b:317]. By revisiting the *churinga* in his own fashion, Lévi-Strauss found, as shown already by the structural treatment of sacrifice, proof of the limits of a symbolic thought embodied by the myth which tended to evacuate all historical continuity (especially that of ancestral figures) and whose ritual was meant to create the illusion of solved contradictions. The *churinga* were supposed to act as signifiers of a lost genealogical continuity, as witnesses of a diachronic individuation evacuated by myth and reinstated by the simulacrum of the ancestors’ incarnation in the body of the initiated. The sacred value of these objects did not depend on a logic of distinctive difference or exchange, it was unique, inalienable, and concentrated in the singularity of their “diachronic knowledge,” not unlike our personal archives (whose digitization merely emphasizes their fetishistic character). Lévi-Strauss never failed to return to our “indigenous” experience of things, as illustrated by the “thingamajig” of the *mana*, in order to make clear the limits of symbolic function. Van Gennep had already stressed in 1906 the antique value of the *churinga*: “…the more they are worn and patched up with gum and fibers, the more the churinga are valued by the Arunta” [Van Gennep 1906: LXXXIV]. Elkin returned in 1938 to this idea of the value of antiquity: “Generally speaking, the older a churinga is, the more value is attached to it, and if the tribe has one made of wood and another one made of stone, it is the latter which will be deemed to carry greater ‘virtue’” [Elkin 1967(1938)]. Nevertheless, this homage paid to the accumulated antiquity of an object and its role as mediator between the present and the past falls short of this unique meaning of the singular and historical individuation of some object or other and the memory of the event of its encounter, which Lévi-Strauss tried to reintegrate into the symbolic order which he had initially excluded.

The ethnographic data held today by the Australian anthropology of Aborigines enrich without invalidating the ancestral depository of the first observers of the *churinga* (Spencer and Gillen, Strehlow, and others; see Elkin 1967 and Moisseeff 1995) by reframing them in a more substantial and coherent
way within the Dream stories circulated by the initiated. The circle or dotted lines engraved on hard wood or stone are meant to attest to traces or prints suggesting the route taken by the Dream beings, without any concern about the actual representation of these beings. They recall the drawings in the sand of the daily stories about the history of totemic ancestors told by women to their children who would one day be initiated. However, within the initiatory framework where objects are carved and lines are traced, each one of the initiated is associated with a unique configuration, an arrangement of lines and circles indicating the singular journey of the child spirit incarnated in them. This unique print is reproduced on wood objects, tattooed on the body, and even drawn on the ground, on the very place where the initiated would lie down on their stomach during the rites: it is difficult to do more for the purpose of impregnation, as Durkheim himself noted. Only the initiated know the secret of the thing and can reveal within the initiatory context what it means to them, for, while the *chu-ringa* does not depend on figurative representation, the perspective of the “thingness” could lead to a lack of awareness of the fact that the discursive dimension is also part of its being; its graphics represent a discursive framework: it is the medium through which a story is told and says something about the evolution of the Dream [Moisseeff 1994:17].

Marika Moisseeff has rightly reconsidered the logic of showing/hiding which seems essential in the conception of individual identity since, it must be remembered, the term “*chu-ringa*” or “*tjurunga*” refers to something which is “one’s own” and “secret” and that this personal and private thing is the object of “shame” and needs to be concealed [Moisseeff 1995:87]. “If the personal *chu-ringa,*” explains Moisseeff, “is able to represent the Dream in all its aspects, it is precisely because the signs affixed onto its surface are neither quite abstract, nor quite figurative; by referring to various semantic levels, to an essential polysemy, they suggest, rather than set, the multiplicity of Dream representations” [Moisseeff 1995:96]. The term “polyvalence” might be more adequate (the same line can refer to the members, the route travelled, or the ties) for such a register which is not one of meaning and writing but of suggesting or evoking.

The integration of the making of the *chu-ringa* into the general theory of fecundity and conception, which was the contribution of Australian contemporary anthropology, enables a better understanding of the strong and intimate link forged between an object and an individual’s identity. The carving and making of a personal *chu-ringa* is very much meant to take over from an “original” *chu-ringa* and a, so to speak, matricial *chu-ringa* that is the incarnation of the spirit child in the so-called lost maternal matrix. Geza Roheim developed more specifically this psychoanalytical reading of the cutting of the umbilical tie and the dual relationship with the maternal figure by adding the role of subincision and the blood spilled over the neophytes’ heads, all the way to the hypothesis of the assimilation of a subincised penis into the *chu-ringa* [Roheim 1970].
pragmatically, Moisseeff insisted upon the fact that the human production of an artifact under men’s initiatory control marked the distance taken from the biological reproduction assumed by women. It provided the material and mediating element for accessing a purely ritual reproduction of the singular identity of individuals who would henceforth become one body with their *churinga*. We can see how the question of the making of individual identity is, here as elsewhere, at the heart of the making of sacred things. The paradoxical logic of showing/hiding illustrated by the fleetingness and hybridity of the assembly of elements used by the reproduction rituals of edible beings is found in that of evoking/concealing the “thing [which is] unique” to each one of the initiated.

The Return to the Fetish: God Things or Object God

The African sources which might have supplied the ethnographic facts attesting to the totemic phenomenon have overall been deemed suspect and often unusable by the Durkheimian group, notably because of the missionary over-interpretations inspired by the theories of original monotheism and Wilhelm Schmidt’s School. The network of missionary informers of the *Anthropos* journal, founded by the latter in 1912, the weeks of religious ethnology held in Louvain and inaugurated that same year, and the teachings of Leroy and Trilles at the Catholic Institute in Paris, a stone’s throw from the Sorbonne, were mobilized entirely against the “evolutionist” and “materialist” theories of “Mr Durkheim” inspired by the “rudimentary” *Forms of the Religious Life*; theories which had been known very early on through the articles published particularly in the *Revue de Philosophie* (1907) and immediately countered by Le Roy in his *Religion des primitifs* (1910). One of the ethnographic weapons – beside the counterreadings of the Australian sources offered by Schmidt in the *Anthropos* journal – would be Père Trilles’s great compendium of 1912, *Le Totémisme chez les Fang* [Mary 2012].

It is not surprising that the revisiting and even “pagan” rehabilitation of fetishism should be carried out in contemporary anthropology beginning with the original fields of Benin, Congo, or Guinea. The open gateway between Africa and Australia outlined by Mauss through the evocation of Dapper’s observations on the “moquisie” of the king and the “charms” of the objects of worship in the Kingdom of Loango [Mauss 1968:245], in its turn called, through a reversal customary in anthropology, for a clarification of the category of sacred things beginning with that of the fetish objects of the Beninese *vodun*, the Congolese *nkisi*, or the Malian *boli*.

Jean Bazin’s return to the “god things” was meant to be more Heideggerian than Durkheimian, but it did seek to question once again the ontological dimension of these sacred things, their “thingness.” “In order to take the worship of things seriously,” he declared, “one has to go in search of the principle behind
this ability that a thing has to exist in itself and by itself (Selbstand), thanks to its own “thingness,” and not just before us and for us as an object (Gegenstand), an element in a representational device” [Bazin 1986:360]. By denouncing the hegemony of the viewpoint of “representation” and “meaning” in the anthropological approach to the fetish, Bazin revived in his own fashion the antitherme-neutic stance of de Brosses (“behind the fetish there is nothing else symbolized by it”) by adding to it everything that could reveal symbolic cryptological presuppositions in their Griaulian version or semiological paradigms of the sign: “A boli does not mean anything, it just is” [Bazin 1986:368]. The chosen stance with regard to thingness relates not so much to an ontological kind of commitment as a need to return to the “things themselves,” a call for a phenomenological description freed from overinterpretations and theological glosses. At the same time, the need to describe the things began to sound like negative theology: the boli is not..., it is not..., there is not... In this exercise for rethinking things, which sought to “bend the stick the other way,” we might rightly wonder what anthropologists would look for, what would fascinate them; this “pure reality,” this “naked materiality,” this immediacy of the presence, this “absolute uniqueness” of the god things have no value or descriptive scope.

The deployment of analysis applied to the ritual practices of sprinkling the boli with blood happily restored the duality of the “registers of religious action,” of formulation intentions and situations in which this impenetrable thingness of the bloodied objects was taken: Silameya – “Islam” and Bamanaya – the custom. “On the one hand, at the Silameya extreme, the object of worship (the offering, the victim) can be “fetishized;” that is, abstracted from the mediatory relationship with God or its intermediaries, for which it is normally the medium. On the other hand, at the Bamanaya extreme, it is when the boli is treated simply as a mediatory place that its normal status is hijacked” [Bazin 1986:358, our emphasis]. This tension and conflict of norms between the fetishization and mediatization of “strong objects” could very well be at the heart of the operative value of the god things, especially if we accept that Islam, as Jean-Paul Colleyn [2004:65] has reminded us, and the Bamanaya find themselves in a relationship of interaction which, if it is not primary, is at least a long-standing one. The compound and plural name “god things” points, so to speak, to an essential hybridity rather than calls for a conversion to a “pagan” theological monism.

The fetishist rereading of the one God offered by Bazin shares in the ambiguity and ambivalence characterizing the “god object” rehabilitated by Marc Augé beginning with the world of vodun [Augé 1988]. The divinity of these things rests on the paradox of an absolute singularity, an irreducible uniqueness which is not at all incompatible with the accumulation of some of the most heterogeneous and singular elements which make up the list of its material substance, and even less so with an ability to multiply into a “battery of objects” [Colleyn 2004]. The “pantheons” do not manifestly account for the participation in
multiple places and gods (altar and worship networks). No doubt, the boli are “divine bodies,” but even so they are not an incarnation of some genie or god; they are also person things without personifying an impersonal supernatural power. However, in the dynamic and energetic principle of the nyama, which is concentrated in these strong objects, we do find what Durkheim retained from the “emanations” of the mana.

More precisely and to construct a less metaphysical parallel between the vodun or boli fetishes and the churinga, we can retain several distinctive characteristics:

1) these things exist, like certain so-called individual totems, in a way based on personal property and privacy (the pocket boli) but, at the same time, there are also lineage, clan boli and even state boli. For Colleyn, the mediation of “strong objects” is related to a reification of social relations; the boli are, so to speak, “the coagulated products of power relations” [Colleyn 2004:68];

2) these substantial and individuated things are made, carved, and engraved starting from incongruous elements from which we could not extract a table of symbols or a coded list of signs, let alone a DNA formula: “each fetish corresponds to formulas (daliliuvo) which are comparable to divinatory draws miraculously revealed by a founding hero” [Colleyn 2004:65], however, the secret of their formula and power has to be kept;

3) the bloodied thing testifies through its accumulated layers of coagulated blood to a life sustained by sacrifice and the “transfusion” of the blood of others, but also, in this way, even by a history of singular events, individual and collective, which are the subject of the stories and discourses which make up their being;

4) finally, when thinking in particular of the churinga, these things have a name which is dangerous to pronounce; they have to remain hidden and are veiled; they only show themselves in certain circumstances, before disappearing again. A whole logic of showing/hiding and doing/undoing is introduced to the complexity of the secrecy of identities.

Augé’s “object god” emanates from an experience and analysis of the Beninese vodun which echoes the Australian totems. The Malian vodun and boli take part in a collective consecration as royalty and chieftainship emblems, as well as in individual initiations within the lineage. As Augé argued: “The vodun is perfectly amenable to a Durkheimian analysis. It is a group vodun. It symbolizes it: a certain number of individuals recognize themselves in it, share its worship [...] Thus, in a sense, the vodun “represents” the group and it makes sense to say that the group represents itself in the vodun” [Augé 1988:40]. However, this method of collective representation goes hand in hand with a principle of differentiation and contextual discrimination which can be seen in the ritual. There is no question of maintaining the myth of an undifferentiated social group which recognizes itself in the divine fusion of moments of excitement in the way a
Durkheimian clan does. The ceremonies called upon for one occasion or another bring together and unify the group; however, at the same time, the differentiated relations which they all have with the *vodun*, which mark the differences and discriminate according to lineage and tribe, social and gender status, or degrees of initiation, are enacted.

The articulation of a system of *vodun* and the consultation of Fa, in particular the configuration of palm nuts on the divination tablet outlining the fate of an individual, leads to a subtle clarification of the ways in which personal identities are materially constructed. The affirmation of the identity of individuals, as we know, goes hand in hand with recognition of the configuration of signs drawn on the sand of the tablets or on the ground: “the more an individual identity is affirmed and defined, the more it is fixed and inscribed in objects which are objects of worship…” [Augé 1988:184]. The elaborate making of Fa at an adult age, after the making of palm nut necklaces during childhood, ultimately leads to the highlighting of one’s personal sign, the *du*, engraved on a piece of clay, and the preparation of a bag in which several substances are mixed with the sand where the nuts outlining the fate of the individuals were thrown and which will be thrown away at their death – a nice image of this elementary and ephemeral, individuated and split, corporal and spiritual identity of the disseminated person. The funeral rituals illustrate more than any others this logic of doing and undoing which applies to the making of humans as well as that of gods.

**Conclusion: The Work of Symbols between Fetishization and Mediation**

The detour via the Heideggerian thingness in the end led the anthropologist Bazin toward an almost mystical religiosity of the presence which tended to reject all mediation and convert “to the beatitude of the immediate” [Bazin 1986: 376-377]. On the other hand, the twofold Lévi-Straussian and Durkheimian fidelity which characterizes Augé’s object god is very active in the realm of symbols, taking into account their reifying as well as socially mediating power. For the fetishist mind (of the savages as well as ours), the unthinkable is the inert, the raw matter which lasts and the brutality of the real [Augé 1988:30], what Augé calls “the provocation of matter” [Augé 1988:139]. There is no question of opposing the symbol to the substantial thing, or the thing to the object of representation, since it is in this triangular space of sacred things, in this quasi-Durkheimian three-poled circularity of the symbol, the object, and the thing (which recalls that of the emblem, the clan, and the species), that there takes place a social and symbolic mediation which always presupposes a third mediator. As it happens, the virtues of this practical operator which is the body takes over from the intellect in the making of identities: “Symbolizing means both forming an object (if necessary by using bodily matter) and enacting a relationship: with a sovereign body the social relationship does not
exist; it therefore makes no sense to say that the former represents the latter, rather, it represents it to the extent that it has made it exist. That is all a fetish is: that which engenders the relationship and does not just represent it” [Augé 1988:140].

Thus, the debate on the representation or figurative representation (of a signified or a referent) of sacred things initiated by Durkheim has shifted onto the social and symbolic ground of the tension between reification and mediation. The combination of Durkheimian undertones from the system of sacred things and the structural logic of symbolic systems (very regularly taken up by Augé beginning with the reading of the Preface to Mauss [1950]) is an essential resource here. If the object god, similar to the totemic god of the churinga, is both a material thing and an object of ritual treatment (that is, object and symbol), it is precisely because the solid and relatively shapeless substance of the body of the vodun is affected by a form which can be guessed but cannot be entirely revealed, and because the material of its composition, far from being impenetrable, calls for a relationship (and a discourse). Thus, the return to fetishism which the “genius of paganism” [Augé 1982] strongly draws upon is in no way a regression toward some kind of substantialist thought: the concrete and discrete kinds of logic of the “Savage Mind” [Lévi-Strauss 1962b], which govern the choice of bodily substances and the compatibility between materials, are at the heart of the making of the thing, as well as of the “sacrificial cooking” of the ingredients which nourish it.

From the “stones of Saint Bessus” taken by pilgrims to Cogne from the mass of the “holy rock” and disseminated in the form of “talismans” [Hertz 1970:120], to the churinga and all the way to the object god of the vodun, there is a whole line of thought which leads a contemporary anthropology of objects to pursue the Durkheimian discussion of sacred things and to rediscover the fetishist intuition. The anthropology of art has also found, thanks, it is true, to Mauss rather than to Durkheim, and under the sign of the fetish rather than the totem, the chance to free the art object, especially the primitive one, from the aesthetic bias and to reintegrate it into a “worship of images” (artifacts, icons, idols) which our cultural piety likens to a “disseminated person” [Gell 2009:119]. However, we must also remember that the “genius of paganism” sees itself as an introduction to “the secular conception of a sacrality without gods or God.” For Augé, the recognition of a “secular sacrality” [Augé 1982:322] beyond the mediatized commemorations of our great figures and their works, as well as the impasses of republican liturgies, essentially takes note of the drives and virtues of the rituality of the most mechanical of social ties, as testified by our daily greetings and our ordinary sense of anniversaries.

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Back to sacred things: emblems, prints and fetishes

The primary form of the system of sacred things which is for Durkheim “elementary”, a set of individuated and disseminated things, introduces, beyond the debate on the universal reach of the a priori opposition between sacred/secular, the principle of a substantiality and of a contagiousness of sacred things that is at the heart of contemporary anthropology’s preoccupations. In the Forms, the epistemological rupture introduced by the theory of emblematism and social symbolism leads to a dynamic and genetic explanation on the strength of “images” that springs doubtlessly less from the social complexity of the marks of totemism than from the inform objects of fetishism, too quickly dismissed by Durkheim and Mauss. This comparative revision
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of the prints of the churinga or the fetishes of the vodu re-actualize this interest for the spirit’s tangible marks and this “fetichist” intuition, this thinghood of the gods-objects, while fitting it in a logic of personal identities manufacture, between reification and mediation.

Key words: sacred things, emblems, lucky, churinga, vodu.

Retour aux choses sacrées : emblèmes, empreintes et fétiches

Le système des choses sacrées dont la forme première est pour Durkheim « élémentaire », ensemble de choses individuées et disséminées, introduit, au-delà des débats sur la portée universelle de l’opposition apriorique entre sacré/profane, au principe d’une substantialité et d’une contagiosité des choses sacrées qui est au cœur des préoccupations de l’anthropologie contemporaine. La rupture épistémologique introduite par la théorie de l’emblématisme et du symbolisme social enchaîne dans les Formes sur une explication dynamique et génétique de la force des « images » qui relève sans doute moins de la complexité sociale des marques du totémisme que des objets informes du fétichisme, trop rapidement écarté par Durkheim et Mauss. La revisite comparée des empreintes des churinga ou des fétiches du vodu réactualise cet intérêt pour les traces tangibles des esprits et cette intuition « fétichiste » de la chosesité des dieux-objets en la réinscrivant dans une logique de la fabrication des identités personnelles, prise entre réification et médiation.

Mots clés : choses sacrées, emblèmes, fétiches, churinga, vodu.

Vuelta sobre las cosas sagradas: emblemas, huellas y fetiches

El sistema de las cosas sagradas cuya forma primera es, para Durkheim, “elemental”, aúna cosas individuadas y diseminadas, introduce, más allá de los debates del alcance universal de la posición apriorística entre sagrado y profano, el principio de una sustancialidad y de un contagio de las cosas sagradas que está en el centro de las preocupaciones de la antropología contemporánea. La ruptura epistemológica introducida por la teoría del emblematism o y del simbolismo social se articula en las Formas con una explicación dinámica y genética de la fuerza de las “imágenes” que sin duda da cuenta menos de la complejidad social de las marcas del totemismo que de los objetos informes del fetichismo, descartado demasiado pronto por Durkheim y Mauss. La vuelta sobre la comparación entre las huellas de los churinga o de los fetiches del vudú reactualizan este interés por las marcas tangibles de los espíritus y esta intuición “fetichista” de la cosesidad de los dioses-objetos reinscribiéndola en una lógica de la fabricación de las identidades personales, tomada entre reificación y mediación.

Palabras clave: cosas sagradas, emblemas, huellas y fetiches.