

The American Psychoanalyst

Volume 54, Number 1 Winter/Spring 2020

Libido, Culture, and Consciousness:

Revisiting *Totem and Taboo*

Daniel S. Benveniste

Speculation on the relationship between psychological development and cultural evolution played an important role in Sigmund Freud's theorizing about the prehistoric origins of the Oedipus complex and psychoanalytic symbolism. These were his speculations regarding the tyranny of the primal father, who was subsequently murdered by the fraternal clan. Freud's ideas were never completely rejected by psychoanalysis but rather neglected as clinical concerns took analysts' attention and as Freud's underlying psycho-Lamarckian assumptions proved inadequate in the light of modern scientific understandings of genetic inheritance.

Nonetheless, if asked about the origins of the Oedipus complex or the recurring symbolism in dreams, most psychoanalytic clinicians would probably at least mention Freud's outdated speculations concerning the individual's biological inheritance of a cultural memory of repeated events in our prehistoric past, events such as a matriarchy that preceded a patriarchy, a primal father who kept all the females to himself, the castration or banishment of young men who threatened the primal father, the killing of the primal father by the fraternal clan, the totemic feast in celebration of and in atonement for the murder of the primal father, and the subsequent establishment of culture. These ideas were featured prominently in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913).

Freud's faulty assumptions were (1) the notion that deeds, repeated countless times by our prehistoric ancestors, would be converted into an archaic inheritance of prehistoric memories that modern people "remember" in the universality of the Oedipus complex and universal symbolism and (2) the notion that individual development is driven by the cultural evolution of our species. But we do not genetically inherit the memories of the deeds of our ancestors, and the similarities between individual development and cultural evolution are not based on cultural events driving individual development. It should be noted that the newer Lamarckian epigeneticists and others exploring the transmission of transgenerational trauma are exploring interesting phenomena, but nothing they discuss is as complex as the inheritance of an Oedipus complex or symbolism.

It is far more parsimonious to recognize the battle between the primal father and the fraternal clan are simply the alpha male social instincts that are common to humans, chimpanzees, and many other animals. These social instincts became symbolized and socialized by way of the human symbolic function, which appears to have achieved its rather exceptional modern capacity about 50,000 years ago. Other primate instincts that became symbolized and thereby converted into psychodynamics are mother-infant bonding, nursing, dominance and submission posturing, alpha male battling, courtship, and so on. Among chimpanzees there is even a copulation interference instinct in which the youngster commonly climbs onto the mother's back and tries to push off males that come to copulate with her. Social instincts support the development of the individual and the group throughout the life cycle, but when the human symbolic function achieved its advanced capacities our social instincts became psychodynamics and copulation interference, and alpha male battling became the instinctual basis of our Oedipus complex.

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In *An Autobiographical Study* (1925/1959), Freud summarized his phylogenetic speculations in the following way:

The father of the primal horde, since he was an unlimited despot, had seized all the women for himself; his sons, being dangerous to him as rivals, had been killed or driven away. One day, however, the sons came together and united to overwhelm, kill, and devour their father, who had been their enemy but also their ideal. After the deed they were unable to take over their heritage since they stood in one another’s way. Under the influence of failure and remorse they learned to come to an agreement among themselves; they banded into a clan of brothers by the help of the ordinances of totemism, which aimed at preventing a repetition of such a deed, and they jointly undertook to forgo the possession of the women on whose account they killed their father. They were then

driven to finding strange women, and this was the origin of the exogamy which is so closely bound up with totemism. The totem meal was the festival commemorating the fearful deed, from which sprang man's sense of guilt (or "original sin") and which was the beginning at once of social organization, of religion and of ethical restrictions (SE 20).

Freud found analogous relations between (1) the child in the phallic stage of development; (2) the obsessional neurosis; (3) the totemic fraternal clan in ancient prehistory; (4) the myth of the hero, including the legend of Oedipus; and (5) the ritual of the sacrificial totemic feast.

In this brief article I present an alternative formulation. It has two components: First, as stated above, I assert our distinctly human psychodynamics emerged 50,000 years ago when our symbolic function evolved its present capacities and clothed our primate social instincts in language. Second, I speculate that throughout the course of prehistory, the challenges of culture drew on solutions derived from the vicissitudes of libido development such that the Paleolithic appears in some ways analogous to the oral stage, the Neolithic analogous to the anal stage, the High Neolithic analogous to the phallic stage, and the Urban Revolution analogous to the adolescent genital stage.

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prehistory, the challenges of culture drew on solutions derived from the vicissitudes of libido development...

My work on this phylogenetic project of psychoanalysis began in 1976 when I came upon the clinical work and scholarly research of John Weir Perry (*The Far Side of Madness*, 1974), a Jungian analyst who followed carefully the recurring images and themes of his patients who were undergoing brief psychotic disorders. Perry found extraordinary parallels, or analogous relations, between the images and themes in his psychotic patients' delusions and hallucinations and those found in the myths of sacral kingship and the rituals of the ancient new year festivals in cultures around the world on the threshold of the Urban Revolution.

The 10 recurring images and themes common to the myths of sacral kingship, the rituals of the ancient new year festival, and the content of the delusions and hallucinations of Perry's patients undergoing brief psychotic disorders are the center, death, return to the beginning, cosmic conflict, threat of the opposite sex, apotheosis, sacred marriage, new birth, new society, and a quadrated world. These are the common preoccupations of many psychotic patients who feel they have died or are dying or have been reborn at the center of the universe. They are God or the devil or some godlike person or celebrity. They have a mission in life to battle against the forces of evil, chaos, or a rival political party in order to renew and bring about a new society organized around love and so on. While Perry's clinical work attended to the personal aspects of psychotic material, his intellectual interests were captured by the recurring images and themes—the phylogenetic or, for him, the archetypal, aspect. Perry's work did not attend to an analogous stage in normal development but in accordance with my interpretation of the material I suggested

that the analogous stage is “adolescence” and when I discussed this with John Weir Perry, he agreed.

Based on Freud’s and Perry’s work, I constructed the following schemas:

	Freud	Perry
1. Stage of normal development	phallic stage	adolescent genital stage
2. Form of psychopathology	obsessional neurosis	brief psychotic disorder
3. Stage in cultural evolution	totemic fraternal clan	Urban Revolution
4. Myth	myths of the hero	sacral kingship
5. Ritual	sacrificial totemic feast	ancient new year festival

With these two schemas side by side, one can easily see Freud and Perry address different stages in both psychological development and cultural evolution, and different psychopathologies as well.

Now I invite you to hold all of that in mind. We’ll come back to it shortly. In 1974 I began working with a severely disturbed autistic boy. Over the course of five years, he drew, with crayons, 1,250 drawings. Each drawing was a large circle or disc. He described it as a “mouth.” He said it “has a star in it.” The “mouth is closing.” The mouth “bites” and has “teeth.” Because he was profoundly autistic and could not tell more of a story about “the mouth,” I explored the symbolism of the mouth in myths and rituals from around the world to see what it might reveal. What I discovered is that the mouth has five basic meanings.

The mouth is:

1. the hero’s passageway to death,

2. the birth canal of the reborn hero,
3. the portal through which the soul embodies,
4. the portal through which the soul disembodies, and
5. an image of integral consciousness.

Reflecting on autistic dynamics, I formulated that the autistic child is, poetically speaking, a disembodied soul with the spiritual task of embodying—that is, entering and being swallowed by the mouth of the body, the family, and the world. If the spiritual task is embodiment, then the psychological task is one of leaving autistic encapsulation and then bonding and attaching to a mother. I then discovered the myth pertaining to the soul entering the body is, curiously enough, the myth of death and rebirth, and the ritual analogue is the funerary ritual.

In the myth of death and rebirth and the ritual of the funerary ceremony, one dies so as to be reborn. Similarly, by abandoning autistic encapsulation and surrendering (dying) to a mother, one is psychologically born. I found this beautifully represented in an ancient Egyptian funerary ceremony called “The Ritual of Opening the Mouth,” which dates back to Egypt’s Urban Revolution. In death the soul was seen as separated from the body, but through this ritual the mouth was opened, the soul reunited with the body, the person was reborn as a spiritual being in the beyond, and was presented with food offerings, including an animal’s breast. But this ancient Egyptian funerary ritual is not the only ritual to explicitly or implicitly be associated with the myth of death and rebirth. Virtually all funerary rituals do that.

I then traced the roots of the ancient funerary ritual past the Urban Revolution, deep into prehistory and all the way back to its origins in the Paleolithic period.

Analogous Relations to Orality and to the Adolescent Genital Stage

orality stage—early infancy	adolescent genital stage
autism	brief psychotic disorder
Paleolithic	Urban Revolution
myth of death and rebirth	myth of sacral kingship
funerary ritual	ancient new year festival

This schema naturally raised an interesting question: If there are analogous relations between orality, autism, the Paleolithic, the myth of death and rebirth, and the funerary ritual and analogous relations between the genital stage, the brief psychotic disorder, the Urban Revolution, the myth of sacral kingship, and the ancient new year festival, what might we find between these two schemas, specifically in relation to the anal stage and the Neolithic period, and the phallic stage and the High Neolithic period?

The following is a brief presentation of the analogous relations I found between the stages of psychological development and cultural evolution.

Oral Stage and the Paleolithic Period

Before getting into the Paleolithic, I want to note that while studying the literature on chimpanzee behavior, I made a startling discovery of something that was absent. Chimpanzees have all sorts of ways of greeting one another, but they don't say goodbye! They greet each other in accordance to rank and relation, they celebrate reunions, and they suffer bitterly the deaths of their loved ones, but in their natural habitat they don't signal goodbye or anticipate absence.

Throughout hominin evolution our Australopithecine and Homo ancestors developed remarkable capacities such as the ability to make stone tools and control fire. But at the beginning of the Middle Paleolithic, 100,000 years ago, something amazing happened. Our ancestors began saying goodbye to their loved ones. They began to bury the dead with amulets, tools, and food. As a cultural defense against grief, death wishes, and survival guilt, they invented the funerary ritual and its corresponding myth of death and rebirth. And suddenly we are back to the oral stage, autism, the myth of death and rebirth, and the funerary ritual.

The spiritual innovations of the Paleolithic period were the funerary ritual, in which the soul was sent off to be greeted by ancestors in the beyond; the amulet, which contains the souls of ancestors; ritual cannibalism, in which the soul of the other is concretely internalized through the act of eating the flesh of other humans; and pictorial representation, in which the image was seen as containing the soul of that which was represented. Common to all of these Paleolithic innovations was the newly emerging basic spiritual concept of the soul, an essential quality constellated in the ceremonial greeting between mother and infant and elaborated throughout the life cycle in every meeting and ritual that confirms and reconfirms the individual and the group. And it is that ceremonial greeting that is so painfully absent with the autistic child.

Interestingly enough, our Paleolithic ancestors also began a sculptural tradition of carving female figurines with motherly attributes. This tradition lasted millennia and was common to Paleolithic cultures the world over. Our Paleolithic ancestors were nomadic hunter-gatherers who feasted or starved at Mother Nature's whim. Their culture was embedded in nature, just as the infant's psyche is embedded in the mother-infant relation. The fusion of culture and nature is analogous to the infant's fusion of self and mother. Thus, both the Paleolithic of cultural evolution and the oral stage of psychological development share in common the qualities of

unity, fusion, oneness, and the nascent emergence of psychological subjectivity—the soul. Note that I am speaking not only of libido development in the narrowest sense but of object relations as well.

The dramatic advances in Upper Paleolithic cultures began 50,000 years ago, and while some peoples have lived Paleolithic lives well into modern history, the Neolithic began in some places as early as 10,000 years ago; the High Neolithic 7,000 years ago; and the Urban Revolution, or beginning of civilization, started about 5,000 years ago.

Anal Stage and the Neolithic Period

The anal stage child develops sphincter control to manage feces and urine and enters into battles with mothering figures for control over toilet training and efforts toward autonomy. The anal stage, in addition to anal eroticism, is about the separation of mother and child, control and loss of control, and the establishment of distinctions between inside and outside, here and there, now and then. If orality is about oneness, anality is about twoness. And the Neolithic Revolution was all about twoness. In the Neolithic Revolution, human culture separated itself from nature by building walls—walls around the village, walls for permanent houses, and walls around the hearth, converting it into an oven and a kiln. The Paleolithic tradition of making maternal figurines continued, but in the Neolithic they were made of fired clay. Soft clay, like feces, could also be fashioned into new forms such as pots—ceramic “walls” containing an open space. Outside the house was a garden established within designated limits for growing the first domesticated crops. Domesticated livestock were also kept within bounds. Agriculture, animal husbandry, permanent houses, and stable villages afforded the possibility of gathering wealth and developing trade with neighboring communities. No longer victims of Mother Nature’s whims,

Neolithic communities took control over food production, and when nature resisted, they made a one-sided contract to trade with her in the form of a ritual sacrifice, which appears to have been the spiritual innovation of the Neolithic. Ritual sacrifice, ostensibly, protected inhabitants of the house and assured the success of the hunt. But psychologically, ritual sacrifice defends us against our feelings of powerlessness by granting a magical means of appealing to the goddess. The themes of separation from nature and twoness suggest the corresponding myth might pertain to the fall from grace, from oneness, or the expulsion from paradise.

The Phallic (or First Genital) Stage and the High Neolithic

The High Neolithic was about ambition and power. The small villages of the previous Neolithic period were transformed into large settlements in the High Neolithic. Technology increased and so did humanity's control over nature. In the High Neolithic, ceramic mother goddesses appeared with children or male consorts, and images of stars and suns were etched into the rocks signaling the beginning of a changing orientation from the bountiful earth goddess to the fertilizing sky god. The Oedipal triangle of the phallic stage involves a child, a mother, and a father. In the High Neolithic, I speculate that agricultural technologies and religion were organized around another Oedipal triangle—human culture, the mother goddess, and the father god. Not only would it make sense this was the epoch that gave rise to what Freud called the sacrificial totemic feast, but archeological evidence and anthropological parallels lead me to speculate that the ritual innovation of the High Neolithic was not simply the sacrifice but the sacrifice of the primal man to bring fertility to the women and the fields as was seen in planting and harvesting rituals. These rituals are based on sexual knowledge but at the same time employ magical control over the gods by offering sacrifices. Relying on magic, they simultaneously deny

that sexual knowledge, the role of the father in reproduction, and their patricidal wishes, as well. The emphasis on phallic imagery embedded in the ambitious undertaking of giant earthworks, huge stone structures, and menhirs (or stone pillars) is also a defense against feelings of vulnerability, weakness, impotence, and castration. The great phallic menhir inspires us with its power but, standing alone, confesses to having been cut off. And who was it that built those great earthworks? Some have speculated it was legions of slaves, whom we could well imagine were forced to feel the vulnerability, weakness, impotence, and castration of their masters. The stone circles, circular earthworks, and tunnel tombs are also reminiscent of the vulva and vagina.

The Oedipal struggles and ambitions of the High Neolithic lead me to speculate the mythic analogue might be the hero's battle with the dragon. And hero mythology is the basis for legends like Oedipus Rex.

Another phallic component of the High Neolithic was the development of metallurgy, from which metal plow tips and spear points were fashioned. These then dramatically transformed both farming and warfare. High Neolithic ambitions were also evident in the construction of large earthworks—man-made ditches and mounds of exceptionally large proportions. At some sites, etchings of daggers, plows, and axes have been carved into the megaliths, and small carved phalli have also been unearthed. While the carved phalli are of small proportions, the menhirs are huge phallic stones that stand alone, in lines or in circles, as at Stonehenge. Many High Neolithic sites reveal an awareness of the seasons and the movement of the stars, which reflect the shift of attention from the bounty of the earth to the fertility of the sky—that is, from the parthenogenesis of the mother goddess to the sexual reproduction of the father god and mother goddess in their sacred marriage.

The Adolescent Genital Stage and the Urban Revolution

The genital stage of adolescence marks the full shift of orientation from the “mother” of childhood and the home to the “father” of adulthood and the world. The pre-Oedipal and Oedipal dynamics of childhood are reworked and integrated such that incestuous bonds are broken, identifications with adult role models are established, and tender and passionate adult love becomes possible. With the teenage development of abstract reasoning, the young adult begins to entertain political, philosophical, and religious thoughts.

The genital stage dynamics of the adolescent, I suggest, are analogous to the Urban Revolution, when cultures around the world spontaneously positioned themselves in relation to male gods and liberated themselves from the circularity of time by inventing calendars. They also escaped the limitations of oral traditions and entered history with the invention of writing. With calendars and writing, leadership of the group fell to visionaries who became the god-kings on earth, identified with the king-gods in heaven. With these modern innovations, the previous nonliterate High Neolithic cultures of old expanded and diversified in the Urban Revolution with a newfound order in sacral kingship.

In sacral kingship the god-king’s mission was to create a kingdom on earth in accordance with the king-god’s kingdom in heaven. Significant features of the myth of sacral kingship and the ancient new year festival, which commemorated it, are the king’s heroic battle with the chaos monster, the sacred marriage of the king and queen, the vision of a new world order, and the establishment of a special relation between the god-king and the king-god. In the king’s heroic battle with the chaos dragon in myth and ritual, we see a cultural reflection of the Oedipal battle. The mythic union of the king and queen parallels the adolescent’s new relation to the opposite sex. And the god-king’s vision of a new world order is analogous to the adolescent’s establishment of an identity and a worldview. The ancient new year festival grants a sense of

meaning and naturally defends us from an awareness of the ultimate meaninglessness of our finite, mortal existence by granting us a special relationship to God or godhood itself.

When Freud formulated his phylogenetic fantasy, he associated the phallic stage and the obsessional neurosis. Though I am unable here to go into the detail necessary for a full elaboration, I will simply note that I associate the first stage with the psychopathology of infantile autism; the second with obsessional neurosis; the third with conversion hysteria; and the fourth with the brief psychotic disorder.

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Four Stages of Psychomythic Development

This revisioning of “the phylogenetic project of psychoanalysis” recognizes the seeds of our psychodynamics, not in the psycho-Lamarckian inheritance of deeds done but in the symbolization of our primate social instincts. It also recognizes how our psychodynamics entered into a dialogue with our cultural evolution in a way that can be traced synchronically. That is to say, the oral dynamics and early object relations of the individual are expressed in the cultural dynamics of the Paleolithic, the anal dynamics are expressed in the Neolithic, the phallic

dynamics are expressed in the High Neolithic, and the genital stage dynamics are expressed in the Urban Revolution.

In addition to demonstrating how the vicissitudes of psychosexual development appear to have shaped our prehistoric cultural evolution, I also note that each cultural stage brought with it technologies and spiritual innovations that became a part of our cultural inheritance by filling language with metaphors that in turn shape our experience of psychosexual development. Accordingly, I propose a sequence of stages, so to speak, each of which is a constellation of metaphors on the threshold of a psychosexual stage and a stage in cultural evolution. I describe these as stages in psychomythic development. They are (1) death and unity; (2) birth and separation; (3) ascension and conflict; and (4) transformation and the establishment of order. Each of the four stages is associated with a constellation of metaphors that might be useful in informing clinical listening. The term “psychomythic” is based on Freud’s term “psychomythology” referring to the vague perception of one’s own psychic apparatus, which creates illusions that are projected onto the world, into the future and out into the beyond—in other words, psychology projected onto the walls of the universe in the forms of religious, philosophical, and political thought.

Daniel S. Benveniste, Ph.D., is clinical psychologist in Bellevue, Washington. He is the author of The Interwoven Lives of Sigmund, Anna, and W. Ernest Freud: Three Generations of Psychoanalysis (2015) and is an honorary member of the American Psychoanalytic Association.