

I Am a Parrot (Red)

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The primitive Brazilian Indian can accept without thought of contradiction anything whatsoever that is told him. [H. Baldus, 1931]

There are some animals which have played so decisive a role in the history of the history of religions that they may truly be seen as emblems (if not totems!) of our discipline. One might recall Saint Nilus and his camel which so animated discussions of sacrifice in the early quarter of this century (see now the major review of this tradition by J. Henninger)<sup>1</sup> or, more recently, the pangolin in the important researches of Mary Douglas on taboo, dirt, and systems of order<sup>2</sup> (see further the splendid parallel study by Ralph Bulmer, “Why Is a Cassowary Not a Bird?”).<sup>3</sup> However the most notable creature of our time is, perhaps, the Brazilian parrot in the traditions of the Bororo tribe, which serves as the “*mythe de référence*” for the three published volumes of Lévi-Strauss’s *Mythologiques* despite formidable competition from jaguars, armadillos, and the like.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is due not only to the central role of the bird among the Bororo,<sup>5</sup> but also because the bird has a “prehistory”—

<sup>1</sup> J. Henninger, “Ist der sogenannte Nilus-Berichte brauchbare religionsgeschichtliche Quelle?” *Anthropos*, L (1955), 81–148.

<sup>2</sup> M. Douglas, “Animals in Lele Religious Thought,” *Africa*, I (1957), 46–58 (reprinted in J. Middleton, ed., *Myth and Cosmos* [Garden City, 1967], pp. 231–247); M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York, 1966), passim.

<sup>3</sup> R. Bulmer, “Why Is the Cassowary Not a Bird? A Problem of Zoological Taxonomy among the Karam of the New Guinea Highlands,” *Man*, II (1967), 5–25.

<sup>4</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York, 1969), pp. 35–37 et passim.

<sup>5</sup> C. Albisetti-A. J. Venturelli, *Enciclopédia Bororo* (Campo Grande, 1962), Vol. I, pp. 725–730; Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, esp. p. 47.

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historians of religion have met the Bororo and their parrots before in an ethnographic report which has continued to fascinate scholars from its first mention in 1894 to the present.

The report is given in the narrative of the second Brazilian expedition of Karl von den Steinen (1887–1888), *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens* (first edition, 1894; second edition, 1897).<sup>6</sup> Von den Steinen, after noting that in order to understand the native “we must put totally out of our minds the boundaries between man and the animal,”<sup>7</sup> goes on to report that “the Bororos boast of themselves that they are red parrots (Araras).” This, he insists, is not merely to claim that after death the Bororo become parrots or that parrots have been transformed into men. The Bororo conceive of themselves simultaneously as birds and men: “They think of themselves as parrots”;<sup>8</sup> “the red parrots are Bororo, indeed the Bororo go even further as we have already noted and say ‘we are parrots’ [*wir sind Araras*].”<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, von den Steinen does introduce metamorphic imagery: the Bororo call themselves parrots “as a caterpillar says that he is a butterfly”;<sup>10</sup> and more explicitly (and in apparent contradiction to his previous remarks), “the Bororo are parrots because their dead transform themselves into parrots,”<sup>11</sup> “[their] belief is that the Bororo man or woman after death becomes a red parrot.”<sup>12</sup>

No study of the Bororo listed in H. Baldus’ definitive bibliography of the ethnology of Brazilian tribes that I have seen independently confirms von den Steinen’s claim that the Bororo flatly assert: “Die roten Araras sind Bororo . . . wir sind Araras.”<sup>13</sup> Where it has continued to be repeated and discussed is in books on “primitive mentality” where it takes its place in what Malinowski termed “the lengthy litanies of threaded statement which

<sup>6</sup> K. von den Steinen, *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens* (Berlin, 1894), esp. pp. 352 f.; 2d ed. (Berlin, 1897), esp. pp. 305 f. (In this paper I cite the 1st ed.) See further the translation by E. Schaden with a valuable introduction to von den Steinen’s work by H. Baldus, *Entre os aborígenes do Brasil Central* (São Paulo, 1940), esp. pp. 452 f. There is an evaluation of von den Steinen’s material on the Bororo (largely philological) by M. Cruz, “Em torno do livro ‘Entre os aborígenes do Brasil Central’ de von den Steinen,” *Revista do Arquivo municipal*, LXXXIV (1942), 163–172.

<sup>7</sup> Von den Steinen, *Unter den Naturvölkern*, p. 351.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 352 f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 512.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 511.

<sup>13</sup> H. Baldus, *Bibliografia crítica da etnologia Brasileira* (São Paulo, 1954), s.v. *Bororo*.

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make us anthropologists feel silly and the savage look ridiculous.”<sup>14</sup> Thus we learn from a Frazer or a Cassirer that the Trumai of North Brazil say that they are aquatic animals, the natives of Mabuig think of themselves as cassowaries, the headman of the Dieri tribe was thought to be a seed-bearing plant—and that the Bororo say that they are red parrots.<sup>15</sup>

This paper will consider a number of representative examples of the use and interpretation of this particular utterance, “We are red parrots,” in the history of the discussion of “primitive mentality.” I intend by this study not only a chapter in the history of our discipline, but also a beginning attempt to clarify a thorny methodological question: How should the historian of religion interpret a religious statement which is apparently contrary to fact? The Bororo is not a parrot—as one psychiatrist noted, presumably applying the ultimate test of speciation, “he does not try to mate with other parakeets”<sup>16</sup>—and any interpretation of von den Steinen’s report must begin with this primary fact.

Alfred Hitchcock has demonstrated that it does not spoil a mystery to give away the solution at the beginning, so let us start with what the Bororo intended to communicate and then work our way backward. The Bororo never said that they were red parrots in the sense that von den Steinen and the majority of his later commentators understood them. They declared several times, according to von den Steinen’s own account, that when they are dead they will become red parrots, and thus they may speak of themselves as being red parrots in the present “as a caterpillar says that he is a butterfly.” The identification is quite specific. Only the Bororo will become red parrots. When pressed, they speculated with von den Steinen that members of other tribes will become other species of birds, that Negroes will become black vultures and the white man would probably become a white heron.<sup>17</sup> This belief in the transformation of the Bororo after

<sup>14</sup> B. Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Primitive Society* (Paterson, 1964: rp.), p. 126.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3d ed. (London, 1911–15), Vol. VIII, pp. 206–208; E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven, 1944), pp. 82 f.

<sup>16</sup> W. Percy, “The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process,” *Psychiatry*, XXIV (1961), 39–52. This quote is on p. 48, n. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Von den Steinen, p. 512. The ‘solution’ was already unambiguously recognized by É. Durkheim and M. Mauss in their famous essay on classification (1901–2): “The Bororo sincerely imagines himself to be a parrot; at least, though he

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death into red parrots is well attested in the ethnographic literature, for example, Lévi-Strauss: "As for the animals, some belong to the world of men—birds and fish, above all—and some, as in the case of certain terrestrial animals, to the physical universe. The Bororo consider, therefore, that their human shape is transitory: midway between that of the fish (whose name they have adopted for themselves) and the *arara* (in whose guise they will complete the cycle of their transmigrations)." <sup>18</sup> This belief in transmigration into birds needs to be distinguished from the kind of phenomena we have usually termed "totemic" and, more particularly, from the notions of animal guardians, nagualism, the alter ego, and visionary animal transformations (such as the widely read report of Carlos Castenada 'becoming' a black crow) <sup>19</sup> which are common in the Americas, especially in association with shamanistic traditions. <sup>20</sup> Such beliefs are likewise found among the Bororo, who believe their shamans to be capable of assuming animal forms to

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assumes the characteristic form only after he is dead, in this life he is to that animal what the caterpillar is to the butterfly" (Durkheim-Mauss, *Primitive Classification* [Chicago, 1963], pp. 6 f.).

<sup>18</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (New York, 1964), p. 219. Cf. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, p. 47: "The Bororos believe in a complicated system of transmigration of souls: the latter are thought to be embodied for a time in the macaws." For other reports, see T. Koch-Grünberg, *Zum Animismus der südamerikanischen Indianer* (Leiden, 1900), pp. 10–19, esp. pp. 12, 14; A. Tonelli, "Il nome dei vivi e dei degunti (aroe) presso gl'Indi Orari (Bororo Orientali) del Matto Grosso," in *Festschrift P. W. Schmidt* (Vienna, 1928), pp. 734–739, esp. pp. 738 f.; A. Colbacchini and C. Albisetti, *Os Boróros Orientais* (São Paulo–Rio de Janeiro, 1942), p. 87; M. Cruz, "O cemitério dos Boróros," *Revista do Arquivo Municipal*, XCVIII (1944), 127–130; G. Mussolini, "Os meios de defesa contra a moléstia e a morte em duas tribos brasileiras: Kaingang de Duque de Caxias e Boróro oriental," *Revista do Arquivo Municipal*, CX (1946), 7–152, esp. 67, 69 f., 100; C. Albisetti and A. J. Venturelli, *Enciclopédia Bororo*, Vol. I, pp. 100–104, esp. p. 102.

<sup>19</sup> C. Castenada, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley–Los Angeles, 1968), pp. 90–94, 128 f. See the remark of Don Juan: "Am I a man or a bird? I'm a man who knows how to become a bird" (p. 45). For the relationship of crow, "wizard" and animal transformations among the Yaqui, see R. L. Beals, *The Contemporary Culture of the Cáhita Indians* (Washington, D.C., 1945), pp. 196–198.

<sup>20</sup> For a general theoretical discussion, see the curious study by O. Falsirol, *Il totemismo e l'animalismo dell'anima* (Naples, 1941). On the complex subject of animal guardians, nagualism, and the alter ego (even further distinctions are required, see C. Wisdom, "The Supernatural World and Curing," in S. Tax, editor, *Heritage of Conquest* [Glencoe, 1952], p. 122) see the comprehensive monographs by R. Benedict, *The Concept of the Guardian Spirit in North America* (Menasha, 1923); G. Foster, "Nagualism in Mexico and Guatemala," *Acta Americana*, II (1944), 85–103; and J. Haeckel, "Die Vorstellung vom Zweiten Ich in den amerikanischen Hochkulturen," *Wiener Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte und Linguistik*, IX (1952), 124–188. Of particular interest are the studies by H. Baldus, "Supernatural Relations with Animals among Indians of Eastern and Southern Brazil," *Proceedings of the 30th International Congress of Americanists* (São Paulo, 1955), pp. 195–198; and O. Zerries, "Die Vorstellung zum Zweiten Ich und die Rolle der Harpye in der Kultur der Naturvölker Südamerikas," *Anthropos*, LVII (1962),

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perform a variety of functions—including becoming parrots to gather fruit.<sup>21</sup>

Von den Steinen appears to have realized the possibility of this solution. With one exception, no commentator on the Bororo tradition has noted that, following his report, von den Steinen speculated that the formula “we are birds” is a later, secondary form. The original formula, he suggested, was “I become a bird” or “I have a [soul] bird.”<sup>22</sup> However, this history of the concept does not remove the difficulty of the saying, “We are araras.” This, von den Steinen continued to believe, rests on the inability of the Indian to distinguish animals from men.

On both internal and external grounds, we are justified in concluding that von den Steinen fundamentally misinterpreted the Bororo’s intention. His own account predominantly witnesses to a postmortem belief in the transformation of the Bororo into a parrot, and he offers a theory of the original form of the saying which requires this future understanding of the statement. The postmortem identification among the Bororo is independently confirmed by other ethnologists, the present identification of the Bororo as parrots is not. The theory which von den Steinen offers to account for the present identification, that the Bororo cannot distinguish between men and animals, is patently false even on the basis of von den Steinen’s own report and owes more to his reading of contemporary anthropological theory than to field observation.<sup>23</sup>

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889–914. Though concerned with a different culture area, see the perceptive remarks by E. Z. Vogt, “Human Souls and Animal Spirits in Zincantan,” in *Échanges et communications: Mélanges offerts à Claude Lévi-Strauss* (The Hague, 1970), Vol. II, pp. 1148–1167.

<sup>21</sup> For general material on South American shamanism, see the various articles by A. Métraux, esp. “Le shamanisme chez les indiens de l’Amérique du Sud tropicale,” *Acta Americana*, II (1944), 197–219, 320–341; and “Religion and Shamanism,” in *Handbook of South American Indians* (Washington, D.C., 1949), Vol. V, 559–599. The Bororo material, with its complex distinctions between the *bari* and *aroettowarare*, has been discussed by Colbacchini and Albisetti, *Os Boróros Orientais*, pp. 87–133; A. Tonelli, “Alcune notizie sui Baere e sugli Aroettowarare ‘medici-stregoni’ degli indi Bororo-Orari del Matto Grosso,” *Atti del XXII Congresso Internazionale degli Americanisti: Roma, 1926* (Rome, 1928), Vol. II, pp. 395–413; R. Lowie, “The Bororo,” *Handbook of South American Indians* (Washington, D.C., 1946), Vol. I, pp. 432 f.; G. Mussolini, “Os meios de defesa contra a moléstia e a morte,” 74–93 et passim.; Albisetti and Venturelli, *Enciclopédia Bororo*, Vol I, pp. 115–120, 239–253; and Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, pp. 222–224. For the detail about becoming parrots, see Colbacchini and Albisetti, p. 131; and Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, p. 318.

<sup>22</sup> Von den Steinen, pp. 512 f. Cf. N. W. Thomas, “Transmigration (Primitive),” in J. Hastings, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York, 1922), Vol. XII, p. 429.

<sup>23</sup> See below, note 32.

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I know of only two later scholars who have brought this Bororo belief in transmigration directly to bear on von den Steinen's report: Rafael Karsten, the Finnish anthropologist, in *The Civilisation of South American Indians* (1926) and, more fully, in his posthumous volume, *Studies in the Religion of the South American Indians East of the Andes* (1964), and the Dutch historian of religions, Th. P. van Baaren, in a brief review of the von den Steinen tradition published in 1969.<sup>24</sup> Karsten, in his later monograph, provides a rich comparative framework for his thesis that the notion of the transmigration of souls into animals and plants is one of the key elements in South American Indian religion. While much of his material is drawn from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ethnography, his evidence is strikingly confirmed by more recent studies, such as Otto Zerries's work among the Waika and Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff's rich report on the Desana.<sup>25</sup> Karsten claims: "All animals have once been men, or all men animals. This seems to be a tenet explicitly or implicitly held by all [South American] tribes."<sup>26</sup> However, his evidence for this assertion is an unconvincing mixture of animal clan names, food taboos, alter ego traditions, and nagualism, along with well-documented beliefs in transmigration.<sup>27</sup> It is within this framework of "the doctrine of metempsychosis" that Karsten places the Bororo tradition. Almost every important animal is "regarded as

<sup>24</sup> R. Karsten, *The Civilisation of the South American Indians* (London, 1926); R. Karsten (A. Runeberg and M. Webster, editors), *Studies in the Religion of the South American Indians East of the Andes* (Helsinki, 1964), esp. pp. 50–74; Th. P. van Baaren, "Are the Bororo Parrots or Are We?" in *Liber Amicorum: Studies in Honor of Professor Dr. C. J. Bleeker* (Leiden, 1969), pp. 8–13.

<sup>25</sup> O. Zerries, "Die Vorstellungen der Waika-Indianer des oberen Orinoko (Venezuela) über die menschliche Seele," *Proceedings of the Thirty-second International Congress of Americanists: Copenhagen, 1956* (Copenhagen, 1958), pp. 105–113; Zerries, *Waika: Die kulturgeschichtliche Stellung der Waika-Indianer des oberen Orinoko im Rahmen der Völkerkunde Südamerikas* (Frankfurt am Main, 1964), Vol. I, pp. 237–284, esp. pp. 256–264; G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos: The Sexual and Religious Symbolism of the Tukano Indians* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 63–65, 192 f. et passim.

<sup>26</sup> Karsten, *Civilisation*, p. 294, cf. p. 435; *Studies*, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> Karsten's material in *Studies* from the Ona (p. 51), Toba (p. 54), Gurani (pp. 55 f.), Itonama (p. 56), Gayacatazes (p. 61), Piaroa (p. 62), and Auracanian (p. 69) tribes appears to reflect some doctrine of transmigration. His material from the Auracanian (pp. 51 f.), Juris (p. 61), Vainumá (pp. 61 f.), Gonjiros, and Awawaks (pp. 62–64, 73 f.) seems only to reflect the presence of animal clan names. His general discussion (pp. 52 f.) and material from the Jibaro (pp. 56–59, 64 f.), Caribs and Arawaks (pp. 65 f.), Checo (p. 67), Quichan (pp. 67 f.), and some Ecuadorian tribes reflects nagualism and related themes of magical transformation. His material on pp. 71–73 clearly pertains to alter-ego beliefs. (N.B. I have only reviewed the material as given in Karsten. I have neither checked the accuracy of his summary of the ethnography nor checked his original sources against more recent reports.)

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the temporary or permanent abode of a disembodied human soul. Thus the Bororo identify themselves with red macaws: the Bororo are macaws and the macaws are Bororo. The souls of both men and women are believed to transmigrate into this bird.”<sup>28</sup> His report on the Bororo, derived entirely from von den Steinen, is unfortunately marred by combining transmigration motifs with food taboos, hunting rituals, magical transformations, etc.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, he has understood the Bororo claim as it was intended. Professor van Baaren, confining himself to a close reading and analysis of von den Steinen’s text (and in apparent ignorance of Karsten’s work) argues a similar conclusion: “According to the Bororo, man and arara are two different manifestations of one and the same entity. Man is potentially an arara; this, however, is quite a different thing from stating that he is one actually, here and now. Man and arara are not identical in the sense that a man is here and now at the same time an arara: as long as he is a man he is only potentially an arara. The comparison of caterpillar and

<sup>28</sup> Karsten, *Studies*, p. 59. Compare the placing of the Bororo material within a similar context, without however providing Karsten’s theoretical framework, in H. Baldus, *Indianerstudien im nordöstlichen Chaco* (Leipzig, 1931), p. 81.

<sup>29</sup> Karsten, *Studies*, pp. 59–61, provides a summary account of the Bororo entirely derived from von den Steinen. With respect to his interpretive framework, several details may be noted: (a) The plucking of the feathers of the tame parrots and the painting of the plucked spots with a sap that turns them yellow is not a “precaution against its spirit” (pp. 59, 61). It produces yellow feathers which are highly prized in ornamentation (Lowie, *Handbook*, Vol. I, p. 424). The same practice among the Desana involves solar symbolism (Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos*, p. 187); this may be the case among the Bororo. (b) The “blessing” of a slain animal (von den Steinen’s term) by the *bari* does not seem to be related to a “totemic” concept (*Studies*, p. 60), but rather is a propitiation of the animal’s guardian spirit (O. Zerries, “Primitive South America and the West Indies,” in W. Krickenberg, et al., *Pre-Columbian American Religions* [New York, 1968], p. 270, who follows Karsten’s earlier understanding of the ritual in Karsten, *Civilisation*, p. 484). For other interpretations and descriptions of the ritual, see R. Waehnelde, “Exploração da Provincia do Matto Grosso,” *Revista trimensal do Instituto historico y geographico do Brasil*, XXVI (1864), 216; von den Steinen, pp. 491–493; V. Frič and P. Radin, “Contributions to the Study of the Bororo Indians,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, XXXVI (1906), 392; M. Cruz, “O exorcismo da caça, do peixe e das frutas entre os Borôro,” *Revista do Arquivo Municipal*, LXXXIX (1943), 151–156; Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 204. This needs also to be related to the complex rituals surrounding the *mori* hunt and to the portions of any hunt set aside for the *bari as mori* (see Colbacchini and Albisetti, *Os Bororos Orientais*, pp. 83 f.; Lowie, *Handbook*, Vol. I, p. 428; Albisetti and Venturelli, *Enciclopédia Bororo*, Vol. I, pp. 245–248, 803 f.; and Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, pp. 219–221). (c) For the *bari*’s transformation into animals—a belief which ought not be combined with a general notion of transmigration—see the material cited in n. 23 above. (d) The animal clan names cannot be confused with food taboos in order to suggest a “totemic” system. As Lévi-Strauss has noted, among the Bororo the clan species are freely killed and eaten (Lévi-Strauss, “Contribution à l’étude de l’organisation sociale des indiens Bororo,” *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, XXVIII [1936], 298), while the most rigid food taboos pertain to the deer, a “non-totemic species” (Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* [Chicago, 1966], p. 99).

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butterfly leads us to conclude that the arara is a form in which man manifests himself after a transformation, after death.”<sup>30</sup>

I should not like to suggest that the correction of von den Steinen’s present interpretation of the identification and the substitution of a postmortem understanding does any more than shift the problem (although, *prima facie*, it *seems* less difficult). For us, the meaning of the phrase “we will become parrots after death” remains as problematic as “we are now parrots” and, apparently, just as contrary to fact. But the exploration of the meaning of this future identification may be set aside for future study. For now it suffices to say that, for me, the key to exegesis lies in Lévi-Strauss’s observation of the Bororo differentiation between aquatic, terrestrial, and aerial realms and the animals associated with them: the Bororo were fish, they are now men, they will become birds.<sup>31</sup>

Leaving this question aside, it is possible to perform a “thought experiment.” What if we did not have this apparent tension in von den Steinen between realized and futuristic parrothood and the supporting evidence of transmigration beliefs culled from later scholars? *What if we only knew that the Bororo insist that they are men and parrots at one and the same time?* The majority of scholars who have quoted von den Steinen have assumed that this was the case, and they have followed von den Steinen’s mistaken lead in assuming that the key to exegesis lay in the fact that the Bororo cannot distinguish between animals and men or between different species of animals.<sup>32</sup>

The earliest use of the Bororo tradition, and one that remains dominant in the literature, is as an illustration of the alleged inability of primitive man to make distinctions. It is all but impos-

<sup>30</sup> Van Baaren, p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> See above, note 18.

<sup>32</sup> The statement in von den Steinen (p. 351) admits no qualification: “Wir müssen uns die Grenzen zwischen Mensch und Tier vollständig wegdenken.” This thesis is patent nonsense, as demonstrated by von den Steinen’s own anecdote about the differing transformations of three “species” of men into three species of birds quoted above. The later work of the Salesians and Lévi-Strauss have revealed the presence of a complex system of Bororo taxonomies. Similarly, his claim of the lack of distinction between animals and men can be refuted by von den Steinen’s observation, in the same passage (p. 351) that “the animal has no bow and arrow or maize pestle” although he insists that, for the Bororo, this constitutes a “mere minor difference.” Nevertheless, von den Steinen’s statement continues to be quoted as characteristic of primitive thought in works by anthropological amateurs, e.g., W. Shumaker, *Literature and the Irrational: A Study in Anthropological Backgrounds* (New York, 1960: rp. 1966), p. 93.

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sible to recover the origins of this regnant notion.<sup>33</sup> Certainly its most sophisticated nineteenth-century form was represented by Tylor's argument that the origins of magic are to be found in a misapplication of the Laws of Association of Ideas familiar from the writings of British and Scottish empiricists (especially Locke, Hume, and Mill).<sup>34</sup> This led Tylor to proclaim that "the sense of an absolute psychical distinction between man and beast, so prevalent in the civilised world, is hardly to be found among the lower races."<sup>35</sup> An early use of the Bororo material to illustrate this thesis is found in the works of Frazer. For Frazer, "haziness is the characteristic of the mental vision of the savage. Like the blind man at Bethsaida, he sees men like trees and animals walking in a thick intellectual fog."<sup>36</sup> Totemism was a central illustration of this "haziness," and it is in this connection that Frazer introduces the Bororo material, closely paraphrasing von den Steinen. Frazer notes, however, that "this curious identification of themselves with the birds does not of itself constitute totemism, though it may be said to be totemic in principle."<sup>37</sup> Although most scholars are certain that totemism is not present among the Bororo, the totemic interpretation of the identification has persisted, occurring most recently in Jensen's *Myth and Cult*.<sup>38</sup>

It was the publication, in 1910, of L. Lévy-Bruhl's *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* which won for the Bororo a secure place in literature. Lévy-Bruhl's most famous postulate was the *loi de participation* which he defined: "In the collective representations of primitive mentality objects, beings, phenomena can

<sup>33</sup> For an excellent collection of articles tracing the notion of 'primitive,' see A. Montagu, ed., *The Concept of the Primitive* (New York, 1968). Fr. Golz, *Der primitive Mensch und seine Religion* (Gütersloh, 1963) provides a shrewd review of the major theories, far superior to E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford, 1965). See further the valuable article by F. R. Lehmann, "Der Begriff 'Urdummheit' in der ethnologischen und religionswissenschaftlichen Anschauungen von K. Th. Preuss, Ad. E. Jensen und G. Murray," *Sociologus*, II (1952), 131-145.

<sup>34</sup> E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 3d ed. (London, 1891: rp. New York, 1958), Vol. I, p. 116.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 53.

<sup>36</sup> J. G. Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy* (London, 1910), Vol. IV, p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 576; cf. Vol. I, p. 119. Frazer also cites the Bororo material in *The Golden Bough*, 3d ed. (n. 15 above), Vol. III, p. 34; Vol. VIII, pp. 207 f. It does not appear in the previous editions.

<sup>38</sup> A. Jensen, *Myth and Cult among Primitive Peoples* (Chicago, 1963), p. 148. For earlier totemic interpretations, see E. Reuterskiöld, *Die Entstehung der Speisesakramente* (Heidelberg, 1912), pp. 47-49, 82 f.; and "Der Totemismus," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, XV (1912), 1-26, esp. 11, 18; E. S. Hartland, "Totemism," in J. Hastings, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. XII, esp. pp. 405, 407. The presence of totemism among the Bororo is maintained chiefly by Colbacchini-Albisetti, *Os Boróros Orientais*, p. 33.

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be, though in a way incomprehensible to us, both themselves and something other than themselves [à la fois eux-mêmes et autre chose qu'eux-mêmes].”<sup>39</sup> His first, and hence normative, example of this “law” was the Bororo:

For instance, “the Trumai (a tribe of Northern Brazil) say that they are aquatic animals.—The Bororo (a neighboring tribe) boast that they are red araras (parakeets).” This does not merely signify that after their death they become araras, nor that araras are metamorphosed Bororos, and must be treated as such. It is something entirely different. “The Bororos,” says von den Steinen, who would not believe it but finally had to give in to their explicit affirmations, “give one rigidly to understand that they are araras *at the present time*, just as if a caterpillar declared itself to be a butterfly.” It is not a name they give themselves, nor a relationship that they claim. What they desire to express by it is actual identity. That they can be both the human beings they are and the birds of scarlet plumage at the same time, Von den Steinen regards as inconceivable, but to the mentality that is governed by the law of participation there is no difficulty in the matter.<sup>40</sup>

Immediately after this passage, Lévy-Bruhl introduces for the first time the term “prelogical,” of which the Bororo are again to be seen as the normative example.

The citation in Lévy-Bruhl is quite close to von den Steinen’s original. Lévy-Bruhl has added the detail that von den Steinen “could not believe it” and has made one significant alteration in direct quotation. Von den Steinen had asserted that the Bororo understood themselves to be araras just as a caterpillar may speak of himself as a butterfly. Lévy-Bruhl’s version omits the ambiguity between present and future (or the Aristotelian actuality and potentiality) in order to emphasize the element of participation. In his translation, the Bororos insist that “they are araras *at the present time*.” (Compounding the misrepresentation, Lévy-Bruhl italicized his addition of *actuellement*.)<sup>41</sup> The mischief done by this cannot be overemphasized. It is Lévy-Bruhl and not von den Steinen’s original report (no matter what the footnote may cite) which will be used by most subsequent writers as an illustration of primitive mentality. For example, G. van der Leeuw, writing about the “instability” of the primitive notion of person as being indefinitely extendable, declared: “[The primitive believes] I am simultaneously made up of several beings and these beings are ‘me.’ I can be a man and, at the same time, a panther or a monkey. We need only recall the famous example of von den Steinen,

<sup>39</sup> L. Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, 6th ed. (Paris, 1922), p. 77. I quote the translation by L. A. Clare, *How Natives Think* (New York, 1926; rp. New York, 1966), p. 61.

<sup>40</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions*, p. 78; *How Natives Think*, p. 62.

<sup>41</sup> See van Baaren, p. 10.

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quoted by Lévy-Bruhl, concerning the South American Bororo who are, at the same time, araras.”<sup>42</sup> Lévy-Bruhl’s version and interpretation dominates the literature. It is only recently that books on “primitive mentality” have begun to dispense with the example of the Bororo.<sup>43</sup>

Lévy-Bruhl’s use of the Bororo identification of themselves with parrots had two crucial effects on all subsequent use of this tradition. First, it separated out the ambiguities of von den Steinen’s original report and suppressed the transmigration-metamorphosis motif in favor of a totally present understanding of the identification. (Indeed, reversing von den Steinen’s conjectural history of the saying [see above, p. 395], Lévy-Bruhl gloomily concludes his book by declaring that when the primitive collective breaks down in transition to “higher mental types” and “individualism” asserts itself, then “the Bororo tribesmen will no longer declare that they *are* araras. They will say that their ancestors were araras, that they are of the same substance as araras, that they will become araras after death.”)<sup>44</sup> From this point on, those who cite the Bororo-*are*-parrots tradition omit the metamorphosis; those who cite the Bororo-*will become*-parrots tradition omit the identification.<sup>45</sup> It is the present rather than the futuristic

<sup>42</sup> G. van der Leeuw, *De primitieve mens en de religie*, 2d ed. (Groningen, 1952), p. 40. Cf. van der Leeuw, “La structure de la mentalité primitive,” *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, VIII (1928), 8, for a more extensive paraphrase of von den Steinen which he already terms “un exemple qui est devenu presque classique.” Van der Leeuw appears inclined to go as far, if not further, than Lévy-Bruhl: “La sympathie est un relation, tandis qu’ici il y a identification . . . il a dû se rendre à l’assertion pure et simple des Bororo qu’ils *sont* effectivement des arara, en dehors de toute interprétation symbolique ou métaphorique.”

<sup>43</sup> E.g., the valuable survey by G. Guariglia, *Il mondo spirituale dei primitivo*, Vol. I, *Le categorie mentali* (Milan, 1967), who discusses Bororo totemism (p. 174) and traditions concerning the destiny of the soul (pp. 195 f.) but omits the arara report. It is perhaps significant that the unjustly neglected monograph by H. Werner, *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development* (New York, 1940)—an expanded translation of Werner, *Einführung in die Entwicklungspsychologie* (Leipzig, 1926)—while quoting copiously from von den Steinen and devoting a section to the primitive notion of person (in which he argues, like Lévy-Bruhl, that “no essential differences are thought to exist between man and animal”) which quotes the sentences immediately preceding and following the arara report, fails to quote the identification (*Comparative Psychology*, pp. 419 f., 426 f.; *Einführung*, pp. 301, 303 f.). Compare his more general statement, *Comparative Psychology*, p. 16; *Einführung*, pp. 16 f.

<sup>44</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, p. 328. Given his severe criticisms of British speculative anthropology, Lévy-Bruhl would, no doubt, be justified in rejecting von den Steinen’s conjectural history.

<sup>45</sup> Examples of the former are given throughout this paper; for the latter, see the material cited above, in n. 20 and general works such as A. E. Crawley, *The Idea of the Soul* (London, 1909), p. 162. More tellingly, when Frazer cites the present identification (*The Golden Bough*, Vol. VIII, pp. 207 f.) he omits the metamorphosis; when he cites the metamorphosis (*The Golden Bough*, Vol. III, p. 34), he omits the identification. Some scholars who perceive that the transformation is

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understanding of the identification that will preoccupy scholars. That a man should think of himself as simultaneously a man and a bird seems absurd, primitive, and hence worthy of comment. That a man should think of himself as becoming a bird after death seems “normal” by comparison (whether because for positivistic scholars, all statements concerning life after death are incapable of empirical verification and hence equally nonsense or, for religious scholars, because they are used to the notion of Christians becoming angels). The present identification is exotic and thereby revelatory of primitive mentality; the future is not. Second, by driving an absolute wedge between “primitive” and “civilized” thought and by insisting that each had its own laws, Lévy-Bruhl set the stage for the consideration of the Bororo as profoundly alien, so different that they made no sense. Either they were representative of a different species of man or they were insane, and one might be tempted to add the Bororo to the lists of parallels between primitives and schizophrenics such as that compiled by Alfred Storch.<sup>46</sup> (It need not be emphasized that this was anti-theoretical to Lévy-Bruhl’s intention and that he later altered his position on the absolute dichotomy of primitive and civilized.)

Following Lévy-Bruhl, scholars utilizing the Bororo tradition had several options. They could uncritically repeat the identification as a classic example of *participation mystique*<sup>47</sup> or offer minor variations on Lévy-Bruhl’s interpretation.<sup>48</sup> They could uncritically reject Lévy-Bruhl without providing a cogent alternative interpretation.<sup>49</sup> They could overturn Lévy-Bruhl’s basic thesis and show that the primitive tradition was not discontinuous with

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one that will occur after death, utilize an interpretation that depends on the present identification, e.g., H. Kelsen’s fascinating study, *Vergeltung und Kausalität: Eine soziologische Untersuchung* (The Hague, 1941), pp. 83 f., which declared that this illustrates the fact that “the difference between men and animals, self-evident for civilized man, has no meaning at all for primitive man.”

<sup>46</sup> A. Storch, *Das archaisch-primitive Erleben und Denken der Schizophrenen* (Berlin, 1922).

<sup>47</sup> E.g., van der Leeuw (see above, n. 42); E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven, 1955), Vol. II, pp. 65, 184; and *An Essay on Man* (New Haven, 1944), pp. 82 f.; E. Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (New York, 1954), p. 105.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., J. Murphy, *Primitive Man: His Essential Quest* (Oxford, 1927), pp. 107 f. E. Reuterskiöld’s thesis, while in respects similar to that of Lévy-Bruhl, is independent of it (see above, n. 38).

<sup>49</sup> E.g., O. Leroy, *La raison primitive: Essai de réfutation de la théories du prélogisme* (Paris, 1927), pp. 68 f.; S. G. Moelia, *Het primitieve denken in de moderne wetenschap* (Groningen, 1933), pp. 46 f., 147 f.; J. Cazeneuve, *La mentalité archaïque* (Paris, 1961), pp. 13 f. I regret that the excellent review of criticism of Lévy-Bruhl by R. Eysink, *Collectieve voorstellingen in het denken der natuurvölker* (Utrecht-Nijmegen, 1946) does not treat the Bororo tradition.

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modern expressions.<sup>50</sup> They could reject his intention and seek to demonstrate that the Bororo identification was logically explicable, that is, it was capable of being intelligible to modern man (usually by invoking the logic of naming).<sup>51</sup> They could make fools of themselves in putting forth rival hypotheses such as C. R. Aldrich's suggestion "that the Boróros consider that they are araras is hardly more incomprehensible than that a mother feels that her new-born child is herself. Primitive tribes rarely move away from their own territory, unless they are driven out of it, so that in all probability the Boróros have no memory of ever living in a land that was not inhabited by araras; they have not yet become sufficiently conscious to discriminate between themselves and the red feathered inhabitants of their country."<sup>52</sup> The relationship between the three theses in this passage, I might add, would boggle even a "prelogical" mind!

However, modifications and alternative approaches to Lévy-Bruhl began to be expressed. The first caution was a linguistic one, that is, the precise sense in which the identification, "we are parrots" was to be understood. The problem was already realized by Lévy-Bruhl, although he did not develop it. In *Les fonctions*, after comparing Spencer and Gillen's report on Australian totemism with von den Steinen's Bororo identification, he declared: "The verb 'to be' (which moreover is non-existent in most of the languages of undeveloped peoples) has not here the ordinary copulative sense it bears in our languages. It signifies something different, and something more."<sup>53</sup> Henri Bergson shrewdly pushed this observation further, while criticizing Lévy-Bruhl on totemic identifications:

Let us take the commonest case, that of an animal, a rat or kangaroo, for example, which serves as a "totem," that is to say a patron for the whole tribe. The most striking thing is that the members of the clan assert that

<sup>50</sup> E.g., Michael Polanyi's wry comment: "What the Boróros mean by identifying themselves with red parrots may be difficult to fathom, but I see no reason to say that it is anymore absurd than the view of many scientists and philosophers that they are machines." I have taken this quote from a recent lecture by Polanyi, "Myths: Ancient and Modern" (1970), manuscript p. 12. Compare a quite similar play by H. Bergson, who compares "totemic" identification with animals to Pascal's dictum, "Man is a reed that thinks" in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (New York, 1935; rp. Garden City, 1954), pp. 183 f.

<sup>51</sup> E.g., J. J. Fahrenfort, *Dynamisme en logies denken bij natuurovolken* (Groningen, 1933), esp. pp. 49–53.

<sup>52</sup> C. R. Aldrich, *The Primitive Mind and Modern Civilization* (New York, 1931), p. 79. Note that this fantastic book contains laudatory prefaces by both B. Malinowski and C. G. Jung!

<sup>53</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, p. 75.

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they are one with it; that they *are* rats, they *are* kangaroos. True, it remains to be seen in what sense they use the word. To conclude straightaway that there is a specific logic, peculiar to "primitive man" and exempt from the principles of contradiction, would be somewhat overhasty. Our verb "to be" carries meanings that we have difficulty in defining for all our civilization: how can we reconstitute the meaning given by primitive man in such and such a case to a similar word, even when he supplies us with explanations? These explanations would possess an element of precision only if he were a philosopher, and even then we should have to know all the fine shades of his language to understand them.<sup>54</sup>

For our purposes we may set the specific question aside. I am not competent in Bororo linguistics, and an examination of the available grammars has not proved illuminating. Furthermore, even if the service of a specialist were available, it would be of no assistance. Von den Steinen provided only a German translation of the Bororo sentence (if, indeed, he was not himself relying on a translator), and thus the recovery and assessment of the Bororo original is impossible. The conditions of Bergson's more general critique are likewise impossible to fulfill in this case (and, I suspect, in any other) and would have the practical consequence of reducing all hermeneutics to silence.

Beyond this question, the interpretation of Lévy-Bruhl and his successors was based on a literal understanding of the sentence. The identification made sense, even though it is false, because the Bororo lack a logic of distinction. I may note, parenthetically, that the futuristic interpretation is equally literal, although it assumes that the Bororo do possess distinctions between actuality and potentiality and that this "Aristotelianism" is the key to exegesis. Whether this implicitly invokes the argument about the characteristic lack of distinction among primitives remains a question. Men do not, in fact, become birds in strict analogy to the acorn becoming an oak or the caterpillar a butterfly. (As a subquestion, I would like to know who suggested this analogy, the Bororo or von den Steinen?) Either one must assume that the Bororo ignore or are ignorant of the fact that men and birds are not the same species (in contradistinction to the acorn and oak and the caterpillar and the butterfly which are) or one must assume that for the Bororo man, bird, oak, acorn, butterfly, caterpillar, each constitutes a separate species which can transfer itself into another species at will (*scil. participation mystique*). In either case, the von den Steinen-Lévy-Bruhl interpretation appears to be maintained.

More recent interpretations have sought to set aside a literal

<sup>54</sup> H. Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, p. 183.

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understanding of the sentence, usually by invoking either the notion of the symbolic or the functional. This change in perspective was signaled in 1934 by E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his critical and appreciative lecture on Lévy-Bruhl: "An object may be perceived in different ways according to different affective interests, interests which in their turn are evoked by different situations. Hence it comes about that a savage can be both himself and a bird."<sup>55</sup> In subsequent writings, Evans-Pritchard was able to supply two parallel instances from his fieldwork among the Nuer. The closest analogue to the Bororo tradition is the Nuer assertion that "a twin is not a person, he is a bird"; but Evans-Pritchard has also explored the processes of identification in his report that when the Nuer utilize a cucumber in sacrifice, they call it an ox.<sup>56</sup>

In his interpretation of the Nuer twin-bird identification, Evans-Pritchard, in conscious dialogue with Lévy-Bruhl, introduced three important elements: (1) he eschewed the contextless catalogues of primitive customs found in the early anthropologists in

<sup>55</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Lévy-Bruhl's Theory of Primitive Mentality," *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts, Cairo University*, II (1934), 1–36. This quote is from p. 32 and was generally endorsed by Lévy-Bruhl in "A Letter to E. E. Evans-Pritchard," *British Journal of Sociology*, III (1952), 117–123.

<sup>56</sup> See Evans-Pritchard, "Customs and Beliefs Relating to Twins among the Nilotic Nuer," *Uganda Journal*, III (1936), 230–238; "A Problem of Nuer Religious Thought," *Sociologus*, IV (1954); 23–41 (rp. J. Middleton, editor, *Myth and Cosmos, Readings in Mythology and Symbolism*, [Garden City, 1967], pp. 127–148); "A Problem" appears as chap. 5 of Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford, 1956), esp. pp. 128–132. Note that this latter article is framed with explicit reference to Lévy-Bruhl. For comments on Evans-Pritchard's twin/bird, ox/cucumber reports, see esp. E. Gellner, "Concepts and Society," *Transactions of the Fifth World Congress of Sociology* (London, 1962), Vol. I, pp. 153–183 reprinted in D. Emmet and A. MacIntyre, *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis* (New York, 1970), pp. 115–149, esp. pp. 131–137 and B. R. Wilson, editor, *Rationality* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 18–49, esp. pp. 34–39; C. Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (Boston, 1963), pp. 78–83 (cf. *The Savage Mind*, p. 224); J. Beattie, *Other Cultures* (London, 1964), pp. 68 f.; A. MacIntyre, "Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?" in J. Hicks, editor, *Faith and the Philosophers* (London, 1964), reprinted in B. R. Wilson, ed., *Rationality*, esp. pp. 65 f.; S. Lukes, "Some Problems about Rationality," *Archives européennes de sociologie*, VIII (1967), reprinted in Wilson, *Rationality*, esp. pp. 205 f.; A. Hayley, "Symbolic Equations: The Ox and the Cucumber," *Man*, n.s. III (1968), 262–272; S. Runciman, "The Sociological Explanation of 'Religious' Beliefs," *Archives européennes*, X (1969), esp. 155–157. The most complete review of the material, with excellent comparative material, is R. Firth, "Twins, Birds and Vegetables: Problems of Identification in Primitive Religious Thought," *Man*, n.s. I (1966), 1–17. See the comments on this article by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, R. Needham, E. Leach, and the rejoinder by Firth in *Man*, I (1966), 398 f., 557 f. (Leach's position draws on his important article, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse," in E. H. Lenneberg, editor, *New Directions in the Study of Language* [Cambridge, Mass., 1964], pp. 23–62 which considers another kind of animal/human identification. Cf. J. Buxton, "Animal Identity and Human Peril: Some Mandari Images," *Man*, n.s. III [1968], 35–49; G. Wijeyewardene, "Address, Abuse and Animal Categories in Northern Thailand," *Man*, n. s. III [1968], 76–93.)

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favor of a detailed study of the language and ideology of the particular people who made the identification; (2) he saw the identification as relational and classificatory, that is, particular aspects of twins = particular aspects of birds in syllogistic fashion (this point has been brilliantly developed by Lévi-Strauss in his comments on Evans-Pritchard's report); (3) he saw the identification as occasional, called into consciousness only by particular situations and thus representative of a particular point of view.

It seems odd, if not absurd to a European when he is told that a twin is a bird as though it were an obvious fact, for Nuer are not saying that a twin "is like" a bird but that "he is" a bird. There seems to be a complete contradiction in the statement, and it was precisely on statements of this kind recorded by observers of primitive peoples that Lévy-Bruhl based his theory of the prelogical mentality of these peoples, its chief characteristic being, in his view, that it permits such evident contradictions—that a thing can be what it is and at the same time something altogether different. But, in fact, no contradiction is involved in the statement, which, on the contrary, appears quite sensible, and even true, to one who presents the idea to himself in the Nuer language and within their system of religious thought. He does not then take their statements about twins any more literally than they make and understand them themselves. They are not saying that a twin has a beak, feathers and so forth. Nor in their everyday relations with twins do the Nuer speak of them as birds or act towards them as though they were birds. They treat them as what they are, men and women.<sup>57</sup> But in addition to being men and women they are of a twin birth, and a twin birth is a special revelation of Spirit; and the Nuer express this special character of twins in the "twins are birds" formula because twins and birds, though for different reasons, are both associated with Spirit. . . . The formula does not express a dyadic relationship between twins and birds but a triadic relationship between twins, birds, and God. In respect to God twins and birds have a similar character.<sup>58</sup>

A somewhat similar formulation was proposed by Evans-Pritchard's student and colleague, Godfrey Lienhardt, in interpreting the Dinka assertion that there are men who can transform themselves into lions and there are lions existing in the form of men. This, Lienhardt maintains, is neither contradiction nor metaphor but rather a mode of expression between the figurative

<sup>57</sup> For a more explicit formulation of what I have termed "the occasional nature of the identification," compare Evans-Pritchard, "Customs and Beliefs Relating to Twins," p. 238: "the Nuer belief that twins are birds is only a conscious notion in certain situations. They are not always aware of the bird-quality of a twin but only on some occasions, for normally they speak of, and act towards, twins as they speak of and act towards other persons."

<sup>58</sup> Evans-Pritchard, "A Problem" (in Middleton, pp. 136 f. = Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, p. 131). Within the context of this paper it is not necessary to argue the question of the validity of Evans-Pritchard's evidence and interpretation (see Firth, pp. 3–8) or to offer alternative hypotheses such as Hayley's ("Symbolic Equations") unconvincing psychoanalytic interpretation.

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and the literal. Man/lion represents “two possible ways of viewing the same being.”<sup>59</sup>

Without explicit reference either to Evans-Pritchard or Lienhardt, the type of interpretation they propose has been applied to the Bororo in two recent treatments: W. Percy (1961) in a rather confused attempt to delineate the various modes of identification that might be present in the statement, “I am a parrot,” through an exercise of what he terms “qualitative phenomenology”;<sup>60</sup> and Clifford Geertz (1966) who, taking Percy as a point of departure, utilizes the Bororo identification to establish a central element of religion in his well-known essay, “Religion as a Cultural System.”

It would seem necessary to see the sentence [I am a parrot] as having a different sense in the context of the “finite province of meaning” which makes up the religious perspective and of that which makes up the common-sensical. In the religious, our Bororo is “really” a “parakeet,” and given the proper ritual context might well “mate” with other “parakeets”—with metaphysical ones like himself not commonplace ones such as those which fly bodily about in ordinary trees. In the common-sensical perspective he is a parakeet in the sense—I assume—that he belongs to a clan whose members regard the parakeet as their totem, a membership from which, given the fundamental nature of reality as the religious perspective reveals it, certain moral and practical consequences flow. A man who says he is a parakeet is, if he says it in normal conversation, saying that, as myth and ritual demonstrate, he is shot through with parakeetness and that this religious fact has some crucial social implications—we parakeets must stick together, not marry one another, not eat mundane parakeets, and so on, for to do otherwise is to act against the grain of the whole universe. It is this placing of proximate acts in ultimate contexts that makes religion, frequently at least, socially so powerful. It alters, often radically, the whole landscape presented to common sense, alters it in such a way that the moods and motivations induced by religious practice seem themselves supremely practical, the only sensible ones to adopt given the way things “really” are.<sup>61</sup>

The solution to the Bororo’s seeming plurality of beings, advocated

<sup>59</sup> G. Lienhardt, “Modes of Thought,” in E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Institutions of Primitive Society* (London, 1954), pp. 97–99. (The quote occurs on p. 98.) See Lienhardt’s later formulation in *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford, 1961), p. 117.

<sup>60</sup> W. Percy, “The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Relations,” *Psychiatry*, XXIV (1961), 39–52, esp. 48: “The quasi-identification events of symbolic behavior can be grasped only by a qualitative phenomenology. This qualitative scale must take account not only of true-or-false-or-nonsense statements . . . but also of various modes of magical identification. It does not suffice, for example, to say that the assertion of a Bororo tribesman of Brazil, ‘I am a parakeet,’ is false or nonsense. Nor is it adequate to say that it is false scientifically but true mythically. It is necessary to understand the particular mode of identification of a particular language-event. Sentences exhibiting the same syntactic and semantic structure may be asserted in wholly different modes of identification.”

<sup>61</sup> C. Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in M. Banton, editor, *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London, 1966), pp. 37 f.

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since Evans-Pritchard, is the assumption of a plurality of languages and, by implication, a plurality of truths.

It is now time to withdraw our experiment and reflect on its results. We have been engaged in tracing the history of an error—no less revealing for being a mistake.<sup>62</sup> In the history of interpretation of the Bororo, there has been a noticeable shift from *surface* to *depth*, from the placing of the Bororo within a contextless catalogue of illustrations of a *general* theory of primitive mentality to a depth analysis of the underlying principles of a *particular* culture.<sup>63</sup> In this process, the statement, “I am a parrot,” has shifted from being an absurdity to be explained away or a puzzle to a serious statement, the truth of which might be empathetically entertained by a non-Bororo (e.g., Lienhardt’s remark that “as anthropologists we have to give at least a temporary assent to such ways of thinking. . . . Only by such suspension of criticism can one learn gradually how thought of this sort, in its context, is a representation of experience which at least is not obviously self-contradictory; and which can satisfy men no less rational, if less rationalizing, than ourselves”).<sup>64</sup> The statement, “I am a parrot,” has come to be seen as revealing a truth rather than being the result of a peculiar process of thought. By utilizing terminology such as “mode” or “symbolic,” it has been possible to affirm both the humanness and the parrotness of the Bororo without allowing one to subsume the other. Historians of religion will presumably be attracted by this anthropological approach which bears so close a resemblance to Eliade’s well-known paradox of sacrality: “By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain itself.”<sup>65</sup> Yet we must be cautious at this point, for the relativism of the anthropologist is not shared by Eliade. While I hear Pirandello’s “*così è (se vi pare)*” in the background of the anthropologists’ treatments, I hear, rephrased, Ivan Karamazov’s famous dictum: only “if God does not exist then

<sup>62</sup> See the fascinating history of error and miscitation by R. K. Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript* (Glencoe, 1965). More germane to our discipline would be the classic study, *Totemism*, by Lévi-Strauss.

<sup>63</sup> See my remarks on “surface” and “depth” in the history of the history of religions in Smith, “Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit,” *History of Religions*, XI (1971), 67–90, esp. 76–80; and the concluding chapter of my forthcoming book, *The Glory, Jest and Riddle: James George Frazer and The Golden Bough*.

<sup>64</sup> Lienhardt, p. 98.

<sup>65</sup> M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York, 1959), p. 12.

everything is possible” as the rejoinder from the other. For the one, a functionalist criterion of truth is employed; for the other, an ontological. Both possess problems in yielding specific explanations and interpretations.

Some of these questions have been raised with explicit reference to Evans-Pritchard's treatment of the Nuer bird/man identification by Ernest Gellner, whose critique of functionalism ranks with the theoretical study by C. Hempel and its application to religious theories by H. Penner.<sup>66</sup> Gellner charges most functionalists with a “too charitable” interpretation of conceptual statements that used to be dismissed by earlier anthropologists as illogical, noting the inevitable circularity of the more recent approach. The functionalists insist that “people cannot mean what at one level (e.g., implicitly, through their conduct) they also know to be false or absurd.” Thus, since the Bororo do not try to mate with parrots, the Nuer do not “act towards” twins “as though they were birds,” they cannot be guilty of contradiction in stating that men are simultaneously birds. But no sane conduct, especially societal conduct which must endure over a long period, can be, by definition, self-contradictory. Therefore it becomes an a priori assumption of the functionalist that no society may hold absurd beliefs. The task of interpretation becomes only that of casting about for a sufficient context to account for a belief one already knew was not absurd. Gellner advances a number of criticisms of Evans-Pritchard and others in light of this proposition, arguing that the contextual theory appears to have as a major function “to enable us to attribute meaning to assertions which might otherwise be found to lack it.” His most telling formulation for our problem is the following:

I am not arguing that Evans-Pritchard's account of Nuer concepts is a bad one. (Nor am I anxious to revive a doctrine of pre-logical mentality à la Lévy-Bruhl.) What I am anxious to argue is that contextual interpretation, which offers an account of what assertions “really mean” in opposition to what they seem to mean in isolation, does not by itself clinch matters. It cannot arrive at determinate answers (concerning “what they mean”) without doing a number of things which may in fact prejudge the question: without delimiting just which context is to be taken into consideration, without crediting the people concerned with consistency (which is precisely

<sup>66</sup> E. Gellner, “Concepts and Society,” reprinted in D. Emmet, and A. MacIntyre, *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis*, pp. 115–149. Cf. C. G. Hempel, “The Logic of Functional Analysis,” in L. Gross, editor, *Symposium on Sociological Theory* (Evanston, 1959), pp. 271–307; H. Penner, “The Poverty of Functionalism,” *History of Religions*, XI (1971), 91–97.

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what is *sub judice* when we discuss, as Evans-Pritchard does, Lévy-Bruhl's thesis) or without assumptions concerning what they can mean (which, again, is precisely what we do not know but are trying to find out) . . . nothing is more false than the claim that, for a given assertion, *its use is its meaning*. On the contrary its use may depend on its lack of meaning, its ambiguity, its possession of wholly different and incompatible meanings in different contexts, *and* on the fact that, at the same time, it as it were emits the impression of possessing a consistent meaning throughout.<sup>67</sup>

The debate between Gellner and Evans-Pritchard is part of a continuing discussion that has exercised British anthropology for more than a decade following the publication of Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958). Some of the key articles in this controversy have been collected in Bryan R. Wilson's anthology, *Rationality*. The discussion centers about the problems of meaning, intelligibility, and rationality. As summarized by Steven Lukes, the problem is: "When I come across a set of beliefs which appear *prima facie* irrational, what should be my attitude towards them? Should I adopt a critical attitude, taking it as a fact about the beliefs that they *are* irrational, and seek to explain how they came to be held, how they manage to survive unprofaned by rational criticism, what their consequences are, etc? Or should I treat such beliefs charitably: should I begin from the assumption that what appears to me to be irrational may be interpreted as rational when fully understood in its context? More briefly, the problem comes down to whether or not there are alternative standards of rationality."<sup>68</sup> Thus in the case of the Bororo identification, one approach has been to take the statement literally, judge it by our standards, and conclude that it is false, an error or a misapplication of our normal, rational procedures. This is the approach of Tylor and Frazer. The question of the meaning of the assertion, "I am a parrot," is not nearly as important to this view as an account of its genesis. A second approach, represented by Lévy-Bruhl, takes the statement literally but holds that our standards do not apply. It contravenes our laws of logic but follows intelligible rules of its own. The statement, "I am a parrot," is a different statement than it appears to us to be. What appear to function as the subject, copulative, and predicate noun in this sentence are none of these in our understanding of the terms. The question of meaning, in

<sup>67</sup> Gellner, pp. 123, 136, 138, 143.

<sup>68</sup> S. Lukes, "Some Problems about Rationality," *Archives européennes de sociologie*, VIII (1967), 247, reprinted in Wilson, *Rationality*, p. 194. Lukes's paper (*Archives*, pp. 247–264; Wilson, *Rationality*, pp. 194–213) is the most suggestive item in this debate and I have drawn on it in the discussion which follows.

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such a view, is likewise held in suspense, despite the many specific interpretations offered. If a characteristic of the “logic” of “primitive mentality” is that it is not constrained to avoid contradictions, how may we interpret the statement by invoking a logic of identification which, for us, is but the concomitant of noncontradiction? If the statement is really different than it appears to be and if our standards do not apply, how can we ever hope to understand it? Are we not driven to accept the full consequences of Elsdon Best’s statement quoted approvingly by Lévy-Bruhl before he introduces the Bororo example? “We hear of many singular theories about Maori beliefs and Maori thought, but the truth is that we do not understand either, and, what is more, we never shall.”<sup>69</sup> It is this problem which ultimately drove Lévy-Bruhl to the uncertainties, ambiguities, and retractions represented by *Les Carnets*. A literal understanding of “I am a parrot” has led to two consequences: they mean it and they are wrong, or they mean it, but we can never understand what they mean.

In an attempt to escape the horns of this dilemma, anthropologists turned to a variety of nonliteral interpretations: the statement functions as expressive in certain situations. The principles of rationality are upheld and the problem becomes one of finding the situation in which the statement will function in a noncontradictory way. Stated in this blunt fashion, this view ignores the question of truth as irrelevant to the interpreter’s task. The best one can say, and this appears to be Geertz’s point, is that it functions as if it were true. But what possible meaning can inhere in the word “truth” in such a view? And will not the functional interpretation of the statement, “I am a parrot,” remain forever empty? The fourth approach, exemplified by Evans-Pritchard, adds to this view the notion of a contextually determined truth. A statement which appears at first glance to be untrue or irrational can be shown to be true or rational by the depth analysis of the criteria for truth or rationality held by a particular culture. This departs from the Frazerian notion of error and the functionalist insistence on the irrelevance of truth. It resembles most closely the approach of Lévy-Bruhl, but appears to differ from him by substituting a culturally relativistic notion for his hypothesis of a universal “primitive mentality” and by suggesting, although with considerable ambiguity, that these contextually determined

<sup>69</sup> E. Best, “Maori Medical Lore,” *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, XIII (1904), 219 quoted in Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, p. 55.

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criteria for truth bear at least formal resemblance to our own and are thus, at least in theory, fully intelligible to us. Such an approach, while not affirming that the Bororo are in fact parrots (arguing, indeed, that the Bororo know they are not), seeks to make intelligible the reasons for holding the belief, "I am a parrot." This approach begs only the question as to whether there are universal, contextually invariable principles of logic, rationality, and truth in addition to contextual ones. It is the suggestion that there are which makes Lévi-Strauss's exegesis of the Bororo statement so intriguing to me, and for this reason I shall return to it in a later publication.

The history of the exegesis of the Bororo statement has driven us to raise the question of truth from which, as historians of religion, we have largely abstained. When confronted with experiences and statements which appear contrary to fact, we have most usually bracketed the question of veracity prompting acidulous criticisms from our more historically minded colleagues; while, at the same time, making grandiose, metaphysical claims, such as "myth is true," which have irritated our philosophical colleagues.<sup>70</sup> In other instances, we have simply repeated or paraphrased a tradition as if this offers self-evident truth (Professor van Baaren's witty title is apropos: "Are the Bororos Parrots or Are We?").

The discussion of this issue has become a lively one in both philosophical hermeneutics and anthropology, and it is essential that historians of religion join in this debate both to learn and to contribute. But the price of admission, to reverse the Steppenwolf formula, is the use of our mind. We must submit ourselves to the kinds of rigorous questions Hans Penner and Edward Yonan have been raising about our principles of intelligibility.<sup>71</sup> If we fail to do so, then it is we rather than the Bororo who are unable to make distinctions and who remain in the dilemma of the ancient Chinese philosopher: "I don't know whether Chuang Chou dreamed

<sup>70</sup> For an example of bracketing, see M. Eliade, *Shamanism* (New York, 1964), p. 255 n. 120 et passim, which has drawn the somewhat naive but pointed criticism of M. Smith, "Historical Method in the Study of Religion," in J. S. Helfer, editor, *On Method in the History of Religions (History and Theory, Beiheft 8 [Middletown, 1968])*, pp. 8-16, esp. pp. 14 f.

<sup>71</sup> See the forthcoming article by H. Penner and E. Yonan, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?" *Journal of Religion*, LI (April 1972), 107-133.

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he was a butterfly, or a butterfly is dreaming that he is Chuang Chou!"<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> J. R. Ware, *The Sayings of Chuang Chou* (New York, 1963), p. 28.

This paper was presented as part of a symposium on "Theory in the Study of Religion" at the 1971 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. I have retained the oral style of the original and its necessary brevity. I am especially grateful to Prof. Hans Penner for his detailed critique of an earlier draft. The research for this paper was begun in 1968 with the aid of a fellowship from the Institute of Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara. The issues raised in the conclusion of the paper will be further discussed in a review of Wilson's *Rationality* and the work of P. Winch in a future issue of *History of Religions*.