

# Totem Worship and Its Manifestation in Community Life of Thai Ethnic Group in Vietnam

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**Abstract:** *In traditional societies, the custom of worshipping an animal or plant species as the origin of the ethnic people is called totem worship. The paper introduces and analyzes some viewpoints of researchers on totem workship, totemic manifestation and its social meanings as well as behaviors of the general population. The paper also provides a case study of totem worship in Thai ethnic group, one of the ethnic groups in Vietnam who retains a relatively rich spiritual life nowadays.*

**Keywords:** Totem, Totemism, Thai Ethnic Group

## 1. Understanding of totem

The term “totem” (sacred objects) is derived from the Ojibwa dialect, an American Indian tribe. Totem means “relatives” or “be related to”. The term was first mentioned in 1791 by an Ojibwa interpreter, J.K. Long, and quickly attracted attention from scientists. Afterwards, many documents started to record rites, ceremonies and beliefs related to totem.

From these documents, James Fraser collected, consolidated, analyzed and composed four volumes of *Totemism and Exogamy* (Thuyết totem và Ngoại hôn), published in 1910. The book was considered as a classic work for

researchers of social sciences and humanities because it had a deep impact on the then belief and religious studies. Some researchers welcomed the work by recognizing the existence of a primitive religion - Totemism, while others who showed their disagreement to explanations of J. Fraser had tried to seek for their own decipherment. This topic was also discussed in the well-known 1905 article “The Secret of the Totem” by Andrew Lang. However, perhaps, it is the Scottish ethnologist J. Ferguson McLennan who deserved credit for finding out the significance of totemism. Opposite views about totem existed for a long time. A number of scientific debates

of this topic have been taking place without an end. These contraries, after all, are represented by two main schools of viewpoint: The first one considers totemism as a form of religion; the second recognizes the existence of totem, not as a religion but a way of classification by primitive man.

Regarding to the term “totem” coined by J.K. Long, the magazine *Handbook of North American Indians* by the Smithsonian Institution asserted that, J.K. Long, when introducing the word “totem” meaning “tutelary god”, had confused the way of naming a clan (after the animal representing that clan) with the beliefs associated to tutelary gods of Ojibwa individuals. In fact, according to Ojibwa legends, there are only indirect relationships, rather than direct, between clans and totems. Similar to the case in Australia, a totem is sometimes named different from an animal, thus the name of an aboriginal clan does not directly evoke in its members’ mind an animal or plant. Such a correlation is clearly different from the interrelationship between an individual and their tutelary god. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish a totem for a whole community from the tutelary god of an individual (Tran Do Dung, 1967).

According to Sigmund Freud, totems are seldomly plants or natural phenomena (rain, water, etc.) but animals, benign or fearsome, that Australian aboriginal clans use to name their respective branches (Sippe). A totem, first and foremost, is the forefather of a clan, also acting as their tutelary god and savior who give them prophecies. While being dangerous

to other groups, a totem thoroughly understands and tolerate its descendants. Worshippers of the same totem fulfill the same noble obligation and they always have a feeling that they will never kill and eat their totem. In ceremonies, members of the same totem worship usually perform and recall behaviors and personalities of their totem through dances. In almost all regions of totem worship, there is a common rule that members of the same totem are not allowed to have sexual intercourses with each other, in other words, they are not permitted to live together as husband and wife. This is the totem-related exogamy (Sigmund Freud, 2001: 45).

## 2. Forms of totem worship

There are different ways of totem classification. However, totems can be categorized into three groups:

- Clan-totems: those which the whole clan depends on and are descended from generation to generation;
- Sexual totems: those belong to male or female members of a clan;
- Individual totems: those possessed by individuals and can not be transferred to others.

The two latter have no effects on the whole clan’s totem because they came into existence quite late and play an insignificant role in the system of totems. A clan-totem is an object honored by a group of men or women who worship the same totem, preserve the same ancestors for their descendants, maintain close connections through common obligations, and unite together through their beliefs to the totem.

The study *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* by Emile Durkheim, the fifth reprint (2005), classifies totems as follows:

**Collective totems:** A community considers an animal, plant or object which has a special relationship with them, particularly that of kindred, as the totem of the whole community. Those sharing the same totem are related or not but they always maintain mutual support and assistance, are in mourning for each other, and cannot live a conjugal life with a partner from the community of the same totem.

**Individual totems:** Each and every individual also has their own links to some object, similar to the relationship between their clan and the collective totem. However, relations of an individual totem are different from those of a collective one.

**Sexual totems:** In some clans, where there are two sides, men and women, there usually appear entities that symbolize each side and protect its followers (quoted by Tran Do Dung, 1967).

### 3. Totemism

By studying expressions of the totem worship in various communities, in 1869, Scottish ethnologist Mc. Lennan coined an ethnological term - totemism. He defined totemism in his following famous formula:

Totemism = Totem worship + exogamy + matriarchy

Though Mc. Lennan's formula is no longer appropriate for ethnologic data collected by ethnologists from different areas all over the world (for example, many clans practice totem worship but

not follow matriarchy), he is still honored as a pioneer in generalizing a seemingly particular phenomenon into a theory (quoted by Bui Quang Thang, 2004).

Mc. Lennan forecasted that most of customs and habits in ancient and modern societies must be understood as remnants of a certain stage of totemism. Mc. Lennan generalized and turned totemism into an important scientific topic, making sciences recognize the significance of totemism, though before him, totems were thought queer.

In his *The History of Melanesian Society*, W.H.R. Rivers defines the practice of totem worship as a "religion" composed of three elements:

1) Social element: There is a correlation between living beings and a community within the tribe, for example exogamous community or a clan;

2) Psychological element: Humans and living beings are believed to be relatives; humans give birth to living beings;

3) Ceremonial element: Living beings must be respected and sacred objects cannot be offended (quoted by Tran Do Dung, 1967).

In 1900, S. Reinach generalized 12 points in treatments of different groups of people to animals as follows:

1) Some species of animals are not killed and eaten; humans raise and take care of some individuals of those species;

2) A dead animal is mourned and buried as a member of the clan;

3) It is forbidden to eat some animal or a certain part of it;

4) In case when people must kill an animal, they beg its pardon and try to

minimize, through art concepts, their violation against the taboo on killing the totem;

- 5) When an animal is sacrificed, it is bemoaned solemnly;
- 6) In some festivals and religious rites, the hide of the totem animal is displayed;
- 7) Clans and individuals name themselves after the totem animals;
- 8) Members in many tribes decorate their weapons with images of the totem animals; male members even paint or tattoo their bodies with the animals;
- 9) If the totem is a dangerous or fearsome animal, the clan's members are exempted from having its name;
- 10) The totem is protected and it also defends the clan's members;
- 11) The totem foresees the future for the clan's members and guides them;
- 12) The clan's members believe that they have an attachment for the totem because both have the same origin (quoted by Sigmund Freud, 2001: 174-175).

It is supposed that S. Reinach added each and every remaining signs and phenomena, from which others could exploit some controversial points of the totemistic system. It is noticeable that this author rejected one of two essential distinctions of totemism and ignored its second important characteristic - the origin of totem and the taboo on endogamy or incest.

Meanwhile, arguments raised by J. Frazer paint a more sincere picture of characteristics of totemism. In his *Totemism and Exogamy*, J. Frazer pointed out that totems are closely associated with taboos, especially that

on incest. He asserted that this is a very important discovery in the history of human beings. According to J. Frazer, totems are physical objects through which barbarous tribes expressed their superstitious reverence, because they believed that they had a special relationship with those objects. There was an interrelation between humans and their death, so the totem protect humans and the latter showed their reverence for the totem in various manners, for example not killing the totem or not plucking it off (if the totem is a plant). Totems are different from fetishes because they are never separate objects but always some certain species of animals or plants; they are rarely a class (klasse) of lifeless things and even seldomly artificial objects (quoted by Sigmund Freud, 2001: 177).

Arguments by S. Freud can be used to generalize totemism as a religious system and a social system also. In terms of religion, it exists in respectful and harmonious interrelations between a man and their totem. Socially speaking, it stands among opposite obligations of a clan's members as well as against other clans. In its later stages of development, these aspects seemed to become separate; the social system tends to surpass the religious one, and on the contrary, some components of totemism still remain in religions in such countries where the social systems shelter in totemism (Sigmund Freud, 2001: 177-178).

In religious aspect, J. Frazer emphasized that members of a clan name themselves after their totem and believe that they come into the world from it. Therefore,

with such a belief, they do not hunt the totem, not kill and eat it, and observe their oath of totem practice. The taboos on hunting and killing the totem are not the only one; sometimes, there are taboos on touching and looking at it and in some cases, on calling out the totem animal's real name. All violations against those totem-related taboos will be punished with illnesses, diseases or even death (quoted Sigmund Freud, 2001: 178).

#### 4. Some standpoints of totemism

Classic anthropologists have spent a lot of time and work in deep researches on totemism. At first, these researches focused on explaining the social role of totems as the key to open the door to the primitive world, especially the development of religions.

In his 1912 book *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (The elementary forms of the religious life), Emil Durkheim introduced a general theory of social nature and significance of religions, in which totemism is a vivid proof for his arguments. Totemism is the most elementary and fundamental form of religions. The author did not study totemism in terms of the origin of religions but focused on its social functions and nature. According to E. Durkheim, whatever seen in totemism occur in all other religions: Religions in general and totemism in particular are social phenomena, deriving from social realities rather than the nature. His argument on sacredness, as "the idealization of the society", and that religions are in fact a specific image of "collective consciousness", is the core

and most valuable idea. Using evidences collected in his ethnological fieldtrips in Australia, he pointed out that clan-totems are sacred and respectful not because of any inherent objective attributes of totems but because they symbolize the clan (quoted by Bui Quang Thang, 2004). Meanwhile, L. Bruhl provided explanations in a different aspect - humans' specific way of thinking in the primitive society - the so-called "primitive mentality". L. Bruhl suggested a fundamental difference between the primitive mentality and the civilized one. He proved that the system of primitive mind is absolutely different from rational thinking, based on logic and inference, of positive sciences in the Western civilization, and he called it mystical and pre-logical mind. The important is ideas: This category of mind is not inferior to that of modern man; it is simply different from our way of thinking. He introduced a revolutionary concept - the law of participation, which decides/ dominates pre-logical mind. L. Bruhl's view can be considered a progress in the history of sciences, requiring a different look at primitive man and society. In the primitive mind, there is no place for our concepts of the causality law or the law of non-contradiction, but the law of participation instead. In the primitive ontologism, humans and living beings are linked together, sharing the same nature (according to the Association of Ethnology - Viet Nam Museum of Ethnology, 2004).

In his book *Totemism*, Lévy Strauss emphasized the viewpoint that it is

necessary to fill the preconceived gaps between the primitive mind and ours. He criticized that the predecessors tend to deepen the difference and lengthen the distance between the primitive man and us, between their religions and ours, between their way of thinking and ours. Those scholars' explanations of totem worship (or religions in general) are counterfeit because they follow a logic which never lies in strange customs practiced by indigenous ethnic groups but within our mind instead. Through ethnological documents, Lévy Strauss introduced a new interpretation: In fact, totemism is a form of classification in which natural objects are used to represent social units. This classification has its own deep implication: The primitive man used differences to express the unity and generality of their society (quoted by Bui Quang Thang, 2004).

Psychoanalyst S. Freud is another researcher who must be mentioned in discussions on totemism. Though anthropologists now do not recognize him as one of their ancestors, many of his thoughts have been accepted by American anthropologists to form the school of psychoanalytic anthropology.

### **5. Expressions of the totem worship in the spiritual life of the Thai ethnic group**

In ethnic minorities living in Viet Nam, both their legends and daily realities now prove that expressions of the totem worship are no longer prevalent like in the past time but remain quite popular. They are legends on the origin of ethnic groups, which are still kept by each and every community.

The Thai is one of ethnic groups composed of various clans. Within a hamlet, there are many clans residing together. In the traditional Thai society, noble families (such as Cam, Bac, Sa, Deo, Sam, Lo) were distinguished from the clans of commoners (Vi, Lo, Quang, Luong, Luong, Loc, Ngan). In the central provinces of Thanh Hoa and Nghe An, some families of commoners became noble, affixing honorable titles to their family names, such as Hun Vi, Mun Quang, etc.

Each and every clan has legends on their own totem. When the totem is in danger, all clan members spare no effort to assist or bury it; they never do any harm to the totem animals which are considered as their ancestors. Therefore, signs to identify different clans are the practice of totem worship.

According to the Thai elderly, Thai clans adopt and worship totems that are the animals sharing the same name as their family name, though some clans do not follow this rule. For example, the Ca family abstains from killing and eating *cót ca* birds; the Cam does not kill ravens; the Lo worships *nộc tảng lo* birds; the Quang not kill and eat tigers; the Ha and the Lang not eat moorhens; the Ha never eats coucals<sup>(\*)</sup>; the Luong worships tigers

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<sup>(\*)</sup> The Ha family's legend about their totem says: the Ha family never eats coucals because the bird is the benefactor that shows the family's ancestor how to treat bone fractures. In the past, a man had his leg broken. A Ha man, in his dream, was told by a god that he should break a young coucal's leg and keep close watch on how it treats its wound. Next morning, the Ha man found a coucal nest in the forest and followed the god's instructions. Several days

or cats; the Lang worships moorhens, the Ngan worships snakes; in some places the Vi never uses fans to cool glutinous rice. The Vi family worships unicorn beetles. Besides, the Vi is also not permitted to kill the *niều* - their totem. If seeing a wounded *niều*, any Vi man must bring it home where they take care of it until the animal recovers. If seeing a dead *niều*, they must bury it with solemn ceremonies. When building their houses, the Vi people place the foot of the tree that is used as the beam pointing to their bed. Daughters-in-law of a Vi family are not allowed to sit in the outer compartment of their house, if their parents-in-law are still alive.

Meanwhile, the Lo family's totem is the *táng lò* bird, so all members must observe the taboo on killing and eating this bird. Some clans worship the same totem, for example the Quang, the Lu, the Luong, the Loc have the same taboo on killing and eating tigers; the Lo and the Vi never kill and eat snakes; the Luong abstains from eating *to* - the mushroom grown on stumps in the forest, and also never touch these stumps.

It is the practice of totem worship that the Thai people have a clear consciousness of their clan origin and minimize consanguineous marriages. At

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later, he returned to see that the bird had recovered and its leg was wrapped in a wild leaf. He picked up the leaf and recognized it came from a very familiar tree. Since then, the Ha possesses an esoteric remedy for bone fractures. The family chief adopted the taboo on eating coucals and ordered that, if the birds are in danger, all Ha family members have to help them (source: <http://baonghean.vn/bai-3chuyen-cua-mot-gia-ban-46862.html>).

present, the consciousness of the clan origin is no longer strong among the Thai communities. So the practice of totem worship. Legends about the clans and families are preserved in some old members' mind only.

## 6. Conclusion

There are abundant expressions of totem worship and respect in different communities. However, the most prominent common characteristic of the totem worship is that all communities have strict taboos related to totems. All members of a totem family are brothers and sisters, sharing the responsibility of mutual assistance and protection. In case a member is killed by an outsider, the killer's whole family will be responsible for the murder, and the victim's whole clan is unanimous in taking revenge. Totem-based alliances tend to be much stronger than normal families; they are not identical because the transfer of totems is conducted under the principle of matriarchal inheritance only.

The taboo principle also forbid members of the same totem clan from living together as husband and wife as well as having sexual relations. This is the well-known and mysterious exogamy associated to totemism. It is possible to say that this is a measure to prevent incest in the era of group marriage.

W. Wundt is the first person who introduced social explanations for the totem worship. In his 1912 book *Elements of Cultural Psychology*, W. Wundt asserted that the totem animal (totemtier) is considered as the ancestor (Ahnentier) of a human group. A totem is a name of the origin

and also has a mythological significance (Mythologische Bedeutung). The application of this concept implies both senses, so in some cases, a totem becomes an unmethodical list of different branches in the same clan (Stammesabteilungen) though first of all, it should have implied the origin or significance of the totem worship. The concept of totem becomes a criterion for dividing and organizing clans (Association of Ethnology - Viet Nam Museum of Ethnology, 2004).

Closely associated with those criteria and quite stable in the belief and sentiments of members of a clan, it is not accident that a totem is defined as the name of a certain group of members of a clan, and also considered the ancestor of that group. Thus, the totem animal automatically becomes the object of worship. The worship of the animal has a totemic significance, except some certain ceremonies and festivals: not a single animal but representatives of a species, in some extent, are considered holy animals; members of the same totem are forbidden from eating the totem animal or permitted to take it on specific occasions.

The most important social aspect of defining the origin on the basis of totems lies in standard habits and customs on sexual relations of a community. These

standards, first of all, are related to conjugal relations. Therefore, the division of clans and families is associated to an important phenomenon emerging for the first time in the era of totemism - exogamy (Sigmund Freud, 2001: 181-182). W. Wundt generalized the social function of totemism as the oldest unwritten law on marriage and family □

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