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Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom, Volume 2

Edward Burnett Tylor

Excerpt

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# PRIMITIVE CULTURE.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### ANIMISM—*continued.*

Doctrine of Soul's Existence after Death ; its main divisions, Transmigration and Future Life—Transmigration of Souls : re-birth in Human and Animal Bodies, transference to Plants and Objects—Resurrection of Body scarcely held in savage religion—Future Life : a general though not universal doctrine of low races—Continued existence, rather than Immortality ; second death of Soul—Ghost of Dead remains on earth, especially if corpse unburied ; its attachment to bodily remains—Feasts of the Dead.

HAVING thus traced upward from the lower levels of culture the opinions of mankind as to the souls, spirits, ghosts, or phantoms, considered to belong to men, to the lower animals, to plants, and to things, we are now prepared to investigate one of the great religious doctrines of mankind, the belief in the soul's continued existence in a Life after Death. Here let us once more call to mind the consideration which cannot be too strongly put forward, that the doctrine of a Future Life as held by the lower races is the all but necessary outcome of savage Animism. The evidence that the lower races believe the figures of the dead seen in dreams and visions to be their surviving souls, not only goes far to account for the comparative universality of their belief in the continued existence of the soul after the death of the body, but it gives the key to many of their speculations on the nature of this existence, speculations rational enough from the savage point of view, though apt to seem far-fetched absur-

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dities to moderns in their much changed intellectual condition. The belief in a Future Life falls into two main divisions. Closely connected and even largely overlapping one another, both world-wide in their distribution, both ranging back in time to periods of unknown antiquity, both deeply rooted in the lowest strata of human life which lie open to our observation, these two doctrines have in the modern world passed into wonderfully different conditions. The one is the theory of the Transmigration of Souls, which has indeed risen from its lower stages to establish itself among the huge religious communities of Asia, great in history, enormous even in present mass, yet arrested and as it seems henceforth unprogressive in development; but the more highly educated world has rejected the ancient belief, and it now only survives in Europe in dwindling remnants. Far different has been the history of the other doctrine, that of the independent existence of the personal soul after the death of the body in a Future Life. Passing onward through change after change in the condition of the human race, modified and renewed in its long ethnic course, this great belief may be traced from its crude and primitive manifestations among savage races to its establishment in the heart of Christianity, where the faith in a future existence forms at once an inducement to goodness, a sustaining hope through suffering and across the fear of death, and an answer to the perplexed problem of the allotment of happiness and misery in this present world, by the expectation of another world to set this right.

In investigating the doctrine of Transmigration, it will be well first to trace its position among the lower races, and afterwards to follow its developments, so far as they extend in the higher civilization. The temporary migration of souls into material substances, from human bodies down to morsels of wood and stone, is a most important part of the lower psychology. But it does not relate to the continued existence of the soul after death, and may be more conveniently treated of elsewhere, in connexion with such subjects as demoniacal possession and fetish-worship. We are here concerned with the more permanent tenancy of souls for successive lives in successive bodies.

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Permanent transition, new birth, or re-incarnation of human souls in other human bodies, is especially considered to take place by the soul of a deceased person animating the body of an infant. North American Indians of the Algonquin districts, when little children died, would bury them by the wayside, that their souls might pass into mothers passing by, and so be born again.<sup>1</sup> In North-West America, among the Tacullis, we hear of direct transfusion of soul by the medicine-man, who, putting his hands on the breast of the dying or dead, then holds them over the head of a relative and blows through them; the next child born to this recipient of the departed soul is animated by it, and takes the rank and name of the deceased.<sup>2</sup> The Nutka Indians not without ingenuity accounted for the existence of a distant tribe speaking the same language as themselves, by declaring them to be the spirits of their dead.<sup>3</sup> In Greenland, where the wretched custom of abandoning and even plundering widows and orphans was tending to bring the whole race to extinction, a helpless widow would seek to persuade some father that the soul of a dead child of his had passed into a living child of hers, or *vice versa*, thus gaining for herself a new relative and protector.<sup>4</sup> It is mostly ancestral or kindred souls that are thought to enter into children, and this kind of transmigration is therefore from the savage point of view a highly philosophical theory, accounting as it does so well for the general resemblance between parents and children, and even for the more special phenomena of atavism. In North-West America, among the Koloshes, the mother sees in a dream the deceased relative whose transmitted soul will give his likeness to the child;<sup>5</sup> and in Vancouver's Island in 1860 a lad was much regarded by the Indians because he had a mark like the scar of a gunshot wound on his hip, it being believed that a chief dead some four generations before, who had such a mark, had re-

<sup>1</sup> Breuef in 'Rel. des Jes. dans la Nouvelle France,' 1635, p. 130; Charlevoix, 'Nouvelle France,' vol. vi. p. 75. See Brinton, p. 253.

<sup>2</sup> Waitz, vol. iii. p. 195, see pp. 198, 213.

<sup>3</sup> Mayne, 'British Columbia,' p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Cranz, 'Grönland,' pp. 248, 258, see p. 212. See also Turner, 'Polynesia,' p. 353; Meiners, vol. ii. p. 793.

<sup>5</sup> Bastian, 'Psychologie,' p. 28.

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turned.<sup>1</sup> In Old Calabar, if a mother loses a child and another is born soon after, she thinks the departed one to have come back.<sup>2</sup> The Wanika consider that the soul of a dead ancestor animates a child, and this is why it resembles its father or mother.<sup>3</sup> In Guinea a child bearing a strong resemblance, physical or mental, to a dead relative, is supposed to have inherited his soul;<sup>4</sup> and the Yorubas, greeting a new-born infant with the salutation, "Thou art come!" look for signs to show what ancestral soul has returned among them.<sup>5</sup> Among the Khonds of Orissa, births are celebrated by a feast on the seventh day, and the priest, divining by dropping rice-grains in a cup of water, and judging from observations made on the person of the infant, determines which of his progenitors has reappeared, and the child generally at least among the northern tribes receives the name of that ancestor.<sup>6</sup> The naming of children, with reference to the belief in return of ancestral souls, appears in Dahome.<sup>7</sup> The renewal of old family names by giving them to new-born children, a practice not unknown among savages, may always be suspected of involving some such thought; as when the New Zealand priest would repeat to the infant a long list of names of its ancestors, fixing upon that name which the child, by sneezing or crying when it was uttered, was considered to select for itself;<sup>8</sup> or when some North American Indians were observed to set the child in place of the last owner of its name, so that a man would treat as his grandfather a child who might have been his grandson.<sup>9</sup>

The belief in the new human birth of the departed soul,

<sup>1</sup> Bastian, 'Zur vergl. Psychologie,' in Lazarus and Steintal's 'Zeitschrift,' vol. v. p. 160, etc., also Papuas and other races.

<sup>2</sup> Burton, 'W. & W. fr. W. Afr.' p. 376.

<sup>3</sup> Krapf, 'E. Afr.' p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Wilson, 'W. Afr.' p. 210; see also R. Clarke, 'Sierra Leone,' p. 159.

<sup>5</sup> Bastian, l. c.

<sup>6</sup> Macpherson, p. 72; also Tickell in 'Journ. As. Soc. Bengal,' vol. ix. pp. 793, etc.; Dalton in 'Tr. Eth. Soc.' vol. vi. p. 22 (similar rite of Mundas and Oraons).

<sup>7</sup> Burton, 'Dahome,' vol. ii. p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> A. S. Thomson, 'New Zealand,' i. 118; see Shortland, 'Traditions,' p. 145; Turner, 'Polynesia,' p. 353.

<sup>9</sup> Charlevoix, 'Nouvelle France,' vol. v. p. 426. See also Steller, 'Kamtschatka,' p. 353; Kracheninnikow, p. 117; Bastian, 'Mensch,' vol. ii. p. 276 (Samoieds).

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which has even led West African negroes to commit suicide when in distant slavery, that they may revive in their own land in fact amounts among several of the lower races to a distinct doctrine of an earthly resurrection. One of the most remarkable forms which this belief assumes is when dark-skinned races, wanting some reasonable theory to account for the appearance among them of human creatures of a new strange sort, the white men, and struck with their pallid ghostly hue combined with powers that seem those of superhuman spiritual beings, have determined that the manes of their dead must have come back in this wondrous shape. The aborigines of Australia have expressed this theory in the simple formula, "Blackfellow tumble down, jump up Whitefellow." Thus a native who was hanged years ago at Melbourne expressed in his last moments the hopeful belief that he would jump up Whitefellow, and have lots of sixpences. The doctrine has been current among them since early days of European intercourse, and in accordance with it they habitually regarded the Englishmen as their own deceased kindred, come back to their country from an attachment to it in a former life. Real or imagined likeness completed the delusion, as when Sir George Grey was hugged and wept over by an old woman who found in him a son she had lost, or when a convict, recognized as a deceased relative, was endowed anew with the land he had possessed during his former life. A similar theory may be traced northward by the Torres Islands to New Caledonia, where the natives thought the white men to be the spirits of the dead who bring sickness, and assigned this as their reason for wishing to kill white men.<sup>1</sup> In Africa, again, the belief is found among the Western negroes that they will rise again white, and the Bari of the White Nile, believing in the resurrection of the dead on earth, considered the first white people they saw as departed spirits thus come back.<sup>2</sup>

The lower psychology, drawing no definite line of demarcation between souls of men and of beasts, can at least admit without

<sup>1</sup> Grey, 'Australia,' vol. i. p. 301; Lang, 'Queensland,' pp. 34, 336; Bonwick, 'Tasmanians,' p. 183; Scherzer, 'Voy. of Novara,' vol. iii. p. 34; Bastian, 'Psychologie,' p. 222, 'Mensch,' vol. iii. pp. 362-3, and in Lazarus and Steinthal's 'Zeitschrift,' l. c.; Turner, 'Polynesia,' p. 424.

<sup>2</sup> Römer, 'Guinea,' p. 85; Brun-Rollet, 'Nil Blanc,' etc. p. 234.

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difficulty the transmission of human souls into the bodies of the lower animals. In North-West America we find some Indians believing the spirits of their dead to enter into bears, and travellers have heard of a tribe begging the life of a wrinkle-faced old she grizzly bear as the recipient of the soul of some particular grandam, whom they fancied the creature to resemble.<sup>1</sup> So, among the Esquimaux, a traveller noticed a widow who was living for conscience sake upon birds, and would not touch walrus-meat, which the angekok had forbidden her for a time, because her late husband had entered into a walrus.<sup>2</sup> Among the North American Indians, we hear of the Powhatans refraining from doing harm to certain small wood-birds which received the souls of their chiefs;<sup>3</sup> of Huron souls turning into turtle-doves after the burial of their bones at the Feast of the Dead;<sup>4</sup> of that pathetic funeral rite of the Iroquois, the setting free a bird on the evening of burial, to carry away the soul.<sup>5</sup> In Mexico, the Tlascalans thought that after death the souls of nobles would animate beautiful singing birds, while plebeians passed into weasels and beetles and such like vile creatures.<sup>6</sup> In Brazil, the Tecunas are said to have believed in transmigration after death into man or brute; the Içannas say that the souls of the brave will become beautiful birds feeding on pleasant fruits, but cowards will be turned into reptiles.<sup>7</sup> A missionary heard a Chiriquane woman of Buenos Ayres say of a fox, "May not that be the spirit of my dead daughter?"<sup>8</sup> Among the Abipones we hear of certain little ducks which fly in flocks at night, uttering a mournful hiss, and which fancy associates with the souls of the dead;<sup>9</sup> while in Popayan it is said that doves were not killed, as inspired by departed souls.<sup>10</sup> In Africa,

<sup>1</sup> Schoolcraft, 'Indian Tribes,' part iii. p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Hayes, 'Arctic Boat Journey,' p. 198.

<sup>3</sup> Brinton, 'Myths of New World,' p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> Brebeuf in 'Rel. des Jes.' 1636, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan, 'Iroquois,' p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> Clavigero, 'Messico,' vol. ii. p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Martius, 'Ethnogr. Amer.' vol. i. pp. 446, 602; Markham in 'Tr. Eth. Soc.' vol. iii. p. 195.

<sup>8</sup> Brinton, p. 254.

<sup>9</sup> Dobrizhoffer, 'Abipones,' vol. ii. pp. 74, 270.

<sup>10</sup> Coreal in Brinton, l. c. See also J. G. Müller, p. 139 (Natchez), 223 (Caribs), 402 (Peru).

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## ANIMISM.

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again, mention is made of the Maravi thinking that the souls of bad men become jackals, and good men snakes.<sup>1</sup> The Zulus, while admitting that a man may turn into a wasp or lizard, work out in the fullest way the idea of the dead becoming snakes, a creature whose change of skin has so often been associated with the thought of resurrection and immortality. It is especially certain green or brown harmless snakes, which come gently and fearlessly into houses, which are considered to be "amatongo" or ancestors, and therefore are treated respectfully, and have offerings of food given them. In two ways, the dead man who has become a snake can still be recognized; if the creature is one-eyed, or has a scar or some other mark, it is recognized as the "itongo" of a man who was thus marked in life; but if he had no mark, the "itongo" appears in human shape in dreams, thus revealing the personality of the snake.<sup>2</sup> In Guinea, monkeys found near a graveyard are supposed to be animated by the spirits of the dead, and in certain localities monkeys, crocodiles, and snakes, being thought men in metempsychosis, are held sacred.<sup>3</sup> It is to be borne in mind that notions of this kind may form in barbaric psychology but a portion of the wide doctrine of the soul's future existence. For a conspicuous instance of this, let us take the system of the Gold-Coast negroes. They believe that the "kla" or "kra," the vital soul, becomes at death a "sisa" or ghost, which can remain in the house with the body, plague the living, and cause sickness, till it departs or is driven by the sorcerer to the bank of the River Wolta, where the ghosts build themselves houses and dwell. But they can and do come back from this Land of Souls. They can be born again as souls in new human bodies, and a soul who was poor before will now be rich. Many will not come back as men, but will become animals. To an African mother who has lost her child, it is a consolation to say, "He will come again."<sup>4</sup>

In higher levels of culture, the theory of re-embodiment of

<sup>1</sup> Waitz, vol. ii. p. 419 (Maravi).

<sup>2</sup> Callaway, 'Rel. of Amazulu,' p. 196, etc.; Arbousset and Dumas, p. 277.

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Wilson, 'W. Afr.' pp. 210, 218. See also Brun-Rollet, pp. 200, 234; Meiners, vol. i. p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> Steinhauser in 'Mag. der Evang. Miss.' Basel, 1856, No. 2, p. 135.



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the soul appears in strong and varied development. Though seemingly not received by the early Aryans, the doctrine of migration was adopted and adapted by Hindu philosophy, and forms an integral part of that great system common to Brahmanism and Buddhism, wherein successive births or existences are believed to carry on the consequences of past and prepare the antecedents of future life. To the Hindu the body is but the temporary receptacle of the soul, which, "bound in the chains of deeds" and "eating the fruits of past actions," promotes or degrades itself along a series of embodiments in plant, beast, man, deity. Thus all creatures differ rather in degree than kind, all are akin to man, an elephant or ape or worm may once have been human, and may become human again, a pariah or barbarian is at once low-caste among men and high-caste among brutes. Through such bodies migrate the sinful souls which desire has drawn down from primal purity into gross material being; the world where they do penance for the guilt incurred in past existences is a huge reformatory, and life is the long grievous process of developing evil into good. The rules are set forth in the book of Manu how souls endowed with the quality of goodness acquire divine nature, while souls governed by passion take up the human state, and souls sunk in darkness are degraded to brutes. Thus the range of migration stretches downward from gods and saints, through holy ascetics, Brahmans, nymphs, kings, counsellors, to actors, drunkards, birds, dancers, cheats, elephants, horses, Sudras, barbarians, wild beasts, snakes, worms, insects, and inert things. Obscure as the relation mostly is between the crime and its punishment in a new life, there may be discerned through the code of penal transmigration an attempt at appropriateness of penalty, and an intention to punish the sinner wherein he sinned. For faults committed in a previous existence men are afflicted with deformities, the stealer of food shall be dyspeptic, the scandal-monger shall have foul breath, the horse-stealer shall go lame, and in consequence of their deeds men shall be born idiots, blind, deaf and dumb, misshaped, and thus despised of good men. After expiation of their wickedness in the hells of torment, the murderer of a Brahman may pass into a wild



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beast or a pariah; he who adulterously dishonours his guru or spiritual father shall be a hundred times re-born as grass, a bush, a creeper, a carrion bird, a beast of prey; the cruel shall become bloodthirsty beasts; stealers of grain and meat shall turn into rats and vultures; the thief who took dyed garments, kitchen-herbs, or perfumes, shall become accordingly a red partridge, a peacock, or a musk-rat. In short, "in whatever disposition of mind a man accomplishes such and such an act, he shall reap the fruit in a body endowed with such and such a quality.<sup>1</sup> The recognition of plants as possible receptacles of the transmigrating spirit well illustrates the conception of souls of plants. The idea is one known to lower races in the district of the world which has been more or less under Hindu influence. Thus we hear among the Dayaks of Borneo of the human soul entering the trunks of trees, where it may be seen damp and blood-like, but no longer personal and sentient;<sup>2</sup> and the Santals of Bengal are said to fancy that uncharitable men and childless women are eaten eternally by worms and snakes, while the good enter into fruit-bearing trees.<sup>3</sup> But it is an open question whether these and the Hindu ideas are originally independent of each other, and if not, did the Hindus adopt the ideas of the indigenes, or *vice versa*? A curious commentary on the Hindu working out of the conception of plant-souls is to be found in a passage in a 17th century work, which describes certain Brahmans of the Coromandel Coast as eating fruits, but being careful not to pull the plants up by the roots, lest they should dislodge a soul; but few, it is remarked, are so scrupulous as this, and the consideration has occurred to them that souls in roots and herbs are in most vile and abject bodies, so that if dislodged they may become better off by entering into the bodies of men or beasts.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Brahmanic doctrine of souls transmigrating into inert things has in like manner a bearing on the savage theory of object-souls.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Manu, xi. xii. Ward, 'Hindoos,' vol. i. p. 164, vol. ii. pp. 215, 347-52.

<sup>2</sup> St. John, 'Far East,' vol. i. p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> Hunter, 'Rural Bengal,' p. 210. See also Shaw in 'As. Res.' vol. iv. p. 46 (Rajmahal tribes).

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Roger, 'La Porte Ouverte,' Amst. 1670, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Manu, xii. 9: "çarirajaih karmmadoshaih yâti sthâvaratâm narah"—"for

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Buddhism, like the Brahmanism from which it seceded, habitually recognized transmigration between superhuman and human beings and the lower animals, and in an exceptional way recognized a degradation even into a plant or a thing. How the Buddhist mind elaborated the doctrine of metempsychosis, may be seen in the endless legends of Gautama himself undergoing his 550 births, suffering pain and misery through countless ages to gain the power of freeing sentient beings from the misery inherent in all existence. Four times he became Maha Brahma, twenty times the dewa Sekra, and many times or few he passed through such stages as a hermit, a king, a rich man, a slave, a potter, a gambler, a curer of snake bites, an ape, an elephant, a bull, a serpent, a snipe, a fish, a frog, the dewa or genius of a tree. At last, when he became the supreme Buddha, his mind, like a vessel overflowing with honey, overflowed with the ambrosia of truth, and he proclaimed his triumph over life:—

“ Painful are repeated births.  
 O house-builder! I have seen thee,  
 Thou canst not build again a house for me.  
 Thy rafters are broken  
 Thy roof-timbers are shattered,  
 My mind is detached,  
 I have attained to the extinction of desire.”

Whether the Buddhists receive the full Hindu doctrine of the migration of the individual soul from birth to birth, or whether they refine away into metaphysical subtleties the notion of continued personality, they do consistently and systematically hold that a man's life in former existences is the cause of his now being what he is, while at this moment he is accumulating merit or demerit whose result will determine his fate in future lives. Memory, it is true, fails generally to recal these past births, but memory, as we know, stops short of the beginning even of this present life. When King Bimsara's feet were burned and rubbed with salt by command of his cruel son that he might not walk, why was this torture inflicted on a man so

crimes done in the body, the man goes to the inert (motionless) state ;” xii. 42, “sthâvarâh krimakîtâçcha matsyâh sarpâh sakachhapâh paçavaçcha mrigaschaiva jaghanyâ tâmasî gatih”—“inert (motionless) things, worms and insects, fish, serpents, tortoises and beasts and deer also are the last dark form.”