

The Phoenix "Totemism"

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After hundred years of an exuberant, though often precarious, existence as a comprehensive term for one of the more vexing problems posed and faced by anthropologists and historians of religion, totemism apparently lost its attraction. At the beginning of the last decade its study almost reached the point of stagnation, owing to the lack of fresh evidence to support one or other of a host of hypotheses. The fate of old-time totemism was sealed when CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS (1962: Chapter I) dealt totemism the coup de grâce by declaring it an illusion, though L. R. HIATT (1969: 93) rose in Australia to "stand squarely opposed to the forces of annihilation" and tried to prove LÉVI-STRAUSS' verdict a mistake. Posthumous attempts (KESSLER 1971: 31-36) to heal the breach of opinions were unconvincing and the English-Australian and the French-American schools remain critical of each other over the death sentence proclaimed by LÉVI-STRAUSS and passed upon the ever elusive subject.

Unexpectedly a new situation, destined to bring about a drastic change of concepts, arose from linguistic research work undertaken independently in Australia. We may well say that totemism can now be likened to the Old Egyptian Bennu bird which burned itself to death only to emerge from the ashes in the old form but with a new life essence. As far as this process is characterized by 'resurrection', the English-Australian school should be pleased, its 'metamorphosis' should meet the views expressed by LÉVI-STRAUSS. In any case these aspects of the new development seem bound to lead to the reconciliation of the differing opinions. From the safe position gained by the recent work and subsequent discoveries it may not be necessary to say more about the totemism of the past in this context.

The new totemistic outlook is, first of all, focussed on the Australian scene. Whilst engaged in linguistic field work in the north-west of Western Australia during the years 1964 to 1968 ¹ the author reported to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra for the first time (1965) on the

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