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THE REACTIONS OF FRANZ BOAS AND KONRAD THEODOR PREUSS TO A STRUCTURAL INTERPRETATION OF KWAKIUTL MYTHOLOGY IN 1933

1. Introduction

In the preface of his book *The Mouth of Heaven, An introduction to Kwakiutl religious thought*, Irving Goldman refers to *The serpent in Kwakiutl religion* which I wrote in 1932 as a dissertation for my doctor's degree at Leiden university under the supervision of my teacher of cultural anthropology J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong. Goldman makes this remark: "It is a curious reflection on the state of ethnological maturity in English-speaking anthropology that the subject on which the corpus of Kwakiutl ethnography was most complete, namely, Kwakiutl religious thought, has been virtually ignored. Boas's original aim to reveal to the outside world the character of Kwakiutl thought was achieved only insofar as the new data were set in print. The only attempt at a thoroughgoing understanding of Kwakiutl religious thought has been that of Müller (1955), a work practically unknown in the English-speaking world. Locher's interesting study (1932) of the serpent theme in Kwakiutl religion was devastated by Boas's review (1933) and never gained credence" (1975:IX).

This statement about my publication is right insofar as the English-speaking world is concerned but it is not true of the German-speaking world. Müller's study, *Weltbild und Kult der Kwakiutl Indianer*, which appeared twenty-three years after my dissertation, criticizes my emphasis on the serpent as a simplification of the religion of these Indians but after this critical remark Müller qualified my book as a fine study of a high order in its convincing presentation of the polar primitive view of the world (p. 11). Müller's opinion was not an isolated one in the German-speaking world. In various German books on ethnology and in encyclopedias (e.g. *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd. edition, 1957, s.v. Amerikanistik) reference was made to my study. Without any doubt this was influenced by the highly favourable review of my book by the well-known German
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anthropologist and Americanist, Konrad Theodor Preuss. This review appeared in 1933 in “Sociologus, Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Soziologie”, published in Germany under the editorship of the anthropologist Thurnwald and an international board of co-editors (among them the anthropologists Malinowski, Sapir and Steinmetz, and the sociologists Ogburn and Sorokin).

The review by Preuss was written after the appearance of the review by Boas, which was originally published in German in the “Deutsche Literaturzeitung”. Boas did not confine his devastating criticism to my publication but included all similar attempts to discover a system or structure in oral mythology. That was the reason why Preuss utilized Boas’ review of my dissertation to make a full attack on his negative attitude which he regarded as a disaster to the real understanding of mythology and religion. The attack by Preuss did not make the slightest impression on Boas, if he ever saw it. The English version of his review of The serpent in Kwakiutl religion, which appeared in 1933 in the “Journal of American Folklore”, even was selected by Boas for the collection of his papers Race, Language and Culture, published in 1940.

2. An old structural trend in Dutch anthropology

Various publications on structural anthropology indicate Dutch anthropology as one of the twentieth century origins of the structuralist approach in current practice (Ehrmann 1970:244; de Heusch 1968:33; P.E. de Josselin de Jong 1972). Of course the most important of these origins is the line Émile Durkheim – Marcel Mauss – Claude Lévi-Strauss, which had a strong influence on later developments of the Dutch structuralist trend. As P.E. de Josselin de Jong has pointed out in recent studies (1960, 1972, 1977), this trend had its own origins in the Dutch tradition of studying classification systems in Indonesia, which goes back to the nineteenth century. In particular he refers to the work of H.A. van Hien on the Javanese spirit world of 1896, the result of empirical observations by a man who did not have a training in anthropology. Another figure who had first hand knowledge of the everyday life of Javanese was van Ossenbruggen, a jurist who arrived at anthropology by way of customary law. He presented the results of his study on Javanese conceptual systems as a contribution to comparative anthropology, and he utilized for his interpretations the views of Durkheim and Mauss on primitive classifications. Van Ossenbruggen’s approach stimulated the work of the orientalist and
anthropologist Rassers, one of the two founding fathers of the Leiden based structuralist trend in the anthropology of the Netherlands. The other one was his friend J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong, since 1922 a supernumerary professor under the Leiden University Fund and since 1935 fulltime professor at Leiden university. It was Rassers who stimulated J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong to a renewed extensive study of the publications by Durkheim and his school. The combination of a selected use of fundamental views of this school with his many-sided knowledge of contemporary mainstream anthropology, together with his own fieldwork experiences in anthropology, linguistics and archeology in North and Central America and in Indonesia, proved to be a fertile one as became evident not only in his publications but especially by the dissertations written under the inspiration of his university teaching.

P.E. de Josselin de Jong rightly emphasized the background of Indonesian studies of the Leiden based structuralist trend. J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong, however, was not an Indonesianist when, in the beginning of the nineteen twenties, he became interested again in the work of Durkheim and his school. At that time he was an anthropologist and linguist who had paid much attention to the study of American Indian cultures. The fact that Durkheim and Mauss frequently made use of examples from these cultures to support their view on classification systems certainly influenced his development towards a structuralist approach. In the thirties he became an Indonesianist more than an Americanist, although it would be better to call him a general anthropologist (Locher 1965, 1974).

It was in the second half of the twenties that I became a student of J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong. At that time I was studying history under Huizinga, the scholar of cultural history whose synchronic morphological study on the waning of the European middle ages was one of the outstanding publications of that period and whose interest in anthropology as part of a general science of culture later (1938) became evident in his “Homo Ludens” (Locher 1958; Colie 1968). However, it was not on Huizinga’s advice that I began my study of anthropology. I wanted to know more about “myth”, a term which I came across in the study of ancient history and, moreover, a notion of actual socio-political importance in the Europe of the twenties. I had heard that de Josselin de Jong paid attention to this subject in his lectures and therefore began to attend them. That is the way I arrived at anthropology and finally took my doctor’s degree on
the basis of a dissertation about the mythology of the Kwakiutl Indians. The subject of mythology and culture of the Northwest Coast Indians was suggested to me by de Josselin de Jong. As he told me, there was a large amount of excellent ethnographic materials available, most of it collected directly by or under the supervision of Franz Boas, the outstanding figure of American anthropology at that time. De Josselin de Jong assured me that from Boas no systematic interpretation was to be expected, certainly not in the way of a structural approach as practised by Rassers and de Josselin de Jong.

3. A structural interpretation of Kwakiutl mythology

In the introduction of my dissertation I stated that in the interpretation of the culture of the Northwest Coast tribes, most attention had been given so far to the social and economic phenomena. I mentioned in particular the work of the French authors Davy and Mauss. Although in Mauss’ pioneer study “Essai sur le Don” as well as in other works of a more general character there was much to be found about the religion of these population groups, up to that time not a single student had ventured to give a detailed analysis of the religious system as such. Hardly anybody proceeded beyond pointing out such mythic figures as he considered most important, and rendering the myths which in his opinion were most characteristic. The German Americanist Eduard Seler, I said, was the only one who had gone a little farther. In a few of his papers, he made important observations about some principles of the doctrinal system and its representation on ritual objects, especially rattles. However, Seler had at his disposal very limited ethnographic materials. Although his approach was strongly influenced by the “nature-mythological” school of thought, he yet succeeded in pointing out connections of primary interest. The antithesis of sun and moon, in particular, was one of the forms in which the dualism of the religious system prevailing here found expression. Moreover, Seler realized that this antithesis was closely connected with the one between life and death. He did not penetrate, however, to the very core of the system; neither did Boas. I pointed out that the ethnographic work of Boas on these Indian cultures was an enormous achievement, in quality as well as in quantity, but that he never had set himself to work out these extensive materials into a synthetic whole. As regards mythology his interest was chiefly directed towards the diffusion of myth types
and figures. He regarded culture as a more or less arbitrary, fortuitous conglomerate of elements which should be analysed by means of the "historical method". According to this method one should try to ascertain whence those elements originated and where are to be found the principal centres of diffusion. If we leave it at that, I stated, little insight is gained into the culture in its entirety. "For is it not most important of all, particularly as regards spiritual culture, to ascertain how the cultural system has been built up, by which forces and principles it is dominated, and how it functions in practice? Of much greater value than the statement that certain foreign elements have penetrated into a culture, is the answer to the question why and in which manner these elements have been accepted. And for this we need some insight into the culture as such. This is pre-eminently true of mythology, which is dominated by a strict system and which by no means consists of a fortuitous hodge-podge of figures and motifs. This system is based in the root idea of native religion" (p. 2). Then I explained the difficulty of studying a culture like that of the Kwakiutl in modern times because of the unsettlement of such a culture through its contact with modern civilization. In particular the social organization was in confusion, as indicated by Boas too, and therefore several associations and connections between social and mythical elements would be difficult to grasp. For several reasons I decided to make use of the following method. As I pointed out: "We made no attempt to reconstruct the whole religious system and to solve all contradictions, but we have selected a figure of obvious central significance and have tried to determine its relations to other figures in order to acquire gradually an insight into the fundamental idea by which the system is governed" (p. 3).

To concentrate on one figure, who obviously has not a peripheral position, and from there to approach other figures, was a method which I had learned from the publications of Rassers on the figure of Pañji and his place in Javanese mythology and theatre (Rassers 1922, 1959). Rassers had also indicated how to deal with historical problems in regard of his subject by applying the view that foreign influences had been incorporated into the old structure of Javanese mythology and culture. My choice of the serpent as a key figure to understand Kwakiutl mythology was not suggested by J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong but certainly was influenced by his publication (1929) on the origin of the divine trickster, a lecture which he delivered to one of the departments of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences. In this lecture he
stressed the relation of the ambivalent trickster figure to socio-religious dualism. In an incidental remark he referred to Seler’s publication on the culture of the American Northwest Coast for the presence there of socio-religious dualism, without, however, specifically mentioning the presence of a trickster figure (1929: 13n).

In his book on Kwakiutl religious thought Goldman’s reaction to my choice of the serpent as a key figure to understand the mythology and the ritual is evident from the following passage: “G.W. Locher has seen in the double-headed serpent the grand integrative image of Kwakiutl religion (1932). One need not go so far in reductivism to recognize how deeply the serpent, even though a comparatively minor figure in the entire Winter Ceremonial, does succeed in portraying the main themes. Sisiutl, as Locher has painstakingly shown, has wide-ranging associative connections with almost the entire spectrum of Kwakiutl beliefs. Through it, we see as from another vantage point the panorama of forces and spirits that occupy the great lineage houses during the winter season” (1975:114-115).

I would say that at that time I did not regard the serpent as the grand integrative image of Kwakiutl religion but as the key figure to understand the religious system of the Kwakiutl. In my dissertation I referred to J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong’s idea about the triad of primeval god (or divine creator), benefactor (culture hero), and trickster (divine deceiver) as the root principle of primitive religious systems in general (1932:8). “These may be three separate figures in mythology”, I said, “or three aspects of the same figure; but they may also be represented in a system by different figures, and this happens frequently.” The ambivalent and complicated structure of Kwakiutl mythology, I argued, became especially understandable if it was approached from the position of the serpent (or substitutes of this figure) because this figure combined the dualistic and monistic nature of the religious system. I did point out, however, that the whole system could also be seen in the light of the bird-serpent figure, the bird representing more the upperworld and the serpent the underworld (p. 100).

Finally I said that the whole year could be differentiated in two, mutually polar, periods. The summer was the time in which predominated: the culture hero and benefactor Qaneqelaku, the upperworld, the South, the day sun, the direction East-West, and the unthreatened life. During this time the community, organized in clans, spread and lead a quietly busy life. In winter the serpent
was dominant, with the underworld, the North, the sun and moon after setting, the direction West-East, the struggle of life and death, light and darkness, in which life and light ultimately triumphed and were reborn. During that period the community, which was then organized in societies, showed an intensive group life. The potlatch and the winter ritual with cannibalism as the central rite engrossed the minds to the exclusion of all other things. It was the time of the mystery of rebirth, embracing ruin, death and revival (p. 100-1).

4. Boas’ criticism

In the table of contents of his publication Race, Language and Culture (1940) Boas summarized his review of my dissertation, which had appeared in 1933, as: “Criticism of the attempt to find a systematic interpretation of mythology”. The review was not just a criticism of a specific interpretation as far as Kwakiutl mythology was concerned. Its general purpose was to reject the attempt to find a systematic interpretation of oral mythology. At the end of his review Boas states explicitly: “A systematic explanation of mythological stories seems to me illusory”. With reference to The serpent in Kwakiutl religion Boas points out: “Dr. Locher seeks a systematic interpretation of mythology without asking himself whether there is such a thing as a mythological system. His method of proving this point, as that of other investigators who work toward a similar goal, appears to me as follows: Myths are not what they appear to be. They hide a deeper significance which we must discover. The investigation is based upon a comparison of the stories which are grouped around the different mythological figures, upon an examination of their names, attributes, actions and associations with other figures. It is hoped in this way to recognize their ‘true’ significance which is unknown to the living native himself, in part, because the original meaning has been forgotten, in part, I presume, because it is taken for granted that the ‘real’ system is just as little known to him as the grammatical system of his language. It seems to me that such attempts to discover the ‘true’ essence of myths are analogous to the primitive way of thinking as assumed by the same investigators. As myths to the student of mythology are not what they seem, so to the primitives sun, moon, stars, lightning, clouds are supposed to hide a deeper meaning. They are conceived as a system, as a form of human life endowed with greater powers. The logic in both cases appears to
As far as the Kwakiutl and Bella Bella are concerned, it can be shown, according to Boas, that parts of the mythology have been introduced quite recently and have never been worked into a system. After giving some examples he declared that the entire method “by which the double-headed serpent is to be set down as the fundamental concept of Kwakiutl mythology” seemed to him to rest upon “a complete misunderstanding of the relation of the Indian to his mythology, and of the development of the mythology of these tribes. Objections such as those here touched upon, could be raised against practically every step of the author’s consideration.” (p. 449).

5. The reaction of Preuss

The largest part of Preuss’ review of *The serpent in Kwakiutl religion* in the journal “Sociologus” (1933) consisted of a full attack on the main theme of Boas’ criticism, namely his rejection of the systematic interpretation of oral mythology. Preuss informs us that already in 1892 Boas told his friend Eduard Seler how completely wrong he was in his publication “Die Lichtbringer bei den Indianerstämmen der Nordwestküste” and how since that time Seler had stopped his research in this field. Boas had used the same argument as he did forty years later. Seler did not understand at all the relation of the Indian to his mythology nor the development of the mythology of these tribes.

The fact that Boas had not set himself to a systematic interpretation of the mythology of “his tribes” and the way he reacted to the interpretations by other anthropologists, necessarily must lead to the conclusion, Preuss said, that according to Boas neither he himself nor anyone else could proceed beyond the ethnographic materials collected by him. As Boas did not confine himself to the criticism of the systematic interpretation of Kwakiutl mythology but gave it a general scope, Preuss held himself entitled to attack this criticism on account of his own experiences in fieldwork and study. He stated: “Überall, wo ich geforscht habe, besonders bei den Cora, Huichol, Mexicano, in Mexico, bei den Kagaba und Uitoto in Columbien und in den Altertümern und den reichen Literaturschätzen der Mexikaner zu der Zeit der Entdeckung, habe ich stets eine Art System in ihrer Religion und in ihren Mythen gefunden, wenn auch erst nach heissem Bemühen und öfters erst nach der Veröffentlichung der zugrunde liegenden Materialien, und ich glaube trotzdem, dass
damit noch immer nicht das Verständnis der benutzten Quellen allseitig abgeschlossen ist. Wie bei den Kwakiutl waren die Mythen und religiösen Handlungen dieser Stämme das Ergebnis vielfacher Völkerbewegungen und Übertragungen. Ein religionswissenschaftliches Studium muss demnach das Verständnis aus Schichtungen innerhalb von Kulturkreisen gewinnen, indem man darin die reichen Daten eines einzelnen Volkes einzugliedern sucht, sodass es nicht so sehr darauf ankommt, ob eine Zeremonie oder ein Mythos von irgendwoher eingewandert ist, zumal verschiedene Bräuche und Mythen derselben mythischen Erklärungsschicht angehören können. Wer sich dagegen wie Boas auf Grund theoretischer Erwägungen überhaupt weigert, auch nur einen Versuch zum Verständnis zu machen, der kann auch nicht besondere Neigung haben zu einem Verständnis zu gelangen.“

After the statement that he had found a kind of system in the religion and mythology wherever he had done fieldwork and research concerning American Indians, Preuss called the approach of Boas a disaster to the study of religion and mythology. Then he said: “Nach dieser notwendigen grundsätzlichen Erörterung dürfen wir uns an der Arbeit von Locher rückhaltlos erfreuen, da sie uns zum ersten Mal einen annehmbaren Ausblick in dem Labyrinth von Mythen und Riten der Nordwestküste eröffnet und dabei eine Methode anwendet, die sich von der engen Anklammerung der Phantasie an das Verhältnis der einzelnen Personen und Tiere zu einander loslöst und nur die Zugehörigkeit zu kosmischen Regionen in Betracht zieht.” The last part of this appreciation is correct if the relation to cosmic regions is not seen in the light of the “nature-mythological” school of thought but in the sense in which this concept was used in the work of de Josselin de Jong to indicate the total order with its subdivision of microcosmos and macrocosmos (1935:11).

6. Conclusion

In his article on history and ethnology (1949, 1958) Lévi-Strauss stated: “C'est à Boas que revient le mérite d'avoir, avec une admirable lucidité, défini la nature inconsciente des phénomènes culturels, dans des pages où, les assimilant de ce point de vue au langage, il anticipait sur le développement ultérieur de la pensée linguistique, et sur un avenir ethnologique dont nous commençons à peine à entrevoir les promesses.” He referred to the introduction which Boas wrote to the Handbook of American
Indian Languages (1911), several years before the publication of Ferdinand de la Saussure’s Cours de linguistique générale. However, as Lévi-Strauss points out in the same passage of his article, we do not find the application of these new insights as far as ethnology is concerned: “Car Boas, qui devait les utiliser pleinement pour fonder la linguistique américaine, et à qui elles devaient permettre de réfuter des conceptions théoriques alors contestées, a fait preuve, en ce qui concerne l’ethnologie, d’une timidité qui freine toujours ses successeurs” (1958:26-27).

But there is no timidity in the way Boas condemned an attempt at a systematic interpretation of Kwakiutl mythology nor in his general statement which I quoted before: “A systematic explanation of mythological stories seems to me illusory”. He also did not accept the idea of a kind of system in mythology which could be compared with the unconscious grammatical system of language.

In the essays on the centennial of Boas’ birth, The Anthropology of Franz Boas, this problem is discussed by Melville Jacobs in his contribution on Folklore. There he says: “Boas’ point of view about the structuring and content of an oral literature made it a thing of shreds and patches. His attitude appears in his review of a book by G.W. Löcher (read: Locher), who regarded an oral literature as a system or structure (1933). Boas demurred, asserting that a folklore is an assemblage of items of which many continue to be contradictory. Although he was correct to the degree that his considerations dealt with some of the borrowed items, his patchwork assumption prevented him and most of his disciples from seeking or accounting for such structuring and internal consistencies as were present.” (1959:131).

My dissertation which I wrote when I was twenty-four years old and with the idea of pioneering in a rich field of ethnographic materials under the stimulating influence of de Josselin de Jong’s structuralism, did not show much timidity either. It is, therefore, quite understandable that Boas was irritated by this inroad on what he regarded as his domain of anthropology. But the scope which he gave to his criticism made it into an outline of his attitude in general towards systematic interpretations of oral mythology. That was the reason why Preuss replied to this criticism as he did and why in recent times some American anthropologists have brought Boas’ review of The serpent in Kwakiutl religion to the fore again. It is important that Irvin Goldman did this too, because he was not only a student of Boas
but also worked for him as an assistant on Northwest Coast problems and, moreover, spent many years of his life in studying the Kwakiutl and their neighbouring tribes.

Of course I know that the present interest in my publication of some forty-five years ago has to do with the impact of Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology on the study of American Indian mythology. Although not in connection with his own publications and statements on the mythology of the Northwest Coast Indians, Lévi-Strauss sometimes has mentioned my name too among the Dutch anthropologists regarded by him as the “précurseurs hollandais” of contemporary structuralism (Locher 1973a:34). I wrote this article to give some substance to this view but also to indicate that in the thirties there was already a debate going on about the interpretation of oral mythology as a system or structure.

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