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Out of mind, out of sight: suppression and taboo in the Leach-theory

In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 135 (1979), no: 1, Leiden, 172-180

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KORTE MEDEDELINGEN

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KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY OF THE TUKANO (DÁTSEA) IN N.W. BRAZIL

The Tukano are the best-known of the culturally related tribes living along the banks of the Rio Uaupés and the Rio Tiquié rivers in the north-western border regions of Brazil. A number of groups are often referred to by this name even though only one of them is the Tukano. This can possibly be explained by the fact that the language of the Tukano has become the lingua franca of this whole region. The "real" Tukano also call themselves Dátsea.

These groups, which are referred to in the literature as "tribe", "sib" or "clan", form exogamous units comprising several hundred members. The term "clan" would be appropriate were it not for the fact that they all have their own distinctive language. Moreover, the people themselves are emphatic that the "tribe" is the largest unit and they have no notion of an even larger grouping.

The Tukano live in longhouses each of which provides accommodation for about 100 people. Missionary influence caused these partly to disappear and they were replaced by settlements consisting of family huts. It appears that the inhabitants of these longhouses or settlements are often though not always related to one another; yet there are no clear rules according to which these local groups are assembled. In principle, every grown man can affiliate himself to the local group (longhouse) of his tribe that suits him best. Considering the fact that marriage is virilocal, a married adult woman has less choice in the matter.

The head of such a local group is the *tuxaua* (this term is also used elsewhere in Brazil to refer to the Indian headman). He is respected, and in theory, the oldest man and the son of the previous *tuxaua*. Of course, it is somewhat difficult to follow the rule and fulfil both criteria at the same time.

As I mentioned, marriage is virilocal and descent patrilineal. There is no defined rule of connubia even though it is most likely that a man will look for a wife in his own district. There is a preference for sister-exchange and bilateral symmetrical cross-cousin marriage. These verbal rules have not been applied for a long time. This fact emerges from an analysis of about 150 marriages (with in fact another end in view). In any event there is no objection to substituting any female kin for a real sister.

I was able to compile a list of kinship terms during a visit to the Dátsea at the beginning of the sixties.¹ The number of terms is restricted. It appears that in a number of cases the people themselves "use" the system followed by anthropologists, and, for example, refer to the son of a brother of the father as "my father's brother's son".

In some instances, no term is provided in the list. This implies that there are kin for whom informants would not or could not provide terms, even though it is possible that the terms did exist.

As far as I was able to establish, the terms were male-ego centred. People address one another using a proper name. It cannot be ruled out that this is a relatively recent innovation, even though informants maintained that this form of address had always been operative; but the names which people have suggest a more recent origin. Outside influences in this area were fairly superficial, yet the Dátsea are especially keen on adopting imported names, some of Portuguese and some of Spanish origin. This is even the case with those who have had little or no contact with whites and who are very much in favour of preserving indigenous usages and traditions. These proper names are not only used in interaction with visiting whites, but also among people themselves.

Genealogical knowledge does not go back very far. They do not know corporate groups with common descent, unless they wish to preserve the earlier named "tribe" as such.

In cases where relatives died some time ago, the relationship is certainly not remembered. In this connection, it is interesting to note those people who are referred to as *beksukéh*. There are indications that this term is used more often than is apparent from the list, for possible relatives who do not belong to ego's exogamous group. Considering WiBr and SiHu one can then think of the ideal of sister exchange in marriage whereby, according to the rules, these two become *beksukéh* to each other.

The criterion of age is given recognition in the terminology by separate terms for older brother, younger brother, etc. This is possibly connected with the practice that an older sibling is given preference: he or she has to marry before a younger sibling; in succession, for example of the *tuxaua*, ideally the older should be chosen; and even in matters of little importance, the rule of primogeniture prevails, so that at an evening smoking session in the *maloka*, the passing round of the cigar should go in an order determined by age.

This list is quite different from the one compiled by Fulop,² which is not a consequence of negligence in either case — his list was assembled from the "Tukano" of the Rio Uaupés in the Columbian district. He possibly gathered his material in one or other "Tukano-speaking" group, but he is not specific about the details. My list derives from the Dátsea, also "Tukano-speaking", on the Rio Tiquié, near the present post, Parí-Cachoeira, to be precise. Considering the haphazard and inaccurate use of the term "Tukano" by most authors, it is possible that we are dealing with the terminologies of different tribes.

Hu	manapéh	FaOBr			
Wi	nemóh	FaYBr	kimbarí	also FaBr	iee pakéh mami / akabí *
So	makéh	FaOSi	kessauwó		
Da	makóh	FaYSi	kimbaró	also FaSi	menjó
SoSo	panami	MoOBr	kɔpɔfbarí		
SoDa	panamió	MoYBr			
DaSo	panamió	MoOSi	kɔpɔfbaró	also MoBr	iee pakóh paneme
DaDa		MoYSi			
SoWi	makéh nemóh	FaFa	nhekwéh	also MoSi	menjó
DaHu		FaMo	nhekwó		
OBr	mami	MoFa	nhokwéh		
YBr	akabí	MoMo	nhokXó		
OSi	mamió	WiFa	manhekéh		
YSi	akabió	WiMo	manhekó		
Fa	pakéh	WiBr	beksukéh		
Mo	pakóh	WiSi			
		SiHu	beksukéh		
		FaBrSo	iee pakéh mami (akabí) makéh		
		FaSiSo	beksukéh		

*) iee = possessive

N.B. The terms *panami*, *panamió* and *paname* are certainly different words. SoDa and DaSo have the same term.

On checking, the orthography in use appeared to be understandable to the Dátsea who were able to read.

NOTES

¹ Emst, P. van

'Indians and missionaries on the Rio Tiquié, Brazil-Colombia.' *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*. Vol. L, No. 2, 1966.

² Fulop, M.

'Notas sobre los términos del sistema de parentesco de los Tukano.' *Revista Colombiano de Antropología*, 1955.

J. D. M. PLATENKAMP

OUT OF MIND, OUT OF SIGHT

Suppression and Taboo in the 'Leach-Theory'

"... if there is such a difference between 'ideal order' and 'empirical fact', presumably a difference comparable to that between ideology and action, with which level is Leach concerned?" (A. Kuper 1973: 196)

Introduction

This essay is concerned with the interpretation of a rather problematical anthropological concept: taboo. My interest in this previously resulted

in a structural analysis of a system of animal classification, based on tabooed words and their euphemisms in a Scottish fisher community (Platenkamp, in press). The present article focuses on problems of a more theoretical nature, while the few ethnographic data serve a mere illustrative purpose.

In a recent contribution to *MAN* (n.s. 11), Halverson criticizes a celebrated essay by Sir Edmund Leach entitled 'Anthropological aspects of language: animal categories and verbal abuse'.¹ As Halverson summarizes his criticism: "I would therefore conclude as follows: ... the 'general theory' is invalid, both theoretically-psychologically and logically-empirically ... There are no 'taboo'-animals in modern English culture, in so far as the term has any generally accepted meaning" (Halverson 1977: 516). These statements represent more than a somewhat trivial controversy. It is no small thing to declare Leach's analysis, which stood model for the animal classification studies of others (e.g. Tambiah 1969), 'invalid' both theoretically and empirically. A closer analysis of Leach's theory therefore seems called for. Moreover, the demonstration in a previous essay that tabooed animal names do exist in northern Scotland is difficult to reconcile with Halverson's conclusions, unless one is reluctant to attribute 'modern English culture' to Scottish fishing communities (cf. Platenkamp, in press; cf. also Czerkawska 1975, Drever 1946: 235-240). Therefore we shall begin by investigating the internal logical consistency of the propositions on which Leach's theory of taboo is based. We will consider his notions of perception and language, suppression of elements and taboo in relation to the assumptions of structural anthropology. Then we will compare these propositions with the analysis of some ethnographical data from Scotland and conclude this essay with an alternative interpretation of the concept of taboo and its methodological implications.

I. *The Propositions of the 'Leach-Theory'*

I.1. Perception and Language

In 1964 Leach wrote: "I postulate, however, that the principles which I adduce are very general, though not necessarily universal" (Leach 1972: 44). The text of the article does not elucidate to which principles this postulate refers and to which it does not. Because it is not clear either to what extent statements about, for example, the function of verbal categories in human perception should be considered meaningful when no universal validity is attributed to them — in which case their function would be culturally determined, which is untenable — we postulate within the context of this essay a general validity for the 'Leach-Theory': with this objective it has been formulated, and as such it can be criticized.

"I postulate that the physical and social environment of a young child is perceived as a continuum. It does not contain any intrinsically

separate 'things'. The child, in due course, is taught to impose upon this environment a kind of discriminating grid, which serves to distinguish the world as being composed of a large number of separate things, each being labelled with a name. This world is a representation of language categories, not vice versa." (Leach 1972: 47).

The relationship that Leach establishes here between language and perception is clear. What is named by language is perceived. One perceives through words, through categories. The question arises, however, whether these verbal categories operate by completely and exclusively determining perception, thus excluding the perception of 'things' the meaning of which has not been denoted by these verbal categories.

Halverson states that, "A perceptual continuum belongs at best only to the neonate. At least as soon as the eyes focus the child begins to distinguish separate things in his world and is thoroughly trained to do so long before he achieves language" (Halverson 1977: 507). Although Leach does not formulate this explicitly, one might assume that these verbal categories do not just distinguish between 'separate things', but rather group these things into categories that are structurally interrelated. The perception of separate things seems to be a function of the development of the operational structure of the human mind. In this connection the observations by Piaget about the relationship between these logical operational structures and linguistic structures are of interest. Referring to the 'general semiology' that Ferdinand de Saussure advocated, he states that "the symbolic or semiotic function comprises, besides language, all forms of imitation: mimicking, symbolic play, mental imagination and so on. Too often it is forgotten that the development and representation of thought (we are not yet speaking of properly logical structures) is tied to this *general* semiotic function and not just to language" (Piaget 1971: 93).²

Observing the development of deaf-mute children, he notes that "the ... deprivation of language does not interfere with the development of operational structures" (Piaget 1971: 93).

He also refers to observations that indicate that the ability to construct binary relationships is a function of the development of these operational structures, which more or less coincides with the learning of language.

Therefore we may conclude that the complex interaction between the development of logical-operational structures and linguistic structures does not justify the exclusive function that Leach attributes to verbal categories *per se* in perception.

I.2. Suppression of elements

If, following Leach, we represent the supposed social and physical continuum as perceived by the child before it achieves language as an unbroken line, thus:

— — — — —

one would expect the linguistic classification of 'things' on this continuum to divide this continuum into sections. Leach takes his argument one step further, however. He states that not all the elements on this continuum are subject to the linguistic classificatory process. Some remain unnamed. In order to make a proper distinction between categories of elements, the boundaries between these categories must be defined sharply and clearly.

Thus "... we are taught that the world consists of 'things' distinguished by names; therefore, we have to train our perception to recognise a discontinuous environment many aspects of the physical world remain unnamed in natural languages" (Leach 1972: 47), as is represented in his diagram:

suppressed elements, or
"tabooed parts of the environment, 'non-things'" (1972: 48).

It is also in the work of Lévi-Strauss that we find this notion, formulated in an almost identical way, but with a somewhat different theoretical implication. After his assessment that, "... in any field a system of significances can be constructed only on the basis of discrete quantities" (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 53), he compares the mythological system of the Bororo with that of the Ojibwa³ and with the totemic plants of Tikopia. He concludes that, "... in all these instances a discrete system is produced by the destruction of certain elements or their removal from the original whole" (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 53). The essential difference with Leach's propositions, however, may be understood from the terminology used. Leach speaks of 'suppression', while Lévi-Strauss talks about the 'removal' and 'destruction' of elements. In other words, Lévi-Strauss refers to a logical operation that is directed towards the development of homologous structures. The Ojibwa myth *tells* us how the sixth god takes off his veil, and casts his deadly glance in order to return from where he came; this permits the remaining five gods to correspond with the five original clans. Now we notice how this operation fulfils the requirements of Leach's proposition only in appearance, for the myth not only recognizes, by its mere verbalization, the 'existence' of the removed elements, it even emphasizes them (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1963: 86ff.). Leach's propositions on language, or rather lexicon, as a set of categories in which elements of the physical and social environment are classified by naming and are thus recognized, must lead to the conclusion that those elements which are suppressed by means of un-naming, cannot be recognized as part of the environment. Obviously the controversial concepts of 'conscious' and 'unconscious' cannot be evaded in this context. Indeed, we read in one of Leach's recent articles that "... we cut up the conscious flow of sensory information into

chunks. We distinguish a thing or an event 'A' from its background 'not-A' by suppressing our consciousness of the boundary between the two" (Leach 1977a: 311).

I.3. Taboo

The problem becomes still more complex, however. It is not only by means of suppression, according to Leach, that categories are distinguished from each other. A second mechanism operates simultaneously: taboo, which is represented by him in the following diagram:

tabooed parts of the environment 'non-things'" (Leach 1972: 48).

At first glance this seems a plausible enough argument, but problems arise when we take a closer look at the analytical quality of this taboo concept. Recalling Leach's propositions about the classificatory function of verbal categories ('names'), one notices how certain elements on the continuum do not 'exist' because they are not denominated, and hence cannot be 'thought of'. These elements are suppressed. (Needless to say, this cannot be the result of any conscious manipulation as suggested in Leach's initial propositions about the learning of languages (cf. p.2f.). It seems to be inherent in the cultural socialization process, and therefore located at an unconscious cognitive level. Leach himself refuses to maintain a consistent distinction between these levels (cf. Leach 1972: 44-45).)

What, in Leach's opinion, is the function of taboo in such a process? "Let there be a circle representing a particular verbal category p . Let this be intersected by another circle $\sim p$, representing the environment from which it is derived to distinguish p . If by any fiction we impose a taboo upon any consideration of the overlap area that is common to both circles, then we shall be able to persuade ourselves that p and $\sim p$ are wholly distinct, and the logic of binary discrimination will be satisfied:

"tabooed overlap between p and $\sim p$ " (Leach 1972: 48).

Now one observes how Leach puts forward a logically inconsistent argument by attributing both to taboo and language a simultaneous function, operating to distinguish categories in an optimally discrete manner. At the level of structural classification his propositions about language result in verbal categories distinguished from each other by unnamed and hence 'un-thought' sections of the continuum. As a consequence, his conception of taboo is not only redundant, but even contradictory.

How should we conceive of an 'overlap' between the categories *p* and not-*p* in a semantic universe in which language functions for the very reason to deny this overlap? Furthermore, how should we conceive of an 'overlap' on a continuum, unless it is the semantic value of the elements themselves (Leach's 'things') that is equivocal? In that case, however, we must assume that language does not properly perform the function that Leach attributes to it; in other words, that verbal categories do not denote exclusively in some cases. But that does not solve the problem either; for that would be the very condition for taboo *not* to occur. Isn't it an essential characteristic that, in whatever situation an element is tabooed, the 'existence' of this element is not 'un-named', but on the contrary, even accentuated?

Halverson properly observes that "...if an object is taboo, it must for reasons of avoidance, etc., be recognised with greater clarity than other objects, not less" (Halverson 1977: 508).

We notice that Leach does not make a consistent distinction between a structural categorical level on the one hand and an empirical level on the other. This results in the formulation of propositions that are logically inconsistent and in a conception of taboo that reduces much of its analytical value.

The inconsistency of the propositions has been demonstrated above. This does not mean, however, that the taboo on animal names itself has been explained. If Halverson states that there are no taboo animals in modern English culture because Leach's explanation is based on unsatisfactory propositions, he attempts to solve the problem by denying its existence. The ethnographic data from a Scottish fishing community contradict Halverson, and we will therefore take a closer look at them.

II. *The Applicability of the 'Leach-Theory'*

II.1. Tabooed animal names in Scotland

Although it is difficult to assess the frequency of execution (how does one measure the non-uttering of words?), Scottish fishermen from a north-east coast village say that once they are out at sea, certain animal names should not be mentioned. These words are *pig*, *rabbit*, *cat*, *cow* and *salmon*.⁴ The prohibition explicitly applies only at sea, and not on land. Instead of two of these tabooed words, euphemisms are used if the species in question must be mentioned at sea. The pig is called *curly tail*, the rabbit becomes *fluffy tail* or *the four-footed animal*.

The fisher people classify the non-fishermen in and around the village they inhabit into two main categories: 'townsmen', who are neither fishermen nor farmers, and 'farmers'. While the townsmen seem to form a diffuse residual category without definite characteristics, a sharp distinction is made by the fishermen between the farmers and themselves. Likewise the tilling of the soil and handling of domesticated animals is considered the opposite of fishing, and evaluated in an extremely negative way.

A previous structural analysis has demonstrated that the 'farmer' and the associations of farming and cattle-raising linked with him constitute the features that in a certain context distinguish the category LAND⁵ from the category SEA. In other contexts different features operate distinctively, like edible/inedible, female/male, domesticated/wild and red/white. These are the features that are represented with a varying degree of intensity in the animal names said to be taboo at sea — a sea that is designated with 'she', and at which the men hunt the white-fleshed wild fish (cf. Platenkamp, in press). It is interesting to confront these data with Leach's propositions; for although they are not consistent, some of them may be quite correct.

The first proposition stated that by naming only a part of the 'things' in the social and physical environment other 'things' are suppressed. As was demonstrated above, the validity of the 'suppressed-parts-of-the-continuum'-proposition cannot be assessed. The proposition that language provides the categories in which elements can be classified seems plausible. The assumption of structural anthropology that elements are subject to binary classification into categories that are structurally inter-related is compatible with it.

It is this assumption, which requires a classification into mutually exclusive categories, however, that makes Leach's notion of overlap between these categories untenable. Where he states that taboo functions in order to maintain the distinction between these mutually exclusive categories, one must conclude that the notion of exclusiveness apparently has no general validity, which would invalidate the assumption itself. Therefore, at the level of structural, or even verbal, classification the Venn-diagram (cf. p. 5) must be considered as a misleading projection of a complex structuring activity.

How, for example, should one localize the above-mentioned series of animals in this diagram? According to Leach's argument these names would refer to marginal animals which for some reason or other cannot be unequivocally classified. An explanation based on the concept of "Social space in terms of 'distance from Ego (self)'" (Leach 1972: 48; cf. also 1977b) is not satisfactory either.⁶

Evidently the problem has to be examined from a different angle.

II.2. Tabooed words as optimal carriers of information

We mentioned above that the series of tabooed words should not be uttered in a specific situational context: at sea. On land the words can

be spoken without any restriction. Let us assume that the empirical context of 'at sea' refers to a cultural cognitive category SEA that is marked off against one or more other categories, in this particular case LAND. We have demonstrated that the attribution of a marginal quality to the series of animal names is untenable both at the empirical and at the structural level. At the empirical level these animals would have to be localized in an intermediate area between land and sea, which is on the beach. This is evidently not the case. At the structural level these animals would, according to Leach's model, bear the characteristics of both categories, and therefore blur the discreteness of the two. The opposite is true, however. The features that constitute the categories LAND and SEA are pre-eminently represented in the tabooed series and their respective euphemisms.

Therefore my contention is that these animal names are tabooed not because they possess marginal, ambivalent characteristics, *but because they carry an optimal amount of information concerning the features that mark the category in which they are classified in various contexts.* The word 'optimal' requires further explanation. The categories LAND and SEA are marked by a set of features, it being dependent upon the context which features operate distinctively. The feature 'white' of the category SEA will be distinctive with respect to the feature 'red' of the category LAND within the context of the transformation of fish by means of smoking and curing, for example.

In a different context it will be the 'maleness' versus 'femaleness' that mark the respective categories. It does not happen, however, for *all* of these features to operate simultaneously in this process.

We have argued that an element, once it is tabooed, is emphasized. Thus the prohibition on uttering a series of words which in fact sum up these features must be considered as a negative rule of behaviour with a positive cognitive function: a continuous confirmation of the semantic content of the oppositional categories (and besides, in a much more effective manner than by an injunction to utter these words).

II.3. Methodological implications

If this thesis is correct, and tabooed animal names are indeed such optimal carriers of information, we could invert the current line of thought, thus opening up interesting methodological perspectives. The demarcation of structurally interrelated categories, i.e. the definition of their distinctive features, would be well served if these features were indeed all represented in the tabooed elements. Thus the definition of the situational context within which the taboo rule is operative may indicate the equivalent structural range of the categories involved. The tabooed elements themselves should be analysed in their distinctiveness vis-à-vis other elements from the same domain (why for instance does the taboo rule apply to 'pig' and not to 'horse'?), which will indicate the features that mark and constitute the categories.

NOTES

- ¹ Published in 1964 in E. H. Lenneberg (ed.), *New Directions in the Study of Language*; the pagination of the quotations used in the present article refers to the 1972 edition: P. Maranda (ed.), *Mythology*.
- ² "... la fonction symbolique ou sémiotique comprend, en plus que le langage, l'imitation sous ses formes représentatives ... la mimique gestuelle, le jeu symbolique, l'image mentale, etc., et l'on oublie trop souvent que le développement de la représentation et de la pensée (sans parler encore des structures proprement logiques) est lié à cette fonction sémiotique en général et non pas au seul langage" (Piaget 1968: 79).
- ³ The latter being more fully elaborated in Lévi-Strauss 1963.
- ⁴ The taboo on uttering the word 'salmon' does not apply to the fishermen who fish for this particular species. This is a specialised profession along the north-east coast.
- ⁵ We will use capitals when referring to land and sea as cognitive categories.
- ⁶ For a critical analysis of this concept see Halverson 1977.

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