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### Savage Spiritualism

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## SAVAGE SPIRITUALISM

Modern spiritualism has been described by Professor E. B. Tylor as in large measure a direct revival of savage superstition and peasant folklore.

"It is not a simple question of the existence of certain phenomena of mind and matter. It is that, in connection with these phenomena, a great philosophic-religious doctrine, flourishing in the lower culture but dwindling in the higher, has re-established itself in full vigour. The world is again swarming with intelligent and powerful disembodied spiritual beings, whose direct action on thought and matter is again confidently asserted, as in those times and countries where physical science had not as yet so far succeeded in extruding these spirits and their influences from the realm of nature."

Since these lines were written, over forty years ago, the investigations of the (English) Society for Psychical Research have begun the scientific analysis of the evidence relating to spiritualism in our own day and civilisation. It is not a little curious, however, that even professed anthropologists, so busily engaged in the elucidation of primitive religion, have paid only scant attention to spiritualistic phenomena among savage and barbarous peoples. The late Andrew Lang, whose versatile pen treated few topics without illuminating them, was the first to attach special importance to this field of research and to present a selection of the more accessible data relating to it. But Lang's studies were never intended to be systematic; moreover, they were coupled with most debatable theories as to primitive monotheism and "high gods of low races," which distracted attention from the major theme. Some day, perhaps, an anthropologist, gifted with impartiality, learning, and acumen, will provide us with a comprehensive survey of savage spiritualism and the relevant aspects of savage magic. Such a study would have great value considered only as a presentation of primitive beliefs, quite apart from its bearings on the larger question of the truth or falsity of "psychic" phenomena generally.

A very cursory examination of the evidence—all that can be attempted here—is enough to reveal the large part which spiritualism, of one sort or another, plays in the lower culture. The

savage, viewing the universe with animistic eyes, finds spirits anywhere, everywhere. "Every bush has its bogle." To his consciousness this world and the next are not sharply dis severed realms. In that other world the dead continue the occupations of their mundane careers; they hunt, fish, and make war; they marry and are given in marriage; and they often revisit the scenes of their earthly life, just as living men may sometimes journey to the spirit land and hold intercourse with its denizens. It follows naturally from these beliefs that the savage is not unfamiliar with what may be called the physical phenomena of spiritualism, that is, with such manifestations as find expression in current notions relating to "haunted houses" and the activities of *Poltergeists*. A *Poltergeist* is a spirit of boisterous tendencies who plays all sorts of uncouth and apparently meaningless pranks. Objects are thrown about promiscuously, furniture is moved in a mysterious fashion, bells are rung, and raps are heard. The Society for Psychical Research does not find that all the numerous modern instances of *Poltergeist* phenomena may be satisfactorily explained as the work of rats or owls, or of practical jokers. Officially, however, the society has not adopted a spiritistic interpretation even for this residuum of explanation-baffling instances; but the savage, confronted with the same phenomena, is less cautious. The Dyaks of Borneo firmly believe that the mysterious rappings heard in their houses are the work of ghosts. The Polynesians thought that the spirits of the dead haunted their former abodes and occasionally aroused the living from slumber by making squeaking sounds. The natives would then inquire of their visitants who they were and what they wanted. Illustrations might be cited from other regions of the aboriginal world. It is rather noteworthy in this connection that the savage seems never to have hit upon spirit communication by means of raps, a method popularised in the nineteenth century by the Fox sisters, but known at least as far back as the early Middle Ages.

On the other hand some of the practices of divination found among primitive peoples are identical with those employed by modern spiritualists. Most methods of divination, as the root of the word indicates (Latin, *deus* or *divus*), are supposed to require the assistance of spirits or of deities for their successful operation. Thus crystal gazing, alike by the savage magician and the civilised medium, is believed to be a means of getting

into touch with the unseen world. This divinatory rite has a remarkable diffusion among aboriginal peoples; the Huilleche, a South American tribe, gaze at a smooth slab of polished black stone, the Australians use both polished stones and crystals in the same fashion, the Zulus look at the reflection in a still pool of water. Crystal gazing has also been found among the Malagasy in the seventeenth century, the Siberians of to-day, and the ancient Peruvians. The Iroquois and Apache Indians employed crystal gazing with apparent success as a means of detecting a culprit otherwise unknown. The same custom was found in Polynesia. When a man had been robbed, he sent at once for a priest, who dug a hole in the floor of the house, filled it with water, and standing over the pool, offered his prayers to the god that the image of the thief might be conducted to the house and placed over the water. This procedure was usually efficacious, even when the priest failed to discover any reflection in the water and found it necessary to defer to the following day a repetition of the experiment. For the thief, learning that his identity promised to be soon discovered, would usually return the stolen property under cover of night. In view of the wide diffusion of crystal gazing among aboriginal peoples, it is not surprising to learn that it was familiar to the Greeks and the Romans, that it was known in India from a remote period, and that it has been commonly practised, both in England and on the Continent, from mediæval times to the present day. The magic crystal is, indeed, so simple a device that one must believe it to have been independently originated in many parts of the world. Modern psychology has shown that the crystal gazer, or "scryer," by looking long and intently at some lucent object, detaches his mind from all impressions of the outside world and projects himself into a state of incipient hypnosis. Hereupon the subliminal or subconscious contents of the percipient's mind come into unwonted activity; memories of events and scenes apparently forgotten revive in full vigour; or latent mental impressions float into consciousness. Up to this point all is clear sailing both for modern psychology and for "common sense." But the anthropological and historical evidence, together with that collected by the Society for Psychical Research, indicates that in many instances the "scryer" is clairvoyant and sees things not with his ordinary eyesight but as an old Arabian author declared, "with his soul." Mingled with these latent impressions and

forgotten memories come glimpses of distant events then occurring about which the seer could have had no normal knowledge, or visions of individuals whose identity had been previously unknown. Unless we bring in the stock explanations—"chance," "lucky coincidence," "self-deception," "fraud"—we shall have to admit that the investigation of this strange faculty of crystal gazing, so anciently and so widely employed, has as yet raised more puzzling problems than it has solved.

Another instance of substantial identity between primitive and civilised practice in matters of divination is found in the use of some form of the magic pendulum. The movement of the divining rod, the *planchette*, the "ouija board," and of similar autoscopies has been satisfactorily explained as the outcome of unconscious, unwilling muscular action on the part of the diviner. Whether the communications thus received have any intrinsic validity is a doubtful, at any rate a difficult, question, demanding for its satisfactory answer more patient inquiry than it has yet received. The prevalent modern attitude may be described as one of whole-souled and healthy scepticism; that of uncivilised peoples, on the contrary, is one of credulous acceptance of the spiritistic hypothesis. Examples of the primitive belief and practice are not far to seek. Thus the Karens of south-eastern Asia at funeral feasts hang a bangle or metal ring by a thread over a brass basin, which the relatives of the dead approach in succession and hit on the edge with a piece of bamboo. When the one who was most beloved touches the basin, the dead man's spirit responds by twisting and stretching the string till the ring strikes against the basin. Among the aborigines of north-eastern India, who believe that illness is due to the possession of the patient's body by an angered deity, the professional exorcist and doctor begins his cure by setting up thirteen leaves to represent the gods, any one of whom may have caused the malady. He then attaches a pendulum to his thumb and by its movement toward this or that leaf endeavours to discover the offended deity. In Melanesia we meet a somewhat similar custom. The diviner and his assistant sit down, the one in front of the other, and hold a stick or a bamboo by the two ends. The diviner now begins to slap with one hand his end of the bamboo, meanwhile calling one after another the names of men not very long deceased. As soon as he names the spirit which is afflicting the patient, the stick "of itself" becomes violently agitated.

In another part of Melanesia (Lepers' Island) the people have a way of "playing" with a ghost. A little house is built in the forest; it has a partition dividing it in two, and a long bamboo is put within, half on one side of the partition, half on the other. The men meet by night and sit on one side of the partition, holding their hands under one end of the bamboo. They shut their eyes and call the names of the lately dead. When they feel the bamboo moving in their hands, they know that the ghost whose name was last to be called is present. In the same way a club is put at night into a cycas-tree, which has a sacred character, and when the name of some ghost is called, it moves of itself and will lift and drag people about. "In Mota a few years ago they tried again a practice of this kind long disused, with a success that caused alarm. A basket was fastened to the end of a bamboo and food put into it; a man took the bamboo upon his shoulder and walked along, the basket at his back; presently he felt a heavy weight in the basket, as much as he could carry, a sign that a ghost had come into it. The bamboo then would drag people about, and put up into a tree would lift them from the ground."<sup>1</sup> These Melanesian instances, resting as they do on Codrington's unimpeachable authority, make it easier to credit the accounts of motor automatisms found, for example, among some African tribes. Thus the Zulu diviners have their *umabakula*, or dancing sticks, which rise to say yes and fall to say no, jump upon that part of the patient's body where his complaint is localised, and even lie pointing toward the house of the doctor who can cure him. In East Africa the divining rod appears to be successfully used, as it was in Europe during the seventeenth century, for the purpose of tracking criminals. Asked to name the perpetrator of a theft, the magician makes men "lay hold of a stick which after a time begins to move as if endowed with life and ultimately carries them off bodily and with great speed to the house of the thief."<sup>2</sup> In conclusion, it is perhaps not too much to say that, with the exception of spirit writing, there is scarcely any type of motor automatisms, *i. e.*, of unconscious muscular actions, which is not as familiar to the savage as to the civilised man.

Dream revelations, by peoples in the lower and middle stages

<sup>1</sup> R. H. Codrington, *The Melanesians*, 223-224.

<sup>2</sup> Duff Macdonald, *Africana*, i., 161.

of culture, are ordinarily regarded as evidences of spiritual intercourse. For primitive man has never had reason rigidly to distinguish between the subjective and the objective, between imagination and reality, between his sleeping and his waking consciousness. The belief that at night the soul may quit its earthly tenement and make distant journeys, even to the regions of the dead, finds, therefore, frequent illustration in both savage religion and modern folklore. Not less common is the notion that human souls may themselves visit the sleeper, who sees them as dreams.

"All their dreams," says an observer of the West African negroes, "are construed into visits from the spirits of their deceased friends. The cautions, hints, and warnings which come to them through this source are received with the most serious and deferential attention, and are always acted upon in their waking hours. The habit of relating their dreams, which is universal, greatly promotes the habit of dreaming itself, and hence their sleeping hours are characterised by almost as much intercourse with the dead as their waking are with the living. This is, no doubt, one of the reasons of their excessive superstitiousness."<sup>1</sup>

Here, as in so many other instances, the generally animistic framework of primitive philosophy seems sufficient to account for the savage's ready acceptance of his dream revelations. Yet one may wonder whether the phenomena should be dismissed in so summary a manner. The Society for Psychical Research has collected numerous modern examples of dreams in which the dreamer has a vivid impression of some unforeseen event—a mishap or a sudden death—the incidents of which have been afterwards confirmed even in minute details. Such coincidental dreams, as they might be called, must be of frequent occurrence among primitive peoples. The Andaman Islanders, indeed, have a class of "dreamers," or second-sighted men, who gain their position through the circumstance of having had some extraordinary dream later verified by the course of events. These persons, it is said, must from time to time produce fresh evidential dreams, if they are to retain their status in the community. Such a requirement, doubtless, often leads to fabrications and pseudo-prophecies on the part of the Andaman seer. From the scientific standpoint, however, we must face the question whether *all* such dream revelations can be explained by chance-coincidence or by the simpler hypothesis of fraud. It

<sup>1</sup> J. L. Wilson, *Western Africa*, 210.

may yet appear that there does occasionally emerge in dreams some higher perceptive faculty hitherto unrecognised or some power of "telepathic clairvoyance," the laws of which are still unknown.

No aspect of modern spiritualism is more familiar than that of the supposed communications from the spirit world made by the medium while entranced. Here, as elsewhere, we find ourselves in the presence of an ancient series of phenomena forming an integral and important part of primitive religion. For the revelations, attributed by the modern clairvoyant to his "control" and by the psychologist to an "alternating" or "secondary" personality, are more simply explained by the savage as due to the familiar spirit, the demon, the ghost, or, it may be, the god, which has taken up its home in the body of a living man. Such a man is said to be "possessed" or "inspired"; and the fact of possession or inspiration is thought to be evidenced by the unusual actions of the patient. He speaks in a voice not his own but rather that of the possessing spirit ("ventriloquism" in the proper sense of the word); he acts in a peculiar manner and one alien to his natural character; he utters prophecies and displays knowledge which could not be normally acquired. It is true that not infrequently the possessed are idiots, maniacs, epileptics, or hysterics, the ravings of whose disordered minds interest the alienist rather than the psychologist. Of such a sort, also, are those pseudo-revelations induced by fasting, use of stimulants, narcotising by drugs, excessive and violent dancing, and other means of bringing on morbid exaltation. Anthropological literature contains numerous accounts of savage practices in these matters. The "devil dancers" of Ceylon work themselves into paroxysms in order to gain divine inspiration; the priest of the god Oro in the Hawaiian Islands revealed the will of the possessing deity when with limbs convulsed, features distorted, eyes wild and strained, he rolled on the ground and uttered shrill and indistinct cries which the attending priests duly interpreted; the fetish-priestess in West Africa, when entered by the fetish, snorts and foams and gasps until at last the revelation forces itself from her reluctant lips. Such details of demoniacal possession may be traced with no divergence in essentials upward from savagery and barbarism into civilisation.

But this is not the whole of the matter. Disregarding the fact that such "morbid oracular manifestations" are habitually



excited on purpose, and the further fact that the professional medium or the savage sorcerer may often exaggerate them, or sometimes wholly feign them, there remain for consideration those numerous instances of genuine manifestations, exhibiting what appears to be a power of supernormal perception on the part of the subject, a power of "seeing without eyes." The modern evidence as to such phenomena among European peoples has, of course, engaged the attention of the Society for Psychical Research and of private investigators; but the anthropological data are still to be collected. This clairvoyant faculty has been observed among such widely separated peoples as the South Africans, the North American Indians, and the New Zealanders. One of the best examples of its use is found among the Zulus. Our authority is David Leslie, who knew the Zulus well and whose book on them is frequently cited for many details of their life and customs. He writes:<sup>1</sup>

"I was obliged to proceed to the Zulu country to meet my Kaffir elephant-hunters, the time for their return having arrived. They were hunting in a very unhealthy country, and I had agreed to wait for them on the North-East border, the nearest point I could go to with safety. I reached the appointed rendezvous, but could not gain the slightest information of my people at the kraal.

"After waiting some time, and becoming very uneasy about them, one of my servants recommended me to go to the doctor, and at last, out of curiosity and *pour passer le temps*, I did go.

"I stated what I wanted—information about my hunters—and I was met by a stern refusal. 'I cannot tell anything about white men,' said he, 'and I know nothing of their ways.' However, after some persuasion and promise of liberal payment, impressing upon him the fact that it was not white men but Kaffirs I wanted to know about, he at last consented, saying, 'he would open the *Gate of Distance*, and would travel through it, even although his body should lie before me.'

"His first proceeding was to ask me the number and names of my hunters. To this I demurred, telling him that if he obtained that information from me he might easily substitute some news which he may have heard from others, instead of the 'spiritual telegraphic news' which I expected him to get from his 'familiar.'

"To this he answered: 'I told you I did not understand white men's ways; but if I am to do anything for you it must be done in my way—not yours.' On receiving this fillip I felt inclined to give it up, as I thought I might receive some rambling statement with a considerable dash of truth, it being easy for any one who knew anything of hunting to give a tolerably correct idea of their motions. However, I conceded this point also; and otherwise satisfied him.

"The doctor then made eight little fires—that being the number of my

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<sup>1</sup> *Among the Zulus and Amatongas*, 224-226.

hunters; on each he cast some roots, which emitted a curious sickly odour and thick smoke; into each he cast a small stone, shouting, as he did so, the name to which the stone was dedicated; then he ate some 'medicine,' and fell over into what appeared to be a trance for about ten minutes, during all which time his hands kept moving. Then he seemed to wake, went to one of the fires, raked the ashes about, looked at the stone attentively, described the man faithfully, and said: 'This man has died of fever and your gun is lost.'

"To the next fire as before: 'This man' (correctly described) 'has killed four elephants,' and then he described the tusks. The next: 'This man' (again describing him) 'has been killed by an elephant, but your gun is coming home,' and so on through the whole, the men being minutely and correctly described; their success or non-success being equally so. I was told where the survivors were, and what they were doing, and that in three months they would come out, but as they would not expect to find me waiting on them there so long after the time appointed, they would not pass that way.

"I took particular note of all this information at the time, and to my utter amazement *it turned out correct in every particular.*

"It was scarcely within the bounds of possibility that this man could have had ordinary intelligence of the hunters; they were scattered about in a country two hundred miles away."

A consideration of dreams and trances leads naturally to the subject of those visual hallucinations experienced by sane and healthy persons when awake and in the full possession of their faculties. That such hallucinations can be produced telepathically, that, in other words, a distant person can by his directed thought produce a phantom of himself in the mind of a distant percipient, is a conclusion which some students of psychical phenomena have not hesitated to draw. More cautious investigators, not yet prepared to accept the telepathic explanation, have admitted, nevertheless, that pure chance cannot account for more than a fraction—a small fraction—of the thousands of recorded cases where there is a close coincidence between the time of death and the apparition recognised by the distant percipient. Savage observers of the same phenomena find a simpler explanation in the doctrine of "death-bed wraiths" according to which it is actually the dead or dying man's soul which has thus manifested itself to a distant person. Illustrations of this doctrine are scattered throughout anthropological literature. It will be sufficient to refer to several cases from New Zealand, where the belief appears to have been very prevalent. Thus the Maori hold that it is always ominous to see the figure of an absent person, for if it is shadowy and the face is not visible, his death may be presently expected, but if the face is seen he is

dead already. A party of natives were seated one night about a blazing fire in the open air when to two of them there appeared the figure of a relative left ill at home; they cried out, the figure vanished, and they returned home to discover that the sick man had died about the time of the vision.<sup>1</sup> A Maori chief had been long absent on the war-path. One day he entered his wife's hut and sat mute by the hearth. She ran to bring witnesses, but on her return the phantom could no longer be seen. Confident of her widowhood, the woman soon afterwards married again, only to have her former husband return to her in the flesh and in perfect health. She escaped punishment, however, as it was supposed that some evil *spirit* had purposely deceived her.<sup>2</sup> Two other instances of waking hallucinations communicated to Andrew Lang by Mr. Edward Tregear, an excellent authority, are as follows:

"A very intelligent Maori chief said to me: 'I have seen but two ghosts. I was a boy at school at Auckland, and one morning was asleep in bed when I found myself aroused by some one shaking me by the shoulder. I looked up, and saw bending over me the well-known form of my uncle, whom I supposed to be at the Bay of Islands. I spoke to him, but the form became dim and vanished. The next mail brought me the news of his death. Years passed away, and I saw no ghost or spirit—not even when my father and mother died, and I was absent in each case. Then one day I was sitting reading, when a dark shadow fell across my back. I looked up, and saw a man standing between me and the window. His back was turned towards me, I saw from his figure that he was a Maori, and I called out to him, "Oh, friend!" He turned round, and I saw my uncle Ihaka. The form faded away as the other had done. I had not expected to hear of my uncle's death, for I had seen him hale and strong a few hours before. However, he had gone into the house of a missionary, and he (with several white people) was poisoned by eating of a pie made from tinned meat, the tin having been opened and the meat left in it all night. That is all I myself had seen of spirits.'"

The performances of savage magicians no less than those of their successors, the mediums of to-day, are commonly attended with a good deal of trickery and the production of bizarre and astonishing feats by means of ventriloquism, prestidigitation, and conjuring in all its branches. The practice of such "white magic" forms an essential part of the equipment of sorcerers, whether we are dealing with Australian *birraarks*, Maori *tohungas*, African fetish doctors, Siberian *shamans*, British Guiana *peai-*

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Polack, *Manners and Customs of the New Zealanders*, i., 268.

<sup>2</sup> Polack, *loc. cit.*

*men*, Eskimo *angekoks*, or Red Indian medicine-men. Some of the feats attributed to these gentry would with difficulty be duplicated by a Hindu fakir or a professional trickster such as Hermann or Keller. The Pawnee doctor, stripped to the skin and operating within a few feet of watchful spectators, swallows spears and swords, and makes corn grow from the seed to the ripened ear all within a brief half hour. A Siberian *shaman* swallows sticks, eats hot coals and glass, stabs himself in the stomach so that the blade passes through his body and is seen protruding from his back, and even decapitates himself and dances about gaily in a headless state. It is especially curious to discover how feats which have comprised the principal stock-in-trade of contemporary mediums are well-known to savage mountebanks as well. Thus the performances of tied mediums, such as the Davenport brothers, may be duplicated among peoples so distant as the Greenlanders and the Siberians, who can scarcely be held to have borrowed the practices from Europeans. Mr. D. Home's handling with impunity of white-hot bodies—a feat attested by Sir William Crookes—seems scarcely more remarkable than the Polynesian fire walking. Even levitation, or the miracle of rising and floating through the air, another of Mr. Home's performances, is a prodigy fully recognised in the literature of ancient India and apparently known to the Peruvians at the time of the Spanish conquest. In truth, even this side of savage spiritualism—the ignoble side—presents close resemblances to contemporary practices.

Yet in the case of the primitive magician and his magic, it is possible to lay too much emphasis on the element of positive deceit and trickery. In the first place, the magician, even when fully conscious that he is himself a cheat, ordinarily credits the remarkable powers possessed by rival practitioners. His own magic may be false and futile, but that of others he believes is real and effective. To assume the contrary is to make of every primitive sorcerer a rationalistic freethinker far in advance of his age. Again, we must allow for much self-deception. Many a magician enjoys a profound belief in his vocation, thinks himself the agent of supernatural beings, and considers his revelations to bear an authentic stamp. It is impossible to hold that the enormous influence which primitive magicians everywhere enjoy among aboriginal peoples could have been secured and perpetuated without a firm conviction on their part of their

miraculous powers. Finally, the consideration of these mediumistic phenomena in the lower culture raises once more the question whether it may not be that the uninstructed savage, whose mental make-up we are only now beginning to understand, has stumbled unwittingly upon certain psychic phenomena oftentimes too readily dismissed as knavery, nonsense, or superstition. This much seems certain: modern spiritualism furnishes an impressive instance of the survival of beliefs and practices reaching back into the dim prehistory of the race.

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