From Collected Works, Vol. 10,
'Civilization in Transition'

ARCHAIC MAN [1]

104 The word "archaic" means primal, original.

every civilized human being, however high his conscious development, is still an archaic man at the deeper levels of his psyche. Just as the human body connects us with the mammals and displays numerous vestiges of earlier evolutionary stages going back even to the reptilian age, so the human psyche is a product of evolution which, when followed back to its origins, shows countless archaic traits.

When we first come into contact with primitive peoples or read about primitive psychology in scientific works, we cannot fail to be deeply impressed with the strangeness of archaic man. Lévy-Bruhl himself, an authority in the field of primitive psychology, never wearies of emphasizing the striking difference between the "prelogical" state of mind and our own conscious outlook. It seems to him, as a civilized man, inexplicable that the primitive should disregard the obvious lessons of experience, should flatly deny the most evident causal connections, and instead of accounting for things as simply due to chance or on reasonable grounds of causality, should take his "collective representations" as being intrinsically valid. By "collective representations" Lévy-Bruhl means widely current ideas whose truth is held to be self-evident from the start, such as the primitive ideas concerning spirits, witchcraft, the power of medicines, and so forth. While it is perfectly understandable to us that people die of advanced age or as the result of diseases that are recognized to be fatal, this is not the case with primitive man. When old persons die, he does not believe it to be the result of age. He argues that there are persons who have lived to be much older. Likewise, no one dies as the result of disease, for there have been other people who recovered from the same disease, or never contracted it. To him, the real explanation is always magic. Either a spirit has killed the man, or it was sorcery. Many primitive tribes recognize death in battle as the only natural death. Still others regard even death in battle as unnatural, holding that the enemy who caused it must either have been a sorcerer or have used a charmed weapon. This grotesque idea can on occasion take an even more impressive form. For instance, two anklets were found in the stomach of a crocodile shot by a European. The natives recognized the anklets as the property of two women

who, some time before, had been devoured by a crocodile. At once the charge of witchcraft was raised; for this quite natural occurrence, which would never have aroused the suspicions of a European, was given an unexpected interpretation in the light of one of those presuppositions which Lévy-Bruhl calls "collective representations." The natives said that an unknown sorcerer had summoned the crocodile, and had bidden it catch the two women and bring them to him. The crocodile had carried out this command. But what about the anklets in the beast's stomach? Crocodiles, they explained, never ate people unless bidden to do so. The crocodile had merely received the anklets from the sorcerer as a reward.

107 This story is a perfect example of that capricious way of explaining things which is characteristic of the "prelogical" state of mind. We call it prelogical, because to us such an explanation seems absurdly illogical. But it seems so to us only because we start from assumptions wholly different from those of primitive man. If we were as convinced as he is of the existence of sorcerers and other mysterious powers, instead of believing in so-called natural causes, his inferences would seem to us perfectly logical. As a matter of fact, primitive man is no more logical or illogical than we are. Only his presuppositions are different, and that is what distinguishes him from us. His thinking and his conduct are based on assumptions quite unlike our own. To all that is in any way out of the ordinary and that therefore disturbs, frightens or astonishes him, he ascribes what we would call a supernatural origin. For him, of course, these things are not supernatural, but belong to his world of experience. We feel we are stating a natural sequence of events when we say: This house was burned down because it was struck by lightning. Primitive man senses an equally natural sequence of events when he says: A sorcerer used the lightning to set fire to this house. There is absolutely nothing in the world of the primitive —provided that it is at all unusual or impressive—that will not be accounted for on essentially similar grounds. But in explaining things in this way he is acting just like ourselves: he does not examine his assumptions. To him it is an unquestionable truth that disease and other ills are caused by spirits or witchcraft, just as for us it is a foregone conclusion that an illness has a natural cause.

It is a rational presupposition of ours that everything has a natural and perceptible cause. We are convinced of this right from the start. Causality is one of our most sacred dogmas. There is no legitimate place in our world for invisible, arbitrary, and so-called supernatural powers—unless, indeed, we descend with the modern physicist into the obscure, microcosmic world inside the atom, where, it appears, some very curious things happen. But that lies far from the beaten track. We distinctly resent the idea of invisible and arbitrary forces, for it is not so long ago that we made our escape from that frightening world of dreams and superstitions, and constructed for ourselves a picture of the cosmos worthy of our rational consciousness—that latest and greatest achievement of man. We are now surrounded by a world that is obedient to rational laws. It is true that we do not know the causes of everything, but in time they will be discovered, and these discoveries will accord with our reasoned expectations. There are, to be sure, also chance occurrences, but they are merely accidental, and we do not doubt that they have a causality of their own. Chance happenings are repellent to the mind that loves order. They disturb the regular, predictable course of events in the most absurd and irritating way. We resent them as much as we resent invisible, arbitrary forces, for they remind us too much of Satanic imps or of the caprice of a *deus ex machina.* They are the worst enemies of our careful calculations and a continual threat to all our undertakings. Being admittedly contrary to reason, they deserve all our abuse, and yet we should not fail to give them their due. The Arab shows them greater respect than we. He writes on every letter *Insha' allah,* "If God wills," for only then will the letter arrive. In spite of our resentment and in spite of the fact that events run true to general laws, it is undeniable that we are always and everywhere exposed to incalculable accidents. And what is more invisible and capricious than chance? What is more unavoidable and more annoying?

If we consider the matter, we could as well say that the causal connection of events according to general laws is a theory which is borne out about half the time, while for the rest the demon of chance holds sway.

It is our assumption, amounting to a positive conviction, that everything has a "natural" cause which, at least in theory, is perceptible. Primitive man, on the other hand, assumes that everything is brought about by invisible, arbitrary powers—in other words, that everything is chance. Only he does not call it chance, but intention. Natural causation is to him a mere pretence and not worthy of mention. If three women go to the river to draw water, and a crocodile seizes the one in the middle and pulls her under, our view of things leads us to the verdict that it was pure chance that that particular woman was seized. The fact that the crocodile seized her at all seems to us quite natural, for these beasts do occasionally eat human beings.

For primitive man such an explanation completely obliterates the facts and accounts for no aspect of the whole exciting story. He rightly finds our explanation superficial or even absurd, for according to this view the accident could just as well not have happened and the same explanation would fit that case too—that it was "pure chance" it did not. The prejudice of the European does not allow him to see how little he is saying when he explains things in that way.

Primitive man expects far more of an explanation. What we call pure chance is for him wilful intention. It was therefore the intention of the crocodile—as everyone could observe—to seize the middle one of the three women. If it had not had this intention it would have taken one of the others. But why did the crocodile have this intention? Ordinarily these creatures do not eat human beings. That is quite correct—as correct as the statement that it does not ordinarily rain in the Sahara. Crocodiles are rather timid animals, easily frightened. Considering their numbers, they kill astonishingly few people, and it is an unexpected and unnatural event when they devour a man. Such an event calls for an explanation. Of his own accord the crocodile would not take a human life. By whom, then, was he ordered to do so?

It is on the facts of the world around him that primitive man bases his verdicts. When the unexpected occurs he is justifiably astonished and wishes to know the specific causes. To this extent he behaves exactly as we do. But he goes further than we. He has

one or more theories about the arbitrary power of chance. We say: Pure chance. He says: Calculating intention. He lays the chief stress on the confusing and confused breaks in the chain of causation, which we call chance—on those occurrences that fail to show the neat causal connections which science expects, and that constitute the other half of happenings in general. He has long ago adapted himself to nature in so far as it conforms to general laws; what he fears is unpredictable chance whose power makes him see in it an arbitrary and incalculable agent. Here again he is right. It is quite understandable that everything out of the ordinary should frighten him. Anteaters are fairly numerous in the regions south of Mount Elgon where I stayed for some time. The anteater is a shy, nocturnal animal that is rarely seen. If one happens to be seen by day, it is an extraordinary and unnatural event which astonishes the natives as much as the discovery of a brook that occasionally flows uphill would astonish us.

Since such an unnatural event as the appearance of an anteater by day can have no natural causes, some invisible power must be behind it. And the alarming manifestation of a power which can transgress the natural order obviously calls for extraordinary measures of placation or defence. The neighbouring villages must be aroused, and the anteater must be dug up with their concerted efforts and killed. The oldest maternal uncle of the man who saw the anteater must then sacrifice a bull.

It is the regularity of ordinary occurrences that gives primitive man a sense of security in his world. Every exception seems to him a threatening act of an arbitrary power that must somehow be propitiated. It is not only a momentary interruption of the ordinary course of things, but a portent of other untoward events. This seems absurd to us, inasmuch as we forget how our grandparents and great-grandparents still felt about the world. A calf is born with two heads and five legs. In the next village a cock has laid an egg. An old woman has had a dream, a comet appears in the sky, there is a great fire in the nearest town, and the following year a war breaks out. In this way history was always written from remote antiquity down to the eighteenth century. This concatenation of events, so meaningless to us, is significant and convincing to primitive man. And, contrary to all expectation, he is right to find it so. His powers of observation can be trusted. From age-old experience he knows that such concatenations actually exist. What seems to us a wholly senseless heaping-up of single, haphazard occurrences—because we pay attention only to single events and their particular causes—is for the primitive a completely logical sequence of omens and of happenings indicated by them. It is a fatal outbreak of demonic power showing itself in a thoroughly consistent way.

"Magic is the science of the jungle." The portent brings about an immediate alteration of a course of action, the abandonment of a planned undertaking, a change of psychic attitude. These are all highly expedient reactions in view of the fact that chance occurrences tend to fall into sequences and that primitive man is wholly unconscious of psychic causality. Thanks to our one-sided emphasis on so-called natural causes, we have learned to differentiate what is subjective and psychic from what is objective and "natural." For primitive man, on the contrary, the psychic and the objective coalesce in the external world. In the face of something extraordinary it is not he who is astonished, but rather the thing which is astonishing. It is *mana*—endowed with magic power. What we would call the powers of imagination and suggestion seem to him invisible forces which act on him from without. His country is neither a geographical nor a political entity. It is that territory which contains his mythology, his religion, all his thinking and feeling in so far as he is unconscious of these functions. His fear is localized in certain places that are "not good." The spirits of the departed inhabit such and such a wood. That cave harbours devils who strangle any man who enters. In yonder mountain lives the great serpent; that hill is the grave of the legendary king; near this spring or rock or tree every woman becomes pregnant; that ford is guarded by snake-demons; this towering tree has a voice that can call certain people.

This projection of psychic happenings naturally gives rise to relations between men and men, or between men and animals or things, that to us are inconceivable. A white man shoots a crocodile. At once a crowd of people come running from the nearest village and excitedly demand compensation. They explain that the crocodile was a certain old woman in their village who had died at the moment when the shot was fired. The crocodile was obviously her bush-soul. Another man shot a leopard that was lying in wait for his cattle. Just then a woman died in a neighbouring village. She and the leopard were identical.

Lévy-Bruhl has coined the expression *participation mystique* for these remarkable relationships. It seems to me that the word "mystical" is not happily chosen. Primitive man does not see anything mystical in these matters, but considers them perfectly natural. It is only we who find them so strange, because we appear to know nothing about the phenomena of psychic dissociation. In reality, however, they occur in us too, not in this naïve but in a rather more civilized form. In daily life it happens all the time that we presume that the psychology of other people is the same as ours. We suppose that what is pleasing or desirable to us is the same to others, and that what seems bad to us must also seem bad to them.

And we still attribute to the other fellow all the evil and inferior qualities that we do not like to recognize in ourselves, and therefore have to criticize and attack him, when all that has happened is that an inferior "soul" has emigrated from one person to another. The world is still full of *bêtes noires* and scapegoats, just as it formerly teemed with witches and werewolves.

Projection is one of the commonest psychic phenomena. It is the same as *participation mystique,* which Lévy-Bruhl, to his great credit, emphasized as being an especially characteristic feature of primitive man. We merely give it another name, and as a rule deny that we are guilty of it. Everything that is unconscious in ourselves we discover in our neighbour, and we treat him accordingly. We no longer subject him to the test of drinking poison; we do not burn him or put the screws on him; but we injure him by means of moral verdicts pronounced with the deepest conviction. What we combat in him is usually our own inferior side.

The simple truth is that primitive man is somewhat more given to projection than we because of the undifferentiated state of his mind and his consequent inability to criticize himself. Everything to him is absolutely objective, and his speech reflects this in a drastic way. With a touch of humour we can picture to ourselves what a leopard-woman is like, just as we do when we call a person a goose, a cow, a hen, a snake, an ox, or an ass. These uncomplimentary epithets are familiar to us all. But when primitive man attributes a bush-soul to a person, the poison of moral judgment is absent. He is too naturalistic for that; he is too much impressed by things as they are and much less prone to pass judgment than we. The Pueblo Indians declared in a matter-of-fact way that I belonged to the Bear Totem —in other words, that I was a bear—because I did not come down a ladder standing up like a man, but bunched up on all fours like a bear. If anyone in Europe said I had a bearish nature this would amount to the same thing, but with a rather different shade of meaning. The theme of the bush-soul, which seems so strange to us when we meet with it among primitives, has become with us a mere figure of speech, like so much else. If we take our metaphors concretely we return to the primitive point of view. For instance, we have the expression "to handle

a patient." In concrete terms this means "to lay hands on" a person, "to work at with the hands," "to manipulate." And this is precisely what the medicine-man does with his patients.

We find the bush-soul hard to understand because we are baffled by such a concrete way of looking at things. We cannot conceive of a "soul" that splits off completely and takes up its abode in a wild animal. When we describe someone as an ass, we do not mean that he is in every aspect the quadruped called an ass. We mean that he resembles an ass in some particular respect. We split off a bit of his personality or psyche and personify it as an ass. So, too, for primitive man the leopard-woman is a human being, only her bush-soul is a leopard. Since all unconscious psychic life is concrete and objective for him, he supposes that a person describable as a leopard has the soul of a leopard. If the splitting and concretizing go still further, he assumes that the leopard-soul lives in the bush in the form of a real leopard.

These identifications, brought about by projection, create a world in which man is completely contained psychically as well as physically. To a certain extent he coalesces with it. In no way is he master of this world, but only a fragment of it. Primitive man is still far from the glorification of human powers. He does not dream of regarding himself as the lord of creation. In Africa, for instance, his zoological classification does not culminate in *Homo sapiens,* but in the elephant. Next comes the lion, then the python or the crocodile, then man and the lesser creatures. Man is still dovetailed into nature. It never occurs to him that he might be able to rule her; all his efforts are devoted to protecting himself against her dangerous caprices. It is civilized man who strives to dominate nature and therefore devotes his greatest energies to the discovery of natural causes which will give him the key to her secret laboratory. That is why he strongly resents the idea of arbitrary powers and denies them. Their existence would amount to proof that his attempt to dominate nature is futile after all.

Summing up, we may say that the outstanding trait of archaic man is his attitude towards the arbitrary power of chance, which he considers a far more important factor in the world-process than natural causes. It consists on the one hand in the observed tendency of chance occurrences to take place in a

series, and on the other in the projection of unconscious psychic contents through *participation mystique.* For archaic man this distinction does not exist, because psychic happenings are projected so completely that they cannot be distinguished from objective, physical events.