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Notes on the Psychic Life of the Australian Aborigines. *By Professor A. P. Ekin, M.A., Ph.D., Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney.*

### KNOWLEDGE OF DISTANT EVENTS BY PSYCHIC MEANS.

We sometimes hear reports of the Aborigines' ability to know what is happening or has happened at a distance, without the possibility of assistance from any ordinary means of communication. Thus one white man of high position and sane outlook, who was convinced that the natives possessed this power, gave by way of illustration the case of his aboriginal manservant, whom he had brought south to Sydney, two thousand miles from his own country. While in Sydney, the native informed him one morning that his (the native's) wife had just given birth to a child. Asked the grounds for his statement, the Aborigine merely replied that he knew, and that later on his employer would know it was true. The latter put the matter out of his mind, but not very long after he received a letter from the north which, among other matters, referred to this event as having taken place about the time stated by the native. There are many cases like this which the white folk concerned believe can only be explained by some such principle as telepathy. If any readers of this article know of any such, the writer would be pleased to hear from them.

Now, whatever explanation we may give of many of the Aborigines' experiences and sources of knowledge, they would themselves supply a telepathic or animistic interpretation. Thus, a very able blackfellow on the North Coast of New South Wales, who would be classed as a karadji or "clever man", a term which also includes medicine-men, recently informed Mr. W. J. Enright and myself that he could cause another person to come along to or past him by concentrating his thoughts on that person for ten minutes or so. He added that he had done this successfully on several occasions. This reminds me of a frequent occurrence in Central Australia, which is somewhat similar in nature. A blackfellow, either for himself or a white person, myself, for example, desires to obtain some information from another native who is out of earshot—about half a mile away. The first thing to do is to attract the latter's attention, especially if he be looking in another direction. To do this, the former utters a low call which no whites whom I know believe can reach the ears of the distant native, and yet he soon turns and is ready to take part in a vigorous exhibition of sign language. Of course, it may be that the ears of Aborigines can detect low sound waves of which we should be quite unconscious, just as their eyes are trained to observe marks and impressions that we do not notice.

In some cases at least it does not seem necessary to resort to telepathy, even though that may yet be shown to be the true explanation. I refer especially to the system of foreknowledge which is associated with involuntary bodily movements.

## FOREKNOWLEDGE AND INVOLUNTARY BODILY MOVEMENTS.

I first became aware of this in North-West Australia in 1927-1928, where it exists amongst all the tribes in the Kimberley Division. Mr. W. E. H. Stanner reported the same a year ago from the Daly River region in Northern Australia, and only recently I came across it on the North Coast of New South Wales. The principle is that a person experiences a twitching, an involuntary movement, in some muscle or part of the body. This is usually an intimation that some relation of the individual concerned will soon appear or visit him. Now in North-West Australia, and also in the Daly River region near by, the part of the body so affected is associated with a particular class of relation (own or tribal). This varies somewhat from tribe to tribe; thus, to take the tribes around La Grange, Walcott Inlet, Forrest River and Hall's Creek in the Kimberley Division, we find that in all four a twitching in the abdomen, more particularly in the vicinity of the navel, denotes a sister's child, or, except in the second tribe, a mother's brother; father is referred to by the upper arm in the second and third, and by the shoulders in the other two; the buttocks signify wife in the second and fourth tribes, but this relation is associated with the lower arm in the first; brothers and sisters are denoted by a movement in the calves of the leg in all except the La Grange tribe, in which they are signified by a twitching in the back, and so on. The Ungarinyin tribe at Walcott Inlet is the most precise, for it distinguishes in some cases between own and tribal relations; thus, an involuntary movement under the right arm-pit refers to own mother and mother's brother, whereas the left arm-pit refers to classificatory mother and mother's brother; likewise, the right and left calves of the leg refer to own and tribal brother (and sister) respectively.

We are not yet in a position to explain the association of these involuntary movements with particular groups of people, especially as it differs in different tribes; there is no doubt some traditional and social reason for the associations, but even so we need not suppose that the person approaching sends some telepathic message or influence to the other, which causes the particular part of the body to move, and so draw the latter's attention. What happens from the point of view of the observer is that the person who experiences the twitching at once withdraws his attention from everything around, looks at or thinks of the part affected, and therefore of the class of persons, one of whom he is likely to see; he goes into a state of meditation until the most likely one of these enters the centre of his consciousness. He is then satisfied, and goes on with whatever he was engaged previously. Apparently the results of such intimations and meditations are so often right as to justify the formation of generalizations. Though, of course, this may be merely a matter of the meditative choice between probabilities, the possibility of telepathic communication when in a state of receptivity from the actual oncoming person must not yet be ruled out of court.

On the North Coast of New South Wales a twitching in the right shoulder signifies a son, in the left shoulder, a daughter, in the elbow, a brother, and, according to some informants, there are other associations; the main point, however, is that if the person who experiences the *wayi*, as it is termed, pays attention, he will learn who is coming. A ringing in the ear is another form of *wayi*, or intimation; if this persists, it means that some relation is dead (Kattang tribe), and if attention be paid, the thought of who it is will come. As one informant said: "he paid attention to such a *wayi*, and the thought of death came and said your Uncle "James" is dead—which proved to be correct.

Similarly, amongst the Nyul-Nyul and Bardi of Dampier Land, north of Broome, the term *bainman* is applied to that something inside a person which warns him of an approaching danger, e.g. that an enemy is about to spear him, or that he is about to tread upon a snake. An involuntary movement in the muscle or artery of the thigh is also *bainman*, and on such occasions a person must think what *bainman* has to say and then act on the information.

Now whatever be the ultimate explanation of these experiences and interpretations, it is at least clear that the Aborigines practise recollection and meditation, and that by

doing so they believe they receive correct information of what is happening at a distance or will happen in the near future.

## TOTEMISM, DREAMING, FOREKNOWLEDGE AND THE DISTANT.

Now it is interesting that in the Manning and Hastings River tribes, there is an alternative word for the involuntary movement which is the occasion of an intimation of some happening; this is *wiygura* (or *wiygiri*), which also may be used for *bakwe*, totem, but the reason for this is no doubt that the totem warns or informs the totemite about what is happening elsewhere or will occur in the future. *Bakwe*, flesh, refers to the actual natural species, kangaroo *et cetera*, whereas *wiygura*, translated spirit, though not a man's spirit, denotes this function common to the totem and the involuntary bodily movement. We find a similar use of a term in the tribes of the Broome District, North-West Australia: *jatj* is the totem of the group and also a power within a person which gives him intimations of events that concern him and are likely to occur or indeed are already happening, e.g. that his employer is coming, or danger is imminent, and that his wife is unfaithful and so on.

Now one function of the totem, more particularly the totem of the local patrilineal group or of a cult group, is to intimate events and possibilities to, or concerning, the totemites. The totem may do this by appearing to the totemite either while the latter is awake or dreaming. Indeed, in many parts the totem is also called the "dreaming". In any case, the totem, as a man's "flesh", appears and warns him against danger, strengthens him in illness, or intimates that one of his clansfolk is sick. The Aborigines, with their totemistic view of nature and man according to which man and the natural species and phenomena share a common life and are mutually dependent, sees nothing incongruous in receiving information concerning each other through the totem either in its substance or in a vision.

But a person's "dreaming" not only represents himself and the members of his own clan in his own experiences, it is also a symbol of him in the dreams of other persons. This dream-totem is sometimes a special totem distinct from that of the local group or the cult-clan, but in any case, to see another person's dream-totem while asleep is to learn something about him.

This is so much part of the Aborigines' psychic life that they—even when civilized—frequently have dream-totems for white men, though the latter may know nothing about it. Thus the "dreaming" of the manager of one aboriginal settlement is wattle tree, so selected because some wattle trees have been planted in the front of his house, and therefore are appropriate symbols for him in dream life. An Aluridja informant in Central Australia said that to dream of water normally means that a white man will soon arrive, though it could refer to a blackfellow with water as his cult-totem and "dreaming". This informant had spent a good deal of time with whites, and may have associated them with their constant search for water in that region when travelling or looking for places to settle, or with their power always to have water when settled by means of tanks, bores and trains. The motor car is also a symbol of the white man; an Aboriginal in this same area dreamt one night of a motor car coming up to our camp, and next day two whites arrived on camels. The suggestion here is that the fortuitous sequence of the dream of the motor man and the arrival of the white men would establish the motor car as the symbol or "dreaming" of the latter.

## IMPORTANCE OF ABORIGINAL DREAM-LIFE.

The phenomena of dream-totemism show the important part played by symbolism in the life of the Aborigines, more especially in the dream-life. Now it should be remembered that a dream to the Aborigines is not a passing fantasy, but a real objective experience in which time and space are no longer obstacles, and in which valuable information and help is gained by the dreamer. This information may refer to the sky world, especially in the case of a medicine-man, for he may visit that world in his dream;

or it may refer to himself or his fellows, or even to his child yet unborn. In the last case, the dream may show him the child that is to be his and is to be incarnated through his wife, or may show him the child's dream-totem. A sick person may even be cured in a dream; thus P.M., an Aborigine of the North Coast of New South Wales, when dying, assured his son that if he were sick or in trouble, he would be there (*i.e.* in a dream) to help him. For example, in one case the sick man saw the departed person in a dream blowing breath into the former's (that is, the dreamer's) nose; the next day he got up, restored to health. Howitt quotes a similar case: An old man of a coastal tribe on the Queensland-New South Wales border, "said, with much feeling, that he saw distinctly in sleep his little daughter, who had died a short time before, standing near him on the night after her death, and he said that once when sick he felt that she was near him, and that then he slept well and recovered".<sup>1</sup>

The explanation of changes in the course of an illness may also be found in a dream; thus, a Sunday Island native (North-West Australia) who was very ill as a result of a septic condition which was manifest in the swollen glands in the neck, had a very bad night during which he was said to have had no sleep. He, however, maintained that he slept and dreamt that a green turtle with hands and feet hit him on the neck with a stone which passed right through his neck and caused the large swellings of the glands; he fortunately hit the turtle back in retaliation, and so had hopes of recovery.<sup>2</sup> An aboriginal woman in the Port Stephens district (N.S.W.), who was ill, dreamt of her totem, the female kangaroo; the latter carried a lovely young one in its pouch, which she pulled out. She then recovered.

#### THE CERTAINTY OF FAITH.

These examples show the depth of the Aborigines' faith in the manifestations of the dream-life. This is true also of their faith in other factors concerned with the cure of illness. The medicine-man, by his actions, sucking and extractions, and so on, gives the patient faith in life and recovery, a faith which must be generated never mind what other practical treatment be given. Moreover, the faith must be absolute. Thus, if a Kattang (North Coast of N.S.W.) medicine-man tells the patient to get up in the morning and go for water, or perform some other task, and the latter does so, he will find himself cured, but if he does not do so, he will never get better. A sick woman who hobbled about on a stick was taken to a sacred "magical" waterhole and thrown in, and her stick was thrown away. She struggled out, and was cured. One informant in this area said that when a person is sick and his totem comes near and makes a noise, the sick person's heart will be strengthened and he will say, "I shall live". This informant maintained that what made the patient better was his faith—himself—and not the medicine-man's treatment; he added that the totem was a sort of messenger from the sky-hero.

#### VISIONS AND TRANCES.

Allied to dreams are the visions of the waking life. These are most widely associated with a father's finding the spirit-child which is to be incarnated through his wife. While hunting or walking, he sees what he thinks is an animal, fish or some other natural species, but when he gets near realizes that the animal form has disappeared and that it was really a spirit-child. On the North Coast of New South Wales a somewhat similar experience, hallucinatory in nature, shows which one of the totems of the section of his child which has yet to be born, will be the child's totem. While the father is out in the bush or asleep he will see one of these totems in a mysterious form: *e.g.* it will be large and then vanish into air, as it were. It is interesting to notice that such visions

<sup>1</sup> A. W. Howitt, *Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, p. 437.

<sup>2</sup> He also proffered another explanation of the swellings, namely, that they were caused by the missionary's strong medicine fighting the sickness. The tribal medicine-man, however, had rubbed the swellings and extracted the badness, and so caused an improvement in his condition.

comply with a set pattern; that is, the animal must be one of the group which belongs to the particular social section concerned.<sup>3</sup> This must be true also of the experiences of postulants for the office of medicine-men when dreaming or in a state of trance. The general patterns of what happens, then, is common in almost all of the tribes for which we have information. Those who have been through it say they were killed, cut open, and had special insides given to them or magical additions made to their insides; they were then healed and raised to life, taken to the sky to receive knowledge, and finally returned to their people in a somewhat dazed and "cranky" condition. Of course, this could all be an actual *ritual* experience, but as fasting and often, too, pain, are preludes to it, a dream or trance could well happen and the experience fit in with the pattern suggested by the medicine-men. It is not easy to get information on this very secret matter, but as many claim to have been made by spirits or a mythical water-or rainbow-serpent and to have visited the sky land, the induced trance conforming to a suggested pattern seems a reasonable explanation.

Medicine-men, as a class, or in some tribes a special sub-group of such, have the power of seeing and communing with the spirits of the dead—being seers or mediums. They can also see the spirit-double of the living. Now, one use to which they put either of these powers is to ascertain who caused a death by magic. Thus, in some tribes, the medicine-man may watch the corpse from a distance, for near it he will see the spirit of the "right man", the "murderer". Amongst the Kattang, the blood of the dead man is mixed with leaves and burnt, and the "murderer" can be seen in the smoke committing the crime. In the Forrest River district the medicine-man may see the spirit of the murderer around the tree-stage shaking a spear at the corpse which is on it; or he may see the spirit of the dead man lingering near the "murderer". Thus the medicine-man is able to see the spirits of the dead and also the spirit-doubles of the living; in such cases, it is probably a matter of directed imagination, for the medicine-man has usually grounds which are reasonable to him, and probably also to tribal authorities, for seeing the spirit of a particular person who thus is denoted as the murderer, condemned thereby to be the object of a revenge expedition.

#### ANIMISTIC AGENTS.

A medicine-man receives during his making certain spirit snakes, iguanas or other creatures which hereafter are at his disposal to gain knowledge of what is happening at a distance or to perform some of his wishes. Thus he claims, and his claim is acknowledged, to be able to send out his spirit familiar, which may normally reside in his inside, to enter another person and clear out his badness or illness, or he may send it forth to gather information on a certain subject. The faith of the patient will explain the working of the former, but in the latter case the medicine-man must get the information by practical means (collaboration with someone else), by meditation on all the information which he possesses, or by some unproved cause; I did know a native who tested a medicine-man in this matter, and was convinced by his power. In the Broome district, which may be given as an example merely, *rai*, the term for these spirit-animals, is also the term for a person's spirit-double; the latter can move about and tell a person whether anything wrong is happening in his country. Thus, it is really part of a man's self which overcomes the bonds of space and time. Since, too, the same term *rai* is applied in this area to the totem associated with the finding of a spirit-child, we see that there is believed to be a common factor in the totem, the spirit-double and the medicine-man's spirit-familiar. This is true elsewhere, as for example, in the coast of New South Wales. These three conceptions have to do with the psychic life, and the function of each is to warn, assist and strengthen the person concerned.

<sup>3</sup> These tribes (Kumbaingeri, Dangeti, etc.) have four sections in which the members of the tribe are classified for purposes of marriage and descent, and between which natural species are divided. *Vide* A. P. Elkin, *Studies in Australian Totemism*, pp. 114, 135, also unpublished field notes.

## CONCLUSION.

I have done little more than refer to some of the claims made quite as a matter of course by the Aborigines with regard to psychic powers possessed by them, either in general or by specially endowed individuals such as medicine-men. They know what is happening at a distance or will happen in the future, with, and sometimes without, the aid of a mysterious power within them, involuntary bodily movements, spirit-doubles, totems or spirit-familiars. The explanation may in some cases lie along the line of meditation and a state of receptivity, or it may require some such explanation as mental telepathy. The importance of the dream-life and of visions has been emphasized, and mention has been made of the traditionally and socially conditioned patterns and purpose of dreams and visions. Up to the present very little research of value has been made into this aspect of aboriginal life, and it is therefore to be hoped that both trained field workers and also other folk who are in constant association with natives will observe and report the facts and conditions with care, and also sympathetically discuss these psychic experiences with the Aborigines themselves.

A. P. ELKIN.