The Achumawi Life-Force

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following translation of a piece by Jaime de Angulo is from a longer paper written in his native French, entitled La Psychologie Religieuse des Achumawi. *It appeared in the journal* Anthropos, *Vol. 23 (1928), pp. 150-154. The selection reproduced here appeared in a section of the original paper headed* L'idée d'un principe vital immanent, *and is presented for the benefit of those who lack access to the original. Annette Boushey's translation of the entire work will eventually be published by Turtle Island Press, whom we thank for permission to print this selection.*

THE entire creed of the Achumawi Indians is contained in these words, spoken to me by one of my friends: "All things have life in them. Trees have life, rocks have life, mountains, water, all these are full of life. You think a rock is something dead. Not at all. It is full of life. When I came here to visit you,[1] I took care to speak to everything around here. That tree at the corner of your house—I spoke to it the first night before going to bed. I went out on the balcony, and I smoked. I sent it the smoke from my tobacco. I spoke to it. I said: 'Tree, don't do me any harm. I'm not bad. I didn't come here to harm anyone. Tree, be my friend.' I also spoke to your house. Your house has life, it is someone. It is you who made it. All right, you made it for a certain purpose. But your house is a person. It knows very well that I am a stranger here. That's why I sent it tobacco smoke, to make friends with it. I spoke to it. I said: 'House, you are the house of my friend. You shouldn't do me any harm. Don't let me get sick and maybe die while I am visiting my friend. I want to go back to my own country without anything bad happening to me. I didn't come here to harm anyone. On the contrary, I want everyone to be happy. House, I want you to protect me.' That's how I did it. I went all the way around the house. I sent my smoke to everything. That was to make friends with all the things. No doubt there were many things that watched me in the night without my seeing them. What do I know? Maybe a toad. Maybe a bird. Maybe an earthworm. I am sure all those people were watching me. They must have been talking to each other. The stones talk to each other just as we do, and the trees too, the mountains talk to each other. You can hear them sometimes if you pay close attention, especially at night, outside. Well, I am sure all those people were watching me the other night, the first night I came here. They probably said: 'Who is that man? He is a stranger. We've never seen him before. But at least he is polite. He sends us his smoke. He greets us. That must be a good man. We should protect him so nothing bad happens to him.' That's how you should do it. I tell you this so you will learn, because you are young. I myself am beginning to grow old. But I still have a long time to live, because I have many friends outside, in my country. I often talk to

them outside at night. I send them smoke. I do not forget them. I take care of them, and they take care of me."

What should we call this? Animism? Or pre-animism? The word animism hardly satisfies me since it seems that animism, as it has been described among certain primitive peoples, carries the idea of souls, of immaterial spirits. These souls or spirits can live in trees, in rocks, in animals. But their material dwelling place is not their only residence. They are not the tree itself, nor the rock itself. They are not even the essence of these. Basically they are immaterial beings distinct from the tree or the rock where they live. And I believe that if you pushed the concept far enough you would find, among all these people, the concept of a personal soul for every living man. For these people, every living man contains two things within him, two things which blend to form his ego. One is his material body, which walks, which drinks, which eats, which talks, which dies. The other is something subtle and inaccessible, which never dies. He feels this thing within him, he is sure of its existence, and he calls it his soul, his spirit. I believe this concept will always be found among those people with whom one also finds animism, as it has generally been described.

Now, among the Achumawi one finds the idea of the soul, but it is very undeveloped. It is barely even present. What we find is really only its embryo. They have the idea of a personal "shadow." They call it the *delamdzi*. But it is not a soul, as we understand it, nor as the ancients understood it. It has nothing to do with breathing. It is something that leaves you during sleep.

Son-of-Eagle, an old shaman, said to me: "You can hear it sometimes in the morning, just before you wake up. It comes from over the mountains. It comes from the East. It comes singing: 'Dawn is rising. I come. I come. Dawn is rising. I come. I come.' " Some time, if you are unlucky, your shadow might leave you. Then you are no longer alive. A man who has lost his shadow is said to be alive, but that is only an appearance. He is really half dead. He can last like that for a few days, even one or two weeks. It is very curious that this soul-shadow is made of light rather than darkness. The real word for casting a shadow is *tinala?ti*, whereas the word for dawn is *delalamdzi*, which suggests the word for soul (*delamdzi*). I call it the shadow-soul because the Achumawi themselves translate *delamdzi* by "shadow." But we must remember that their own subjective interpretation of their sensations is evidently very different from ours. Thus, judging from their language, it is not so much the black mass that they consider the essential phenomenon of the shadow (even physical), as it is the stopping of the sun's path. But I can't go into a linguistic discussion here, for that would demand too long an explanation of certain details of their language.

So we find the concept of the shadow-soul among the Achumawi. But the Achumawi never imagine that these beings, full of power and of life, that they speak to—the trees, the animals, the rocks—they never imagine that these beings contain their own shadow-soul. I am absolutely certain of that, as I have asked many questions on the subject of young and old alike. They haven't the slightest idea that these beings could also have their shadow-soul. When asked about it they reply: "I don't know. Maybe so, because they are like us. But I never heard that. I never thought about it." No, what the Achumawi speak to is the tree itself, the animal itself.

Now, in animism as it has generally been described, it seems to me that one speaks instead to an immaterial spirit residing in some spring, or some rock, or some animal. (This immaterial spirit could very well leave this residence and choose another.) For most people I cannot help believing that this is a

projection of the personal soul on the exterior world, but for the Achumawi the process is exactly the opposite. He does not people the world with spirits; he draws them from it. He is not conscious first of all of his personal soul, of that which constitutes the inside of his ego, of sending it hence into the outside world, of putting it here and there, in the rocks, in the trees. On the contrary, he is conscious above all of external life, of the life that swarms and crawls all around. This is the life-force (they themselves say: life is the same thing as power), and he strives by every possible means to draw it into himself. When he succeeds in this, he has not done it through projection, but on the contrary, he has done it through identification.

This distinction could perhaps appear insignificant to some. Perhaps I am only confusing things by dwelling on it. But it seems to me that it is real. As for myself, I know that when I went to the Achumawi for the first time I had the other idea—I imagined their "spirits" to be like ours. It was only little by little and with much effort that I began to grasp their idea, and indeed I am afraid of not succeeding in making it clear. At any rate, I do not claim that one mode of thinking precedes another. That is why I prefer not to call this "pre-animism." (Could this be what Marett calls animatism?) For now I will simply call it the "concept of the life-force immanent in everything."

It is perhaps interesting, while we are on this subject, to say that I know quite well, through conversations with my friend Katsumahtauta, that even though he speaks English very fluently and sometimes uses the word God, he has no idea of what this word means, and I have never been able to make him understand. But one day I happened to repeat these words to him, recently discovered, if I'm not mistaken, on a Grecian manuscript in Egypt, and attributed by some to Jesus Christ: "Lift up the rock, and there you will find me. Cut into the tree, and you will find me there." Katsumahtauta understood that immediately. He responded very tranquilly: "Well of course that's how it is. That's how we say it is, we Indians. There is life everywhere, even in the rocks and in the trees. How many times have I already told you that! Whoever said that, he knew what he was talking about. He must have been someone like the Indians."

Now we will describe, more specifically, the Achumawi's relationship with these outside beings, full of life-force.

From his earliest childhood, the Achumawi Indian is in intimate contact with nature, with things of the outdoors. This has been said so often about primitive people that it has become a cliché that goes in one ear and out the other without making any impression. That is why I insist on calling the reader's attention to it. He must imagine, if it is possible for him, the enormous difficulty of material life for very primitive people, for people who did not have metal. To fell a tree they had to keep a fire burning around the trunk. It is easy to say, but try doing it. Green wood does not burn, so it takes many days.

One day an old Indian helped me make clappers. This musical instrument is nothing but a stick of elder with a three-quarters split. With a saw and a knife we made three of them in less than a quarter-hour. The good old man remained thoughtful for a while. Then he said to me: "Back in my Grandfather's time it took a whole day to make one of them. Think about it: to cut an elder, first of all you had to make a knife of willow wood. You know you can't cut wood with an obsidian knife. It would break like glass. So you see, my little one, when you split it, if you split too far and it splits in two the whole length, that's a whole day lost!"

These days, when we want a deer we need only take the rifle and go out. Before an hour passes it is very rare if we do not find a band

of them, and even if the animal is further than one hundred feet, the shot kills it. But the Indian's bow rarely carried (effectively enough to kill a deer) more than forty paces. So, to approach to within this distance from a deer, you need many strategies and much patience. You have to study a herd of deer for longer than a week. You hide behind a bush. You watch them from far away. You take note that in the afternoons they leave the woods by such-and-such a path, that a certain doe is in the habit of going off to the right and hurrying towards an open place, a little clearing where the clover grows in abundance. It is there that you will have to go tomorrow, to lie in wait—and the next day the herd does not appear! For one reason or another, it has changed its routine. And while he lies with his stomach on the ground, lying in wait for hours, the Indian sees thousands and thousands of occurrences of the life of the woods. It is a coyote who slips between the grasses. All of a sudden he stops. He scratches himself. Then he sits down on his hindquarters and seems to reflect for a few moments. He starts on his way again at a trot, but in another direction, and disappears into the brush. Now it is a huge black fly with orange wings who comes to buzz around his head. She goes away. She disappears towards the blue of the sky. Then she comes back again. She buzzes incessantly around his head. Finally she rests on his arm. Then she flies away again. Now it is a turtle who approaches between the plants and disappears behind a tree. She seems to be looking for someone. Then a condor appears suddenly in the air, very high in the sky, and he turns and turns in his soaring. Then he goes away again. It is late. The shadows lengthen. Night comes out from all around.

It is time to return towards the village. The path becomes darker and darker under the big trees that swing and creak in the evening wind. The Indian arrives at the village. He goes down the ladder into the big communal house where the crowd of people of his village swarm around in the light of the central fire. And until very late at night the old ones tell story after story, long accounts of the adventures of Coyote, of his brother-in-law Turtle, of the Rock who ate people, and others, and others. He falls asleep without even hearing the end, and in his dreams he sees Coyote again, and the big black fly with orange wings, and the turtle who was looking for someone.

I wanted to give this description, which seems to have nothing to do with religion, to give a feeling for the atmosphere of the Indian milieu. The scientific descriptions of ethnology that we find in books are inevitably dry and do not give the least impression of the mysterious world of the Achumawi, whose life is so inextricably mixed in with the animals, the trees, the plants. But without forming some mental picture of that life, it is, I believe, almost impossible to understand how and to what extent the Achumawi Indian finds himself in a state of direct mystical connection with the universe that surrounds him. Now that is precisely his religion, and his entire religion.

NOTE

1. He had come to visit me in Berkeley, far from his native land. In general, the Indian does not like to leave the corner of the earth where all the spirits are familiar to him.