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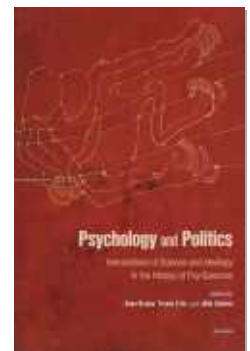
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“Tell Them That We Are Not Like Wild Kangaroos”: Géza Róheim and the (Fully) Human Primitive

Shaul Bar-Haim

I

Psychoanalysis has stood at the center of the post-colonial critique since the emergence of this discourse after World War II. However, while scholars such as Franz Fanon in the 1950s and 1960s drew heavily on psychoanalytic notions to reveal the epistemology of the colonial gaze (Fanon 1967), since the 1980s, other scholars attacked psychoanalysis itself as a paradigmatic case study of Europocentric social science (Nandy 1995; Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Seshadri-Crooks 1994; Khanna 2003; Brickman 2003; Said 2004; Anderson, Jenson, and Keller 2011). Post-colonial literature has shown the importance of nineteenth-century anthropology in the development of Freudian thought, particularly in Freud’s speculative cultural writings on the pre- and early-history of humanity, and especially *Totem and Taboo*. In this and other works, scholars have shown that Freud was a loyal follower of Darwinian anthropologists such as Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer. They argued that so-called “primitive” people are living evidence of the early stages of the human being. For nineteenth-century British anthropologists, “they” (primitive people) are what “we” (progressive, civilized people) used to be thousands of years ago.¹

¹ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a “primitive” could be, among other things, “a firstborn child or animal”; “an ancestor or progenitor”; “a predecessor”; “an original inhabitant, an aboriginal”; “a person belonging to a preliterate, non-industrial society”; “that which is primitive or recalls an early or ancient period”; “(with pl. concord) simple, unsophisticated, or crude things or people as a class”;

As Freud observed on the very first page of *Totem and Taboo*:

There are men still living who, as we believe, stand very near to primitive man, far nearer than we do, and whom we therefore regard as his direct heirs and representatives. Such is our view of those whom we describe as savages or half-savages; and their mental life must have a peculiar interest for us if we are right in seeing in it a well-preserved picture of an early stage of own development. (Freud [1913] 1955, 1)

However, in order to understand the context to Freud's perceptions of the "primitive," we should bear in mind that for nineteenth-century anthropology, "primitives" were never just the concrete objects of study. As Johannes Fabian pointed out, the primitive was always "a category, not an object, of Western thought" (Fabian 1983, 17–18). The usage of the "primitive" as a category was not limited to certain people in certain geographical areas, but a normative scale for cultural, ethical, and mental development and progress. As will be discussed later in this chapter, it was not only non-Westerners who were perceived as "primitive"; children, mentally-ill, "degenerate" people, and even working-class people were all widely considered to have a "primitive" mind. Thus, the "primitive" state was a phase of development for individuals and collectives rather than a description of specific societies. Early psychoanalysts, such as Freud, Sándor Ferenczi, and Ernest Jones embraced these perceptions by all means (Jones 1920, 257; Freud [1916–1917] 1963, 371; Ferenczi 1913, 213). However, Géza Róheim, the focus of this chapter, was in many respects an exception to the general opinion of early-twentieth century psychoanalysis about the category of the "primitive." Róheim, I argue, attempted to change the way in which this category of the "primitive" was perceived as a category denoting a not-fully-human subject.

Before discussing the originality of Róheim's understanding of the "primitive," we must first discuss a fundamental similarity between him and other nineteenth-century social thinkers. A main trigger for Róheim's expedition to Central Australia was the refutation of Bronisław Malinowski's claim that

and "an uncivilized, unintelligent, or uncouth person." The word "primitive" has been in use in English since the fifteenth century, but it was not central to colonial discourse until the mid-nineteenth century, when Darwinian anthropology became dominant. It was only then that the "primitive" replaced as the key notion what was hitherto known as the "savage." See Kuper 1988 and Trautmann 1992.

the Oedipus complex is not a universal phenomenon and cannot be found, for instance, in non-Western matrilineal societies (Smadja 2011). Róheim was sent by the interwar psychoanalytic community to defend not only the validity of the Oedipus complex as *universal*, but also as one of the core notions of nineteenth-century social science: the idea of the *universal* nature of science, i.e., that human nature is similar in all places, and therefore, that beyond the surface of culture and history, people everywhere are similar in their motivations and behavior. Universalism was a pivotal principle in the emergence of modern politics as it served as the precondition for what Étienne Balibar defined as “civic universalism,” or the “adequacy between the capacities of the human and the powers of the citizen” (Balibar 2012, 208). If—and only if—one can be defined as fully human, one is entitled to become a citizen with full rights. When this equation between humanness and citizenship became the rule, Balibar claims, “the only consistent way to deny citizenship to individuals in a regime of civic-bourgeois universality is to deny them full humanness, full membership in the human species” (208).

Biology and anthropology played central roles in this process of affirming and denying “full humanness.” Thus, for instance, colonial hierarchies were created not only by political, economic, and military imperial powers, but also by scientific comparisons of the “primitive” and the “civilized” in order to argue that the latter is a “developed” version of the former.² Many strands of Victorian anthropology, which was highly influenced by evolutionary theories, perceived the “primitive” and the “civilized” as belonging to the human spectrum and measurable by the same scales, which are universalistic. However, while the “civilized” is *fully* human, the “primitive” is still in the process of *becoming* a human, and thus cannot be entitled to his or her full rights (Kuper 1988). The innovation of Géza Róheim, at least in psychoanalytic discourse, was that although he did not challenge the principle of universalism itself, he insisted on attributing “full humanness” to the subjects he studied, namely, the “primitives.”³

² Since the eighteenth century, many different European thinkers such as Montesquieu, Hume, Knox, and Gobineau perceived the “civilized” as the last and final stage in the evolutionary process of collectives and individuals. The three main stages of this process were the “savage,” followed by the “barbarian,” and ending with people becoming fully reasoned persons, i.e., “civilised.” I am very grateful to Simon Jarrett for sharing this information with me. See also Jarrett 2016.

³ See also Linstrum (2016, Chapter 2), for another interwar Freudian anthropologist, C.G. Seligman, who attempted to prove the universality of the psychoanalytic principles by collecting and analyzing dreams from all over the British Empire.

Róheim changed several of his pre-expedition views during his field-work, but he did not give up the idea that the Oedipal structure is universal and can also be found among “primitives.” Like Jones before him, he argued that Malinowski failed to recognize the flexibility of the Oedipus structure to fit into different forms of domesticity in different societies and cultures. Freud, Jones argued, “regards the relationship between father, mother, and son as the prototype from which other more complicated relationships are derived” (Jones 1925, 127). This “prototype,” Jones and others in the psychoanalytic community thought, can be found in patriarchal and matriarchal (or matrilineal) societies alike.

But for Róheim, the debate over Oedipus was not only a scientific issue, but something to do with the very essence of humanness. He writes: “we are human beings because we have an Oedipus complex, but our individuality depends on the early developments of this nucleus, on the specific traumata we have suffered or courted” (Róheim 1932, 92). Therefore, Róheim attempted to show that the Oedipus complex is a dominant factor in the psychosocial development of “primitive” people. As historian Joy Damousi claimed recently, “in arguing that the self was universal, Róheim was positioning the unconscious of the indigenous self as a subject worthy of analysis and interrogation and not an inquiry to be dismissed as simple-minded or childlike” (Damousi 2011, 93). But at the same time, he aimed not to reduce indigenous peoples and their unique culture into a prototype of the common Western model of domesticity, but to present them as another model of the “human,” indeed, the “fully human.” This effort does not make them less “primitive” or more “progressed”; it changes the epistemological perspective of the researchers.

II

Even though Róheim was a loyal follower of the nineteenth-century universalistic approach—and did not follow Malinowski’s new relativistic approach—he still challenged the fundamental assumption of his anthropological predecessors that the “savage” necessarily has a less-developed mind, and therefore he or she are less rational. He writes:

My first impression during my field work was that savages are not nearly so savage as the anthropologists; or in other words, that they are not nearly so mysterious as one would think from reading Tylor,

Frazer, Levy-Brühl, or even Róheim. Because we read so much about animism and magic, totemism and demons, we come to identify primitive people with these things unintentionally and to imagine them as always plagued by demons, or running into taboos, and passing their lives in a chronic state of terror. Similarly, if we only knew Europe from the Catechism, the Talmud, and the books of Folklore, we might easily imagine that the main occupations of the inhabitants of this continent were confessing, fasting, and telling fairy tales and legends. (Róheim 1934b, 238)

For Róheim, the idea that the “primitive” is irrational was not only an expression of observers’ ignorance, but also a clear sign of their lack of self-reflection. The professional danger of an anthropologist’s fieldwork, he thought, is that “as he slowly overcomes the feeling of strangeness in his new environment, the sorcerer and cannibal becoming as commonplace acquaintances as his school friends. . . . Instead of a group of uncanny beings, he now sees an idyll of the type imagined by Rousseau” (Róheim 1932, 2). Róheim compares this non-reflective observer to a psychoanalyst who works only with *transference*, and is not aware of the existence of *countertransference* in his or her work (16–18).

No one was more sensitive to the epistemological asymmetry between the native and his or her Western observer than natives themselves. As one of Róheim’s informants told him: “you have seen our land, our houses, our customs, but we do not know your country. When you go home, tell them (the whites) that we are not like wild kangaroos, eaters of rotten wood, but have our customs and habits also” (Róheim 1932, 276). Indeed, on top of Róheim’s scientific mission, he now realized that he had another moral commitment to his informants: to help them become “fully human” in the eyes of his anthropologist colleagues.⁴ In other words, exploring the Oedipal structure of their society—the specific form that this structure takes place among Central Aus-

⁴ Róheim, however, had his own blind spots. For example, he was unaware of, or refused to see, the removal of indigenous children from their families in order to give them to white families (what was known later as the “stolen generation”), even though these child abductions were happening in some of the places that he visited during the same periods. Warwick Anderson argues that “[e]ven as Cecil Cook planned the removal of mixed-race Aboriginal children from their families, Róheim was insisting their separation anxieties were internal manifestations of the universal family drama, thereby exonerating the settler state. . . . Striving to make a general argument against the psychic cost of ‘civilization,’ Róheim had turned a blind eye to

tralian natives—was his way of including them as human living subjects who needed to be respected as such, rather than excluding them from humanity as part of a living “museum” in the form of “primitive” tribe; or, alternatively, excluding them from humanity because their “primitiveness” is evidence that they are not fully human *yet*.

Róheim did not abandon the term “primitive” altogether, but he tried to fill it with a different ethical meaning in the lexicon of Westerners. He probably would not deny, for example, that civilized people are more *progressed* than “primitives.” However, he believed that *progress* is not an ethical value in itself (Bar-Haim 2015). Moreover, he thought that being primitive or non-progressed should not be a factor in denying one’s fully humanness. Indeed, he would probably fully agree that “primitive” is a category of thought rather than a specific object of study, as Fabian suggested.

III

For Róheim, “only my friends of the Central Australian desert can be described as primitives in the true sense of the word” (Róheim 1932, 4). All other “primitives” that he knew of (Somali, Papuo-Melanesians, Yuma Indians) “are closer to us psychologically than to the Australians.” Thus, there are a few degrees of primitives, and only few pure “primitive” peoples left. The main distinctive characters of the “primitive,” all of which Central Australians have, and the rest only few, are: 1) absence of the latency period; 2) “slight depth of repression with rapidly ensuing projection”; 3) total absence of the anal-reactive character-formation; 4) “the strength of their narcissism”; and 5) “the absence of the sado-masochistic perversion.”⁵ Due to the limits of space, I will restrict myself to discuss the first parameter of the lack latency period among “primitive” people. This lack of latency period, Róheim argued, is not

the real damage it wrought in central Australia. Rather than a costly defense against object loss, civilization might be its cause” (Anderson 2014, 142). On the “stolen generation,” see Jacobs 2011. On the role of denial in Australian settler society, see Attwood 2017.

⁵ For Róheim, all these parameters are casually connected to each other: in short, the latency period in civilized children is the source of repressions and aggressions, and therefore the absence of it is the reason for the lack of sadistic perversions among “primitive” people.

limited to non-Western “primitive” people but can be found everywhere, like primitivism itself. Thus, the “primitive” cannot serve as a category used to deny “full humanness.”

Let us remind ourselves what the latency period is. Laplanche and Pontalis define the latency period (the time which extends from the age of five or six to the onset of puberty) as a phase “constituting a pause in the evolution of sexuality,” that is, “a decrease in sexual activity, the desexualisation of object-relationships and of the emotions,” and “the emergence of such feelings as shame and disgust along with moral and aesthetic aspirations” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 234). With the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, the child fully identifies with his or her parents and represses any libidinal struggle he or she had with them in the years before. The sexual content, which was so dominant in the Oedipal phase, is now sublimated, and paves the way for full formation of the super-ego. In other words, the latency period is the outcome of the dissolution of the defeat of the child in the Oedipal struggle against his or her parents. The child gives up his incestuous desires for the unconscious, i.e., the child sublimates these desires, and is now ready to obey to the social contract, represented at this stage mainly by the parents.

However, according to Róheim, “the latency period, which is the time of full super-ego formation in our own civilization, is absent or only faintly indicated among the most primitive races of mankind” (Róheim 1934a, 406). Thus, in some respects, childhood in Central Australia is much longer. For instance, child’s breastfeeding is much longer; repressions and sublimations of sexual content are much more limited. But in a “primitive” condition, when childhood ends, puberty comes; there is no prolongation of childhood in the form of latency period, which creates the psychosocial conditions for the “non-primitive” children to gain a “cultural progress”:

If we compare various races, people, and phases of culture with each other, the prolongation of infancy proceeds *pari passu* with cultural progress. The races which play a leading part in civilization arrive at puberty much later than primitive mankind. The situation is the same if we regard it not from the biological but from the sociological or psychological point of view. A Pitchentara child attains a considerable degree of economic independence when he or she is about six or seven years old. A Papuan child helps his father and mother with the garden work, has a little garden of his own, and in Duau at the age of

ten a house of his own. *But we find the same difference at home if we compare the children of the peasant class or proletariat with those of the aristocracy or rich bourgeoisie.* (Róheim 1934a, 403)

Primitiveness, then, can be found everywhere, claims Róheim. There is nothing new in itself in Róheim's comparison between "primitive" people in colonies and the "primitive" at home. In his book, *Faces of Degeneration*, the historian Daniel Pick writes: "the object of the racial anthropology which emerged in [the late nineteenth century] was not only Africa or the Orient, but also the 'primitive' areas and groups within the home country" (Pick 1989, 39). Not only anthropologists but many other nineteenth-century scholars from the social and natural sciences thought of "primitive," "regressive," "atavistic," or "degenerate" people as a central component of European society. Moreover, many of them believed that these people endanger the "progressive" tendency of modernization as a whole (*ibid.*) Indeed, the flourishing of sciences that articulated these racial languages is the appropriate context to understand the rise of racial politics in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe (see Pick 1989; Gilman 1985; Morris-Reich 2006).

But one could adopt the same terminology of the "primitive" and reach very different conclusions. For example, Róheim did not try to refute the notion of the "primitive" altogether, as some of his contemporary anthropologists did. He still assumed that the children of the "peasants class or proletariat" are as *fully human* as the children of the "aristocracy or rich bourgeoisie." Thus, he also assumed that colonized "primitive" children, despite their primitiveness, are *fully human* too.⁶

We can now see more clearly how Róheim used the "primitive" in his work as a category of Western thought rather than a specific object of study. As such, it was applicable for Central Australian children and the children of the lower classes in Europe alike; both, in some respects, were considered "primitives." For example, both types of children lack a latency period as part

⁶ Children, like "primitives," who were very often compared by nineteenth-century social and natural scientists, were considered throughout the nineteenth century as not *fully human*. Indeed, childhood itself, like the "primitive" state, was perceived as a phase in the process of becoming *fully human*, a process which "primitive" people failed to do. See Stoler (1995, 150) and Nandy (1984). For the distinction between "human beings" and child "human becomings," see Qvortrup et al. (1994, 1–23).

of their development; but also, both types of children, like all other children in the world, Róheim believed, had to go through an Oedipus complex. He thought of these two developmental phases as essentially different. The Oedipus was regarded as part of the human condition as such, while the “latency period” was specific to certain social and individual conditions. Thus, for Róheim, the Oedipal structure was part of being human, and therefore can be found in any society, including “primitive” ones. The existence or lack of a latency period as a specific developmental phase varied from one society to another, and therefore cannot deny one’s “full humanness.”

One may argue that this typology is not only *essentialist* but also simplistic and arbitrary in its insistence that the Oedipus complex is universal while other developmental stages like the “latency period” are different and influenced by culture and history. However, the point to be made for our purposes is that Róheim thought of the “primitive” as a category rather than an object, which should not deny one’s “full humanness,” as nineteenth-century traditions of social sciences implied. Róheim’s effort, therefore, challenged the political consequences of what Balibar called “anthropological differences”: the “differences perceived among humans that are also immediately constitutive of the idea of the human” (Balibar 2012, 208–209). As Balibar argues, the constitution of the “human” is inevitably violent because the moment one defines “humanness,” one also excludes the “other” as “non-human”: for example, in the form of “black,” “insane,” “pervert,” “primitive,” and so on. For Róheim, I argue, the aim was not to “humanize” the “primitive”—a task doomed to fail—but to accept “primitiveness” as a legitimate dimension of the “human”; indeed, the *fully human*.

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