

On the requirement to break a bough in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*

Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* seeks to explain the existence of a rite of succession in which to become the next priest at Nemi for the goddess Diana one has to be or do the following (p.2, p.4):

- (a) Be a runaway slave.
- (b) Enter a certain sacred grove.
- (c) Break a branch of a certain tree, which no one but a runaway slave is allowed to break.
- (d) This entitles one to a fight to the death with the current priest, which one must win.

A puzzle. Frazer takes on the following commitments:

Savagery commitment. The rite he is trying to explain is something savage. He says it “stands out in striking isolation from the polished Italian society of the day, like a primeval rock rising from a smooth-shaven lawn.” (p.3)

Soul attribution commitment. He characterizes the savage as attributing souls to a number of entities which civilized man would not attribute souls to, including trees. “To the savage the world in general is animate, and trees are no exception to the rule. He thinks that they have souls like his own and he treats them accordingly.” (p. 59)

Accordingly commitment. Treating trees in accordance with the attribution of souls, for many (so-called) savages, means not killing them or damaging them (pp.59-61). Trees will feel injuries done to them, as Frazer depicts the primitive worldview (p.61).

Bough break requirement. The rite of succession at Nemi requires breaking a branch of a certain tree in the sacred grove (p.4). The puzzle is: why, given the commitments above?

Some proposals. (1) Frazer was an evolutionist: he believed there is a sequence of stages which societies evolve through, with some societies being at the earliest stage still. A speculation is the requirement to break a bough is a step towards what he would call a civilized outlook, in which the tree does not have a soul and so does not feel injury. The runaway slave is the more progressive person and hence only they may perform the act.

(2) Another speculation is the tree somehow represents the society and the runaway slave who breaks off a branch represents the change ahead, in which one member or former member will die.

Reference

Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The Golden Bough, Volume 1*. New York: Macmillan.