

The Golden Bough as an argument against diffusionism

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Abstract. This paper interprets Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as presenting an objection to diffusionism: the diffusionist theory cannot account for the isolation of the rite Frazer focuses on, in the societies studied by classicists.

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By the sacred grove

A slave did rove,

Put his hands upon a tree

Like a pigeon free

The debate between evolutionism and diffusionism dominated late nineteenth century British anthropology and the period before the fieldwork revolution. The question participants addressed was why one society and another both had some feature. Evolutionist explanations said that societies went through a sequence of evolutionary stages. Two societies at the same stage would have features defining that stage, even if there is no contact with each other and no intermediaries connecting them. The diffusionists posited centres of creativity from which innovations spread. In a certain period, a certain country or city might be a centre of creativity from which innovations spread: ideas, styles, technologies, and more.

Now as we move further back in time, we find that texts are not always as explicit as they

are today. They often don't say, "This is my position... And this is my opponent's position... And I don't agree with him because..." Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* strikes me as such a text. The aim of the book is to explain a horrifying rite of succession at Nemi. There was a priest of the goddess Diana. To become the next priest, one had to be a runaway slave. Then one had to enter a sacred grove and break off a branch from a tree in that grove. That entitled one to a fight to the death with the current priest. To kill him: that is what one needed to do in order to become the next priest.

This is a quotation from Frazer's enchanting opening chapter, regarding the rule of succession:

This strange rule has no parallel in classical antiquity, and cannot be explained from it. To find an explanation we must go farther afield. No one will deny that such a custom savours of a barbarous age and, surviving into imperial times, stands out in isolation from the polished Italian society of the day, like a primeval rock rising from a smooth-shaven lawn. (1894: 2-3)

How do we explain the distribution of such a rite if diffusionism is true? Why are there not other instances in the regions studied by classicists? If it is replied that sometimes there are innovations beyond a centre of creativity but they are not valuable enough and so people import innovations instead, how can one explain the persistence of the rite? It persists, as if it were experienced as having value, yet is isolated in its region – there is no other rite like it.

Frazer does not say that he is against diffusionism. But surely the diffusionist of the day who read his work would have felt a challenge and I presume that was the plan! To repeat, how can the diffusionist account for the following qualities?

- (i) The rite was isolated in its larger region – there was no rite like it there.
- (ii) It persisted, indicating that it was perceived as valuable.

A solution for the diffusionist is to speculate that Nemi was a centre of creativity and that innovations were experienced as valuable by people in neighbouring areas, but regarding this particular rite everyone thought, “It’s good, but we’re not doing that in our village!” But the solution requires some elaboration of “Why not?” because it looks a cunning way of dealing with the problem of runaway slaves.

Reference

Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The golden bough. A study in comparative religion. Volume 1*. New York: Macmillan and Company.