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**Volkan on Animals and Birds #1**

# ANIMALS AS LARGE-GROUP SYMBOLS

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Many national or ethnic groups' identities are represented by animal symbols. For example, the lion symbolizes British collective identity, while Turks consider the gray wolf their national symbol. This phenomenon goes back to the beginnings of human history--people have always linked their own valued or feared characteristics, and attempted to divide and order experience, through the symbolic and totemic use of animal and plants in their environment.

The symbolic significance of animals is sometimes obvious and primal, such as those associated with fertility, warfare, wisdom, or specific behaviors, while in other cases animals are used as symbols for complex and abstract ideas and beliefs. Some primitive people collectively believed, for example, that an omnipotent lion of the heavens swallowed the sun and thereby brought on darkness each day (Biedermann, 1992). In ancient Egypt, Sekhmet, the goddess of war and defender of the sun god Re, was represented by a lion, and in Judeo-Christian tradition, the lion symbolizes both divine and evil power. The wolf has symbolic significance in Old Norse mythology, as well as in the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, China, and numerous other cultures, tribes, and ethnonational groups. The Turks' use of the wolf dates back thousands of years to their early history in the steppes of Central Asia.

In some cases the original significance of an ancient animal symbols within a large group or ethnonational collective is difficult to pinpoint. In others, a certain animal was adopted by a leader and thereby elevated or resurrected as a unifying symbol. "Genghis Khan … claimed to be descended from a blue-gray 'chosen wolf' which itself was sired by the sky (*Tenggri*)" (Biedermann, 1992, p. 387). Adolf Hitler's fascination and identification with a wolf also has been documented: "As a boy, he had been pleased to find that his given name was derived from the Old German 'Athalwolf,' meaning 'noble wolf'" (Ehrenreich, 1997, p. 212). Hitler named his favorite dog "wolf" and generalized his identification with this predator by calling the SS his "pack of wolves." At times, he also believed that the German people followed him because they realized that "now a wolf has been born" (Waite, 1993, p. 26).

Animals and other symbols in modern times also have come to represent large-groups through conventional agreement. A country's animal and the symbols displayed on its flag are often chosen through a vote or general consensus, as are the birds and flowers of each state in the U.S. Sometimes such choices are the subject of intense debate, competition, and rivalry. But even when the process of such selections assumes seemly irrational proportions—indicating that large-group symbols are psychologically powerful things—in the end, like a red octagon that symbolizes "stop," the relation between signifier and signified is clear.

In psychoanalysis, however, the concept of a symbol has a narrower meaning and focuses on how it originates in the unconscious. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900), and in his many other writings that followed, Freud understood symbols as a means of reducing anxiety by repressing unacceptable wishes or other derivatives of instinctual drives. An individual is aware of the symbol itself, but unaware of what is symbolized. If someone dreams of a snake, for example, he sees an actual image of a

snake, but the penis that the snake may represent is not consciously perceived. Initially, Freud believed that symbols representing body parts, body functions, birth, death, sexuality, and childhood intimate objects and relationships with parents and siblings are universal and are included in a kind of system of phylogenetic meaning. Such a belief "has now been largely replaced by the assumption that the recurrence of such symbols across cultures has to do with the similarity of human beings' experiences and interests from infancy onward and of the cognitive processes involved in symbol formation" (Moore and Fine, 1990, p. 192).

Humans therefore share the need to use animal and other symbols and many are cross-cultural. Yet this generality is concurrent with specificity in regard to the symbols used by large groups. Neighboring groups typically do not have the same animal symbol, even if they share many other historical, religious and linguistic characteristics. When large groups do share a symbol such as the lion, one ethnonational group's lion has minor or major differences from another large group's lion, and members may adamantly defend and justify the use of a lion to specifically symbolize their exclusive group identity.

Many perspectives, including those of anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, sociologists, political scientists and others, are consequently needed to understand the origins, evolution, and perpetuation of animals symbols and their use by groups of people to define collective identity and other beliefs. Psychoanalytic approaches are useful as well in comprehending the complex and intertwined relationship of mankind's internal and external world that we find expressed in animal symbols.

For example, while psychoanalytic insights alone may not help us understand why a certain large group chose a specific animal symbol thousands of years ago, and what it

consciously and unconsciously represented, they can more clearly explain how and why children in a given large group attach themselves to shared symbols and make them an extension of their internal worlds. Volkan (1988, 1997, 1999) studied this phenomenon through his concept of *suitable reservoirs* of externalized self and object images, which is useful in outlining the *pre-oedipal* beginnings of large-group identity

For practical purposes, during the course of normal development, a child integrates his sense of self around the age of 36 months and develops his core individual identity. This integration, however, is not a total process. Some images of the self as well as internalized objects, both "good" (libidinally determined) and "bad" (aggressively determined), remain unintegrated at this early age. Because these unintegrated images threaten to destabilize the established core identity, they must be disposed of.

The child utilizes many ways of dealing with unintegrated self and internalized object images and emotions attached to them (Kernberg, 1976; van der Waals, 1952) and employs many mechanisms ranging from splitting and denial to repression for this purpose. Among the spectrum of mechanisms, those of externalization are critical and ubiquitous. The caretakers in the child's environment consciously and unconsciously direct the child to externalize his or her unintegrated self and internalized object images onto certain items in their environment. These items already have been accepted by the caretakers as amplifiers of their own cultural, ethnic, or national sentiments, such as a horse and cowboy hat for an American boy. They become suitable reservoirs to absorb children's externalized and unintegrated "good" images. Unintegrated "bad" images are externalized onto other items, often those that belong to "others" or enemies.

When one large group's animal symbol becomes a "good" suitable reservoir for all children belonging to this large group, it creates an invisible network that links the

children together. “Good” suitable reservoirs—whether they are animal symbols or other items—become a large group’s marker without children being aware of this process.

Suitable reservoirs, although they bear some resemblance to transitional objects (Winnicott, 1953), belong to a different phase of life and have different functions. The latter is chosen by the child himself or herself and has a specific meaning only for that child. Suitable reservoirs are offered to children by adults belonging to a specific large group and become the foundation on which more sophisticated ideations and affects concerning ethnonational identity and large-group belonging will be built. It goes without saying that, as children of the same large group grow, they also attribute more sophisticated meanings to their animal symbols and such meanings are condensed into the original function of the suitable reservoir.

Large-group animal symbols which are used as childhood suitable reservoirs have intimate relationships within all children’s, as well as adult’s, internal worlds. Therefore, when a large group regresses (Loewenberg, 1995), individuals may experience large-group animal symbols as “protosymbols” (Werner and Kaplan, 1963)—as if they *are* one’s large-group identity. Thus, any attack on an ethnic, national, or religious group’s animal symbol (as well as other symbols which originate as suitable reservoirs) is perceived by those belonging to that large group as personal attacks damaging their large-group identity.

During the Cold War period, for example, Americans and the Soviets exhibited exaggerated emotional investment in their respective animal symbols. The enemy’s symbol was either devalued or rendered dangerous while one’s own large-group symbol was invested with idealism. Americans characterized the Russian bear as a vicious, devouring, castrating, or murdering animal, while Soviets portrayed the American eagle

as representing a combination of maliciously carnivorous and greedy orality with exhibitionistic phallic activity. Such depictions invoked anger and were considered deeply offensive by the respective sides.

Animal symbols are also used in a pathological way to dehumanization an enemy (Bernard, Ottenberg, and Redl, 1973) during war or war like situations. In such cases, one large group regresses and begins to utilize protosymbols of the enemy as their shared "bad" suitable reservoir (Volkan, 1997, 1999). First, the enemy is demonized but still is perceived as retaining human qualities, although they are predominantly negative human qualities. Later, those of an enemy group may be rendered as vermin or a loathsome animal that must be exterminated, or a cancer that must be excised "for the sake of humanity." In Rwanda, Hutu first referred to Tutsi as evil people and later began calling them *cafards*, meaning cockroaches (de Swaan, 1996).

Many readers also may recall reports of symbolic dehumanization associated with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the behavior of Iraqi troops in Kuwaiti City's zoo. With no one to feed or care for the animals displayed there, many suffered terrible deaths, or were believed to have been eaten by Iraqi soldiers. These stories were prevalent among Kuwaitis after the war, and reflected their belief that the Iraqi soldiers were less like humans and more like savage and predatory animals. Conversely, other stories involved reports that Iraqi soldiers locked some Kuwaiti women, whom they had raped, in empty zoo cages and exhibited them naked as if they were animals.

On the other hand, a regressed large group may utilize animal symbols in a reparative or adaptive rather than destructive way. For example, Cypriot Turks chose parakeets as a "good" suitable reservoir (Volkan, 1976, 1988) during the tumultuous period following Britain's withdrawal from the island in 1960. Although independence

brought hopes for a new future, Cypriots continued to consider themselves either Greek or Turkish, and within three years a bloody conflict broke out between the two groups. Between 1963 and 1968, Cypriot Turks were forced to live in increasingly small enclaves that became more like prisons or ghettos. During this traumatic period of their history, they raised hundreds and hundreds of parakeets, whose cages hung everywhere—at homes, at grocery stores, at coffee shops. The Cypriot Turks were preoccupied with the birds and obsessively kept track of which ones were fertile, which was the mother of other birds, which one was crippled, and so on.

Originally the birds symbolized the victimized, imprisoned Turks—by externalizing their "bad" aspects, the people could tolerate living in subhuman conditions. But Cypriot Turks went one step further, and by giving the parakeets positive attributes they turned these symbols into "good" suitable reservoirs. The parakeets came to represent their hopeful, good parts—as long as the birds were fertile and sang happily, Cypriot Turks unconsciously felt assured that they themselves could survive imprisonment.

In 1968, the political situation on the island changed with the intervention of Turkish troops, and Cypriot Turks could leave their enclaves. The utilization of birds as suitable reservoirs ended and parakeets, which are not native to the island, also disappeared, although some continued to be kept as ordinary pets. This brief example and the others mentioned here indicate that animals figure prominently in the relationship between human's inner and outer worlds, and such themes will be further explored in this volume.

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