

Why was *The Golden Bough* so popular?

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Abstract. I presume numerous readers would have reacted as later critics famously did: we lack the sources to pursue Frazer's goal of explaining why there was this rite of succession. Consequently, I find the popularity of his book puzzling. I cast doubt on Marilyn Strathern's explanation and offer a wild conjecture.

Draft version: Version 3 (28th October 2022, appendix added).

“Is it because of Cambodian fishermen

That the Golden Bough was popular then?”

Why was Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* so popular with late Victorian and early twentieth century readers? The book opens with a description of a rite of succession. To become the next priest of the goddess Diana at Nemi, one had to be a runaway slave and enter a sacred grove and break a branch from a tree. (Not just any tree, by the way, one particular tree, which must have caused missed opportunities.) This entitled one to a fight to the death with the current priest. Frazer wants to know why there was this rite. He provides some information about the Italian place Nemi in ancient times and what was worshipped there but it is not much, as he himself acknowledges:

Such then are the facts and theories bequeathed to us by antiquity on the subject of the priesthood of Nemi. From materials so slight and scanty it is impossible to

extract a solution of the problem. It remains to try whether the survey of a wider field may not yield us the clue we seek. (1894: 6)

What I expect most readers to think is “If you do not have more information about that society, enough to explain the rite, then you cannot explain it at all, or at least offer a justified explanation rather than a speculation. Give up on the project.” And that is a well-known criticism of Frazer, associated especially with later anthropologists (see Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 3; D’Andrade 1995: 4-5; Lavenda and Schultz 2018: 180). Thus there is a puzzle:

- a. Early on Frazer runs out of relevant local information about Nemi, so we expect readers to judge that his question of why there was this rite there cannot be answered.
- b. And yet his long book was immensely popular.

It is true that Frazer’s opening pages are beautifully written, or if “true” is the wrong word, I find them to be so and I expect many others would as well. But soon enough there are his long sequences of example after example and it is not easy going. One has to “acclimatize” oneself to this kind of text.

The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has attempted to explain Frazer’s popularity in terms of assumptions shared with the audience, making the book familiar in feel. A lack of shared assumptions can be a barrier to comprehension and so probably a barrier to popularity, but at present I am not convinced by Strathern’s explanation. She writes:

...what has to be explained in his case is its astonishingly ready acceptance at large. One reason, I suspect, is that context for his writing was amply provided by the assumptions of the audience he addressed... Indeed, by the 1900s, many of Frazer’s ideas were unremarkable. Finding vestiges of the past in the present, treating the Old Testament as an archive, establishing contemporary parallels to

former practices did not of themselves require new conceptualization. (1987: 257)

Let us suppose that late Victorian and early twentieth century readers assumed the following:

1. Some practices are remnants from earlier stages of a society and do not have any function at present.
2. Even if one is not a believer, the Old Testament is still valuable because it records some historical events.
3. Some contemporary rites are the same, or very similar, in requirements to earlier ones.

But did they also assume this: given appropriate information about contemporary societies, we can know without more information about ancient Nemi society why there was this rite of succession? Imagine you find a contemporary people with the same rite of succession. Did readers think it acceptable to infer that those in Nemi had the same reason for having this rite, without any further information about Nemi? (Perhaps they were persuaded that enough contemporary cases with the same reason would sort-of licence the inference.)

What I imagine is that someone read Frazer's sentence "From materials so slight and scanty it is impossible to extract a solution of the problem," and shut the book and said, "Well, that's that over." Here is a wild conjecture though. Some readers were searching for the secret of the University of Cambridge: "That's exactly what would normally happen here – twelve volume Frazer would be abandoned after six pages – but not at Cambridge and we can reach a higher level if we can somehow work out why."



Appendix

After drafting this article, I came upon a seemingly¹ super-thorough investigation of the question of why *The Golden Bough* was popular, by a Cambridge classicist:

The extraordinary appeal of *The Golden Bough* derived from the power of this combination: from its weaving together so many central problems of late Victorian, early twentieth-century Britain. (Beard 1992: 219)

My dissatisfaction with previous treatments of the question of the book's popularity probably has to do with a difference in formulation. Component (a) of the puzzle, as I have formulated it, is not stated by this commentary or Strathern's attempt five years earlier (nor do these earlier commentators imagine vivid scenes of "Well, that's that over."). Once you state it, you are forced to confront how readers reacted to the lack of local evidence. How did they deal with the glaring reason not to read on, specifically overcome it? The reason is not acknowledged and the question not addressed in previous treatments. Note that it is not just ancient Nemi about which information is scant; there is no record of anything like this rite in the surrounding region according to Frazer (1894: 2).² And the criticism of a not-doable project was an important part of anthropology by the 1920s, though my reference to Radcliffe-Brown is to papers collected in a book of 1952.

References

Beard, M. 1992. Frazer, Leach, and Virgil: The Popularity (and Unpopularity) of the Golden Bough. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34 (2): 203-224.

¹ A non-expert reader would notice the thoroughness – look at all the sources – but I fear they are unlikely to realize how important the initial formulation is, which takes two or three lines. You can hammer away at a problem for ages, but if the formulation is wanting then it risks becoming mere raw material for someone else.

² So as not to overcomplicate, I have not mentioned Frazer's use of other ancient sources above, focusing on inferences back from contemporary cases.

D'Andrade, R. 1995. *The development of cognitive anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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

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Strathern, M. 1987. Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 28 (3): 251-281.