

### 1.2. Primal Religions

#### Syllabus

- a. The nature of primal religion and its importance for the study of religion – present a portrait of primal religion and give an account of its important influence on all religion
- b. Write a brief paragraph on the concepts and phenomena of Manu, Tabu, Totem, Shaman

#### HL 2013

- a) Explain how a connection between the sacred and profane may be found in two of the following features in primal religion

#### HL 2009

- b) Outline how people express the relationship between the sacred and profane using one example of an object associated with a religion

#### HL 2006

- c) Choose two of the above and explain the part they play in primal religion: Mana, Tabu, Totem, Shaman.
- d) i. Discuss the influence of primal religion on one of the above religions

**a. The Nature of Primal Religion and its Importance for the Study of Religion –Present a portrait of Primal Religion and Give an Account of its Important Influence on all Religion**

**What is a Primal Religion?**

First account of human religion dating back to the pre literate era in and around 50,000 BCE.

The term religion has evolved overtime. Mother of all religions and has formed the basis of every religion that has since emerged. Emerged from agricultural people who lived close to nature and were at the mercy of natural disasters such as storms, floods, disease and famine and no science to explain the chaos surrounding them

In relation to the time of our ancestors it refers to the way in which ancient societies attached meaning to key moments of their lives. They marked these key moments through rituals, structures, statues, paintings and other artefacts. Their traditions were the outward expressions of a belief in a spiritual world of powers or beings stronger than human kind

Sense of awe and wonder is common to every age and our attempts to reach out to something 'other' beyond material world still very much exists

**Primal religions share three common features:**

1. Recognise the all-encompassing power of religion. No boundaries between the sacred and secular
  2. Use oral rather than written sources and traditions
  3. Enactment of traditional myths in rituals that expressed the nature of human-divine relationships, community living and the centrality of the natural world to all life.
- Imitating helped memorise oral traditions.

The similarities between Primal Religions and the three major world religions make it important to study. Such as the following similarities of certain practices of primal religions with the Islamic faith.

### **Burial Places**

Primal Religions: Death rituals suggested belief in an afterlife

The discovery of a 25,000-30,000 year old mass grave in 1984 by Karl Maska is quite significant due to the certainty that there was a religious essence to the burial

Islam: Belief in an afterlife still exists and how religions bury dead today still reflects this in how a religion formally buries the dead. In Islam the dead are buried in a very particular way.

### **Sacrificial evidence**

Primal Religions: To appease, praise, beg or honour God. Belief in a spiritual world

Islam: In Islam on the last day of Ramadan a lamb or other animal may be sacrificed to God

### **Deity representation through art, carvings, paintings**

The experience of people worshipping Idols in primal religions rather than focusing on the divine influenced Islam to forbid such practices very seriously as they are a major sin

### **Religious constructions such as temples and altars**

Mosques, Churches, Synagogues in contemporary religion

**b. Write a brief paragraph on the concepts and phenomena of Totem, Shaman, Manu, Tabu**

**1. Totem**

A feature of some tribal societies that believe natural objects and creatures possess supernatural powers

**Origins:** Comes from the word **Dodem** meaning 'the person is a relative of mine' - Ojibwa people of Canada

Totemism is a feature of some tribal societies where natural objects and creatures are seen to possess supernatural power

*Totem: something in nature that symbolises the spiritual essence of an individual or a group, connecting them with their spiritual ancestors (MS) from which all of that tribe are believed to be descendants*

Something natural such as an animal, bird or plant that symbolises the spiritual essence of an individual or group and connects them with their spiritual ancestry

The totem functions as a guardian spirit and there are generally prescriptions on eating, killing or touching the totem animal.

**Primal Religion:**

For the North American Indians and Australian Aborigines such natural entities had deep and special significance

The practices and rituals of worship which indicated the sacredness of the totem often arose from awe and respect these tribal people had for nature and their environment, on which they relied for survival

## **Misconception**

In modern times some people adopt a personal spirit animal helper which has some kind of special meaning to them and incorrectly call this a totem

## **Contemporary Influence**

The bald eagle might be considered the totem of the people of the USA, though it carries no spiritual mythology amongst these people. Beyond tribal religion in modern times some people adopt a personal spirit animal helper which has some kind of special meaning to them, and incorrectly call this a totem. This practice is common in the New Age movement. Some even believe that their animal helper acts as a spirit guide. Some Native Americans take a dim view of others' adoption of totem animals, arguing that a non-adherent cannot truly understand totemism apart from the cultural context and that it may even represent a commercialisation of religious beliefs.

## **2. Shaman:**

Feature of many primal traditions

**Origin:** Evinki people of Siberia and North East China

### **Who?**

A person who can make contact with the supernatural world because of his/her special personality and training or can be inherited. Established a close relationship with the spiritual guardian through fasting and prayer

Shamans maintain a special relationship with the worlds and beings that they visit, and can become possessed by supernatural beings when in trance states, facilitating communication between the worlds

Shamanism, requires specialised knowledge or abilities rather than a practice carried out by the majority. Shamans are not usually organised into full time ritual or spiritual associations in the way that priestly people are. Shamanism presumes that the visible world is pervaded by invisible forces or spirits that affect the lives of the living.

### **What do they do and how?**

Intermediary between the natural world and the spiritual world. They travel between two worlds in the state of a trance

### **Why?**

Shamanic communication can be used to:

Cure illness, to protect during long journeys, bless harvests

Control the weather, divination, interpret dreams

Gain prophetic wisdom and knowledge so they can provide physical and spiritual healing

Some societies, the ability to cause suffering

*Shaman: a man or a woman who inherits gifts from his/her ancestors for the purpose of being a living mediator between the profane and the sacred; between humanity and the spirits inhabiting the cosmos (MS)*

### **Primal Religion:**

Native American Cherokee clan in which the shaman played a part in the creation of earth

### **Contemporary Influence**

This sense that a human has established a connection with the divine is prominent in Catholicism whereby a person goes to confession to get closer to God and ask for forgiveness to a priest. Like the Shaman, the priest is a mediator between the divine and mankind.

### 3. Mana

**Origin:** Melanesian

#### **What?**

Refers to the action of the spirit world (the sacred) in the human world (the profane)

It appears to be a precursor of formal religion

#### **Who?**

Certain people, places or things are embedded with the power of Mana

Power of Mana comes from kinship with gods and ancestors

Some people, places or things have more Mana than others – they are more gifted and powerful, e.g. tribal chiefs embody the Mana of their people and land, as do all who are strong, wise or skilful

#### **Primal Tribe**

The Melanesians believed that all success was traced back to mana, which they interpreted similarly to luck

One could acquire or manipulate this luck in various ways e.g. magic

Certain objects that contain mana can change a person's luck. Such objects may include charms or amulets

**Example** if a prosperous hunter used a charm that had mana and he gave it to another person, then people believed that the prosperous hunter's luck would transfer to the next holder of the charm.

This impersonal force is the manifestation of the spiritual world in the human world and strengths of the mana are tense if not fraught with danger. To manage such encounters social restrictions and boundaries are marked off – called Tabu

## 4. Tabu

**Origin:** Polynesian

The word "*tabu*" or "*tapu*", meaning a restriction or prohibition related to the sacred.

This may be temporary, as associated with periods of ritual impurity such as menstruation, or permanent, such as gender or caste restrictions.

Rules of Tabu preserve the power and sacredness of the mana

System of setting apart a person or an object as either sacred or accursed

Removed from everyday use for use in ritual worship that channels the mana of the spiritual world

Sacred places and objects – vessels, instruments, symbols, dance masks can only be used by those mana filled people who are ritually consecrated and pure i.e. tabu

Rules of ablution (washing), purification, touch, gesture and sound maintain 'otherness' of all that is tabu

To break these rules requires reparation – making amends or sacrifice in order to avoid the punishment of illness

The term has passed into more general usage to describe the ritual prohibition or the restriction on certain categories of people to enter the domain of the sacred

Some taboo activities or customs are prohibited under law and transgressions incur harsh penalties. Other taboos result in embarrassment, shame and rudeness

Tabu must be left alone and should not be approached or interfered with. In some cases they may not even be spoken of

### **Australian Aborigines**

Certain people are forbidden to participate in certain rituals



The basis of this structure is the concept of taboo, which dictates that certain things and activities, owing to their sacred nature, are set aside for specific members of the group and are forbidden to others. Violation of this principle has on occasion been punishable by death.