

# Primal Religion

Most world religions have holy texts: for example, Christianity has the Bible; Islam, the Qur'an; Hinduism, the Gita; and Sikhism, the Granth Sahib. But what about those societies without a tradition of writing? Many societies in the world are non-literate or oral, that is, they communicate chiefly by the spoken word, and their traditions are memorized.

## Oral traditions

The religion of oral societies has tended to be viewed as magic or superstition, with the implication that these religions were undeveloped, unsystematic, and hence not really noteworthy. Another view suggests that perhaps religion has "evolved" over millennia, and these oral societies are in a sense "primitive".

But this isn't necessarily the case. Non-literate oral societies have quite sophisticated belief systems, with complex rituals and profound mythology and symbolism. In other words, just because a people is non-literate, it does not mean they do not have a noteworthy religion. Members of non-literate oral cultures have extraordinary powers of memorization, and they have unique ways of telling and dramatizing their society's beliefs and traditions. Complex ideas and deep spiritual insights are passed in this way from generation to generation. Many oral cultures also communicate by other means; for example, they may tell their stories and record their beliefs in rock paintings or bark carvings.



## Animism

"Primal" religion is the best of a poor selection of words for the beliefs of these oral cultures. Primal religion contains basic, fundamental, even universal religious forms. More literate religions have some characteristics of primal religion, such as the idea of the interconnectedness of humanity with the world, and the concept of an intermediary figure between humankind and the gods. In addition, the term "primal religion" implies a sense of "first-ness": it precedes and informs whatever follows. It does imply an evolutionary model of the development of religion (something that is debated); nevertheless, the term allows various religions to stand in their own right.

Primal religions are usually grouped together as "animism". All physical things have *anima* (Latin for "life", "soul"), and are animated by spirit. These societies believe that the material and spiritual worlds are one and the same: everything has *anima*, that is, everything is *animated* by having a living soul of some sort.



## CHARACTERISTICS OF PRIMAL RELIGION

Ninian Smart (1927–2001) was a leading scholar and teacher in the field of Religious Studies. In his book *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (1984), he sets out some of the main features of primal religion.

### MANA

A term originating in the cultures of the Pacific, *mana* is a surrounding force that is invisible and populated with deities. *Mana* resides in chieftains, animals, places, and large rocks or geographical features of significance.

### TABU TABOO

From the Pacific word *tapu*, it is the idea that someone is so full of *mana* that they cannot be approached by the profane and worldly. Things also may be taboo, or a taboo may be put on something, setting it aside as "holy". A warrior on the eve of battle may become ritually taboo, and a corpse may be taboo, for example.

### HIGH GOD

Most, if not all, primal religions have a concept of a High God. The High God is above and beyond this world; it is creator and ruler of all, including souls. The High God is often regarded as remote and can't be described; hence people pay greater attention to lower gods.

### TOTEMISM

Rooted in the natural world, totemism relates to kinship with animals or a species of plant. The totem object is sacred: perhaps it is heroic in legend or is the creator of the tribe. The totem animal usually represents strength, cunning, or wisdom.

### ANCESTOR VENERATION

The human creator of the society, or a hero with great mana, is often honoured through religious ritual. This may be done due to perceived connections with fertility and the health of the land. Ancestors live on; they are the "living-dead".

### SHAMAN

A shaman is a person with the gift of ecstasy who can go between the living and the "living-dead". The motif of journey is important: the shaman has powers to journey to the realm of the living-dead so as to return with guidance, healing, and wisdom.

## Myth

Myth and story-telling are important in primal religions both in their content, and the ongoing pattern of their telling. Myths explain origins, good and evil, local landforms, past events, and future possibilities.

### THE CREATION MYTH OF THE MONGOLS

This myth comes from *The Secret History of the Mongols* (thirteenth century), as translated by Igor de Rachewiltz (2004).

*In the beginning there was a blue-grey wolf, born with a destiny ordained by Heaven Above. He mated with a fallow doe and together they came across the Tengis lake, and settled at the source of the Onan river, on Mount Burhan Kaldun. And Batachkhan was born...*



# Northern Europe

## THE CELTS AND THE GERMANIC TRIBES

Modern European life and thought can be traced back to the “old gods” of northern Europe. There are two traditions identified: the Celts (now recognized particularly in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, parts of south-western England and north-western France) and the Germanic tribes (particularly the Scandinavians and the Vikings). There is a rejuvenation of these traditions today, with the Druids of Britain, Celtic worship themes in modern Christianity, and the New Age movement drawing on the rites, rituals, and symbols of both traditions. Like Greco-Roman traditions, much has made it into the worldview and language of Europeans, from Christmas traditions to names of the days of the week.

### The importance of myth

The first people to record the myths and stories were mainly Roman, so no doubt some bias has crept into the retellings we have today. Also, early Christian missionaries who spread out over Europe recorded various myths and folk tales. Much of this is interpreted through the lens of early European Christianity. For example, many of the Scandinavian myths were written down by one Snorri Sturluson (d. 1264) in Iceland. Many of the stories were oral traditions, and hence reinterpreted in the telling by either Roman or Christian storytellers: their religious aspects may well have come unstuck from their broader cultural functions (such as entertainment, explanation, or celebration). Both Celtic and Germanic traditions are polytheistic – there were many gods.

### Celtic religion

There has been some reinterpretation of pre-Roman Celts (Gauls) by the Romans, but it is clear that the Celts had a horned god called Cernunnos. He may have been represented by a stag, and was probably related to fertility and war. The Horned One sometimes had a consort. This Earth Mother was worshipped, and there are many Irish stories about her mystery, vigour, and beauty. Water played a role in Celtic religion, particularly springs, wells, caves, and sacred groves. Human sacrifice is evident, and there was probably a “cult of the head” – the human head is a major theme in Celtic art.

Celts believed in an afterlife, and Druids performed sacrifice, divination, and a liturgy.

### Germanic religion and the Vikings

Again, coming to us through Roman interpretations, the Germanic tribes (such as the Goths) were warlike, and hence Roman observers assumed a war god was dominant. There is a prominent female deity, probably associated with fertility: women were associated with holiness, purity, and prophecy. Divination, often associated with horses, was common. The Norse gods – those of the northern Scandinavians and Vikings – are widely known: Woden (Odin), Twiz, Thor, Frey, and their homeland Valhalla are still studied today.

Gundestrup Cauldron (bowl), Celtic ritual vessel of 2nd century BC. Inside on right is Cernunnos, King of the animals. Silver partially gilded.



### The Vanir deities of Norse mythology

These are the “lesser” gods of Norse mythology, which are largely associated with maintenance and reproduction.

- **Njord:** The deity who controls wind and sea.
- **Frey:** Son of Njord, deity of rain and sun, he is also associated with fertility. The English Friday is named after Frey.
- **Freyja (Frigg):** Consort of Odin and sister of Frey, she is goddess of love and fertility.
- **Heimdall:** Watchman of the gods.

### The Aesir deities of Norse mythology

The Aesir deities were the “active” gods of Norse legend, the victors in a series of mythological battles that pitted them against the Vanir deities. After the war was finished, and the deities united, the Aesir nevertheless retained their associations with war.

- **Woden (Odin):** Named Woden in the south, and Odin in the north (amongst the Norse peoples), he was father of all the gods, the god of war, who was worshipped particularly by warriors and tribal leaders. The English Wednesday (literally “Woden’s day”) is named after him.
- **Thor:** Along with Odin, Thor is the best-known deity. He is the god of thunder, and is depicted with a large hammer. He is the strongest of the gods, and also the god of fertility (and hence “Thor’s day” – Thursday).
- **Balder:** Son of Odin and Freyja, he is a god of beauty and brightness.
- **Loki:** A mischievous deity, he is the father of monsters.



### OTHER NORSE DEITIES

In addition there are some other deities: Tiwaz (English “Tuesday”) is the legislator, and the Valkyries are Odin’s maidens of war who carry slain warriors off to Valhalla, the majestic halls of Odin. Valhalla is a type of heaven: it is a place of reward for slain warriors, with golden shields on its walls, and it is surrounded by sacred animals and trees. Valhalla has inspired popular culture today as diverse as art, place names, and video games.

Viking memorial picture stone of Sanda Gotland with saga of God Thor son of Odin dedicated to brothers Rodvisl Farbjorn & Gunnbjorn 10th century AD