

Ecology Saviour: Primitive Reverential Worship of Physical Environment

D.Rajakumari

Assistant Professor- English, Chellammal Womens College, Chennai, India

Abstract

Few centuries ago our mother earth was a beautiful paradise to live in but the explosion of human population leads to disastrous progress in science and technology. This has ultimately resulted in the deterioration of nature which in turn has made the earth a threatening hell. To save the mother earth, the environmentalists and researchers are struggling to explore new ways and means. Unless the mankind realizes that 'the nature is not captive and he cannot claim the superiority over other forms of life', the havoc caused cannot be put back in order. This study focuses on how the modern man must understand and follow the beliefs of primitives which uphold the notion that the human life must be in a harmonious relationship with the powers of nature and he should not dismiss the primitives' worship of physical environment as mere superstition.

NATURE AS DIVINE AND SACRED

Since time immemorial the Mythological and spiritual experiences have been closely intertwined and they have played a key role in viewing the Earth as a divine home to be treated with great care and reverence. The religion of primitives, as well as their manners and customs, depended, in large amount, on the environment of the region where they lived. The primitive men observed numerous ways to pacify the Nature-Spirit that culminated in religious conviction. The worship practices of nature by the ancient civilizations provide the deep insight to deal with the environmental crisis. In every way, early worship practices were purely based on the 'psycho-physical' relation between the man and the environment.

Man in this stage may hold that a stone, a tree, a mountain, a stream, a wild animal, a heavenly body, wind, an instrument of the hunt or of labour or of domestic utility--indeed, any object within the range of real or fancied existence possesses just such a soul as he conceives himself of. It worked on the idea that the world around him was a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects, which were agitated by desires, moved by emotions and empowered by abilities parallel to those he perceives in himself. (Hauck 194)

Primitives unsurprisingly inherited the 'like' consciousness to everything that they saw and sensed around them. Worshipping the physical environment is central to every culture around the globe and the legendary stories of such practices have been the subject of many voluminous collections. Detailing the legends behind each worship practice is highly impossible. So a humble effort is made to detail a few worship practices in this study.

Mountain worships are revered to be holy by the indigenous people and this form of worship is considered the most prominent among other forms of nature worship. It is perhaps because of the symbolic aspect of a mountain peak which is believed to be a connecting point between the heaven and the earth. Mount Olympus in Greek mythology, Mount Sinai in Judaism, the Hara, Berezaiti in Zoroastrianism. Mount Kailash and Mount Himalayas in India, Fujiyama volcano in Japan, Mount Etna in Italy, Mount Etna of Rome and a lot more are considered to have religious significance. So there are a plenty of legendary tales about them. Stone worship is also predominant among some of the ancient societies of the world. Remarkably, stones were the primary objects of defense and also the chief objects of worship. Thus stones evolved as one of man's earliest symbols of reverence and worship. Huge stones have played a very significant role in the history of religion. In recognition of the durability of stones and the spiritual powers associated with them, the Dakotas Semitic Tribes in South-western Asia worshipped them ardently.

Worship of trees is one of the widespread forms in many religions around the world and it has been given deep and sacred meanings all the way through the ages. "Many cultures thought trees were antennae for divine energies. If you look at the culture of Ireland, they had the Brehon law of the forest, and had all these rules about how to treat it. The forest was a sacred place"(Anand). In Lakota mythology, Inyan Lakota held every part of their soil sacred. An important Inca ritualistic stone is the 'Intihuatana' the most famous being the one atop the highest point of mount Machu Picchu in Peru. The ancient Druids in the United Kingdom were nature worshippers and believed in the power of stones. The banyan tree is central to several Asian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. In folk religion and folklore, trees are often said to be the homes of tree spirits. For the ancient Celts, the Yew tree was a symbol of immortality and it functioned as symbols of renewal. Germanic mythology as well as Celtic polytheism both appear to have involved cultic practice in sacred groves, especially grove of oak. The term *druid* itself possibly derives from the Celtic word for oak. In Egypt, the evergreen date palm was a sacred tree, and a palm branch was the symbol of the god Heh, the personification of eternity. The Egyptian Book of the Dead mentions the sycamore as one of the earliest-recorded sacred trees. In Japan, trees such as the cryptomeria are venerated at Shinto shrines. For the Romans a wild fig has spiritual powers. The oak was the most venerated and all European tribes shared reverence for the oak. In Central Africa, the Oubangui tribes plant a sapling when a child is born. relating the wellbeing of the tree with that of the child. A sacred grove or sacred woods are any grove of trees that are of special religious importance to a particular culture. Sacred groves feature in various cultures throughout the world. They were important features of the mythological landscape and cult practice of Celtic, Baltic, Germanic, ancient Greek, Near Eastern, Roman, and Slavic polytheism, India, Japan, and West Africa. Ancient holy trees remain in the English and Estonian countryside and are mentioned often in folklore and fairytales.

Animals have been worshipped in almost in every culture for a very long time and are considered divine. This kind of worship refers to rituals involving animals, such as the glorification of animal deities or animal sacrifice. In 1906, Weissenborn suggested that animal worship resulted from man's natural curiosity. Primitive man would observe

an animal that had a unique trait and the inexplicability of this trait would appeal to man's curiosity. As part of animal worship, whale, crocodile, turtle, fish, crab, bear, dog, cat, goat, tiger, lion, monkey, snake and birds have been regarded as godly deities throughout the world. Innumerable folktales are widespread in every part of the world. In Asian lore, whales and dragons sometimes have large connections. Serpents are also common as a religious symbol or as serpentine deities, sharing many similarities with dragons.

‘The crocodile-headed Egyptian God, Sobek, is associated with pharaonic power, fertility, and military prowess, but serves additionally as a protective deity against the dangers presented by the Nile river’. It is evident that the Greeks, Neanderthals, Japanese(Ainu), Alaskans, Chinese, Austrians, and northern Canadians were the ardent worshippers of Bear.

Many religions have considered cattle to be sacred, most famously Hinduism from India and Nepal. They are also equally worshipped in Zoroastrianism, and ancient Greek and Egyptian religions. Cattle and buffalo are respected by many pastoral people that rely on the animals for sustenance and the killing of an ox is a sacrificial function.

Dogs have a major religious significance among the Hindus in Nepal and some parts of India. Horse worship has been practiced by a number of Indo-European and Turkic peoples. Elephant is worshipped at Ennarea in southern Ethiopia. In India, the popular Hindu god Ganesha has the head of an elephant and a torso of a human. The deer is important in the mythology of many communities like Eurasian Steppe, Greeks and Hindus. Tiger is worshipped by Chinese and Koreans. In Hinduism the monkey deity, Hanuman, is a prominent figure. The Raven is the chief deity of the Tlingit people of Alaska. In India snake worship refers to the high status of snakes in Hindu Mythology.

Birds have many qualities that may have seemed supernatural or god-like to ancient cultures. For Egyptians, Irish, North American natives and Indians, many birds such as eagles, hawks, ibises, and herons are infused with sacred qualities. The concept of man-animal divinities is also observed by all the major religions which are practiced by Indians, Greeks, Mesopotamians and Egyptians .

Water as a primal element and the sacred qualities attributed to them form a basis for the creation of various myths and stories around the world. Water divinities are common in mythologies of many civilizations in which the ocean, great river, lakes, spring and holy wells are more important. And Fire is another element worshipped or equated with god across various religions. Fire has been an important part of human culture and worship since the Lower Paleolithic. Zoroastrians, Greeks and Hindus largely worshipped fire. The sky has also important religious significance. Many religions, both polytheistic and monotheistic, have deities associated with the sky. The sun, moon, planets, stars and constellations are worshipped in myriad forms. Astrotheological worship is most important to Israelites. The planet Deities worship could be seen till date in Babylonian, Greco-Roman religion and India. Ancient people had great knowledge in astronomy and they were polytheistic. They knew that planetary positions ultimately influence the inhabitants of earth and this belief made them worship the planets for their protection and needs.

In the ancient religions, the powers of nature were venerated as manifestation of Gods . For instance the people worshipped the thunder god as the supreme power or source of the forces of thunder and lightning. In Indo-European cultures, the thunder god is frequently known as the King of the Gods. ‘Natural phenomena such as thunder and lightning, high mountains, dangerous precipices, and water-falls, came within their ken and naturally were propitiated by offerings and a certain amount of worship so as to protect human beings from harm’ (Bingham).

The worship practices of the primitive men are not fairy tales but a way of life in those societies and civilizations. Whatever is venerated is accordingly protected to preserve its sacredness and this belief played a vital role in environmental conservation. It gives an insight about the deep and spiritual connection that exist between human beings and nature since time immemorial. ‘All that is done to us is done to the Earth and all that is done to the Earth is done to us’. However as time passed by humans started valuing themselves more than anything else in the world. This self-centered attitude and the ruthless pursuit of power and progress have led modern man to tamper with the natural rhythm of the universe. He must not exercise authority over ‘...the fish of the sea and fowl of the air, over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing’. The bio-centric worldview is the need of the hour to curtail human intervention in the natural order. All living micro and macro organisms are valuable on their own. If mankind develops the environmental ethics pursued by their ancestors, the posed threat on earth will be curtailed.

Works cited

Anand, Vidhya.2019, Supernatural Powers Of Sacred Trees In Ancient Cultures.Web. 20 March.<<https://www.look4ward.co.uk/spirituality/supernatural-powers-of-sacred-trees-in-ancient-cultures/>>

Bingham, Hiram,2003,.,*Lost City of the Incas.*:Phoneix Press, New York ,Print.

Hauck, Albert.,ed.1896, *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, iii.; cf. “Bros, La Religion des peuples non-civilisés,” chap. II. Print.

Lubbock, John. 2005,*The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man.* LLC:Kessinger Publishing Company, Print.

Messerli, Bruno, and Jack D. Ives,eds.1997, *Mountains of the World: A Global Priority.* “International Mountain Society.”London:Parthenon Publishing Group,Print.

Porteous, Alexander.2002, *The Forest in Folklore and Mythology.* US: Courier Dover Publications, Print.

Weissenborn, Johannes. "Animal-Worship", *Journal of the Royal African Society*(1906,b). Web. 14 March 2019.<www.che.ntu.edu.tw/ntuche/safety/upload/browse.php?u...b=13>