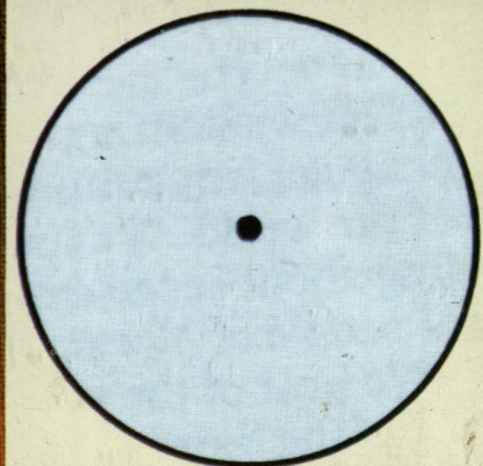
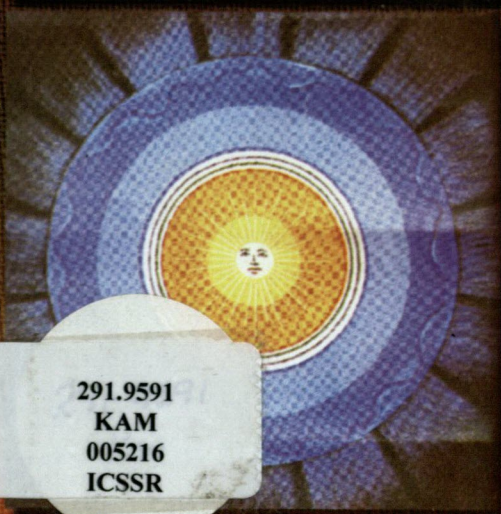
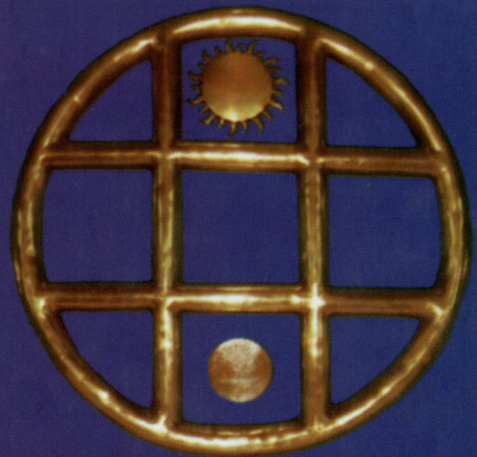
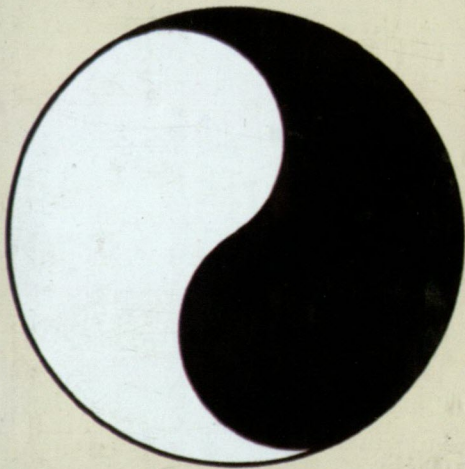


ESSAYS ON PRIMORDIAL RELIGION



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GANGMUMEI KAMEI

The anthropologists and the Christian missionaries have written on the religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous tribal people with bias and prejudice.

Prof. Gangmumei Kamei's essays on primordial religion exposed the fallacy and inaccuracy of Tylor's animism. He discusses Dr. Harold Turner's proposal of primal religion to define the tribal religious belief. However Prof. Gangmumei Kamei opines that the term primordial religion which means existing since the beginning of time is a more accurate definition of tribal religion which is an ancient and eternal belief. Prof. Kamei also thinks that the Sanskrit term Sanatan Dharma meaning ancient and eternal religion expresses the tenets of tribal religion.

The other three essays deal with the indigenous belief of Maori people of New Zealand, Zulus of South Africa, the Cherokees of North America and Sankyo of Korea. There is another essay on Tribal Religious Reform Movement of Northeast India, the Seng Khasi Movement of Meghalaya, the Zeliangrong Religion Revivalism of northeastern India and Donyi-Polo of Arunachal Pradesh. Prof. Kamei devotes an essay on the Zeliangrong Religion as a case study of primordial religion.

The work of Prof. Kamei is a brief but a thought provoking exposition on philosophy of Tribal Religion which will be of interest to anybody who is interested in tribal study.

Rs. 350



Professor Gangmumei Kamei is a retired Professor of History in Manipur University. He also taught at the erstwhile Jawaharlal Nehru University Post Graduate Centre at Imphal. He was also the founder Secretary and later President of the Manipur Historical Society. He is a life member of Northeast India History Association. He was the Coordinator of Centre for Tribal Studies in Manipur University. Currently he is the President of the Manipur Centre for Social Studies. He has extensively written on history, culture and social issues of Manipur.

He is a scholar, political and social activist with a strong sense of commitment to the people. He was the founder President of the Federal Party of Manipur. He was a member of Manipur Legislative Assembly and several time Minister in the Government of Manipur. He is associated with the United Religious Initiative, Manipur Co-operation Circle.

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GANGMUMEI KAMEI

*Former Minister,
Higher Education, Environment and Law ,
Government of Manipur*

**AKANSHA PUBLISHING HOUSE
NEW DELHI**

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AKANSHA PUBLISHING HOUSE

4649-B/21, Ansari Road
Darya Ganj
New Delhi - 110 002
Ph. : 23263193 / 9811582579
Email: ektabooks@yahoo.com



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CHAPTER ONE

THE PRIMORDIAL RELIGION: DEFINING THE TRIBAL RELIGION

Man is a thinking and speaking being who always believes in the supernatural as the cause, continuity and end of his existence. There are no people without a religion. Religion is the system of worship of God by men with a code of moral, spiritual and social behaviour in dealing with God and society. The indigenous people have a religion of their own for ages. Religion has been the core of the indigenous way of life. Their religion has been misinterpreted by the anthropologists, Christian missionaries and scholars of comparative theology as "animism".

TYLOR'S ANIMISM

Sir Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917) who is generally accepted as the father of social anthropology was the first scholar who propounded the concept of animism in his paper entitled, "Religion of Savages" in the Fortnightly Review (1866) in which he wrote, "The theory which endows the phenomenon of nature with personal life might perhaps conveniently be called 'animism'." He further developed it in greater detail in his classic, Primitive Culture: Researches into Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Arts and Culture" (1871). With this work, the term "animism"

has stuck to Tylor's name. He further replied to the criticism of animism by his contemporaries in his paper, "On the Limits of Savage Religion" in the *Journal of Anthropological Institute* (1896).

Tylor describes animism as the minimal definition of the religion of the savage as "the Belief in the Spiritual Beings". Tylor's use of the term, "Savage" to mean the primitive people is a subject of critical comments. But many writers in the 19th century Europe used this term universally. It is said that Taylor would have preferred the term "Spiritualism" to describe the primitive religion but for his dislike for a group known as the Spiritualists in the mid nineteenth century who were a religious group which had the object of establishing communication with the dead. The spiritualists sought to communicate with the dead and they were condemned by the mainstream churches.

Tylor's use of the term, animism has been described by the critics as misleading. Animism is a belief that all natural objects have souls. But his animism is more a spiritism, dealing with an unempirical world of the spirits. There had been criticism of this concept by sociologists like Andrew Lang. Emile Durkheim, R.R. Marrett and Wilhelm Schmidt as the "Belief in Spiritual Beings (Soul, ghost, demon and ghosts) did not cover the primitive religion or the religious beliefs of the tribals.

Tylor defended that his concept was an answer to the question, "What is the most rudimentary form of religion which may yet bear that name?" Tylor thought that religion was present in all cultures properly observed and it might turn out to be present everywhere. He entertained the idea of a pre-religious stage in the evolution of cultures and believed that a tribe in that stage might be found. To proceed in a systematic study of the problem, he required a minimum of religion and found it in the "Belief in the Spiritual Beings".

According to this concept, religion had evolved from a doctrine of souls arising from the spontaneous reflection upon "death, dream, apparitions to a wider doctrine of spirits" which eventually expanded to embrace "powerful demons and gods". He left out the religions of vision and passion.

Andrew Lang (1844-1912), a Scottish folklorist theorized that the primitive tribes believed in a High God, a creator of the universe and often a legislator of a moral order as found among the tribes who had been explored both by the Christian missionaries and anthropologists. Andrew Lang was pleading for the existence of a "primordial monotheism", a belief in a Supreme God among the tribes. E.B.Tylor dismissed this as an imagination of the Christian missionaries. This is not so, the concept exists in the present times among the tribes.

Wilhelm Schmidt in his "Origin of the Idea of God (1912) discovered a High God among the primitive religion and confirmed Andrew Lang's primordial monotheism. He wrote, "Tribes have a memory of a High God, a benign creator, a Father-God who is no longer worshipped because that God is not feared." Monotheism has been suggested to be more naturally primitive as a world view than animism.

It has been asserted that the tribes are found not to be animistic, as their system of religious beliefs and mode of worship of the God do not present a picture of degenerated religious practice. It has been suggested that due to the loss of contact with prophets and religious seers, they had degenerated to polytheism, worship of many gods. James Frazer in his "The Golden Bough" observed that when definite deities with specific names and functions were recognised, the animist had become a polytheist and the term animism was no longer strictly applicable, Frazer's thesis is that animism is a stage in the evolutionary development of a tribal religion. If animism means Belief in Spiritual Beings, every religion has these rudimentary ideas in one form or the other.

In India, under the great influence of E.B. Tylor, the official administrators including ethnographers were instructed by the then British Government of India to use the term "animism" to describe the religion of the tribal or indigenous communities. They were also directed to use the term in the Census of India since 1901. In the north east, the Government of Assam published anthropological monographs from 1906 onwards, like the Khasis by P.T.R. Gurdon, The Garos by A. Mayflair, The Meitheis by T.C. Hodson, The Kacharis by Rev.S. Endle, The Naga Tribes of Manipur by T.C. Hodson, The Lushai Kuki Clans by John Shakespeare, The Sema Nagas by J.H. Hutton, The Angami Nagas by J.H. Hutton, The Ao Nagas by J.P. Mills, The Lohtas Naga by J.P. Mills , The Thadou-Kukis by William Shaw, The Lushai Crysalis by A.G. McCall, The Lakhers by P.N. Perry. These powerful writings have described the tribal religion as animism. Even, the religion of the Meitheis has been wrongly described as animistic by T.C. Hodson.

Following these anthropological writers, the Christian missionaries in their declared objective of converting the tribes into Christianity had condemned the tribal religion as heathen, pagan and animistic. Their religion was described as worship of demons and evil spirits.

The tribal educated elite including the new Christian converts condemned their own religion as animism. However, enlightened scholars of the tribal communities who are the followers of the traditional religion refuse to accept the derogatory name. Even Christian writers who have sympathy for the tribal culture do not accept the appendage.

PRIMAL RELIGION

Dr. Harold Turner, a Presbyterian theologian of New Zealand in a recent article in "A Lion Handbook: The World Religions" (1994 London) came out in a strong defence of

the religion of the indigenous people. He writes, "Most of the common terms for these religions are either offensive or inaccurate. Tribal people do not like to be called heathen, savage, primitive or superstitious and words such as animistic, pre-literate, traditional or ethnic are not accurate." He pleaded that "Religion must be carefully distinguished from magic where people try to use spirit power for their selfish ends. The term "Primal Religion" has been proposed to replace Animism."

According to Turner, the word, 'Primal Religion' means the religions that are prior to the universal religions. Primal religions are not religions for all people. They are the religions of one tribe or a people who realize that other people have their own gods and religious system, the word "primal" means primary or basic. Primal religions usually have the main basic features that belong to all religions.

TENETS OF PRIMAL RELIGIONS

Basic to primal religion is a belief in a spiritual world of power or beings stronger than man himself. Men are not alone in the universe; behind every ordinary thing and daily event there is a "spirit power" which is called Mana by the Polynesian in south Pacific, Mutunga by the South Africans and Orenda by North American Indians.

- i) Every primal religion has a group of spirit power whom they call gods.
- ii) Primal religions have a belief in a Supreme God above all other power. This God is thought of as a Universal God for all people (like the Great Spirit of the North American Eskimos or Indian, Io of the Maoris of New Zealand). This is the creator of all, High God, Sky God and is concerned with the moral lives of the people or community. He is the Almighty God.

iii) **Ancestor Worship: Worship or Honour of the Living Dead.** There is a strong belief in the continuing presence of the ancestors who are honoured rather than worshipped and remembered as human beings and not as gods.

iv) **Dream and Vision:**

To them myths are not fairy tales, but long and complicated stories containing people's theology and philosophy of life. Dream and vision are interpreted accordingly.

v) **Rituals and Festivals:** the followers of the primal religions made prayers and offerings to God or specific gods in form of sacrifice of animals, and inanimate objects like water, flower, grass, ginger, leaf etc.

vi) **Medicine Men:**

There are medicine men who are priest, medium, diviner, healer and shaman, but not witch doctor, sorcerer or magician. The priests perform the rituals and organise the festivals.

Dr. Turner has commented that many primal religions have collapsed under pressure in the developing areas of the world due to the Christian missionary movements, others have persisted remarkably and have adapted to change. He said, "They should never be regarded as the childish religions of the primitive people or the crazy antics of the savage dominated by the witch doctor. There are serious efforts by adult people to create and preserve a spiritual system which can sustain them both in life and death."

Turner's primal religions may fit well to the indigenous faiths of the north east India. Animism is an inaccurate and fallacious name for the religion of the indigenous people.

THE PRIMORDIAL RELIGION

The primal religion covers all the features of the indigenous faith or the tribal religion. An indigenous faith implies an ancient root and cultural heritage, the present consciousness and future continuance. The term, "prior to the universal religion" expresses the ancient but do not necessarily represent the present status and the future. Many Indian scholars and Hindu philosophers have described Hinduism as "Sanatan Dharma" which has been interpreted as an ancient and eternal religion or way of life. Likewise applying the criteria of antiquity and eternity, the indigenous tribal religion has been also been described as Sanatan Dharma, not in the sense of Hinduism but on the basis of similarity of the tribal religion with Hinduism.

We find the similarity in essence to indigenous faith with some popular form of Hinduism. Therefore, it is thought that the more appropriate term to describe the indigenous tribal faith is "Primordial religion" meaning a religion with a primordial existence; existing since the beginning of time. Primordality is basic to any religion which is based on a myth of creation which ascribes to the Supreme Being as the Creator of the Universe, men and all living beings. I var Lissner, a German scholar in his "Man, God and Magic" used the term "primordial religion" to describe the religious beliefs of the polar tribes in a different context (Lissner : 1961;21) On the empirical level, an overview of the indigenous religions of the major tribal communities of north east India shows that they have a common feature of polytheism with a strong belief in the Supreme God, the creator and the Almighty God. These tenets meet all the essentialities of a functional religion with a philosophy and theology. The primordial religious system has the following features.

1. Belief in the Supreme God who is the creator of the Universe, benevolent and protector of men.

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2. Belief in the existence of many gods and deities who are to look after the different aspects of the world, nature and the humans.
3. The concept of Ancestor worship and belief in the rebirth of soul.
4. Belief in the Heaven, the abode of God and gods; land of the Dead where the man or his soul goes after death.
5. Belief in the deities presiding over villages and places.
6. Offerings made to gods and deities in the worship or propitiation to them.
7. The performance of the Rites of Passage:
Festivals of the community, individual ceremonies.
8. Organisation of the religion at the village levels.
9. Concept of sin as a deviation from social and moral code and customs, and retribution by God, society and man for the sin.
10. Belief in the redemption and salvation of Soul for the good doers.
11. Traditionally, the tribal religions have no founders; they are historically evolved. They do not usually have any name.

The recent trend in the primordial religion is the establishment of religious organisations which supervise their ancient religion. They have coined name or discovered ancient name for their religion. The village level religion has been upgraded to community level. They have written down the religious teachings and tenets in books in their own dialects. There is a concurrent development of religion and culture. Religion is seen as an aspect of cultural heritage

and social solidarity. Leaders of the religion have developed philosophy and theology in their own way.

They give strong emphasis that primordial religion and culture are inseparable. Culture can be preserved when the religion of the community survives. There is a universal realization of the identity of the indigenous people who are aroused to fight for the preservation of their religion and culture.