

Ancient Religion Egypt and Mesopotamia Questions

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What do the terms sympathetic magic and animism refer to? How do they play a central role in the development and survival of early humans? How does the Pygmy Hunting Ritual help us understand their use? How can we relate these ideas to early forms of art? Provide and explain an example of each.

Sympathetic magic and animism are interconnected concepts relating to human thinking and understanding of multiple objects. Sympathetic magic is an imitative type of magic in which things and objects can affect each other, even at a distance. As defined,

“Sympathetic magic is defined as improbable contamination, broken into the law of similarity (something that resembles a toxic object is toxic) and the law of contagion (once in contact, always in contact)” (Sarsony).

Animism refers to every creature in the universe possessing some type of spirit or soul. Nasir et al. defined it as “Animism, the belief that everything that exists on this earth, like stone, wood, wind, and others, have a soul or spirit”. Both these beliefs played a vital role in the development and survival of early humans on Earth. Human belief in supernatural objects and their impacts gave them strength for safety and survival. They had some instinctive vibes to call upon and take energy from these spiritual beings. It also helped to look after the affairs of early humans. For example, these beliefs evolved in much complexity and led humanity towards comprehensive religions. Various religious rituals and practices are the vivid expositions of these beliefs.

Similarly, these beliefs are authentically used in the Pygmy Hunting Ritual. The belief in connection with some spiritual agents satisfied the hunter’s mind. They can hunt the animals with satisfaction by considering permission from spirits to hunt them. Prayers in the form of cries are the sole exhibition of making connections to spirits for the well-being of both parties.

However, these ideas are merely relevant to early forms of art. Human beings have started to think

critically and analyze things. Their thinking and relationships with other objects led to the evolution process. Eventually, humans succeeded in flourishing art and formulated various tools. For example, knapping stones with hands may be the first phase of human art to use stone pieces as knives. Evolution in this aspect also evolved human organs in a parallel direction to make them compatible for survival and development.

How did natural and geographic forces help shape ancient Egyptian culture? What were the historical and religious ramifications of the environment in which Egyptian culture emerged? (For example, think of the most important natural elements in the Egyptian environment and how they help inform and explain many facets of ancient Egyptian life and culture.) You should use at least one example from Egyptian art, literature, or mythology/religion in your response.

Various natural and geographic elements and forces joined hand in hand to formulate ancient Egyptian culture. These elements forced and urged humans to bind themselves and sprout a unique culture with multifaceted norms, values, and features. Social organization and human settlement along the banks of the River Nile in the form of villages were the first influences of these forces. Those men learned to live in groups, and their benefits tied to each other.

Moreover, the said forces created a sense of adopting professions among humans to earn a livelihood. Agriculture was the preferential profession of ancient Egyptian people due to massive land fertility. For this purpose, they invented early geometry for flood prediction and land demarcation (Mazzio).

Meanwhile, ancient Egyptian masses introduced trade customs and a common language among different villages. Trade and language laid a foundation of cultural and societal norms among ancient Egyptian people. Besides a common language, they were also well aware of some other languages over time. For example, the “Rosetta Stone” is evidence regarding the multi-lingual capability of Egyptians. Some rules and laws were carved on this stone in three different languages, i.e., Demotic, Hieroglyphs and Greek.

Furthermore, the said forces enabled those people to discover new horizons, i.e., division of time. They divided the whole year span into three seasons: inundation, sowing, and harvesting seasons. In

addition, they also allocated months in equal lengths (thirty days) and weeks into equal days (ten days). However, the environment left momentous imprints on historical and religious aspects of Egyptian culture as the religious and spiritual beliefs revolved around their environment. Due to the surrounding environment, they became polytheists, i.e., believing in many gods and goddesses. These included the Nile, Moon, Sun Horus, etc.

The most important and influential natural element in that environment was the Sun. They used to worship the Sun by various names such as Aten, Amon, Re, Ra, etc. According to their beliefs, the Sun was solely a symbol of rightness and light, warmth, and the growth of life on the earth. They used to resemble the Sun with goodness, purity, and a conqueror of darkness in the world. The regularity and cyclic emergence of the Sun also fascinated them. It is usually believed that the Egyptian belief after death may have roots in the cyclic and ordered emergence of environmental elements like the Sun and moon. They resembled the rising of the Sun after its setting with the rise of humans after death in their spiritual and religious norms and ideas.

What do the *Enuma Elish* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* tell us about life and religion in ancient Mesopotamia? You should utilize/summarize what happens in each of the assigned Readings and explain how these narratives and outcomes can be seen as reflecting the life and spiritual outlook of ancient Mesopotamians.

The *Enuma Elish* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* are myths and poetic narratives about life and religion in ancient Mesopotamia. Considering these keenly, one can imagine the environment before creation, the emergence of various gods, their rivalry with each other, the origin of life, as well as passions of love and hatred, and eventually, the conquering of virtue over evil.

The *Enuma Elish* is a narration of creation that starts from nothingness and leads towards the origin of life, having been divided into multiple phases, i.e., tablets of creation. Apsu and Tiamat, represented by sweet and salt waters, respectively, are prime gods with Mummu, their son. Multiple gods originate, like Lahme. Anshar, Anu, Marduk and Ea. When younger gods disturb Apsu and Tiamat, Apsu proposes to destroy them, but Tiamat opposes him. Ea finds out about this plan and captures Apsu. Meanwhile, Tiamat is pleased to avenge Apsu, and she starts producing a furious army and nominates Qingu as king. Ea reports these battle preparations to his father, Anshar, who appoints Marduk as commander of the battle.

Marduk advances towards the spell of deception and challenges Tiamat to one-on-one combat.

Marduk defeated Tiamat, built the earth, and made the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. All other gods declare Marduk as their king, and he proclaims Byblons a religious centre. Finally, Marduk and Ea create life from the blood of Qingu. Marduk states, “I will collect blood and create bones, and from them, I will create a savage and call him ‘man’” (Rosenberg).

However, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* revolves around the rivalry between good and evil, where the king Gilgamesh represents evil at the start of the epic. People of Uruk complain to the gods about his abuse of power. The god Aruru creates Enkidu to compete with Gilgamesh. Enkidu lives in much harmony with animals and destroys traps to capture them. A trapper persuades Enkidu to sleep with a woman, and after this act, all the animals reject him.

Eventually, Enkidu moves towards the city and wrestles with the king. They become friends and travel to fight Humbala. Enkidu defeats and kills Humbala. Ishtar, the love goddess, releases the Bull of Heaven after rejection from Gilgamesh. The Bull of Heaven plays havoc on Uruk city but is defeated in the end. Enkidu dies and Gilgamesh starts wandering in search of Utnapishtim. After crossing the furious mountain ranges, he meets Siduri. Meanwhile, he wishes to cross the sea with one hundred and twenty wooden logs. Gilgamesh longed for immortality after meeting with Utnapishtim.

Utnapishtim first rejects his desire for immortality, but after criticizing by the gods, he accepts the proposal with some conditions. Gilgamesh cannot succeed in achieving morality after much struggle and returns. Finally, the death time comes to Gilgamesh, and the people of Uruk mourn in the streets and praise him with gods in words such as,

“O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab, great is thy praise” (Sandars).

The stated epics have long-lasting effects on the spiritual and religious life and beliefs of ancient Mesopotamians. These myths depict their firm belief in goodness and righteousness. From their point of view, all power rests with gods with final authority, and they bless humans for noble causes and deeds. The Mesopotamian culture was embedded with dogmas and philosophies that ensured the victory of virtue over the curse.

Moreover, their spiritual norms revolve around the death of every living person. Mesopotamians believed in living life with bravery and valour for a noble cause under the leadership of a just ruler. They had the opinion that forces of chaos are ultimately destined for elimination by the forces of uprightness.

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