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Q4(c)

Highlight the differences and similarities between totemism and animism

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Highlight the differences and similarities between totemism and animism
- Keep the highlight within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Animism, for Tylor, is belief in souls in persons and things.

Totemism, for Durkheim, is the clan's sacred emblem and the rite that gathers the group.

They share a sacred link to non-human beings and an old evolutionary placement that is no longer law.

They differ as intellectualist soul-theory versus sociological emblem-theory.

Village spirits and clan names in India may resemble either without copying Australian totemism.

Introduction

Animism and totemism are two classical names for early religion. Edward Tylor used animism for belief in souls and spirits. Emile Durkheim used totemism, especially Australian clan religion, as the elementary form of the sacred. They overlap as theories of non-theistic religion. They differ in what they take as the object of worship.

Body

Animism

- Tylor, in *Primitive Culture*, defined animism as the belief that persons, animals, plants, and things have souls.
- Dreams, death, and trance were his evidence for how the soul idea arose.
- Animism is a philosophy of nature as peopled by wills. It need not organise a clan.

Totemism

- A *totem* is a plant, animal, or object that stands for a clan and is treated as sacred kin.
- Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, argued that the *totem* is the clan's emblem, and that worship of the *totem* is society worshipping itself.
- Taboos of killing and eating, and rites that gather the clan, are the social machinery.
- Radcliffe-Brown and later writers debated whether totemism is one institution or a bundle of practices.

Similarities

- Both were used to describe religions without a single high god of the Abrahamic type.
- Both link the sacred to non-human beings.
- Both were placed by nineteenth-century anthropology at the start of a religious evolution, a ladder that later anthropology rejected as a law.
- **Both can appear in the same society:** spirits of place beside clan emblems.

Differences

- Animism centres souls in things. Totemism centres a social emblem and a group.
- **Tylor's path is intellectualist:** people infer souls. **Durkheim's** path is sociological: rites make the sacred.
- Totemism is a system of classification of groups. Animism is a theory of life in nature.
- Indian illustrations include village spirit cults that look animistic, and clan or gotra animal names that look totemic without being Australian totemism.

Flow diagram

Tylor animism -> Souls in beings
Durkheim totemism -> Clan emblem rites
Souls in beings -> Sacred non-human
Clan emblem rites -> Sacred non-human
Sacred non-human -> Not one evolutionary law

Conclusion

Animism and totemism are similar as classical labels for sacred relations with non-human beings. They differ because animism is a doctrine of souls and totemism is a clan emblem and rite. Tylor explains belief. **Durkheim** explains society. Neither is a universal first stage of all religion.

Facts & figures

Primitive Culture

Tylor's work that defined animism as the minimum definition of religion.

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Durkheim's study that took Australian totemism as the clue to the sacred.

Totem

A species or object that stands for a clan and is hedged by taboo and rite.

Intellectualism

Tylor's view that religion begins in inference from dreams and death.

Society as sacred

Durkheim's claim that in worshipping the totem the clan worships its own unity.

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