

**ORAL LITERATURE AND PAGAN RELIGIONS:  
AN INVESTIGATION INTO PAGAN FAITHS AND THEIR  
DEPICTION IN LITERATURE**

**Preeti Sharma**

Head Of Department  
Department of History and  
Ancient Culture

**Rugmani Venkatadri**

Research Scholar  
Banasthali University, India.

**Himadri Ghosh**

Director  
Department Of Design  
Banasthali, Rajasthan, India

**Abstract**

*Paganism is the oldest faith practiced since the dawn of human life, as is evident from the Venus figurines and cave murals. Paganism is folk faith and an expression of the way small communities were grateful to their natural surroundings for bestowing bounties and blessings that enabled them to be self-sustaining and happy. Folk faith regarded magic as a higher power which manifested itself as nature. They expressed their sentiments through folk lore in the form of ritual celebrations and others. Pagan lore has not been given justice in literature since the past as everything was written from the point of view of Christianity. This paper brings out the interconnectedness between oral literature and pagan religions and enounces the need for authentic and unbiased oral literature on the same. Various case studies have been cited. My sources are secondary data and primary data obtained from my visits to certain areas inhabited by communities following old pagan practices.*

**Keywords :** 'Pagan' 'folklore' 'Oral literature' 'Authentic' 'Unbiased' 'Practices' 'Rituals' 'Sacred spaces'

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- **Rugmani Venkatadri**  
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**T**he essence of the paper is a pressing need for more earnest oral literature in dissemination of information on pagan religions.

Oral literature is a term that includes ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, word games, recitations, life histories or historical narratives.(World Oral Literature Project: About) Religion often, if not usually, is characterized by: 1. Beliefs in or concern about (and regarding) supernatural beings or spirits, or dramatically extra-ordinary forces, which are sometimes explicitly understood as divine or holy or conceptualized with a similar cognate. 2. Division of the world into sacred and profane objects or domains or spaces. 3. Ritual acts and forms, often focused on sacred objects or spaces, but sometimes also having to do with seemingly mundane matters, such as birth, food preparation and consumption, and death. (Taylor 15)

Paganism can be understood as a group or set of faiths that consider nature as sacred. The term 'pagan' itself stems from the Latin *paganus* translated loosely along the lines of "country dweller" or "rustic"; thus it was initially a word describing a person of locality rather than a religion.("The True Meaning of Paganism")This term points to pagan faith as a belief system, a folk-faith prevalent in a specific geography or locality. The innate attachment and love for their natural surroundings results in folk practices expressing reverence and gratitude to the earth and other inherent elements such as rivers,

mountains. These are viewed as blessings and bounties instrumental for their sustenance and progress.

In cases of migrations, pagans preserve memories of origins and cultural practices and continue transmitting the same to younger generations. Every ritual is harmonious with seasons and the cycle of life. Distribution of people across places causes variations resulting in mild or strong differences in rituals and customs.

The pagan faith is the oldest and is evident by pre-historic Venus figurines as well as cave murals. These reflect the way people venerated the natural and the spirit world around them. Later, as societies evolved, pagan beliefs became firmly rooted and assumed different forms such as animism, heathenism and others.

Pagans believed in a higher power called magic and was manifested in nature. They venerated nature as self-sustaining, regenerating, life giving and healing. Instead of propounding concepts on heaven and hell, they affirm that life on earth with all her bounties is a heaven and all humans must work in harmony with the order of nature to ensure the collective happiness of the entire community.

Pagan belief transcends barriers of organized religions. The higher power is experienced directly through communion with the earth, and trees, mountains, rocks, flowers as well as animals. Shrines or holy spaces are created for worship and veneration. Often, to extend these sentiments idols made of clay or stone are venerated to represent nature.

For simplification of understanding several pagan faiths developed a pantheon of gods representing different components of nature to inspire strength and confidence among humans, to urge them to do good to make life on earth very pleasant. Pagans believe that their gods were interactive and propelled humans to be industrious and co-operative in making the earth a better place. One could gravitate towards a deity to whom one felt affinity. Pagan religions had acts of offerings and sacrifices to appease nature or deities

representing the same. Pagan deities generally represent many aspects such as fertility of the earth and women, marriage, harvest, protection, healing and strength.

There was no conflict between spiritual quest as well as the practical world. There is unified progress of the individual, family and members of the tribe. One never forsakes the social unit in pursuit of higher truths. The *raison d'être* of the community is to ensure that resources are sufficient for all presently as well as stowed away for times of scarcity.

The bond between literature and religion has long standing. Literature is a vehicle for the carriage of thoughts, beliefs, customs and ideologies across the world in various languages. Religious beliefs have myths associated with them that are remembered, narrated as well as passed on, and these climax in valuable literature that expresses the sentiments as well as educates the young on the same.

However, pagan beliefs transmitted through oral lore precedes the invention of the written word. Certain ethnic groups led an isolated existence in particularly inaccessible areas or migrated far from their place of origin and wanted to become self-sustained as well as preserve traditional practices. They did so by preserving memories and practices at festivals and in daily life.

Reasons were several beginning with the non-existence of a script and the lack of a feeling for needing one. The Celts of ancient Europe, Ireland and Scotland, the ancient mountain people of Georgia, the Brokpas of the Batalik region of Ladakh, the Kalash people of Pakistan and the Toda tribes of the Nilgiri hills of Ooty are some of the examples of pagan peoples. Some important families or persons in the tribe, the equivalent of shamans or druids, considered lore to be sacrosanct. Hence the prevalent belief was that the sanctitude and efficacy of lore would be lost if documented and passed on as texts or even sung at a non-festive occasion.

Pagan religions contain symbols, signs and objects to represent their beliefs. Literature endeavours to preserve the significance of the same, and attempts to explain

with more feeling and emotion for accurate coherence. A passionate observer might document the lore of a non-literate tribe with accurate detail of customs, religious practices and beliefs. However, in case of conversion to a newer faith the laity or the descendants of former spiritual leaders may have forgotten the meanings of symbols, rituals and practices. A writer has to be a patient observer and deduce facts by reading comparative texts or studying other tribes with similar rituals and customs. Sometimes, the spiritual guides in the tribe may hesitate to share information. In case of the language being a rare one spoken only by the members of the tribe, then accurate translation might not occur.

Pagan followers have aesthetic and artistic manifestations in their material culture symbolic of their faith, for expression of identity to other tribes or onlookers. However, dissection of these elements and expression of the same in the written word, however beautiful, may not do justice to those sentiments of the heart of the folk-tribes. Presence of outsiders during certain folk traditions is taboo, due to fear of being misunderstood and misinterpreted by them. An author kept in the dark has a blurred picture and the consequence is an inaccuracy of details and subsequently a miscarriage of the truth.

If literature enables one to feel and understand for oneself the sacred experience by conveying the subject matter of faith, lore conveys faith strongly through tunes, instruments, dances as well as the teachings of the spiritual guides. Lore documented by an observer imparts solely an external feel and is not a true substitute for the emotions and feelings incited by oral lore. There is a high incidence of oral literature getting coloured by the new religion adapted by the pagan tribe. As a result, customs and practices may change or be explained from a different point of view. The younger generation will start believing in the distorted version. Oral literature that documents this version is not a pure expression of the faith.

Michel Peissel, a French traveller and writer in his writings on the Brokpas of Ladakh narrated an incident where they claimed that ancestors trained 'gold digging' furry ants for extraction of gold. He had merely quoted Herodotus who believed marmots to be

'furry ants'. He later confessed to Parvez Dewan, a known writer that he had never visited the village. Lack of integrity and truth poses a major problem in generation of authentic oral literature. These are possibly occurring limitations.

## **The religion of the ancient Celts (Case study 1)**

Long before the Romans Celts have existed, they dwelt not just in Britain and Ireland, but from Spain and France to southern Germany and the Alpine lands, Bohemia, and later in Italy, the Balkans and even Central Turkey. (James 2005) They were non-literate with oral transmission of religion-cultural traditions. Though their later inscriptions show the use of alphabets such as Ogham, Phoenician, or Greek, they did not leave behind any religious texts. Classical as well as Christian literature were biased and wildly exaggerated while describing Celtic practices. However, Celts are now perceived as an intelligent society of warriors, artisans, miners, weavers as well as farmers, due to the endeavour of archaeologists and cultural anthropologists.

Celts practised Druidism. Druids were men in the tribe who concerned with retention of memories and oral transmission of lore. Their own law forbade them to write down the same, according to Caesar. They guided the laity regarding rules and rituals to be followed. They attached the notion of the supernatural to their own landscape, with various ritual enclosures and sacred shrines. There were bards, the custodians of tradition who sang sacred and mundane lore. Ovates were healers as well as diviners. Druids and Druidesses were proficient in their role as priests/priestesses, teachers, musicians, theologians and judges. They had as many as more than 300 deities whom they worshipped. Some of the more famous are: Arawn, Brigid, Cernunnos, Cerridwen, Danu, Herne, Lugh, Morgan, Rhiannon and Taranis. ("Celtic religion in Ireland")

Celts carried out animal sacrifices to pacify deities of the spiritual and natural world. They believed that the entire universe was living and venerable as it was believed that rocks, mountains, streams, all naturally occurring were all inhabited by living spirits. They believed in spirits protecting animals such as goats, cattle as well as snakes. Certain trees

such as the fairy tree were considered very holy. As Christian records erased all topics on women as spiritual leaders, one finds no complete details regarding the status of women in religious hierarchy. However as there were several goddesses who were worshipped one may assume that women as creators of a new generation were revered.

## **The religion of the Todas (Case study 2)**

The Todas are inhabitants of the Nilgiri hills of Ooty. They are pastoral cattle people. Their legend enounces that their ancestors lived above the sky and descended to earth holding the tail of a buffalo. Their shrine consists of anigloo shaped reeded structure called 'mandu' with a very small entrance. Above the entrance is an icon of a majestic bison head drawn with butter. Vegetarianism, application of cow or buffalo ghee onto the hair for ceremonies were some of their practices. As polyandry was prevalent in the past there are speculations as to whether they worshipped the five Pandavas, however almost all their rituals involve buffalo or bison worship. Their priest resides in the shrine for days together, before ceremonies. They speak a language with no script. Their lore and songs is often cited from other points of view and misinterpreted on blogs.

## **The pagan practices of the Brokpa tribe of Ladakh**

The Brokpa/Drokpa tribe are a sub-set of the Dards, an Aryan group that migrated from Gilgit. They speak Brokskad, a dialect of Shina language still spoken in Gilgit with no script. The Brokpas are a pastoral mountain folk with expertise in agriculture as well as animal husbandry. Goats are their wealth, and cows are abhorred as impure. They inhabit four villages such as Dah, Hanu, Darchik and Garkone which are nestled in the Batalik region of Ladakh. They are recognised by their picturesque headdresses decorated with flowers, needles, coins as well as beads.

Though they currently follow the Degungpa sect of Buddhism, their adaptation of the same is only superficial. They continue to follow pagan practices involving worship of juniper trees, goat horns, rocks. They consider mountains, rivers and pasture grounds as pure.

Their festivals are related to harvesting, transhumance, sowing, and involve dance and songs that proclaim their past migration lore as well as deities that they worship. During their celebrations, they invite their pantheon of deities to join them in the celebration. There is a belief that their deities also migrated with them and went to a away higher place and are invoked during festivals and then also given a farewell ceremony by means of chants and actions.

The spiritual leader is a Lhabdag, in charge of rituals like sacrifices, offerings and the commencing of the festival ceremonies. He lights a fire from juniper twigs, purifies homes with juniper leaf ash and conducts a goat sacrifice to appease the deities during the fertility festival of the year. They believe in fairies, and in their interaction with the mundane world. There are deities such as Yangdring Yangse, goddess of fortune and chance, Mun Shringmen, goddess of fertility and Mun Gyantze, goddess of hunting.

There is a strong belief of past humans and deities co-existing and visible to one another. All aspects of their life such as arrangement of the hearth, costuming and lifestyle practices are governed by the practices of pollution and purity. According to the Brokpas earth is heaven, and life led is in accordance with nature. The elements on their headdresses are talismanic and invoke the protection of nature.

Pagan religions amount to 5–6 percent of the world's people, collectively outnumbering Jews, Sikhs, Jains, or Baha'is. They include, among others, Shintoists, followers of the Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean traditions, numerous tribal religions of all continents, and of course the "new" Pagans. (York 130) Today, there is a renewed interest in paganism. Modern paganism includes the revived mystery schools of the Hellenic world, Celtic religions of ancient Europe, Ireland and Scotland, and modern religions such as Wicca and neo- heathenism. Literature on these religions is circulated and vastly read, albeit with secrecy, due to pagan practices in the west being under wraps.

Hermann Francke, a missionary, devoted his time in Ladakh interacting with many communities and dedicated himself to dissecting and translating their hymns. He

documented them in written form with metaphorical analysis. Rohit Vohra, an ethnographer and an anthropologist published several papers and books on Brokpas throwing light elaborately on their practices, enabling others in understanding miniscule details. He spent time studying their practices, mastered the language, studied genealogy of the important families of the community in Dha-Hanu and successfully provided a treasure of information on the religious practices of this community

The efficacy of oral literature depends on factors like passion, involvement, dedication, unbiased deductions and inquiries based on personal experience. A systematic and involved exploration with the ability to perceive accurately and read between the lines with an open mind is required to generate authentic oral literature that reflects deep understanding of folk-philosophy. Multiple pagan sub-cults co-exist within organized religions much room for more oral literature. Vernacular texts concerned with folklore need an accurate translation. This will augment the treasure-trove of human knowledge and wisdom.

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