

Indo-European Studies 1

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Question 1: What is it that defines a culture as Indo-European, and how are the defining factors useful in understanding that culture? Min. 300 words.

The primary trait that distinguishes a culture as being Indo-European (IE) is through linguistic, as opposed to racial or ethnic, criteria. The comparative philology of the various languages first became known in the early 19th century and the study has continued ever since.¹ These IE languages are related, and probably stem from a common language we call Proto-Indo-European (PIE). Over time, the languages would separate and change, but often with some predictability. For instance, the Proto-Indo-European *k^w evolved to a "k" sound in Q-Celtic (Irish) but a "p" sound in P-Celtic (Gaulish and Brittonic). An example would be the reconstructed PIE word for the number "4", "k^wetwores," which changed to "cethir" in Old Irish and to "pedwar" in Welsh.²

From the study of linguistics, scholars accept that Proto-Indo-European evolved into such diverse languages as Celtic, Italic, Slavic, Greek, Indic, Indo-Iranian and Tocharian, among others. Indeed, scholars recognize 16 different language branches, with six of them having been "extinct for centuries."³ Of course, these evolutions were also affected by borrowings from the languages of their neighbors and conquered peoples to greater or lesser degrees.

It is the words, and the concepts behind them, that can give us a glimpse into what an Indo-European culture was like.

The words that have been reconstructed for PIE are those which seem to have continued on into many of the subsequent languages, and therefore would indicate that these concepts and ideas would be common to many of those subsequent cultures (though they might evolve over time). Words we have in PIE include those for cattle raising (with cow, ox and steer all well attested) as well as words for meat, marrow and herd. The importance of cattle is also seen, "in a frozen expression, 'to drive cattle', generally used in the sense of cattle raiding and found in Celtic, Italic and Indo-Iranian."⁴ Domestic horses are also well attested. Other terms are for small settlements, fortified enclosures and the wheel. We also have terms for relatives that say a lot about the culture. While there are many words for the family of the husband, there is only one term for a direct relative of the wife, that of her brother, who may have raised the boys of her family as a foster-father, teaching the arts of war. These, and other words, seem to indicate that it was a patriarchal society where the wife went to live with her husband's family.⁵

These words and the concepts behind them can be traced back to the PIE homeland. While I won't go into the search for this homeland, suffice it to say that the most accepted (though still controversial) site for this homeland is in the arid, grassland steppes of southern Russia, east of the river Dnieper between and Black and Caspian Seas.⁶

This area was not good for agriculture, but could support a pastoral way of life. The domestication of the horse enabled people to control large herds of cattle, which defined wealth. With wealth came status and a need to protect that wealth. Warfare to protect the herds from raiders, as well as to raid neighboring herds, raised the status of warriors. Women were only necessary for the production of children and so were reduced to the status of near chattel in some cultures. Patriarchy and patrilineal descent dictated how society was set up and these traits are visible in most of the IE cultures, both ancient and modern.

Question 2: George Dumézil's theory of tripartition has been central to many modern approaches to Indo-European cultures. Outline Dumézil's three social functions in general, and as they appear in one particular Indo-European society. Give an example of one Indo-European society where this social division is not reflected. Min. 300 words.

George Dumézil's three functions are the three classes into which IE societies were divided: leadership, might and production.⁷ These divisions could occur both in the heavenly realm as well as on earth.

As a pastoral people, the Proto-Indo-Europeans valued status and warlike qualities. The first two functions were of primary importance to them. The priests fulfilled the first function, and the leaders and warrior elite filled the second function. The introduction of wagons pulled by yokes allowed whole families to accompany their herds, creating a transient population. With larger herds, a ranked social order developed, led by petty chieftains. Naturally, the top social ranks would be in the families that followed their herds.⁸

But where might the third function be?

Even a pastoral people required some of the products of agriculture, such as wheat and bread. Agriculture in the PIE period was confined to river valleys and forested areas of the steppe.⁹ But the PIE peoples undoubtedly traded with, or raided, the more settled agricultural communities to the west.

Over time, these agricultural communities were dominated or conquered by the pastoral Indo-Europeans, creating a lower class filled with the producers of society – the farmers and artisans. The Gods and Goddesses of the conquered peoples would also be demoted, usually to the level of being deities of fertility, looked down upon by the Gods of war and of the Shining Sky.¹⁰

In the later Celtic societies, the three functions could be seen in the division of society into the Druids, warriors and the cattle owners. The Druids combined both types of sacred sovereignty, the magico-religious and the legal-contractual.¹¹ They were the magicians, seers and bards as well as the judges. The warriors and their chieftains would take the next function. Cattle raids, common in Irish myth, were ways of raising the status of a warrior by the stealing of wealth and the taking of the heads of opponents, proving virility in battle. The third function is visible in the artisans who produced beautiful weaponry, torcs and jewelry, in the farmers who produced the food everyone ate (except for the meat of cattle and sheep), and in the merchants who created trading networks all over the Celtic areas.¹²

While the functions are not as clear in the arrangement of the Celtic heaven as they are for the Germanic tribes¹³, they are nonetheless still there. Lug (Lugh) personified the magical side of the first function in the second battle of Mag Tuired, hopping about on one foot and keeping one eye closed. He was the patron of seers, druids and bards. He was also the guardian and truth and law, presiding over the feast of Lughnasadh where legal matters were addressed.¹⁴ Nuada, another God who was a King of the Tuatha de Danann, lost the kingship when he lost his hand, and became less than perfect.

Cú Chulainn, the great Irish warrior, also had supernatural traits that indicate a first function status, but is primarily seen as a warrior whose spectacular feats made him famous, and second function. His battle-rages, his defense of Ulster against overwhelming odds and his other exploits mark him out as a military leader. When Lugh arrives at Tara for the first time, Ogma is the champion of the Gods, perhaps the Irish war God.

The third function is that of fertility and productivity. The Irish river goddesses fit in here, as does the Dagda. His myths revel in His sexuality and His great attraction to porridge, food of the common people.

One IE culture that doesn't entirely fit into the three functions is that of the Germanic tribes. While they had a strong warrior class and producer class, the magico-religious first function had disappeared by Caesar's time. Warfare was a "magic-laden, sacred activity in German tradition; hence, priestly functions were absorbed by charismatic war leaders, who might be regarded as magician-chiefs."¹⁵ Thus the first function had been absorbed by the second function.

Question 3: Do you agree with Dumézil's claim that tripartition is central to IE cultures? Why or why not? Min. 100 words.

Yes, I do agree with this, generally speaking. While there are exceptions to the rule (such as the German tribes above), most of the cultures showed various levels of tripartition in both the secular and the supernatural spheres. The Germanic Gods were particularly good examples of this. The Aesir were the Indo-European Sky Gods who looked down contemptuously on the Vanir, those

fertility deities, like Freyr and Freya, who occupied the third function, and who may have originally been the Gods of a conquered people.¹⁶ Tripartition exists in the cultures of ancient Greece, Rome and particularly Vedic India.

One area where there is little tripartition, though, is the realm of goddesses. They mostly seem to be third function, such as fertility goddesses, possibly the Mediterranean "Great Goddesses" that the IE peoples could not just ignore¹⁷.

However, there are also transfunctional goddesses, such as the Irish Macha, who manifested in three forms, first as a prophetess and wife of a priest (first function), then known as "Red Mane", with red being the color of warriors (second function) and finally Her third incarnation as the wife of a prosperous farmer (third function). As a transfunctional goddess, she fits into all three functions of society.¹⁸

Question 4: Choose one modern culture descended from an IE source, and describe briefly the influences that have shaped the modern culture and distinguish it from other IE-derived cultures. Examples include migration, contact with other cultures, changes in religion, and political factors. Is there any sense in which this culture can be said to have stopped being an IE culture? Min. 600 words.

The modern culture descended from an IE source that I know the best is that of the United States. The two main IE traits that have come down to us are language and tripartition.

English is an IE based language¹⁹ that has been influenced by many other IE languages. The language of the Anglo-Saxons was first introduced to Britain following the invasions of the Dark Ages beginning in the 6th century CE. This language was of Germanic origin and formed the basis of Old English, the language in which *Beowulf* was written.

Following the Norman Conquest of Britain, Norman French, itself descended from Latin through the filters of various barbarian dialects, became the language of the new aristocracy, leaving Anglo-Saxon as the language of the peasants. Over time, the Old English of the common people was so heavily influenced by Norman French that it developed into Middle English, Chaucer's language, much of which can be understood by people today. This language is the one that slowly developed into the one we speak now.

But it is the tripartite system that we have inherited from the old IE traditions that really show how influenced by the ancients we are. While there are some non-IE cultures that have some tripartite patterns, many of them have systems influenced by other numbers than three, such as the numbers 7 and 40, sacred in the Middle East, and the number 4, sacred to many Native American tribes²⁰. But only the Indo-Europeans treat tripartition as a "special class of concepts

requiring and receiving almost endless elaboration in all spheres of cultural ideology and behavior...²¹

When the nation was founded, Thomas Jefferson inserted the triad, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" into the Declaration of Independence. This triad follows Dumézil's three functions perfectly – Life, being defined by religion and law; Liberty, which can only be gained and protected by force of arms; and Happiness, which is usually about sex and wealth.²² Indeed, triads are common in everyday language, such as, "stop, look and listen," "snap, crackle and pop," and "blood, sweat and tears."

The framers of the US Constitution also created a government that follows a tripartite pattern. The first function's judicial sense was placed in the Supreme Court, which also rules on matters of morality and religion (the religious side of the first function). The second function is represented by the President and the military, and no matter how powerful the Pentagon may be, it is still subject to the will of the government. The third function, Congress, is the representative of the people, and is primarily concerned with providing economic prosperity (through the Federal Budget).²³ The system of checks and balances assures that the three functions all operate as a cohesive whole, which is another essential component of tripartition in ancient IE cultures.

The influence of the IE concepts of the duality of sacred sovereignty are also evident on the majority religion of the USA, Christianity. While this religion grew out of a Semitic religion from the Middle East, it was filtered through the Greek culture before becoming the State Religion of the Roman Empire.

The first function in IE pantheons is usually divided into two parts, the magico-religious and the juridico-contractual.²⁴ Examples of first function deities from earlier IE cultures include the Vedic Varuna/Mitra and the Norse Odin/Týr. Usually, the first part, represented by Varuna and Odin, can be said to be mysterious and frightening, while the second part, represented by Mitra and Týr is more bright and friendly.²⁵ The Gods of the first function balanced fear and trust.

The religion that Christianity grew out of, Judaism, saw its monotheistic God as omnipotent and omniscient but also often as merciless. As He is aware of violations of the Law, He, like Varuna, exacts punishment for the people's "sins". He even destroys whole communities, such as those of Sodom and Gomorrah. The new religion of the Christians kept the Judaic God but added another of their own, the God's son, who is all about forgiveness and love. The wrath of the God of the Old Testament is downplayed in the New Testament, but the paradox is still there. Modern Christian preachers often exhort their followers to "fear God", but when surrounded by everyday troubles, they are told to "trust in God." Perhaps the IE concept of sacred sovereignty helped pave the way for the acceptance of the foreign God imported to IE lands over the last two millennia.²⁶

It is apparent that the United States is still an IE culture, in that our language is IE, and the organization of the society retains many tripartite elements.

Question 5: From its beginnings, ADF has defined itself in relation to Indo-European pagan traditions. What relevance do you think historical and reconstructed IE traditions from the past have in constructing or reconstructing a Pagan spirituality for the present and future? Min. 600 words.

Since we all live in a culture descended from IE sources, it makes sense to investigate and consider the ancient IE pagan traditions in creating our own religion for the present day.

We live in a magical world, filled with spirits that have been shunned and feared in recent millennia. What better way to understand who they are, and to form relationships with them, than by studying the past, when they were worshiped and venerated? The Gods want our worship and love, but we need to know Them, to feel Them and to discover what They want from us. The Spirits of the Land (and their close relatives, the Spirits of the Home) surround us, asking for our respect, love and support, as in days of old. But most people are blind to Them or, when confronted with evidence of the Fey, fear Them. And our Mighty Dead are also feared or at best, ignored.

But we can only make sense out of all this chaos if we impose some order on the situation. Studying the ancient ways of our IE forebears can give us the framework we need to begin this process. ADF has created a cosmology that draws on a number of IE traditions, creating a system that can be adapted to any of our reclaimed ancient traditions. And through meditation, trance and shamanic journeying we can put flesh on the skeleton we have built out of ancient practices.

And a strong skeleton it is. By sticking to one set of ideas, rather than branching out and incorporating wholesale information from non-IE sources like the ancient Egyptians, Sumerians or Native Americans (to name three), we can create a coherent whole. Too much eclecticism runs the risk of making too shallow a foundation, which could see the entire edifice crumble.

And over time, our culture has become distorted by the influence of the dominant religion and its attitudes towards nature and the environment.

The ancient IE traditions show us a time when people lived in harmony with nature and the earth. While civilization is man's attempt to impose order on the chaos of nature, to make islands of safety in a turbulent world, ancient man managed to do so without disrupting and unbalancing the natural order of the universe. Modern man, taking the biblical admonition that all creatures (and therefore nature in general) are to be under the dominion of Adam (man), has

thrown so much of nature out of balance that extinctions become commonplace and global warming may even threaten the existence of man himself.

But this does not mean that we should adopt all IE thought and tradition wholesale. Studying the historical traditions from the past also allows us to not make the same mistakes that the ancients did.

Some ancient practices are abhorrent, such as head hunting and human sacrifice. Some attitudes are also abhorrent, such as the subjugation of women. Other attitudes, such as the hierarchical nature of the three functions as reflected in *status*, need not be so rigid. Just because an ancient pastoral people conquered and dominated their ancient agricultural neighbors doesn't force us to accept only patriarchy or patrilineality as the basis of a healthy culture. Polyamory can have its place in the world, and heterosexuality need not be the only acceptable orientation (indeed, Didorus Siculus wrote that homosexuality did exist in ancient Gaul²⁷), neither of which would have been acceptable to the ancient Germanic tribes, or to the Greeks and Romans for that matter.

The position of women in the ancient IE cultures varied from being almost property, as in ancient Greece and (to a lesser extent) Rome, to a position of near equality in some of the Celtic areas. In creating our religion, we can have equality for the sexes, regardless of which ancient IE culture we feel most drawn to.

In fact, only by studying the ancient cultures and modeling our religion after theirs can we take the best and leave the rest.

NOTES

¹ Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 1989), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 107.

³ Winn, *Heaven, Heroes, and Happiness* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), 37.

⁴ Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 1989), pp. 117-118.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁷ Winn, *Heaven, Heroes, and Happiness* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), pp. 17-19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Chapter 6.

⁹ While the PIE people probably started out as part time agriculturists, the advent of the horse may have made them less reliant on their own agriculture.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹² *Ibid.*, Chapters 4,5 & 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 95. There is evidence of a mixing of traditions that may account for the "bewildering state of Celtic mythology."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

¹⁷ Ibid., 238.

¹⁸ Ibid., 240.

¹⁹ Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 1989), 10.

²⁰ Winn, *Heaven, Heroes, and Happiness* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), pp. 58-59.

²¹ Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 1989), 271.

²² Winn, *Heaven, Heroes, and Happiness* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995), 58.

²³ Ibid., 54.

²⁴ Ibid., 82.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 82-89.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 100-101.

²⁷ Koch, Editor, *The Celtic Heroic Age* (Oakville, CT and Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2000), pp. 14-15.