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Comparison of Rituals in Hindu, Buddhist, and Viking Cultures

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In comparing the rituals sacred to the Vikings, Hindus, and Buddhists, there are similarities that demonstrate these disparate cultures held the same essential things sacred. There are also many instances where the rituals diverge, illustrating that some of these cultures would have seemed alien to each other. There is such a stark contrast between Viking society and Buddhism that the two cultures would have horrified each other. The bloodlust of the Vikings would have been incomprehensible to the peace-seeking Buddhists; conversely, the Buddhist restraint in all things, specifically the ascetic views of the five moral Buddhist precepts, would have utterly confused the warrior mentality of the Vikings. Somewhere in the middle, the Hindu culture has attributes that overlap both.

Beliefs

At the core of Buddhism are five moral precepts and the Noble Eightfold Path. The five offenses that practicing Buddhists refrain from are: taking any life, theft, promiscuity or sexual offenses, lying or gossiping, and consuming alcohol or intoxicants. By following the Noble Eightfold Path to end cravings and suffering, Buddhists are on the path toward *nirvana* when practicing: right views, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. (Sivers 2020) Buddhism believes **Dharma** to be cosmic law and order.

Hinduism embraces **Dharma**, which is the purpose, duty, and conduct of each person to live the right way. A person's duty, the ethics involved in performing that duty, and understanding that everything else is also duty-bound, is to be mindful of Dharma. **Samsara** is the continuation of life in the cycle of birth/life/death/rebirth. **Karma** is the understanding that actions have consequences, and even intentions are met with a resulting Karma; this belief has been fully embraced by Western society. **Moksha** is liberation from the Samsara cycle and attachments to earthly things. **Yogas** are paths or practices that often involve meditation, chanting, and mindfulness. There are many overlaps between Buddhism and Hinduism in the focus on the inner self and making the right choices to achieve greater personal reward.

These concepts of action, consequence, and living the right way to reach transcendence could not be further from the individualistic and mercenary Viking way of life. "The ultimate measure of a man was not his passive obedience to authority or social expectations, but the active greatness that he achieved for himself through his own heroic efforts." (McCoy 2021) (Duchesne 2011) Vikings were motivated by their desire for wealth and power but also enjoyed adventurous pursuits that increased their community standing. They strove to outdo their peers to gain notoriety for their deeds and infamy after death.

Food and Alcohol Consumption

With the first notable precept being that Buddhists refrain from taking life, that extends to animals as well as people, so Buddhists are vegetarian. Additionally, the fifth precept is an avoidance of alcohol or intoxicants that can cloud the mind's perception and prevent reaching *nirvana*.

While Vikings hunted reindeer, enjoyed barbecued meats, and ate fried pork in addition to stews and soups, research by Anneleen Kool, a botanist and researcher with the Natural History Museum in Oslo, suggests that the Viking diet included more plants than had previously been thought, and one of Norway's oldest laws supports that conclusion. The Frosthating Law states, "If one man goes in another man's onion garden or angelica garden, then he is lawless." The angelica plant is said to resemble celery and soap, so possibly similar to cilantro. (Kjørstad 2020) Also omnivorous, the Hindu diet is typically lacto-vegetarian, meaning that meat and eggs are generally avoided, but some dairy, fish, chicken or lamb may be consumed. Beef is always avoided due to the sacred nature of the cow in Hindu culture.

Hindus typically avoid alcohol, like Buddhists. (Patience 2016) By contrast, Vikings mainly subsisted on mead and beer, especially when onboard ship due to the scarcity of clean drinking water, although the alcohol content likely would have been much lower than modern brews. (Goldsmith 2016) Viking culture "greatly prized good drink, and over time different lore became associated with various beverages. There is a reason why Vikings raising ale horns in a mead hall buzzing with merriment is still an indelible image on the collective imagination. (Rodgers 2018)"

Capital Punishment

As previously mentioned, Buddhists are against the taking of a life and therefore would not have participated in capital punishment. By contrast, the more moderate Hindus typically have not taken a stand on the death penalty. There is debate about using capital punishment as a deterrent that protects innocent people, but the scripture from different branches of Hinduism report that death by hanging is an appropriate punishment for violent crimes in the past and modern accounts cover hangings as recently as 2015. (Singh 2020)

The Vikings took retribution to sadistic lengths with the "blood eagle" execution. "First the intended victim would be restrained, face down; next, the shape of an eagle with outstretched wings would be cut into his back. After that, his ribs would be hacked from his spine with an ax, one by one, and the bones and skin on both sides pulled outward to create a pair of "wings" from the man's back. The victim, it is said, would still be alive at this point to experience the agony of what Turner terms "saline stimulant"—having salt rubbed, quite literally, into his vast wound. After that, his exposed lungs would be pulled out of his body and spread over his "wings," offering witnesses the sight of a final bird-like "fluttering" as he died." (Lapenberg 1834) (Dash 2013)



Wedding Rituals

Of these three cultures, by far the most heavily ritualized wedding traditions are those of the Hindus. The wedding ceremony varies widely by region but is believed to be designed by the cosmos according to the horoscopes of the bride and groom. There are three key rituals that are almost universally observed: **Kanyadan** is the bride's father giving her away, **Panigrahana** is voluntarily holding hands near the sacred fire to signify the willingness of both to marry, and **Saptapadi**, which is taking seven steps before (around) the sacred fire during the ceremony. The bride often wears red and has henna applied in complex designs on her hands and feet.

Buddhists are informal by contrast in the ceremonial nature of marriage, as the focus is on the relationship itself and nourishing the attachment. Offerings are made, but a set list of rituals is not established for marriage within Buddhism.

Vikings had wedding ceremonies rich with ancestry and symbolism, falling somewhere in the middle of the three cultures for ritualistic wedding practices. Ancestral swords, animal sacrifice, and an exchange of rings and vows were among the most observed traditions. Friday being Frigg's day (goddess of fertility) made it the traditional wedding day, and the bride removed her *kransen*, the gilt circlet worn by unmarried women, and traded it for a wedding crown. The *kransen* was passed on to her future daughter. (Esser 2019)

Infant Rituals

As infant mortality was so high, with roughly 17% of the population dying in infancy, the Viking rituals of *ausa vatni* and *nafnfesti* offered emotional distance as the rituals had to be completed before the baby was considered a real person. (The Viking Network 2004)

“When the baby was born, he was placed on the ground until the father picked up the child and placed him inside the father's coat. This symbolized that the father accepted that the baby was his child. He would then inspect the child. If the baby had any problems, he would be left exposed to die. If he was healthy, they would perform a ceremony called *ausa vatni* in which they sprinkled water over the baby. At this point, the child would be named in a ceremony called *nafnfesti*. For this, the father would state the child's name and give him a gift. The gifts usually consisted of things such as a ring, weapon, or a farm or land deed. After this, the child could no longer be subject to exposure as it would then be considered murder.” (Esser 2019)

The Hindu culture also has a series of named rituals that are acknowledged for different stages or events in a person's life. These life-cycle rites mark milestones, but different sects adhere to a different number of rituals. Many of the rituals start during the mother's pregnancy and continue past baby's firsts to the start of school, maturation, graduation, wedding, fasting, and death.

In general, there are no particular rules or obligations surrounding the arrival of a new baby in Buddhist culture. In some regions, monks may be invited to the home to prepare the baby's horoscope in order to arrive at the baby's first name. The parents take the baby to receive blessings at the local temple within a month of birth. The blessings requested are of the Three Refuges: the Buddha, the dharma, and the Sangha. (Website Editors 2021)

Winter Solstice

All three cultures have rituals surrounding either the beginning or ending of winter solstice and/or the new year: For the Vikings, Jol (pronounced YULE) lasted from late December through mid-January and was a time to feast, drink, perform plays, decorate evergreen trees, and honor the Norse gods.

Hindus in Sri Lanka and South India still celebrate Pongal on January 14 to mark the end of winter solstice. The Pongal festival was mentioned as far back as the 9th century in the Shiva bhakti text *Tiruvembavai*. (Prema Kasturi 2007)

The Buddhist tradition of observing Children's Day is a modern one. Sri Lankan sects celebrate Uduvapa Poya to commemorate Sangamitta Day and her bringing the sacred Bodhi tree sapling to plant in Aunradhapura. Aside from modern holidays and regional festivals, over all the Buddhists do not have one cohesive winter solstice celebration. (Harishchandrar 1998)

Handling Death

Cremation by funeral pyre was typical for disposing of remains in both Viking and Hindu cultures, while sky burials were considered most desirable for Buddhists. The belief in taking a body high up a mountain close to where vultures lived allowed the carrion to break down the remains faster and help the soul achieve reincarnation more quickly. The body was no longer considered sacred as it was an empty vessel, and due to the rockiness of Tibet and Qinghai, burial was impractical. Scarce lumber meant cremation was unfeasible, so sky burial was also the most practical procedure.

Another similarity among the three cultures is the belief in some form of zombie, or the undead. Burial practices among the Vikings entailed things like tying the big toes together, while Buddhists told stories about Ro-langs, which translated to "corpse" and "to rise up". In Hinduism, there are many instances of the dead being reanimated, but the technicalities surrounding the event distinguish it from the other two cultures. In Hinduism, it's considered more of an astral shift from one body to another.

In comparing the cultures of Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Vikings, it is clear that there are some parallel practices in the respect for ritual and tradition, but it is also easy to see where the Vikings take a clear departure from the more placid Buddhists and Hindus. The similarities between Hinduism and Buddhism in regard to rituals is most strongly found in the pursuit of ideal ways of conducting behavior and living life, both of which sharply contrast with the self-centered pursuit of glory by the Vikings.

Notes

Comparison of Rituals		
Viking	Hinduism	Buddhism
The Blood Eagle – execution method	Death by hanging	Five moral precepts: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Refrain from taking life 2. Refrain from theft 3. Refrain from promiscuity or sexual offenses 4. Refrain from lying/gossiping 5. Refrain from alcohol/intoxicants
Infant Rituals – naming ceremony <i>nafnfesti</i>	Pregnancy, Infancy, Life Rituals	Six perfections: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dana (generosity) 2. Sila (morality) 3. Prajna (wisdom) 4. Dhyana (meditation) 5. Virya (energy) 6. Ksanti (patience)
Wedding Ceremonies	Heavily ritualized wedding ceremonies	Relaxed, celebrates love, offerings
Warding Off Draugr (Zombies)	Vetala haunt cemeteries and take demonic possession of corpses	Ro-langs (skin/blood/flesh/bone/mole zombies) Samsara – rebirth
Cremation Rituals	Cremation within 7 days	Sky burial allowing vultures to consume body
Body Modification – teeth	Body Modification: Forked tongue Mehndi henna painting for wedding	Body Modification: Forked tongue
Preparation for War – animal hides, living in wild, trance	Mandir – temple Bhajans – religious songs	Meditation – mantras, chanting, mala (meditation beads)
Yule (Jol)	Pongal – winter solstice	Children’s Day
Human Sacrifice	Rumored with no proof ever happened	Rumored to have happened Bowling – sign of respect
Blot Sacrifice	Used to exist but was phased out in 10 th or 11 th century	No sacrifices. Offerings: flowers, candles

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