

Examples of Totemism in Human Culture 9064

North American Aboriginals

Totemism can be said to characterize the religious beliefs of most indigenous peoples in [Canada](#) and the [United States](#). The Sauk and [Osage](#) peoples of the northeastern United States, for example, assigned qualities of their clan totems through names to individual members. It was expected that those in clan of the Black Bear or the Wolf, among others, would develop some of the desirable traits of those animals. Among the [Ojibwa](#) people, from whose language the concept of totemism originated, people were divided into a number of clans called *doodem* named for various animals. Of the various totemic groups, the crane totem was considered the most vocal. The bear, since it was the largest, was sub-divided into various body parts that also became totemic symbols. These totems were then grouped according to habitat of the given animal, whether it is earth, air or water—and served as a means for governing and dividing labor among the various clans.

In addition, North American native peoples provide one of the most recognizable examples of totemism in all of human culture—the [totem pole](#). Totem poles are monumental [sculptures](#) carved from great [trees](#), typically Western Red cedar, by a number of indigenous peoples located along the [Pacific](#) northwest coast of North America. Some poles are erected to celebrate significant beliefs or events, while others are intended primarily for aesthetic presentation. Poles are also carved to illustrate stories, to commemorate historic persons, to represent shamanic powers, and to provide objects of public ridicule. Certain types of totem poles are part of mortuary structures incorporating grave boxes with carved supporting poles, or recessed backs in which grave boxes were placed. The totem poles of North America have many different designs featuring totemic animals such bears, birds, frogs, people, lizards, and often are endowed with arms, legs, and wings. Such designs themselves are generally considered to be the property of a particular clan or family group, and ownership is not transferable even if someone outside this clan or group possesses the pole. Despite common misconceptions, there has never been any ubiquitous meaning given to the vertical order of the images represented on the totem pole. On the contrary, many poles have significant figures on the top, while others place such figures bottom, or middle. While totem poles can be described as an example of totemism due to their representation of clan lineages, they were never used specifically as objects of worship. Hence, any associations made between "idol worship" and totem poles were introduced upon the arrival of Christian missionaries.

Nor-Papua

Among the Nor-Papua people, who live in the northern region of [New Guinea](#), exogamous patrilineal groups are commonly associated with various species of fish. These totems have an unprecedented cultural presence and appear in numerous representations, including ceremonial flutes within which they take the form of spirit creatures, as well as sculpted figures that are present in every household. Individuals in the various groups are believed to be born from the fish totems. These children come

from a holy place, the same holy place to which the totem fish are believed to bring the souls of the dead. Upon reaching responsible age, children are given the choice of whether they will accept the totem of their mother or father. Because of this immense totemic importance, numerous species of fish are classified as taboo for killing or eating.

Shona

In [Zimbabwe](#), totems (*mitupo*) have been in use among the Shona people ever since the initial stages of their culture. The Shona use totems to identify the different clans that historically made up the ancient civilizations of the dynasties that ruled over them in the city of Great Zimbabwe, which was once the centre of the sprawling Munhumutapa Empire. Clans, which consist of a group of related kinsmen and women who trace their descent from a common founding ancestor, form the core of every Shona chiefdom. Totemic symbols chosen by these clans are primarily associated with animal names. The purposes of a totem are: 1) to guard against incestuous behavior, 2) to reinforce the social identity of the clan, and, 3) to provide praise to someone through recited poetry. In contemporary Shona society there are at least 25 identifiable totems with more than 60 principal names (*zvidawo*). Every Shona clan is identified by a particular totem (specified by the term *mitupo*) and principal praise name (*chidawo*). The principal praise name in this case is used to distinguish people who share the same totem but are from different clans. For example, clans that share the same totem *Shumba* (lion) will identify their different clansmanship by using a particular praise name like *Murambwe*, or *Nyamuziwa*. The foundations of the totems are inspired in rhymes that reference the history of the totem.

Birhor

The Birhor tribe inhabits the jungle region of the northeastern corner of the Deccan province in [India](#). The tribe is organized by way of exogamous groups that are traced through the patrilineal line and represented by totems based on animals, plants, or inanimate objects. Stories tracing the origin of the tribe suggest that the various totems are connected with the birth of distant ancestors. Totems are treated as if they were human beings and strict taboos forbid such acts as the killing or eating of a totem (if it is a plant or animal), or destroying a totem if it is an object. Such behavior represents a failure to conform to the normal rules of relations with ancestors. The consequences for such misappropriations are dire, and the Birhor believe that the subsistence of their people will be placed in jeopardy if transgressions against the totem occur. Furthermore, the Birhor have put elaborate protocol in place concerning reverence for deceased totemic animals.

Iban

The Iban tribes of [Malaysia](#) practice a form of individual totemism based on dreams. If a spirit of a dead ancestor in human form enters the dream of an individual and proceeds to offer protection in the name of an animal, the dreamer must then seek the named animal as their personal totem. The attainment of such a spirit animal is so important that young men will go to such measures as sleeping on graves or fasting in order to aid the dream state. If a dream involving animals has been experienced, then the chosen

individual must observe the spirit animal in its natural environment and come to understand its behaviors. Subsequently, the individual will often carry a part (or parts) of their totem animal with them, which represents their protector spirit, and will present sacrificial offerings to its spirit. Strong taboos are placed upon the killing or the eating of the entire species of the spirit animal, which are passed along from the bearer of the spirit to their descendants.

Maori

The [Maori](#), the aboriginal people of [New Zealand](#), practice a form of religion that is generally classified as totemism. Maori religion conceives of everything, including natural elements, as connected by common descent through *whakapapa* (genealogy). Due to the importance of genealogy, ancestors, of both the mythical and actual variety, are of the utmost importance, serving as individual totems. People are thought to behave as they do because of the presence within them of ancestors. For instance, Rangi and Papa, the progenitor god and goddess of sky and the earth respectively, are seen not only as establishers of the sky and earth, but also as prototypes for the basic natures of men and women. In addition, Tane, the son of Rangi and Papa and creator of the world in the form we know it, provides an archetypal character for Maori males. Maoris also identify numerous animals, insects and natural forces as totems, including most importantly kangaroos, honey-ants, the sun and the rain. Maoris construct totem pole-like objects in honor of these totemic groups.