

# Indo-european cultures essay sample



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A recurring and powerful concept that is present in many Indo-European myths is that of the existence of a society with three social classes or functions. Donald Ward suggests that the idea of a “threefold death” found in myths across Europe and Asia can be used to prove that this idea of tri-functional societies is a valid one. The concept was very present in Celtic society, and Ward draws a lot of evidence from Celtic myth. Julius Caesar himself noted how the Celts had three classes: druids, knights and common people.

However, Ward also uses further supporting evidence from various other societies’ mythologies too, such as Greek, Roman and English. He supports George Dumézil’s idea of a tripartite society. 1 Dumézil’s hypothesis was that societies consisted of three castes. For instance, he drew out the similarities in social classes between Celtic Ireland’s druids, bo-aire, and grad fene and Vedic India’s brahmans, kshatriyas, and vaisyas. 2 For the first function, there were usually deities who ruled over matters of magic and law.

It is the function that deals with sovereignty, and maintains religious and legal order. The gods belonging to the first function were often presented in pairs, for example, Odin and Tyr, from Norse mythology, and Mitra and Varuna from the Vedic. The second function which deals with the warrior caste includes the war gods (which were often Thunder gods as well) such as Mars, Thor and Indra. Next is the third function of fertility; in this case there were usually two mythological characters associated with this function.

In Norse mythology, this function was handled by brother-sister pair Freyr and Freya while their Greek mythology counterparts could be Castor and

Pollux. 3 Another example is from Hindu mythology where the third function was associated with Asvins, the twin deities of light. 4 Donald Ward uses further material from Dumézil to support his theory. The French scholar described how there existed sacrificial rituals that were associated to each of the three functions. He suggests that for the third function, the death involves drowning. Two examples from Greek mythology are cited.

First, the story of the Thessalian Piasos and then of Glaukos, son of Minos and Pasiphae, who dies by drowning after he falls into a vat of honey. This idea is recurrent in Irish mythology, for instance, there are various stories of heroes drowning in a vat of beer during festivals in Ireland. 5 Another example from Ireland depicts how a group of people were sacrificed by drowning with the intent of warding off plague. This supports the trifunctional theme, since deities of the third function were the one responsible to look after human wellbeing and to fight diseases.

Hence that particular sacrifice is evidence of the idea that death by drowning is related to third function divinities. Another motif that comes to support the theory of Donald Ward is that of a “threefold death”. Here, he gives several examples that are from different origins but yet are strikingly similar. A story associated with an Irish legend describes how a man named Grag, is prophesized to die by a weapon, by burning and by drowning and indeed that prophecy ends up being fulfilled. The three kinds of ways he died represent the three functions.

His falling from a tree after hurting himself with his spear corresponds to hanging which is a first function death. Dying by drowning again here is

associated with the third function. Two elements here can be associated with the second function; death by fire and by weapon. The same story occurs in the Irish life of St. Moling, but this time, the deaths Grag suffers from appear to be associated with the nature of the crime he committed. For example, for having stolen cattle, which is a violation at the tertiary function level, he dies by drowning, and for killing Suibhne, he dies by fire/weapon.

The crime for the first function is not mentioned in the story however. 7 Similar threefold death stories exist in other cultures, namely French, Welsh, English, Germanic and others. 8 Another famous story which I think is a good example of the association between the three social classes and myth, is that of Paris of Troy. In that story Paris has to choose which of Hera, Athena or Aphrodite is the most beautiful. Each goddess tries to bribe him with a different offer. Hera offers him royal power, Athena offers him military glory while Aphrodite offers him Helen.

Those three choices are clear associations with the three fundamental social classes in Indo-Europe. Hera and her offer for royal authority represent the ruling class. Athena and her bribe of military glory has to do with the warrior class and finally Aphrodite who is associated with reproduction and sustenance, can be associated with the third class, the food producers. 9 Georges Dumézil himself find this example as a perfect case of trifunctionality in the Greek society.

I find this example very interesting and good support for his theory, although there are not as many Greek stories that can be used to support the tripartite society as Celtic stories for instance. However although, the

evidence provided by Donald Ward and Georges Dumézil do explain a lot about Indo-European culture, there do seem to be some discrepancies in their theory. For instance there are several elements that do not fit the tripartite society, and hence the idea that myth can be used to explain it.

In the different societies, the king is associated to the first function, however the king also has warrior aspects which would also make him related to the second function. Furthermore there are people who do not seem to belong to any of the three social classes described by Dumézil, for example slaves and artisans. <sup>10</sup> In Donald Ward's article about the threefold death, even though he gives a lot of supporting evidence, most of it is for the first and third functions. There is less data describing second function deaths, and when there is, there seem to be some discrepancies.

For example, in the Irish story about Grag, somehow he seems to die four ways, by hanging (falling from tree), fire, weapon and drowning. Ward explains it by saying both fire and the spear represent second-function sacrifice here. <sup>11</sup> Also, when associating gods with the here social classes, there are also some discrepancies; sometimes the gods' functions overlap or are not definite. For example Mars is said to be the god of war, but was also regarded at some point in time as the protector of people.

Overall, I think that the theory of Donald Ward sounds like a very reasonable one, especially with data from various cultures to back up his arguments. It is a very plausible theory that societies were composed of three levels. The evidence from myths, folktales and history he provides support this idea.

There lie discrepancies here and there, that come to discredit the theory, but

nevertheless I think that his analysis, especially the similarities drawn between various different cultures, was a well-made one and that, if anything, it provides a lot of insight into the Indo-European cultures.