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Evolutionary Competition as Religion: A Religio-Biological Model of the Maori and Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions

Benjamin Highland

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Evolutionary Competition as Religion: A Religio-Biological Model of the Maori and Vaisnava
Sahajiya Traditions

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of Religious Studies from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

The field of Religion Studies has become an increasingly disjointed and overlooked discipline in the modern era. In part, this phenomenon is due to a lack of a clear and consistent epistemology with which to study constructed religious traditions, resultant from the divide between structuralist and post-structuralist thought. While structuralists attempt to find commonalities between religious traditions, post-structuralists assert that religions are not trans-cultural or trans-historical and should be studied only within their specific cultural contexts. In an attempt to reach a reconciliation between these two seemingly distinct epistemologies, I will introduce biological theory, specifically, multilevel selection theory (MLS). After reviewing the merits of modern religious theory and relevant biological paradigms, I propose a common, biologically grounded epistemological approach: the Religio-Biological Model. Placing the human brain and evolutionary competition at center of the religious universe, the model has the potential to incorporate the work of authors within and outside the field of Religious Studies. By offering a source of possible consilience between structuralist and post-structuralist thought, the Religio-Biological Model is a promising and interdisciplinary step forward that binds together religion, culture, history, and biology into a cohesive framework.

I present my argument over the course of three chapters. Chapter One provides an overview of the religious and biological theory from which I base my Religio-Biological Model, illustrating the structuralist and post-structuralist division through the work of anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Talal Asad respectively. While Geertz is not traditionally considered a structuralist, his attempt to provide a common definition of religion mirrors the aim of many structuralist thinkers. The role and function of the human brain and sensory organs within the

model are also outlined in this chapter. In Chapter Two, ethnographic data concerning the nature of the Maori and Vaisnava Sahajiya traditions are presented, providing the basis for my demonstration of the Religio-Biological Model in Chapter Three. Although quite different in many ways, the traditions and historical progression of the Maori, whose pacific religion is indigenous to the island of New Zealand, and the Sahajiya, who were a seventeenth to nineteenth-century tantric community in Bengal, fit neatly into the Religio-Biological Model. Moreover, the Maori's emphasis on kinship and the Sahajiya's rejection of social structure presents an opportunity to display the versatility of the model. With great care, I selected these two disparate, non-Western traditions to highlight the trans-cultural and trans-historical nature of the Religio-Biological Model.

Before proceeding any further, I must provide a brief disclaimer. Some may argue that I reify the traditions of the Maori and Sahajiya, treating their abstract beliefs as tangible biological forces. It is not my intention to diminish the rich variety and depth of these traditions. Instead, I wish merely to demonstrate several possible biological forces that may result from their complex symbolic universes. It is precisely because of their abstract and all-encompassing nature that these forces are able to operate. Thus, in my analysis, I seek explain how each tradition promotes or does not promote specific prosocial behaviors. By no means are these behaviors meant to be an exhaustive or complete list of the effects of each religion. They are merely meant to demonstrate the biological influence of religious psychology that is the basis of the Religio-Biological Model.

I also must mention representation, as primary sources for both religions are difficult to locate. The Maori had a largely oral tradition, meaning that few of their practices and beliefs were written down until the arrival of the Europeans in 1769. The Vaisnava Sahajiya, on the

other hand, practiced many erotic rituals that they wished to hide from the larger Bengali society, and, for this reason, their writings are extremely confusing and difficult to translate. As such, I will rely heavily on the work of early ethnographers in New Zealand and on the work of Glen Hayes – a professor of Religious Studies who spent much of his doctoral work in Bengal studying and translating Vaisnava Sahajiya texts. In the case of the Sahajiya, I will also rely upon translations of the work of sixteenth century Hindu poets outside the tradition where necessary.¹ While there are certainly problems in relying so heavily upon translations and the work of early ethnographers, these are largely unavoidable in the cases of the Maori and Vaisnava Sahajiya.

¹ The work of the blind poet Surdas and of the poetess Mirabai both feature Krishna prominently, doing well to capture the mythology from which the Vaisnava Sahajiya drew. Further, these poets existed in great temporal proximity to tradition.

Chapter 1. The Religio-Biological Model: Uniting Religious and Biological Epistemology

The Religio-Biological Model aims to create a common epistemology for use by scholars of religion. A field with fractured methods will invariably produce conflicting and incompatible research, detracting from its collective authority. As such, it is my goal to unite the two major paradigms within modern Religious Studies: structuralism and post-structuralism. What follows is my discussion of this major divide in religious theory and an explanation of my proposed method to mend it. The human brain is a truly trans-historical and trans-cultural organ, exerting constant forces within recent history and across cultures. Thus, it is my contention that evolutionary competition, as modeled by multilevel selection theory (MLS), provides the basis for consilience between structuralism and post-structuralism.

What is a Religion?

In modern Religious Studies the most major theoretical divide is between structuralism and post-structuralism. Defined as a method of interpreting and analyzing aspects of human cognition, behavior, culture, and experience that focuses on patterns, rather than superficial diversity, structuralism seeks to find underlying commonalities among many groups. In this way, structuralist thinkers support the notion that all religious communities can be united by their similarities. Post-structuralist thinkers, on the other hand, offer critiques of the methods with which this structural knowledge is produced, arguing that implicit cultural and historical biases lead to magnification of some perspectives and minimization of others and therefore misinterpretation. Thus, their work attempts to deconstruct the effects of power and perspective in academic discourse and to demonstrate the importance of accurate historical depictions. The

major figures I employ to represent these approaches are anthropologists Clifford Geertz (1926 – 2006) and Talal Asad (b. 1942) respectively. Although Geertz is not traditionally considered a structuralist thinker, his attempt to provide a common definition of religion mirrors the aims of structuralists. Their spirited debate demonstrates well the fracture that separates modern scholars of religion. It is my aim to suggest a reconciliation of these epistemologies through the application of biological principles.

Geertz embraced the field of “symbolic anthropology” – a discipline animated by a humanistic effort to interpret culture in a manner that gives full weight to the role of ideas, beliefs, and emotions in creating meaning in life. This focus led him to suggest his own explicit definition of religion in the hope of reviving academic growth in his field, which he perceived to have stagnated. Before discussing this definition, though, two common, but imprecise terms must be discussed: “culture” and “symbol.” Geertz defined culture as:

An historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitude toward life.²

This definition of culture accords well with biological concepts of heredity and change over time, as the form of future cultural groups resembles those of the past. However, it places a tremendous amount of weight on the meaning of the word “symbol,” which he goes on to describe as “any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception.”³ Conception denotes worldly meaning. With an understanding of these terms, it is now possible to discuss his view of religion.

² Clifford Geertz, “Religion as World-View and Ethic,” 349.

³ Ibid., 349.

As a structuralist, Geertz considered religion and culture to be quite similar, in that they are both extrinsic sources of information that inform the actions of humans. This fact is made clear by the strong correlation between his definition of culture and of religion:

(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of the general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁴

One central insight expressed by this definition is the intrinsic double aspect of cultural patterns. Acting as a kind of mirror, cultures give objective conceptual form to social and psychological reality by both shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves. In this way, they create “moods and motivations,” inducing a distinctive set of dispositions in religious adherents. Motivations, as Geertz explains, are persisting tendencies that encourage individuals to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain types of feelings in certain situations. These motivations are made meaningful, he continues, by reference to the ends they are designed to conduce. Conversely, moods are made meaningful by the conditions from which they are conceived to spring.⁵ This structuralist definition of religion has since become the most widely cited and accepted definition of religion today.

Another important aspect of Geertz’s definition is its recognition that religion functions in part to provide a general order for the universe. The world can seem to be a chaotic and unkind place. However, religious symbols, as he explains, provide a cosmic guarantee that it can be comprehended and that, regardless of any given positive or negative emotion one feels, it can be endured. A wonderful example of this quality of religion is the Navaho curing rite, which is usually referred to as “sings.” As Geertz details, it is composed of three main acts: a purification

⁴ Ibid., 349.

⁵ Ibid., 350-352.

of the patient and audience; a statement of a wish to restore well-being in the patient; and an identification of the patient with the Holy people, leading to their eventual cure. The ritual's sustaining effect allows those stricken with disease a vocabulary to understand the nature of their distress and its relation to the wider world. In this way, by means of symbols, a perception of order in the world is created that accounts for, and even celebrates, the ambiguities of human existence.⁶ Per the structuralist paradigm, the importance of religion lies in its ability to provide a framework of general ideas from which both individuals and groups can draw.

Geertz's work is supported by the ideas of past religious scholars, such as Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) who was the first to hint at the possible adaptive nature of symbolic religious thought. He posited that religion functioned as an organizer of social life, acting both to define groups and to prescribe behaviors.⁷ In large part, he based this observation on the symbolic division between the sacred and the profane that he perceived to be common among religions: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart – beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."⁸ Communities, then, per Durkheim, are united by their own shared sense of the sacred.⁹ Their specific beliefs and practices designating them as members and their common totems binding them together, representing not just deities, but personified and visible forms of their own society.¹⁰ Thus, through religious gatherings, groups

⁶ Ibid., 355-56.

⁷ David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 54.

⁸ Emile Durkheim, "The Social as Sacred," 106.

⁹ Ibid., 106-109. Durkheim argued that the sacred formed the core of religion and was derived from the totemism practiced by our ancestors. A totem could take the form of an animal, a cross, or a coat-of-arms, but always serves as a singular designation of a collective entity, such as a clan or a religious group. Aboriginal tribe members, for instance, consider themselves to be united by a bond of kinship, simply by the fact that they share a common name.

¹⁰ Ibid., 112.

reinforce their own collective identities by worshipping symbolic representation of themselves.¹¹ Durkheim's insight into the functionality of symbolic religious thought in many ways laid the foundation for Geertz's later contributions.

The work of anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902 – 1973) was also influential in Geert's thought. During his time with an African tribe known as the Azande, Evans-Pritchard noticed conceptions about the universe that were so deeply embedded in their society that they went almost completely unquestioned. One boy, for example, drew on a culturally embedded belief in witchcraft to explain why his injured foot took days to heal. Believing so firmly in native epistemology, other Azande found a variety of methods to confirm his account and to explain away evidence that conflicted with their view of the universe.¹² Thus, Evans-Pritchard came to the realization that many beliefs – like those of the Azande – are embedded in the cultures in which they arise, appearing uniquely realistic. Existing within their own bubbles, every culture and religion holds beliefs and conceptions that symbolically make sense of the universe within their specific context.

Despite the strengths of Geertz's argumentation and the legacy of supporting theorists, post-structuralists take issue with his definition of religion. Anthropologist Talal Asad, for instance, keenly critiqued its limitations, pointing out that it is not as trans-cultural and trans-historical as he presents it to be. Asad, who grew up in the Middle East, argues that Geertz completely disregards the bias introduced by Western discourse and their subsequently limited understanding of non-Western religions. Further, he argues that Geertz fails to understand the effect of Western epistemology on non-western traditions and concludes that Geertz's definition

¹¹ Durkheim described this as collective effervescence, which can be defined as the coming together of a large group of individuals who are experiencing the same sense of euphoria and projecting it onto a totem.

¹² E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Primitive Religion and Modern Theories," 311-319.

is based completely on Western philosophical thought and a monolithic scientific narrative about the study of religion.¹³ Asad's post-structuralist critique of Geertz's method demonstrates that it is impossible to completely separate oneself from their own context. It is impossible to truly understand another culture or religion when viewing it through a lens derived from Western understandings and preconceptions. Thus, he concludes that Geertz's definition can never be applied successfully to religions that developed outside the Western context.

A central theme of Asad's critique is the neglected effect of power in shaping religious traditions. Religious symbolism alone, he contends, is not by itself capable of producing religious traditions. As such, he states:

It was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing truth. Particular discourses and practices were to be systematically excluded, forbidden, denounced – made as much as possible unthinkable; others were to be included, allowed, praised, and drawn into the narrative of sacred truth.¹⁴

In other words, Asad contends that Geertz insists upon the primacy of meaning without considering the processes by which these meanings were constructed.¹⁵ This assertion is surely sound, as Geertz does pay little attention to the influence of existing, non-religious social structures over the formation of tradition. However, what both Geertz and Asad overlook is the explanatory forces expressed by biological theory, which help to model this tension. Although they cannot completely explain the influence of power over the development of religious tradition, biological models highlight the dynamics of the many outside forces acting upon religion, be they political, ecclesiastical, or otherwise.

¹³ Talal Asad. *Genealogies of Religion*, 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

For this reason, it is interesting that Asad's suggested method for studying the development of religions in their specific contexts, known as historical/cultural genealogy, bears resemblance to evolution by natural selection. Focusing on a particular idea and tracing its development over time in relation to its environment, his model is reminiscent of the manner in which natural forces shape the development of traits in the animal kingdom.¹⁶ For example, Asad traces the marginalization of religion in the modern day to the actions of the medieval Christian Church. As his argument goes, the Church established its authority and discipline through teachings and practices that were not the convictions of its practitioners but were instead the final test of "religious truth." As a result, Roman Catholic authority became fragmented in the seventeenth century, leading to an inability to produce concrete knowledge. Eventually, he concludes, this development caused religion to become marginalized in everyday society. Like an evolved trait shaped by external environmental forces, the character of Church was influenced by surrounding ideas and institutions.

So, what is a "religion" and how should it be studied? Per the work of Geertz, Durkheim, and Evans-Pritchard, they are culturally embedded systems of symbols that work to furnish the universe with specific and uniquely realistic conceptions of reality. Per Asad, they are dynamic, culturally distinct entities whose transformation over time can be best understood by careful examination of their culturally specific contexts. The strengths of these theories cannot be understated; however, they collectively fail to acknowledge the importance of human evolutionary history, a paradigm which can unite these seemingly antithetical theories. Invoking insights from biology and biological

¹⁶ Ibid., 53-54.

theories, it is my aim to weave together the many past contributions from structuralist and post-structuralists alike.

To accomplish this synthesis, I will root my arguments firmly in the biological paradigm, relying on the phenomenal and the observable. It is through our biologically evolved senses and brain, after all, that we construct our perception of the universe. Thus, I propose a model of religion that places the senses and the mind centrally and submit the Religio-Biological Model:

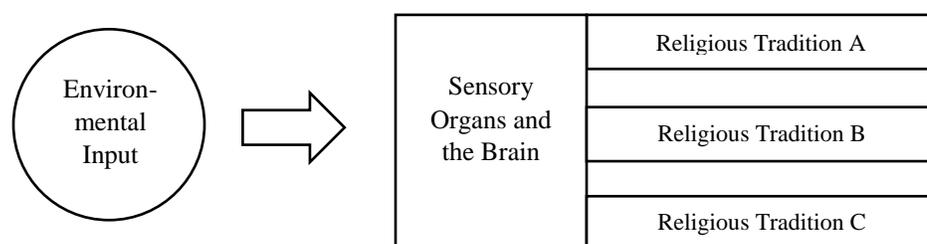


Figure 1. The Religio-Biological Model

As biological beings, humans interpret the world and its various environmental inputs using their senses – sight, smell, hearing, etc – turning these inputs into symbolic representations of reality. The human eye, for example, turns light waves into a series of upside down and inverted snapshots of our physical environments. These symbols are in turn processed, sorted, and organized by the human brain into coherent representations of the world around us. Within their specific temporal and geographic contexts, these systems of symbols result in the creation of specific, uniquely realistic conceptions of the universe, per Geertz, which leads to the formation of culturally specific groups. Thus, through the senses and the brain, environmental inputs are turned into a variety of religious traditions (as well as non-religious traditions).

It is through this common biological process that Geertz and Asad can be reconciled. Although the final outputs may be distinct, the function of our shared machinery – the senses and the brain – is truly trans-cultural and trans-historical. In this way, Geertz is correct: religions can

be considered systems of symbols that establish powerful, pervasive, long-lasting, and uniquely realistic moods and motivations in men. However, the array and form of individual symbols contained within these systems of symbols are shaped by specific power dynamics in their cultural landscapes. In this way, Asad is correct. Competition between religious, political, and other groups within society selects for the most socially advantageous traits, or, in this case, symbols and therefore systems of symbols. Previously existing symbols and institutions within any culture influence the creation of new symbols in direct relation to their power. Thus, any misunderstanding of these power dynamics – perhaps caused by our inherent biases – leaves religious traditions on some level incomprehensible to those outside them. An individual located within Religious Tradition C, for instance, may never be able to comprehend Religious Tradition A in its entirety. But, because the organ that creates these symbolically derived and culturally specific renderings of the universe is trans-cultural and trans-historical, Geertz and Asad can be united at least on this basic level.

One potential critique of the Religio-Biological Model is its exclusion of the divine. For this reason, it could be equally represented as the following:

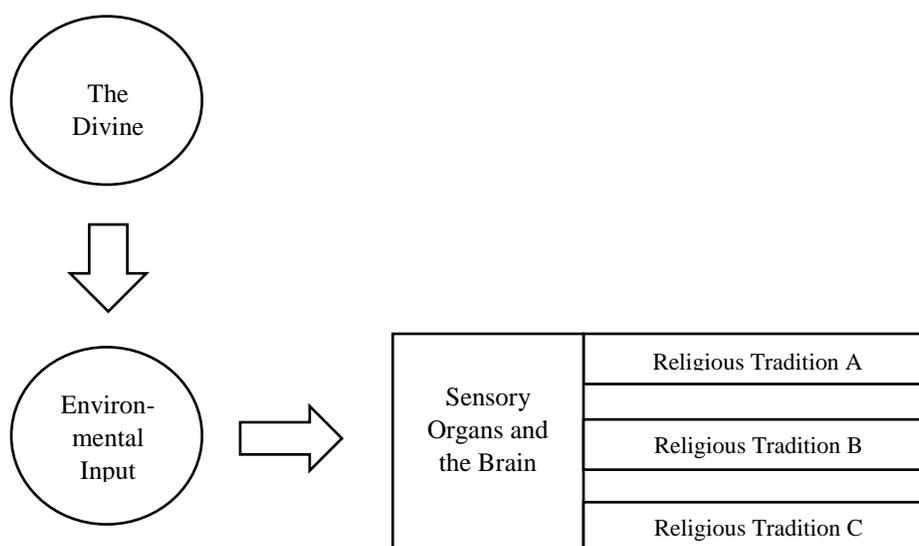


Figure 2. The Religio-Biological Model of Religion with Divine Input

In this rendering, the divine is treated as another input that shapes our environments and is subject to interpretation through the senses and by the brain. Although this seems apt in many ways – religious rituals do often engage the senses through chants, art, and action – it is certainly not true of the more mystical religious traditions. For this reason, the Religio-Biological Model could also be presented as:

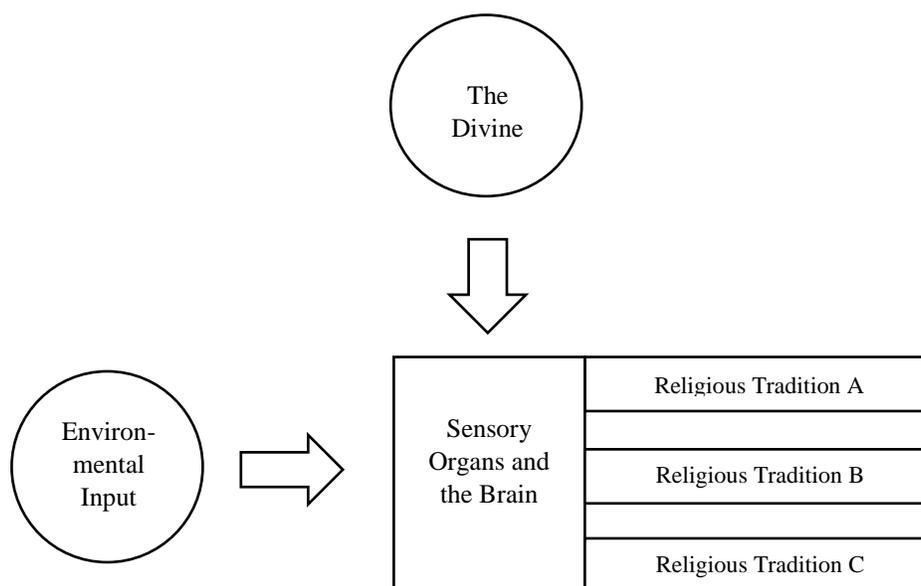


Figure 3. The Religio-Biological Model of Religion with Divine Input Directly to the Brain

This representation is more consistent with mystic and/or ascetic traditions that consider earthly inputs to be distractions and seek to separate themselves from the body and the sensual, concentrating only on their connection to the divine. However, in any case, the ultimate result is the same: a conception of the order of the universe influenced by the environment (including the divine in some manner) that is ultimately interpreted by the human brain.¹⁷ With this in mind, the model can be applied to any religious community

¹⁷ Only the most ardent ascetics could claim to have completely separated themselves from the body. And, even in these cases, their claims are by no means definitive.

in the East or West. Thus, for simplicity purposes, the Religio-Biological Model is best represented as a system with one environmental input, encompassing both the phenomenal and the divine. To understand the workings of this system, the nature of the senses and the brain must be examined.

The Senses and the Brain

Italian theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli offers an intriguing view of the universe. Taking a slightly philosophical approach, he asserts that our view of reality is clouded by our false perception that humans are special, separate from the other animals and facets of nature. The passing of time, he claims, has made it increasingly clear that humans are not external observers of nature, but integral parts of the world that we seek to understand – manifestations of nature itself. So, instead of limiting our perception by prescribing to a notion of reality that separates man from nature, Rovelli contends that only by accepting our place within it will we ever come to understand the universe. Captured and interpreted using many different languages – Mathematics, English, Biology, etc. – the world is incredibly complex.¹⁸ Thus, he concludes, we should accept our place within nature, realizing that there is no significant difference between “I” and “a collection of neurons.”¹⁹ Only in this way can we fully realize reality and enjoy its transcendent beauty.

In accordance with the views of Rovelli, many scholars within the emerging field of Cognitive Religious Studies ground their work firmly in the phenomenal world.²⁰ Edward Slingerland – an expert in the connections between cognitive science and the humanities – for

¹⁸ These different languages can in some ways be regarded as a variety of collections of symbols meant to give meaning to the chaos of the universe.

¹⁹ Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, 73-81.

²⁰ Cognitive Religious Studies utilizes modern evolutionary science to shed new light on the nature of religion.

example, argues for an “embodied” approach to the study of religion, which involves treating the human mind and its products as part of the physical world and therefore subject to physical laws. In this way, Slingerland considers humans to be integrated body-mind systems – like all the other body-mind systems running around in the world. In other words, he asserts that the human mind can be considered coterminous with the human body (especially the brain), meaning that it is no more than a very complex physical thing evolved over millions of years.²¹ Because our neurological architecture and basic biological drives are evolved, the “embodied” study of religion subjugates cultural forces to biological ones, arguing that religion can be ultimately reduced to biological forces.

Although the view offered by Slingerland is uncomfortable, there are powerful reasons to consider it. While some of his claims – such as that consciousness is not distinct from matter, but rather a property of it – are controversial, others are undeniable.²² Humans can almost certainly be reduced to body-mind systems that are the products of natural selection. However, as it is not my desire to argue the location or existence of consciousness, which the word “mind” in some ways implies, I will preferentially utilize the term “body-brain” system, as it more clearly articulates the aim of this paper: to examine the common biological forces that influence human actions. While it is possible that the mind does in some way transcend the body, the capabilities of the human brain are certainly bounded by our evolutionary history. With slight cultural variation, certain truths regulated by the body-brain system hold – humans enjoy the taste of sugar, dislike the smell of dog urine, and have preferences for light, strength, and truth. These preferences surely aided our ancestors in their ability to survive in dangerous, uncertain, and constantly changing environments.

²¹ Edward Slingerland, “Who’s Afraid of Reductionism?,” 378–382.

²² This theory runs completely against any idealistic notion dualism, arguing that there is only this realm.

Sensory organs provide the input into our body-brain systems. Ariel Glucklich – a professor of the Psychology and Anthropology of Religion at Georgetown University – for instance, likens our senses to “wiring.” Binding us to our contexts, they equip us for survival by allowing us to interpret our environments. In New York, for example, one uses their sense of sight to gauge the distance and speed of a delivery truck in relation to the width of the street, allowing them to pass safely.²³ The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (b. 1941) offers a similar view of the senses. Arguing that science possesses the only means of understanding reality, he asserts that our senses – with the help of scientific tools and models – provide unique insight into the nature of reality.²⁴ The senses allow humans to separate the pleasant from the unpleasant, the useful from the useless, and the dangerous from the benign. Moreover, they allow us to investigate our universe, aiding us in our pursuit to understand reality. It is through the senses that our body-brain systems receive environmental input and construct our realities.

Sensory input is, of course, encoded and interpreted by the brain. The products of millions of years of evolution, our brains are responsible for synthesizing various inputs into a useful output. As Glucklich explains:

[The brain] is a biological organ that directs the body as a whole to create a complete system of input and output that will resonate to the external information. [It] controls the organs of sense and causes them to interact with the environment in such a way that perception (input) and response (output) maximize survival in a given ecology.²⁵

Depending on our specific physical and cultural environments, these inputs may differ. However, their interpretations are modulated in a conserved manner. Our shared evolutionary and genetic

²³ Ariel Glucklich, *The End of Magic*, 100-101.

²⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Magic of Reality*, 12-19.

²⁵ Ariel Glucklich, *The End of Magic*, 103.

history has shaped our brains in predictable and uniform ways.²⁶ Because of this history, the symbolic realities created by our brain and based upon the various sensory inputs we encounter – connecting sights, sounds, and feelings together to form a coherent narrative of the world – can be said to share a common point of origin. These symbolic understandings of the universe are the building blocks of religion and tradition.

Pascal Boyer – a French and American anthropologist known for his work within the cognitive science of religion – presents a similar view of the human brain. In his 2001 work *Religion Explained*, Boyer argues that humans have evolved in very particular ways; and as a result of natural selection, human brains are only capable of processing information via a specific set of mental dispositions. Moreover, he asserts the human brain to be the most developed inference system of its kind. An organ whose information processing centers allowed humanity’s survival as hunters and gathers during a time in which predator detection and contagion/pathogen avoidance were critical to survival. Again, the human brain is presented as a highly conserved organ whose processing capabilities were evolved conservatively to deal with adaptive problems. So conservatively, in fact, that its processing capabilities are limited by evolved mental dispositions.²⁷ Because brains across cultures share this evolutionary history, it makes them a perfect point of consilience for scholars within Religious Studies and between the humanities and natural sciences.

²⁶ Robert Fuller, *Spirituality in the Flesh*, 76. Based on population, there may exist slight differences in the genes influencing sensory processing in the brain. As referenced by Robert Fuller, the work of Dean Hamer suggests that differences in the VMAT2 gene – which controls monoamine signals to be more dramatic, causing dopamine, serotonin, and noradrenaline to have stronger effects on consciousness. In Hamer’s words, “The result is a radical shift in the communication between the front and the back of the brain – a shift that, in this individual, brings a profound sense of joy, fulfillment, and peace.” In this way, the VMAT2 gene could directly impact an individual’s likelihood of experiencing “self-transcendent” events.

²⁷ Jason Purvis, “Dealing with the Brain in Social Science,” 65-66.

Consilience within Religious Studies and with the natural sciences offers many advantages to the study of religion. As Slingerland and Joseph Bulbulia – a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Auckland specializing in the Evolutionary Religious Studies (ERS) – argue, “The importance of the evolutionary framework lies in its ability to organize descriptions of religious diversity, to refine and motivate specific explanatory hypotheses and to facilitate the development of shared empirical techniques for their evaluation.”²⁸ By offering a single paradigm in which to base theories of religion, evolutionary science provides an incredibly stable basis for study. In support of this argument, Slingerland and Bulbulia offer rebuttals to several common objections to ERS. First, they clarify that the most basic rationale for ERS is the consistency that concentrating on the brain-body unit offers the field. Second, they clarify that ERS is not synonymous with the mistaken views of theological progression, offered by thinkers such as Edward Tylor and James Frazer.²⁹ Instead, it is a process that accords with random variation, inheritance, and selection that leads to an accumulation of designs. Third, they make clear that evolutionary theories can be applied beyond the level of genes and individuals and to cultural forms themselves.³⁰ These clarifications make a persuasive argument for the utility of synthesizing religious and biological theory and basing this synthesis on the commonalities of the human brain.

The most apparent advantage of synthesizing religious and biological thought is the application of evolutionary theory to the progression of religious culture. Moderated by the human brain, cultures and groups – like individuals – can evolve over time; and, their evolution

²⁸ Edward Slingerland and Joseph Bulbulia, “Introductory Essay,” 309.

²⁹ Tylor and Frazer suggested models of religion that posited a progression from savage religion to modernity and from magic to science respectively. As has been since noted, these theories were heavily influenced by the Western bias of their authors.

³⁰ Edward Slingerland and Joseph Bulbulia, “Introductory Essay,” 309-321.

can be described by biological theories. In his work *Darwin's Cathedral*, evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson (b. 1949) argues that religion is a group level adaptation that facilitates the formation of large, cooperate groups able to outcompete their rivals.³¹ Making use of multilevel selection theory (MLS), Wilson's argument did much to inspire the field of ERS. Similarly – and more recently – Bulbulia has posited that the biological function of religion is to increase within-group cooperation: “Selection has canalized religious psychology to foster rapid solutions to two recurrent adaptive problems: getting along with others and getting along with ourselves.”³² It is around these assertions that I will base my analysis. However, before proceeding any further, an appropriate biological paradigm for my study must be decided upon.

Choosing a Biological Paradigm

There are two primary biological theories that address the evolution of cooperation: kin selection (KS) and multilevel selection theory (MLS). In many cases, the two are ultimately equivalent in their ability to model changes in gene frequency. However, their logic is very different. KS focuses entirely on the relatedness of social partners, arguing that close relatives will act more altruistically towards one another because of an increase in inclusive fitness.³³ Conversely, MLS concentrates on the relative strengths of within-group and between-group selection. Although both have their merits, one must ultimately be selected as a means of analysis, as they suggest very different causalities.

³¹ David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 1-46.

³² Joseph Bulbulia, “Are There Any Religions?,” 81.

³³ Inclusive fitness can be defined as the ability of an organism to pass on its genes directly or through the copies present in its close relatives. For example, a gene that protects copies of itself present in its siblings would have a higher inclusive fitness than a gene that simply protects itself.

One proponent of KS is Dawkins. In his 1976 work *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins asserts that social behaviors are completely gene centered, positing that modern genes are descended from ancient replicators – the original molecules capable of creating copies of themselves.³⁴ These replicators, he argues, in an unconscious battle for survival with one another, developed increasingly complex “survival machines” that aided in their survival and transmission to future generations. Eventually, this evolutionary race resulted in modern organisms, or as he calls them, survival machines. A monkey, for instance, is an excellent survival machine for preserving and transmitting genes in trees.³⁵ Dawkins explains behaviors in a similar manner, asserting that social behaviors and therefore religious behaviors are completely selected for by genes. While Dawkins views represent a reductive extreme, they demonstrate one possible application of biological theory to religious thought.

In 1983, psychologist C. Daniel Batson (b. 1943) offered a more convincing application of KS, describing the possible biological origins of religiosity. His argument centered around the idea that religious symbolism metaphorically extends kin groups. The term “family,” for instance, denotes those to which one is biologically related to or descended from. However, it can also be extended symbolically to include close friends or members of the same community. As Batson notes, “Certain forms of religious imagery may serve to extend the range of application of the narrowly kin-specific innate altruistic impulse.”³⁶ In his view, religions that espouse the teaching that we are all the children of God, belonging to the same religious family, could build cognitive bridges that encourage us to respond empathetically – and therefore cooperatively – to those whom we are not naturally predisposed.³⁷ This theory is certainly

³⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 19

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁶ Daniel Batson, “Sociobiology and the Role of Religion,” 1383.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1383-1384.

plausible, but is not without fault, as it is difficult to believe that cognitive bridges alone could account for the majority of religiosity.

However, the most striking deficiency in Batson's theory is that his reliance on KS seems to fundamentally mischaracterize the essence of religiosity. KS asserts that organisms subconsciously wish to protect copies of their own genes present in close relatives, an underlying assumption does not seem consistent with religion. Many religious believers, for instance, seem to idealize the notion that they are part of a group, a fact that led Durkheim to refer to religion as "an eminently collective thing."³⁸ Similarly, the actions of the religious martyrs do not seem to provide any benefit to their kin. This incongruity is made even more obvious by the mathematical formula for KS:

$$\bar{w}\Delta\bar{p} = (-c)Var(p) + rbVar(p) \quad (1)$$

Hamilton's law, which is derived from equation (1), states that a trait will increase in a population as long as $rB > C$.³⁹ In other words, if the benefit of a behavior (B) multiplied by the relatedness (r) exceeds the cost (C) imposed on the actor, the frequency of that trait will increase because of indirect reproductive gains.⁴⁰ Moreover, since KS applies to only a small number of evolutionary cases, the claim that familial symbolism alone could reliably ensure kin-specific benefits to non-kin seems dubious.⁴¹ Thus, it seems that there are issues with a theoretical framework that relies upon KS.

A more appropriate biological model for the study of religion is one that represents both individuals and groups. In recent years, David Sloan Wilson has introduced such a theory into the discourse of Religious Studies: multilevel selection theory (MLS). Describing religions as

³⁸ Emile Durkheim, "The Social as Sacred," 106.

³⁹ Samir Okasha, "The Relation Between Kin and Multilevel Selection," 441.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Birch and Samir Okasha, "Kin Selection and its Critics," 23-24.

⁴¹ Telmo Pievani, "Individuals and Groups in Evolution," 323.

group level adaptations that facilitate the formation of large, cooperative groups, Wilson's theory more convincingly accords with religious theory.⁴² This is for two reasons: First, it captures the collective attitude expressed by many religious believers. Second, it balances this disposition with the potentially selfish behaviors of individuals. Beyond its compatibility with religious theory, though, this unique synthesis establishes a middle ground that allows for both adaptive problems at the heart of religiosity – getting along with others and getting along with ourselves, per Bulbulia – to be simultaneously analyzed.

The forces that drive selection on the individual and group levels are conceptually similar to one another, but in practice can often work antagonistically. Adaptations that benefit a group, for instance, may impose significant costs on individuals. The mathematical equation for MLS articulates precisely this problem:

$$\bar{w}\Delta\bar{p} = Cov(W_k, P_k) + E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})] \quad (2)$$

Formula (2) clearly demonstrates that the direction of selection on social traits depends crucially on the balance between within-group ($E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})]$) and between-group ($Cov(W_k, P_k)$) selection. If group selection forces exceed those of individual selection ($Cov(W_k, P_k) > E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})]$), then the frequency of that social trait will increase.⁴³ Thus, a trait that favors the group may be selected for even if it is costly to the individual, assuming that group selection forces have the necessary strength.

This assertion is in fact quite intuitive but has historically been met with skepticism. Dawkins, for instance, has argued that selfish individuals within an altruistic population would quickly become dominant, implying that the forces of between-group selection could never

⁴² David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, 1-46.

⁴³ Samir Okasha, "The Relation Between Kin and Multilevel Selection," 439.

successfully overcome those of within-group selection.⁴⁴ In recent years, however, MLS has been gaining widespread respect. Wilson argues that social controls – punishments – lower the relative cost of altruism and allow between-group selection to dominate within-group selection, producing a higher-level unit that functions like an organism. Because selfish behavior can be easily detected and punished in human society, for example, a single individual cannot dominate other group members.⁴⁵ Such developments have once again made group selection-based theories a theoretically viable method of analysis.

Beyond theory, though, there have been several evolutionary transitions that clearly demonstrate that between-group selection can triumph over within-group selection. As Wilson and biologist Dag Hessen have explained, nucleated cells did not evolve through a series of small mutational steps, but through the cooperation of groups of bacteria. Similarly, modern multi-cellular organisms are composed of highly cooperative individual cells and social insect colonies coordinate their activities so well that they may be considered super organisms. Moreover, Wilson and Hessen argue that human evolution itself may represent such a transition. To a greater degree than any other primate, we have evolved to cooperate, suppressing self-serving behaviors that could prove detrimental to the formation of groups.⁴⁶ The major transitions in evolutionary history suggest that on rare occasions between-group selection can come to dominant within-group selection, forming well-regulated and cooperative groups of individuals.

A comparison of the strengths and underlying assumptions of both KS and MLS makes it clear that MLS is the theory most well suited for a synthesis of religious and biological thought. Its balance of individual and group-level forces as well as the explanatory power of social

⁴⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 72.

⁴⁵ David Sloan Wilson, Mark Van Vugt, and Rick O’Gorman, “Multilevel Selection Theory and Major Evolutionary Transitions Implications for Psychological Science,” 7.

⁴⁶ David Sloan Wilson and Dag Hessen, “The Blueprint for the Global Village,” 124.

controls make it well suited for the study of religion. However, because MLS is usually used to describe changes in allele frequencies, it must be understood that its application to religiosity is not meant to be representative of actual allele fluctuations. Because the complexities of human behavior cannot be said to be completely genetic, this assertion would be somewhat nonsensical.⁴⁷ Instead, the use of MLS is meant to capture the conflict between the individual and the group – the self and the community – addressed by many religions.

Groups are made up of individuals with a diverse and not completely similar set of traits. To solve this problem, Wilson coined the term “trait-group” to highlight the intimate relationship between traits and groups. Unlike nonsocial traits, which alter only the fitness of individuals, social behaviors affect the fitness of individuals and those that interact with them.⁴⁸ So then, a trait-group can be defined as a set of individuals that influence each other’s fitness with respect to a given trait.⁴⁹ Take for example a flock of birds that issues warning calls at the sight of a predator. If the warning call can be heard by its own flock and the flock in the next tree, then the trait-group must include both flocks. Conversely, if only a subsection of its own flock can hear the warning call, then the trait-group must be reduced to include only those birds.⁵⁰ The same logic can be applied to any religious group. Those who fully adopt the symbolic thought of their tradition and those who gain indirect benefits by associating with them must be considered members of the trait-group. In this way, members of a religious trait-group can be said to include those who vehemently adhere to their traditions and beliefs and those who associate with them through social, tribal, or kin relation.

⁴⁷ It is possible – even likely – that humanity has evolved certain alleles overtime that make religious feelings more likely. However, culture also plays a large role in the behavior of modern humans.

⁴⁸ David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral*, 15.

⁴⁹ David Sloan Wilson and Dag Hessen, “The Blueprint of Multilevel Selection,” 155.

⁵⁰ David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral*, 15.

With an appropriate biological paradigm in mind – and an understanding of the relevant previous religious theories – an analysis of religious groups using the Religio-Biological Model can be conducted. To perform this analysis, I will introduce two distinct religious traditions, separating their ethnographic information into distinct categories: their symbolic universes, their social controls, and their trait-groups. In this way, I hope to demonstrate the evolved similarities between traditions revealed by MLS. Below, Table 1 summarizes these various categories, including explanations of their utility, into which I will break my ethnographic information:

Table 1. Categories and Explanation of Ethnographic Data

Category	Explanation
Creation of a Symbolic Universe	Formed from the senses and brain, the symbolic universe is a collective perception of nature and the world around the group. Thus, it provides the basis for mythology and theology necessary for the creation of social controls and trait-groups.
Social Controls	Social controls – punishments – are the rules that govern trait-groups, created in accordance with their collective symbolic understandings of the universe. Without them, the between-group level of selection would never be able to overwhelm the within-group level of selection.
Trait-Group Formation	The trait group itself is the unit of social organization that competes with other groups. Moderated by social controls, trait groups allow for greater evolutionary success.

With these categorizations in mind, I will detail the traditions of the Maori – the indigenous pacific population of New Zealand – and of the Vaisnava Sahajiya – a tantric Hindu community in Bengal.

Chapter 2. Ethnographic Data: The Maori and the Vaisnava Sahajiya

As detailed in Chapter One, Chapter Two will break down the Maori and Vaisnava Sahajiya traditions into their symbolic universes, social controls, and trait-groups. Through this provision of ethnographic data, I will explain the common biological forces acting on both traditions. These categorizations are in no sense meant to reify these rich and diverse traditions, but merely to serve as a representative sample of symbolically derived characteristics for my study. In doing so, I will demonstrate the commonalities between the distinct traditions that will then be used in my application of the Religio-Biological Model in Chapter Three

Symbolic Universes

The symbolic universe is produced by the brain and sensory organs in response to environmental stimuli, forming the mythology and theology of a religious tradition. Within this symbolic universe, an individual is able to ground themselves and a group is able to create rules. In this section the myths of the Maori and Vaisnava Sahajiya will be examined, as they offer an excellent view of a population's symbolic interpretation of the universe. Functioning as mirrors of society, they reflect the values, institutions, and interests that capture and stimulate the imaginations of individuals and communities at large.⁵¹ Thus, they serve as an excellent beginning for my demonstration of the Religio-Biological Model.

⁵¹ As mentioned in Chapter One, these assertions rely on the work of Durkheim, Geertz, and Evans-Pritchard.

[A] Maori: Maori and Their Kin

The pantheon of Maori gods is unlike those of most religions, especially those popular in the West. The Maori considered the divine world to be the source of good fortune and of misfortune, so proper action towards the gods in their different domains was incredibly important.⁵² Elsdon Best (1856 – 1931), an often-cited ethnographer who studied the language and culture of the Maori during the early twentieth century, separated Maori gods into four major and sometimes overlapping categories: 1) Io, the Supreme Being, 2) Departmental gods, 3) Tribal gods, and 4) Family gods.⁵³ While this hierarchy of deities is slightly disputed, it lays out well a basic framework from which to understand the Maori tradition. Io, the Supreme Being, was a beneficent deity whose presence was so removed from daily life that his influence was hardly felt.⁵⁴ Departmental gods, on the other hand, were incredibly important in Maori mythology, serving as the creators of man and as personifications of natural phenomenon.⁵⁵ Finally, the tribal and family gods played the largest role in everyday life, performing protective and hostile functions. As will be discussed, these deities do much to inform the Maori understanding of themselves and the universe.

To simplify the Maori religious framework further, two terms must be explored: *tupuna* and *atua*. The term *tupuna* translates roughly to ancestors, denoting primal ancestors of humans who had never been human themselves. These “gods” could represent the whole category of nature over which they presided, or any element of it. Taane, for example, was the *tupuna*

⁵² Jean Smith, “Tapu Removal in Maori Religion,” 26.

⁵³ Elsdon Best, *Maori Religion and Mythology*, 134.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 138. Io may have been a reaction to the Christian God. In any case, his presence was not felt strongly in the daily lives of the Maori, so his existence and/or non-existence does not weigh heavily upon this study. As Best notes, “Io does not seem to have played any active part in directing the everyday affairs of man. No offerings were made to him, and the people generally had no direct dealing with him, but only through their priests.” As such, little attention will be paid to Io in my discussion.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

associated with trees, birds, and insects and was thought to direct punishment towards those who committed offenses against his domain. These primal ancestors accord with Best's classification of departmental gods, providing a classification of man's world at a high level of generality.⁵⁶

Atua, on the other hand, referred to embodied forms of the more recent human dead.⁵⁷

Frequently, the term was used to describe spirits of recently deceased chiefs, as well as corpses and bones.⁵⁸ These were the "gods" that one would appeal to in everyday circumstances.⁵⁹

Together, these terms can be used to denote all deities in Best's categories of family gods, tribal gods, and departmental gods.

Within Maori belief and tradition, *tupuna* and *atua* played different roles. To trace the role of the *tupuna*, the Maori creation myth must be examined. Before the creation of man and the separation of the domains, there were only primal ancestors, all cloaked in darkness. Although believed to be ancient relatives of the Maori, these *tupuna* were not themselves considered to be human. Rangi (Heaven) and Papa (Earth) – the ancient beings and parents to the rest of the departmental gods – held each other so closely that no light could enter the world.⁶⁰ Dissatisfied with this darkness and lack of space, their sons plotted against them, debating whether to slay them or simply to separate them. Taane-mahuta (forests, birds, and insects) convinced all his brothers – with the exception of Tuu-matauenga (humans) and Taawhiri-maatea (winds) – that separating their parents would be best. After many attempts by the brothers, Taane succeeded by placing his head on the ground and his legs in the air, pushing his

⁵⁶ Jean Smith, "Tapu Removal in Maori Religion," 26.

⁵⁷ Adele Fletcher, "Sanctity, Power, and the "Impure Scared,"" 54. The term *wairua* is used to denote the noncorporeal portion of a human being that becomes an *atua* upon death. Interestingly, this *wairua* was also believed to be able to travel during sleep. This was the Maori explanation of dreams.

⁵⁸ In some cases, *tupuna* were referred to as *atua* because of their supposed ancestry, but this practice was unusual.

⁵⁹ Adele Fletcher, "Sanctity, Power, and the "Impure Sacred,"" 54.

⁶⁰ Elsdon Best, *The Maori As He Was*, 35.

father Rangi up, forming the sky.⁶¹ This separation of Rangi and Papa allowed light to enter the world and gave space for their sons to multiply and have children.

Having achieved their goal, there was little time for Taane and his other brothers to celebrate. Taawhiri – who had not originally agreed to the separation – joined with his father and began to wage war against his brothers. He broke down Taane’s trees and stirred up Tangaroa’s (sea) oceans.⁶² He rushed to attack Rongo-ma-taane (cultivated food) and Haumia-tikitiki (uncultivated food) but was thwarted by Papa who hid her children under the ground to save them. Finally, he rushed against Tuu-matauenga (man), but was ultimately unable to vanquish him in battle. As the only other brother who wished to slay his parents, Tuu was not bothered by Taawhiri’s wrath. Instead, he showed himself to be brave and fierce in battle; and, after fending off Taawhiri’s attacks, he became angered by his other brothers’ lack of bravery. As such, he too turned against them, making nooses to catch the children of Taane, flax nets to catch the children of Tangaroa, and digging up Rongo-ma-taane and Haumia-tikitiki, devouring them all in an act of revenge.⁶³ Thus, humans – the children of Tuu – were begotten on this earth and continued to multiply and dominate the world.⁶⁴

Although this account of the Maori creation myth comes to us largely through the lens of earlier European ethnographers, it does well to demonstrate the place of *tupuna* in their mythology. As the most ancient beings, they possessed tremendous power, representing the most basic natural phenomenon and entities: Heaven, Earth, forests, winds, etc. This explains Best’s

⁶¹ Jean Smith, “The Creation of Life – And Death,” 43-44.

⁶² Taawhiri-maatea’s onslaught caused Ika-tere (the father of fish) and Tuu-te-wehiwehi (the father of reptiles) – Tangaroa’s grandchildren - to consult on how best to escape the storm. Quarrelling, Tuu-te-wehiwehi fled inland and was sheltered by Taane, while Ika-tere went to the sea. Tangaroa, enraged by the desertion of some of his children – has waged war on Taane ever since.

⁶³ In Maori culture, eating enemies defeated in battle was a common practice. However, in the myth, Tuu-matauenga was unable to conquer and devour Taawhiri-maatea. For this reason, it is thought that Taawhiri-maatea continues to attack man in the form of storms to this day.

⁶⁴ Jean Smith, “The Creation of Life – And Death,” 44

reference of “departmental gods.” However, because of their broad nature, they were removed from the daily life of the Maori and were only rarely called upon for assistance. For similar reasons, these gods were not generally believed to be vindictive, dangerous, or hostile towards humans. It was only when angered or offended by careless actions – such as felling one of Taane’s trees without performing the necessary acts of placation – that these gods would inflict suffering.⁶⁵ The *Tupuna* are incredibly important figures in the Maori religion but played a small role in the day to day activity of the tribe.

Atua, on the other hand, were much more localized than *tupuna* and played an incredibly significant role in the daily lives of the Maori.⁶⁶ However, like *tupuna*, they helped to personify natural phenomenon.⁶⁷ The work of Jean Smith, a scholar of Maori ritual, will be utilized here to provide a background for the understanding of the distinctions between the two. The influence of *tupuna*, such as Tuu, was incredibly important during war time, but it was a tribal *atua* or the spirit of a still-born child (*atua kahu*) who would be consulted as an oracle on a regular basis.⁶⁸ In this way, *atua* were similar to *tupuna*: both provided benefits when called upon. As mentioned before, many *atua* were thought to be the spirits of dead ancestors, especially chiefs who were thought to continue their interest in tribal affairs even after death.⁶⁹ This type of *atua*, for instance, may attempt to help or protect his kin by sending omens of impending danger.⁷⁰ Also like *tupuna*, though, an *atua* may remove their protective powers if offended or slighted.⁷¹ In this

⁶⁵ Elsdon Best, *Maori Religion and Mythology*, 138.

⁶⁶ Occasionally, the term *atua* was used to refer to primal ancestors. Generally, though, they were referred to as *tupuna*

⁶⁷ Elsdon Best, *The Maori As He Was*, 41-42.

⁶⁸ Jean Smith, “Tapu Removal in Maori Religion,” 26

⁶⁹ Adele Fletcher, “Maori Religion,” 1802.

⁷⁰ Jean Smith, “Tapu Removal in Maori Religion,” 26.

⁷¹ Elsdon Best, *Maori Religion and Mythology*, 138.

way, these *atua* were incredibly important for success in daily life. However, unlike *tupuna*, not all *atua* were considered to be benevolent.

Atua can be grouped into two categories: those who were friendly and sought to protect humans (unless offended) and evil spirits who sought to harm them. In this way, they solved a problem in the Maori religion: Why did misfortune sometimes befall those who had not offended the gods? While ancestral gods and recently deceased ancestors were concerned with the good fortune of their living relatives, evil spirits were thought to actively work against tribal interests. Often associated with still-born or aborted children, they were sufficiently detached – due to their minimal acquaintance – from the kin group to attack or even kill its members.⁷² The *atua kahu* (the spirit of a still-born child), for instance, were greatly feared by the Maori and were believed to be especially active during the night. They were not the only category of evil spirits, though. Others, such as Whiro – the personified form of evil descended from Rangi and Papa – were also sources of terror among the Maori.⁷³ The evil *atua* were another major force in the symbolic universe of the Maori.

This brief sketch of Maori deities and their corresponding mythology does much to provide a background of the tradition. Populated by an array of *tupuna* and *atua*, their symbolic universe was kin-centric. Rich in detail, this universe synthesized environmental inputs and provided conceivable answers to many of the mysteries of the world. Apart from providing emotional support to individuals, their symbolic universe also provided benefits to groups. From the inhabitants of this symbolic universe – gods – concepts such as *tapu* and *mana*, which will be detailed in later sections, were thought to derive. These concepts formed the core of Maori social

⁷² Adele Fletcher, “Sanctity, Power, and the “Impure Sacred,”” 71. Fletcher also theorizes that the resentment of still-born and/or aborted children about being denied life may contribute to their malevolent nature.

⁷³ Elsdon Best, *Maori Religion and Mythology*, 138.

controls, allowing for the formation of large, cooperative groups. The same process is true of the Sahajiya.

[B] Vaisnava Sahajiya: The *Lila* and *Prema* of Krishna

As was the case with the tradition of the Maori, the Hindu pantheon of gods is home to an incredibly diverse set of deities. Their various myths do much to highlight this incredible diversity of the Hindu tradition. As David Kinsley (1939 – 2000) – a recently deceased professor of Religious Studies at McMaster University, specializing in the history of Hinduism – wrote:

The gallery of Hindu gods includes soft, beguiling deities, such as Lakshmi and Parvati; withdrawn, ascetic gods, such as Shiva; kingly, active gods who involve themselves in maintaining the balance between good and evil, such as Vishnu, and his assortment of incarnations; intoxicating and beautiful gods such as Krishna; and terrible, frightening deities such as Kali.⁷⁴

The wide variety and characteristics of Hindu deities has allowed Hindus to connect to the divine in a myriad of ways throughout the centuries. Whether it be cults dedicated to the terrifying goddess Kali or the Vaisnava Sahajiya themselves, there have always been numerous groups in Hindu worship, each utilizing unique methods to connect with some part of the divine. However, for the purposes of this chapter, only one deity and his associated myths will be examined in detail: Krishna.

Although technically an incarnation of Vishnu, Krishna has become an incredibly popular and independent deity within the Hindu tradition. In his stories – coming mainly from the *Bhagavata Purana* – Krishna embodies *lila* (play) and demonstrates a unique route towards connecting to the divine. By shunning social obligation and engaging in divine play, one is thought to be able to connect to the divine and be liberated from this life. In this way, *lila* took on

⁷⁴ David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, 2.

a theological element during Krishna worship. According to Professor William Sax of the South Asian Institute at the University of Heidelberg University:

[Participation in Krishna’s eternal sport] is a state of liberation that can be achieved by attaining on earth a state of total mental absorption in the *lilas*. The schools of Vallabha and of Caitanya hold that such raptness of attention is not a mere means of liberation but is the state of liberation itself, and say that those who truly achieve this ecstatic state do not care whether they shall be taken into transcendency on death or shall be reborn into the world.⁷⁵

To various degrees, schools of Krishna worship embraced *lila* as a path towards liberation. Of particular interest here is the Caitanya movement, which placed a major emphasis on the practice, influencing heavily the Vaisnava Sahajiya tradition.⁷⁶ To gain a better understanding of *lila* and its influence on the Vaisnava Sahajiya, specific Krishna myths must be examined.

Throughout his life – with the exception of his appearance in the *Bhagavad Gita* – Krishna embodies *lila*. As a baby, Krishna is famous for taking every available opportunity to steal ghee (clarified butter) from those around him, earning him the nickname “The Butter Thief.” Ghee, produced by the sacred cow, had an irresistible sweet taste, signifying the sweet love of the divine. Because Krishna was divine himself, though, his theft reflects only his desire to play. In several myths from the *Bhagavata Purana*, the child Krishna also engages in play through his battles with various demons, such as Putana and Kaliya.⁷⁷ So carefree and confident in his ability to vanquish his foes, these battles themselves demonstrate the nature of *lila*.⁷⁸ As Kinsley states:

The theophany of the Child Krishna, then, expresses the nature of the divine as unconditioned. God like the child (in this case, as a child) belongs to a world that

⁷⁵ William Sax, *The Gods at Play*, 18.

⁷⁶ Glen Hayes, “Possible Selves, Body Schemes, and Sadhana,” 685. The emotional wave of religiosity (bhakti) that Caitanya (1486-1533 CE) inspired throughout northern India and Bengal greatly popularized the worship of Krishna and his divine consort Radha.

⁷⁷ David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, 20-22.

⁷⁸ Patton Burchett, “Krishna.”

is not bound by social and moral convention, a world where fullness and bounty make work superfluous.⁷⁹

Krishna's childhood does much to illuminate the nature and importance of *lila*. Through the play and the deviance of social norms, one can connect to the divine in the symbolic universes of both the Sahajiya and wider Hindu tradition.

The deviance from social obligation and morals characterized by Krishna's youth are also expressed incredibly clearly and succinctly in the poetry of Surdas, a sixteenth-century blind Hindu poet thought to be influenced by the Vallahba school. In his 22nd poem, Surdas writes of the infancy of Krishna:

Holding his foot in his hand, [Krishna] is sucking his toe.
 He lies alone in his cradle absorbed in his happy play.
 Siva has started worrying and Brahma has become thoughtful.
 The Banyan tree has reached the level of the water of the sea.
 Thinking that the clouds of Pralaya [cosmic dissolution] are gathering in the sky,
 Dikpatis are rounding up their elephants.
 Sages are fearful in their hearts, the earth is shaking and the serpent Sesa is
 spreading his hood in anxiety
 The folks of Braj [city of Krishna's birth] do not know what is happening.
 Surdas says that he knows what will happen and so is worried.⁸⁰

Completely aloof and absorbed in self-amusement, the infant Krishna embodies the essence of *lila*. Sucking his toe, he allows the world order to fall into disarray, a testimony to divine freedom and spontaneity that transcends this world and the essential nature of the divine as self-delight.⁸¹ This rejection of social obligation and morals are central to *lila* and to the Vaisnava Sahajiya tradition.

The Krishna myths that provide the greatest insight into *lila* and the Vaisnava Sahajiya traditions, though, are those that take place during his adolescence. As a teenager, Krishna's

⁷⁹ David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, 15.

⁸⁰ Surdas, "The Poems of Surdas," poem 22.

⁸¹ David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, 19.

beautiful appearance is subject to endless poetic descriptions. Irresistible and charming, the passion inspired by the adolescent Krishna is captured well by the sixteenth-century Hindu poetess Mirabai, a devotee of Krishna, whom she proclaimed to be her husband:⁸²

As in summer blooms a garden so my spirit buds and blooms; and of every flower the name is always Krishna. As a butterfly in sunshine filled with light in blue air hovers thus I dance. In the golden halls of Brindaban I dance before my Krishna on whose brow gleams the Tilakam. Holy Krishna. From my lips I tear concealment and my willing breasts reveal; love inflamed I dance into the Light of Blessed Krishna!⁸³

In this poem, the utter beauty of Krishna and the pure divine love or *prema* that Mirabai feels for him is emphasized.⁸⁴ Through this *prema*, Mirabai demonstrates the ethos of the Sahajiya, showing that one must be completely devoted to the divine, as a wife is to her husband in order to achieve liberation.

In traditional mythology it is not Mirabai who is the consort of Krishna, but Radha, a beautiful young milkmaid (gopi) with whom Krishna shares his *prema*. In many of their myths, Krishna and Radha are separated from each other during the daytime, longing to be reunited. During the night, though, the sounds of Krishna's beautiful flute playing awakens Radha and the other gopis, enticing them to come frolic and engage sexually with him.⁸⁵ For her part, Radha employs a coy attitude meant to tempt Krishna and heighten the game of love.⁸⁶ The type of love that Krishna and Radha share with each other – love in separation – is thought to be the most powerful type of love and therefore the most salvific.⁸⁷ As Kinsley explains, “A consistent feature of the love between Radha and Krishna, and indeed love in general, is that it

⁸² David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, 24-25.

⁸³ Paul Althaus, *Mystic Lyrics*, 34.

⁸⁴ Glen Hayes, “Possible Selves, Body Schemes, and Sadhana,” 686.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 686.

⁸⁶ David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, 42-43.

⁸⁷ Edward Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, 17.

takes place in a world apart, in an ideal world that shuns the ordinary world.”⁸⁸ The love story of Krishna and Radha is meant to portray a vision of the divine that is warm and approachable. As they move into the realm of love and lovemaking, Krishna and Radha invite a total, impassioned response from worshippers.⁸⁹ It is here that there is a significant difference between orthodox and Sahajiya Vaisnavism: While the orthodox believed love in separation to be sacred only in poetry, the Sahajiya asserted it to be sacred in both poetry and doctrine.⁹⁰ Thus, it was around this life-affirming eroticism that the Vaisnava Sahajiya based their tradition.

Although it is difficult to locate and translate authentic Vaisnava Sahajiya texts, “The Necklace of Immortality” demonstrates the importance of *lila* and *prema* in the tradition. Translated by Glen Hayes, the text illustrates their symbolic universe, providing instructions on performance of their ritualized and supposedly salvific sexual intercourse:

57. The Place of the Hidden Moon is reached by joining the two principles together. Behold how all the regions of the vast cosmos emerge in that special place.

96. The Pond of Lust is reached through the ninth door of the human body. This is a subject which has been revealed by the holy books.

97. There are four Ponds within the body: The Pond of Lust, the Pond of Arrogance, the Pond of Divine Love, and the Pond of Immortality.

98. The four Ponds exist within the human heart. If you have a physical body, you can reach the other shores of reality.

99. The pond of Lust is the most sought-after thing of all. Without fail, you must keep performing your practices.

168. You must perform your practices with the physical body of your Female Partner. Through such practices, you will attain your own Cosmic Substance.

169. The Ponds are within the man, but the woman becomes conscious of them. A Female Partner suitable for such practices should be a desirable and joyful woman.

170. During sexual intercourse, the Ponds and lotuses shimmer with erotic energies. The Pond of Divine Love, where Divine Love blossoms, is eternal.⁹¹

⁸⁸ David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*, 41.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹⁰ Edward Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, 13

⁹¹ Glen Hayes, “The Necklace of Immortality,” 321-323.

Just as Krishna and Radha engaged sexually with each other, so did the Vaisnava Sahajiya with female partners. In this way, the tradition embodies the rejection of societal norms and the strength of divine love, *prema*, as a path towards salvation. As Hayes describes, the Sahajiya believed that within every individual was a “true form” that corresponded to the inner divine aspect of either Krishna or Radha.⁹² Engaging with this aspect, they believed, was the key to escaping *samsara*⁹³ and achieving liberation from this world.

The myths of Krishna and his *lila* and *prema* heavily influenced the symbolic universe of the Vaisnava Sahajiya. His embodiment of *lila* and emphasis on breaking traditional social obligations and morals, as well as the erotic nature of his adolescence guided them towards erotic rituals that became central to their tradition. Drawing from the strength of divine love, *prema*, the Sahajiya attempted to achieve salvation. In this way, the Sahajiya imagined a symbolic universe in which deviation from societal norms and engagement in divine play and love provided a conception of the universe. As before with the Maori, these beliefs provided emotional support to their members, greatly informed their social controls, and led to the creation of distinct trait-groups. The character of these social controls in both the Maori and Sahajiya traditions will now be examined.

Social Controls

Central to ability of MLS to model groups dynamics are social controls. Functioning as punishments that lower the relative cost of altruistic behaviors, they are the rules that govern any given society or collective. Without them, a group would be overwhelmed from within by selfish

⁹² Ibid., 310.

⁹³ *Samara* can be defined as the constant cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that keeps individuals trapped in a constant state of worldly suffering.

individuals. Still, though, the power of social controls cannot be said to be completely predictive, as it is but one force acting upon an individual and a group. At any given time – and possibly depending on the individual or group – social controls may prove to be more or less effective. In other words, even with a set of well-regulated social controls, there are still likely to be some cheaters who find ways to cut corners for their own individual benefit. However, a well-policed set of social controls will discourage the majority of individuals from cheating the system and damaging the group, as the risk of discovery may be greatly outweighed by the benefits of adherence. Both the Maori, drawing from their emphasis on kinship, and the Vaisnava Sahajiya, drawing from Krishna’s *lila* and *prema*, developed unique but homologous sets of social controls that regulated their societies.

[A] The Rules of the Maori: *Tika, Mana, Tapu, and Noa*

Early ethnographers have accused the Maori of having no generalized concept of good and/or good vs. evil. While this stance may accord with Western theological and ethical ideas, it does not capture the complexity of Maori social controls. It is undeniably true that the Maori did not possess an explicit list of rules (such as the 10 Commandments in Christianity). However, in their place, the Maori have traditionally focused on following the ways of their ancestors, who serve as a model for kinship group or tribe. Here, the concept of *tika*, meaning simply “natural,” has its place in Maori social controls. As Jorgen Prytz-Johansen (1911 – 1989) – an often-cited Danish historian of religion versed in both the Maori and other Polynesian languages – puts it:

There is no well-defined distinction between history and the customs of the ancestors as an expression of man’s nature on the one hand and history and the customs as a deliberate model on the other. In other words, ethics are after all an aspect of man’s nature; man’s love of woman, his claim for rehabilitation for

insults, and his liberality are all three of them parts of his humanity. It may be said in one word in Maori; they are *tika*; they belong to his *tikanga*.⁹⁴

In Maori thought, following the ways of one's ancestors – the way that life had always been – was the highest ethical ideal. By doing this, one could live a *tika* life. This concept was a major social control that regulated their daily lives, enforced not by a single god but by the collective strength of their ancestry.⁹⁵

Maori mythology teaches that the gods ensure everything is kept within its own bounds, meaning everything is *tika*, having its own specific nature. The way in which each entity expresses its *tika* is through *tikanga* – a word derived from *tika*, which denotes its nature or function. For example, the *tikanga* of a human being includes their appearance, conduct, habits, and so forth. It is the way one acts and the inner form of life that manifests itself in one's conduct. Being in accord with human nature, being “natural” and therefore reasonable and correct is the central quality here.⁹⁶ Importantly, though, behaving naturally – following one's ancestors – is defined in reference to a particular type of ancestor: namely, the *rangatira*, a nobleman or chief who embodies all Maori virtues.⁹⁷ Thus, Maori held themselves to an ideal embodied by their great, wise ancestors.⁹⁸

The ethical ideal embodied by the *rangatira* served as a model for the Maori, especially those of high rank, such as living chiefs. To Maori of lower rank, these ethical ideals remained important, but were not emphasized to the same degree. As recorded by Best from a Ngati Awa (a Maori tribe) source, these qualities of a great, wise chief are as follows:

1. Industrious in obtaining and cultivating food.
2. Able in settling disputes, etc.

⁹⁴ Roy Perret and John Patterson, “Virtue Ethics and Maori Ethics,” 187.

⁹⁵ As was discussed previously, the line between ancestors and gods were greatly blurred in Maori society.

⁹⁶ Roy Perret and John Patterson, “Virtue Ethics and Maori Ethics,” 187.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁹⁸ A *rangatira* was also a hereditary title for the leader of each tribe.

3. Bravery.
4. Good leader in war – an able general.
5. An expert at carving, tattooing and at ornamental weaving.
6. Hospitality.
7. Clever at building a house or *pa*, and in canoe-making
8. A good knowledge of boundaries of tribal land.

In order to bring good fortune to himself and his tribe, a chief must do his best to exhibit all of these qualities.⁹⁹ If he fails or is outdone by a rival chief, his tribe may face serious repercussions, such as defeat in battle, slavery, or even death.

While the concept of *tika* and the ideal of a *rangatira* do well to explain one facet of Maori social controls, no characterization of the Maori social control system would be complete without a discussion of *mana*, *tapu*, and *noa*. *Mana* can be defined as a supernatural power that can be present in a person, place, object, or spirit. It is commonly understood as prestige, power, or authority; however, such status is really a product of possessing *mana*, rather than *mana* itself.¹⁰⁰ On some occasions, something could become *tapu* by being imbued with *mana*. Often translated as “prohibited,” *tapu* can serve a protective role, denoting places or persons with high *mana* and warning individuals against the potential harm of encountering it. However, a more apt translation – as given by Johansen – is “inviolable.”¹⁰¹ Something can be *tapu* either for its own sake, thus being “inviolable,” or for the sake of others, because it is dangerous.¹⁰² Further, *mana* may contribute to the *tapu* nature of an individual, object, or place, but *tapu* things need not possess *mana*.¹⁰³ *Noa*, on the other hand, simply translates to “free of *tapu*.”¹⁰⁴ An object or person that was *noa* was common and thus generally safe to approach or touch, whereas an

⁹⁹ Jorgan Prytz-Johansen, “Tapu,” 173. These qualities were especially emphasized for living chiefs. Maoris who were not chiefs did not worry themselves as much with adhering to these ideals.

¹⁰⁰ Roy Perret and John Patterson, “Virtue Ethics and Maori Ethics,” 192.

¹⁰¹ Another word frequently used to translate *tapu* is “sacred.” As an adjective, though, *tapu* translates to “requiring consideration.”

¹⁰² Jorgan Prytz-Johansen, “Tapu,” 174.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁰⁴ Adele Fletcher, “Sanctity, Power, and the “Impure Sacred,”” 54.

object or person that was greatly *tapu* was not.¹⁰⁵ As shall be discussed, all of these concepts relate to concepts of kinship and helped to create social controls in Maori society.

Mana can be described as a type of fellowship between kinship members, permeating and being shared by entire tribal groups. The chief and the tribe shared a common, identical *mana*, although the chief owned the *mana* of the others in the tribe.¹⁰⁶ In this way, his *mana* was the sum of his and of each his tribal members' *mana*. Thus, as possessing *mana* was thought to correlate with success, authority, and power, a chief who ruled over more subjects with greater *mana* was thought to be better able to fulfill Best's eight qualities of a *rangatira*. This metaphysical aspect of *mana* led to the creation of a hereditary system wherein chiefs became transmuted into the aristocratic class.¹⁰⁷ Johansen sums up this relationship between *mana* and success well, stating, "Just as the *mana* of the feet shows itself in speed, so the *mana* of the forest manifests itself by there being many birds, as the forest and its birds constitute a whole which descends from Taane."¹⁰⁸ In this way, the success of a chief and his tribe are related to their *mana*, so the fates of all related individuals was thought to be regulated by their shared *mana*, leading to the creation of social controls that promote reciprocity within trait-groups.

Mana was not a static quantity, it could be gained or lost based on one's actions. In one text, a war between two chiefs – Mango and Whatihua – makes this transference of *mana* perfectly clear. Whatihua advanced towards Mango's fortress, but as he drew close, Mango's people made a sally and defeated Whatihua, killing many of his men. Captured, Whatihua was taken before Mango, who forced his head to the ground and urinated upon it, stealing his

¹⁰⁵ From the word *tapu*, the English word taboo is derived.

¹⁰⁶ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, "Mana," 81. The *mana* that permeates a kinship group is the source of the chief's authority.

¹⁰⁷ Roger Keesing, "Rethinking "Mana," 152.

¹⁰⁸ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, "Mana," 79.

mana.¹⁰⁹ *Mana* was also dependent on behavior. For instance, to maintain their chief's *mana*, a kinship group must honor their chief, however, as an inherent part of their fellowship, so must a chief honor his people.¹¹⁰ In doing so, *mana* is created, and a reciprocal relationship was established. By permeating the fellowship of *mana* with his personality – through gift-giving or another action – he attaches people to him, allowing himself and his tribe to attain greater success. Therefore, it is impossible to say whether a person honors others for his own sake or the sake of others, as one honors *mana* itself, which is communally shared among the fellowship.¹¹¹ The success of the chief and the tribe depend heavily on one another, so these customs were strong social controls toward cooperation.

Like the chief and his people, the chief and his land shared a *mana*. Of course, since the chief's *mana* is deeply connected to that of his tribe, so can it be said that the tribe's *mana* is shared with the land. Thus, as with his people, the possession of land manifests itself in a true fellowship, meaning that a chief must understand how to make the country yield. In this way, social controls towards developing skills such as fishing and/or farming were encouraged, as an individual devoid of these skills would be thought to have low *mana* and be less respected in society. In one legend, for example, two men, Whata and Tongowhiti, were both interested in obtaining the *mana* of a lake. Both men placed eel traps, but only Whata understood where to place them so that he caught the eels, proving that he had a true fellowship with the lake. So, Whata took the lake and its *mana* for himself and his tribe. Just as the *mana* of his people affects him, so does the *mana* of his land. Because of his fellowship with the lake, Whata was thought to

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 76-77.

¹¹⁰ All free men who participate in the fellowship have *mana* (their share in the fellowship), meaning that the chief is very far from being an absolute ruler. However, his considerable amount of *mana* gives him great influence.

¹¹¹ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, "Mana," 82-83.

become a better fisherman.¹¹² This story hints at the existence of a social anxiety towards the mastery of skills, as those who were skilled were thought to possess greater *mana* and therefore to be more successful.

By far the best example of *mana* and its necessity to the Maori comes from battle. As was also the case with the tribe and land, involving one's surroundings in a fellowship allows one to have some effect on it. Without possessing *mana* and permeating another's *mana* with one's own, one is powerless to cause change. *Mana* and fellowship are so important that even with an enemy in battle a fellowship must be formed. It is for this reason that an enemy is called *hoa-riri*, translating to "fighting-comrade." The outward manifestation of a fight, then, is really only a question of who has the greater *mana* i.e. who can conquer the other from within, bringing the others will and confidence to the ground so that one's weapon can reap the final victory. In other words, the loser has *mana* forced upon them that desires their defeat, or even death. As opposed to other more benign fellowships, this type of fellowship involves both parties attempting to completely dominate the *mana* of the other. Thus, if successful, one may be said to take their enemy's *mana*, making the chief aspect of war a fight of *mana*.¹¹³ Again, this belief hints at the existence of a social anxiety towards to mastery of skills, in this case battle. An individual who was more skilled in battle was thought to possess greater *mana*, and to be more successful for that reason.

As previously discussed, one's *mana* or lack thereof can affect their *tapu*. However, *tapu* was also dependent on an individual's ancestry. *Tapu* individuals inherited their *tapu* from their relationship to their *atua* and *tupuna*. The more direct one's descent from the gods, the greater

¹¹² Ibid., 84-85.

¹¹³ Ibid., 86-87.

their *tapu* and the higher their rank.¹¹⁴ Thus, *tapu* arguably played a larger role in the daily lives of the Maori, permeating every level and almost every aspect of their lives. As Johansen puts it, “*Tapu* contains demands which are respected by everybody without exception from slave to chief, although the demands made are different for those two extremes of society.”¹¹⁵ *Tapu*, was taken so seriously, in fact, that violations – known as *hara* – were thought to likely result in disaster or even death for those involved.¹¹⁶ Thus, notions of *tapu* were constantly on the mind of all Maori and formed important and powerful social controls. Like the concept of *tika*, this belief encouraged individuals to live in accordance with their ancestors wishes. It also made them adhere to societal hierarchy.

Numerous sources have offered various and sometimes conflicting descriptions of *tapu* throughout the ages. The sum of these accounts, though, offers an intriguing perspective. Edward Shortland – A New Zealand scholar and linguist who is known as one of the most perceptive Western observers and writers on the subject of *tapu* – offered the following account of *tapu*:

A portion of the spiritual essence of an *Atua*, or of a sacred person, was communicated directly to objects which they touched, and also... the spiritual essence so communicated to any object was afterwards more or less retransmitted to anything else brought into contact with it... the act of eating food which had touched anything *tapu* involved the necessity of eating the sacred essence of the *Atua*, from whom it derived sacredness. If to eat an enemy was the greatest insult to be offered to him, how horrible to eat anything containing a particle of the divine essence.¹¹⁷

Shortland’s analysis of *tapu* does well to capture its infectious nature, according well with Johansen’s account, which describes *tapu* as life.¹¹⁸ Propagating by contact, any violation of or

¹¹⁴ Jean Smith, “Tapu Removal in Maori Religion,” 26.

¹¹⁵ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, “Tapu,” 173.

¹¹⁶ Adele Fletcher, “Sanctity, Power, and the “Impure Sacred,”” 55.

¹¹⁷ Edward Shortland, *Traditions and Superstitions of the New Zealanders*, 102.

¹¹⁸ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, “Tapu,” 176.

contact with *tapu* persons, objects, or places made the offender themselves *tapu* as well.¹¹⁹ In these descriptions, *tapu* functions as the left-over life given off by touch. More interestingly, though, it provides a basis for social hierarchy, as some were believed to be inherently more *tapu* than others.

This extraneous life could have disastrous affects if not removed, such as illness, death, or lunacy. For instance, a slave who eats the chief's food gets part of the fellowship into them but lacks the *tapu* needed to assimilate it. Therefore, it does not become *mana*, but rather *aitua*, an extraneous and dangerous element. Violations of *tapu* could also result in lunacy, nervousity, anxiety, and cowardice due to the presence of this extraneous life.¹²⁰ One Maori text describes this belief well:

34. It is these *tapus*,
35. It is these illnesses,
36. It is these great gods who kill.
37. *Kahukura* will rise on this sky.
38. Go, you whipping gods!
39. Go, you beating gods!
40. Go behind!
41. Go through the big toes!
42. ? (Mahihi ora)
43. To the day,
44. To the World of Light,
45. Saved spirit.¹²¹

Lines 34-36 parallel *tapus*, illness, and gods who kill, suggesting that in the violator of a *tapu* the illness was caused by the presence of extraneous life, expressed either by “the *tapu*” or by *atua* “demon” or “god.” Lines 38-45, on the other hand, appeal directly to the god *Kahukura* – the reliever of afflictions caused by *atua ngau tangata* (man afflicting demons) according to Maori

¹¹⁹ Adele Fletcher, “Sanctity, Power, and the “Impure Sacred,”” 55.

¹²⁰ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, “Tapu,” 181-182.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

mythology.¹²² Contact with the life essence of another being that one is unable to assimilate was thought to have potentially horrific consequences. This was a major social control promoting adherence to social hierarchy.

Similarly, having one's *tapu* violated by another could have equally as disastrous consequences, causing chiefs, priests, and other individuals of high *tapu* to carefully avoid things that could violate their *tapu*. A priest, for instance, may lose their specific content of life due to a violation of their *tapu*, which is expressed by stating that their *atua*, 'god,' leaves them. Thus, the whole nobility of an individual is at stake. If one's *tapu* is violated, they can have no *mana* and cannot function as a great chief.¹²³ In effect, violation of one's *tapu* robbed them of part of their life essence. It is for this reason that Johansen remarked, "However formal the word *tapu* is in itself – what makes the *tapu* customs an institution is not strange and exotic rules of the game, but a profound respect for life, an awe which now honor, now fear stands in the foreground."¹²⁴ According to Johansen, life must be perfect and whole, thus any pollution or weakening of one's *tapu* – in the form of extraneous life or one's own diminished life force – was a deadly danger, simply because life was no longer whole.¹²⁵ For Johansen, *tapu* is a reflection of life.

However, Jean Smith – another authority on the subject of *tapu* – disagrees with Johansen's life-centered interpretation, arguing instead that this claim is an unqualified generalization, applying to only a limited number of Maori attitudes towards *tapu*. Instead, Smith argues that *tapu*, like *mana*, is a process of subjugation, relating it to the common utilized Maori metaphor of eating. As she puts it, "Food that is eaten wrongfully can turn and eat the eater..."¹²⁶

¹²² Ibid., 181.

¹²³ Ibid., 183.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 185.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 188.

¹²⁶ Jean Smith, "Tapu Removal in Maori Religion," 39-42.

This view again brings to mind the case of a slave eating their chief's food. Lacking the *tapu* to assimilate it, the food does not become *mana*, but rather the dangerous element *aitua*. While Johansen argues that the resulting illness is caused by the presence of extraneous life, Smith contends that the slave's inferior *tapu* is subjugated to the chief's superior *tapu*, causing illness and eventually death. In either case, the result is the same: contact with persons, objects, or places with greater *tapu* can prove deadly, suggesting the existence of a social control that punished those who deviated from societal structure.

Smith's use of the eating metaphor sheds important light on the concept of *tapu*. As he describes, "All *tapus*, whether protective or destructive, involved subjection to the gods, and it is very significant that Kararehe described *tapus* as feeding on man. Metaphorical expressions relating to cooking and eating were among the commonest type of metaphor the Maori used."¹²⁷ Recall Shortland, who described eating an enemy as the greatest possible insult to be offered to him. Upon considering the metaphor of eating, it becomes clear that this insult is in part the subjugation and assimilation of their *mana*. To combine Johansen and Smith's representations of *tapu*, it could be said that the extraneous life passed on to a violator of *tapu* either eats them or is eaten by them. This view seems to be confirmed by the Maori view of sickness, especially of stomachaches, and death, which were thought to confirm that one really was eaten by the gods.¹²⁸ In Maori culture, the metaphor of eating held significant emotional, theological, and ethical weight, contributing to their social control system.

Tapu removal rituals, too, seem to confirm the explanatory power of the eating metaphor and the existence of social controls for hierarchy. Rather than being described as purification rituals – rituals in which an individual is purified of a foreign substance – it is more apt to

¹²⁷ Ibid., 36.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 37.

describe them as pollution rituals. One was not purified of the foreign *tapu*, but rather the foreign *tapu* was polluted. As Smith explains, “Just as a man’s protective *tapu* was removed through pollution in *hara*, so the most effective way of removing a destructive *tapu* ritually was through pollution.”¹²⁹ Thus, polluting agents – such as cooked food, excrement, and the vagina – were used to remove foreign *tapu*.¹³⁰ Cooking food, it was thought, deprived it of its *tapu*, making it *noa*. As such, bringing cooked food into contact with something *tapu* was the most usual method of committing *hara* and removing *tapu*.¹³¹ However, eating was another powerful method of pollution. When one eats, they either pollute something more powerful than themselves and die, or they subjugate something less powerful than himself and live.¹³² Through pollution, *tapu* could be manipulated and subjected and the social controls for hierarchy were reinforced.

The *tapu* of the gods was thought to be especially potent, hence *tapu* pollution rituals were used to subjugate and control them. It was thought that the ritual pollution of a *tapu* entity had the opposite effect of *hara* – subjugation of the gods, rather than by the gods. Offerings of cooked foods, for instance, were believed to deprive the gods of their power by polluting them. Another – and the most extreme – method of controlling the gods was to directly cook and eat them. Lizards, for example, which were considered to be *atua ngau tangata* (man-eating gods), were on occasion ceremonially cooked and consumed. To put it another way, if an individual saw themselves as being eaten or otherwise subjected by the gods in *tapu*, in *tapu* removal it was they who ate the gods.¹³³ Perhaps the best example of the pollution and subjection can be found

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³⁰ The role of women in Maori society disputed in sources. Sometimes they are described as being *noa*, allowing them to cook food. However, they are often featured in *tapu* removal rituals. In one such ritual, the woman steps over the *tapu* violator. Sources written by older ethnographers presume that it is the close proximity to her vagina that pollutes and removes the foreign *tapu*. More contemporary sources, though, contend that *tapu* was not connected to gender.

¹³¹ Jean Smith, “Tapu Removal in Maori Religion,” 28-29.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 48.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 33-37.

in the Maori creation myth itself. Recall that after fending off Taawhiri, Tuu grew angry with his brothers, caught their children, and subjugated and ate them. In this way, Tuu made his brothers *noa*, articles of food. Through pollution, the *tapu* of the gods could be diminished and eventually subjected to humanity. This hierarchical reversal seems to be an exception that proves the rule. Through ritual manipulation and inversion of the social control that allowed the gods power over them, the Maori attempted to dominate their gods.

Maori social controls are a complex and interlocking puzzle all relating to concepts of kin. The concepts of *tika*, *mana*, *tapu*, and *noa* are incredibly interrelated and had far reaching implications. Possessing *mana*, which could be gained through the subjugation of others' *mana*, manifested itself in outward success and power, possibly increasing one's *tapu*, although this was not always the case. *Tapu*, on the other hand, allowed *mana* to be assimilated and subjugated. One's *tapu* could be diminished through pollution or subjugated completely if confronted with a more powerful *tapu*. Thus, possessing *mana* and *tapu*, allowed one to come closer to the ethical ideal of a *rangatira*. Informed by the symbolic universe populated by *tupuna* and *atua* alike, these conceptions resulted in the formation of numerous social controls.

While it would be impossible to provide a complete list of the social controls present in Maori society, I will attempt to highlight several common and important ones. These various social controls, their bases, and consequences are summarized in the below table:

Table 2. The Basis and Group Effect of Selected Maori Social Controls

Selected Social Control	Basis of Punishment	Group Effect
Punishment for Breaking from Social Norms	<i>Tika</i> – Those who did not live in accordance with their ancestors were pushed to the margins of society.	This resulted in adherence to the ethical ideal of the <i>rangatira</i> , promoting qualities such as industriousness, skill in diplomacy, bravery, hospitality, and knowledge of tribal lands – all of which would provide group benefits.
Punishment for Lack of Reciprocity	<i>Mana</i> – Chiefs who did not give to their people and people who did not give to their chief were thought to be less successful.	By entering reciprocal fellowships, the Maori encouraged cooperation and altruism between the chief, his subjects, and their collective land. In this way, group benefits were provided.
Punishment for Lack of Skill	<i>Mana</i> – Those who were low in <i>mana</i> were treated with less respect.	Because outward success was thought to correlate with <i>mana</i> level, there was likely a level of anxiety that prompted individuals to practice useful skills – battle, fishing, etc. Groups containing individuals who are adept in these skills would likely outcompete those without. ¹³⁴
Punishment for Hierarchical Violations	<i>Mana/Tapu/Noa</i> – <i>Tapu</i> violations were thought to have dire consequences including illness and even death.	These beliefs likely lead to the creation of organized and stratified groups that were more efficient than disorganized ones, allowing them greater efficiency and success. ¹³⁵

In this way the symbolic universe of the Maori led to the creation of rules that directly punished individuals for breaking from group norms and increased overall group fitness. The same basic process can be observed in Vaisnava Sahajiya and larger Hindu tradition.

[B] The Rules of the Sahajiya: *Dharma, Svadharma, Samsara, and Moksha*

Interpreting the social controls of Hinduism is a difficult endeavor, as the tradition is so extremely diverse, containing an immense amount of primary literature of various authorities. Hindu literature rarely provides a straight forward answer to any problem.¹³⁶ While the interpretation of generalized Hindu social controls is difficult enough, the interpretation of Vaisnava Sahajiya social controls is further complicated by a lack of primary sources. Orthodox

¹³⁴ Roger Kessing, "Rethinking "Mana," 147.

¹³⁵ Peter Buck, *The Coming of the Maori*, 345-347.

¹³⁶ Arti Dhand, "The Dharma of Ethics, the Ethics of Dharma," 350.

Hindu ethics speak of *dharma*, but the Sahajiya seem to have rejected or reimagined many of these principles. As devoted Krishna worshipers, after all, they fully embraced the concept of *lila*, rejecting traditional social norms and values. Still, though, a discussion of orthodox Hindu ethical ideals helps to provide a background on the society and beliefs from which the Sahajiya emerged. Drawing from orthodox Hindu ethics and the theology of the Sahajiya, their social controls will be examined.

Orthodox Hindu thought had both non-soteriological and soteriological elements, represented by the concepts of *dharma* and *moksha* respectively. A set of texts known collectively as *Dharmasatra* literature deals primarily with non-soteriological, worldly issues that affect the everyday lives of Hindus. For this reason, any discussion of Hindu social controls must include a discussion of *dharma* – an action concept in religious Hinduism that served as a reference point for daily implementation. *Dharma* can be said to function as a normative concept that has been promulgated, ratified, and constantly re-worked by those in power, mainly the Brahmins, throughout the centuries.¹³⁷ The soteriological side of orthodox Hindu thought, on the other hand, concentrates on otherworldly issues. Generally, it can be said that Hindus believe that they are trapped in a constant cycle of birth, death, and rebirth known as *samsara*. For Hindus, this was a great misfortune and source of suffering. Most post-Vedic classical Hindu texts, therefore, agree on one common good: *moksha*, translated usually as “liberation” or “freedom.”¹³⁸ This liberation from *samsara* became a theological ideal for Hindus – to escape the suffering of this world and be united with the divine. *Dharma* and *moksha* are both central concepts in Hinduism that the Sahajiya reinterpreted.

¹³⁷ Julius Lipner, *The Hindus*, 98.

¹³⁸ Arti Dhand, “The Dharma of Ethics, the Ethics of Dharma,” 350-351.

Dharma played an incredibly important role in everyday Hindu life. According to professor of Hinduism at the College of William and Mary Patton Burchett, *dharma* is believed to uphold and sustain the integrity of the universe, maintaining social order. Further, it was believed that human behavior that was in accord with *dharma* was beneficial, while actions that were not had negative consequences.¹³⁹ For these reasons, it serves as the basis for many social controls. The most general form of *dharma*, applying to all persons according to the *Mahabharata*, dictates that one must adhere to a code of non-harmfulness, as well as truthfulness, charity, patience, self-restraint, and compassion. These values are geared towards self-cultivation, creating cooperative group members. However, the degree to which any given person adhered to this general code of ethics was greatly dependent upon their own spiritual insight and wisdom.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, understanding *dharma* and behaving in a manner that accords with it were two entirely different matters.

To complicate the matter further, there also exists individual, specific *dharma*. Sometimes translated as *svadharma*, this form of *dharma* was particular for each being. A male in a specific *varna* (social class), for instance, has a different *svadharma* compared to a woman in another *varna*.¹⁴¹ Thus, Hindu social controls also depend upon personhood. As Arti Dhand - an associate professor at the University of Toronto, specializing in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* - explains:

One is not simply a person; one is a man or a woman. One is not simply a worker in the public world, but one belongs to a particular occupational community - a community of sweepers, for example, or a community of scholars and philosophers, that is, a caste community. One's personhood is circumscribed by considerations of one's vocation, or stage of life - whether one is a student, for example, or whether one is an earning member of a society, a householder. One's

¹³⁹ Patton Burchett, "Dharma and Karma / Mahabharata."

¹⁴⁰ Arti Dhand, "The Dharma of Ethics, the Ethics of Dharma," 354-356.

¹⁴¹ Patton Burchett, "Dharma and Karma / Mahabharata."

personhood is further elaborated by one's age and seniority in various hierarchies.¹⁴²

The rationale behind these differences – in the terminology of the Samkhya philosophical school, which eventually was adopted into the lexicon of all later schools – was that all matter was composed of three strands, or *gunas* – lightness, energy, and heaviness.¹⁴³ Combining and manifesting in different ratios within different beings, these *gunas* rendered each person necessarily unique, and therefore in need of different specific *dharmas* to guide them.¹⁴⁴ Thus, each individual had responsibilities and expectations that were specific to their place in society, creating a social control towards hierarchy.

However, the general and specific forms of *dharma* were not always in accord with one another, sometimes conflicting directly. When this was the case, a Hindu was faced with a real ethical and moral dilemma, as was the case with Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Part of the *Mahabharata*, the *Gita* centers around the story of two warring bands of cousins – the Kauravas and the Pandavas – who fight over the right to rule their kingdom.¹⁴⁵ Arjuna, a Pandava, is forced to choose between subdivisions of his particular *dharma*, his *kuladharmā* (*dharma* of family) and his *varnadharma* (*dharma* of his occupation as a warrior), and the general *dharmic* principle of non-harmfulness. While his *kuladharmā* dictates that he should not harm – and especially not kill – his kin, his *varnadharma* requires him to kill whoever may be his foe in battle.¹⁴⁶ Thus, Arjuna was placed in a horrible and confusing ethical position, demonstrating quite clearly that understanding and adhering to one's *dharma* can be difficult.

¹⁴² Arti Dhand, "The Dharma of Ethics, the Ethics of Dharma," 352.

¹⁴³ An individual manifesting high degree of lightness in their mental and psychological frames may be better suited towards the responsibility of teaching, while those who manifest higher levels of energy may be better able to defend territory and maintain order.

¹⁴⁴ Arti Dhand, "The Dharma of Ethics, the Ethics of Dharma," 352.

¹⁴⁵ Patton Burchett, "Dharma and Karma / Mahabharata."

¹⁴⁶ Arti Dhand, "The Dharma of Ethics, the Ethics of Dharma," 357.

Despite the difficulties, though, specific correct actions are still thought to exist.

Overcome with grief, Arjuna turns to his counselor and charioteer (who unbeknownst to him was Krishna in human form), telling him that he had decided not to fight. Upon hearing this, Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna, reminding him that the self is immortal, while the body of any human being will be destroyed sooner or later:

Our bodies are known to end,
but the embodied self is enduring,
indestructible, and immeasurable;
therefore, Arjuna, fight the battle!

He who thinks this self a killer
and he who thinks it killed,
both fail to understand;
it does not kill, nor is it killed.¹⁴⁷

As Krishna tells Arjuna, there is still a path that is in harmony with *dharma*, specifically that of his *varnadharma*.¹⁴⁸ Thus, despite any confusion, there are specific social controls to which a Hindu is expected to adhere in each situation that generally support a stratified society.

However, the Sahajiya largely broke with traditional Hindu thought, disregarding social and moral norms to focus on their own salvation through *moksha*. A tantric sect, they focused on sensual experiences to achieve a state of transcendence. As Glen Hayes explains, tantra refers to a wide variety of yogic techniques that emphasize the correspondence between the human body and the universe and that use an equilibrium between male and female energies to reach an ultimate reality.¹⁴⁹ Although tantra was not usually sexual in content, the tantric practices of the Sahajiya community heavily ritualized sexual intercourse, considering it to be salvific.¹⁵⁰

Believing that each individual was a microcosm of the universe and that the guiding principle of

¹⁴⁷ *The Bhagavad Gita*, 34.

¹⁴⁸ Patton Burchett, "Dharma and Karma / Mahabharata."

¹⁴⁹ Glen Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal," 333.

¹⁵⁰ Glen Hayes, "The Necklace of Immortality," 311.

this universe was unity, the Sahajiya thought that cosmic unity could be regained through the sexual union of a man and a woman.¹⁵¹ However, this emphasis on sexuality caused great discomfort in the larger Bengali Vaishnava community during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries; and, as such, many facts about the Sahajiya community remain unclear, such as their precise ethical standpoint.¹⁵² However, it can be said with certainty that their ultimate goal was to transcend the realm of *samsara* through Tantric ritual practices.¹⁵³ In this way, the Sahajiya community uniquely utilized ritualized sexual intercourse to create a social control that encouraged members to shun societal obligations in the hopes of achieving *moksha*.

As has been previously discussed, the Sahajiya were heavily influenced by the Caitanya school of Hinduism in Bengal. In this school, the relationship between Krishna and the gopis was a theological one, meant to allegorize a soul's quest to rejoin its creator. The gopis, representing the human soul, were drawn to Krishna by his flute playing, wanting nothing more than to unite with him. Accordingly, the rituals of Caitanya Vaishnavism sought to develop an alternative spiritual body with the identity of one of Krishna's followers. To accomplish this feat, they sang hymns, chanted, and danced. Some individuals even chose to "become" female attendants to Krishna's most loved consort Radha, so that they could experience the most intense type of love with their deity.¹⁵⁴ In this way, the Caitanya held a dualistic view, believing that human beings themselves were not divine. Conversely, the Sahajiya believed that within every individual was a "true form" that corresponded to the inner divine aspect of either Krishna or Radha, implying their own divinity.¹⁵⁵ Engaging with this aspect, they believed, was the key to escaping *samsara*

¹⁵¹ Edward Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, 36.

¹⁵² Bengali society was sexually conservative according to Hayes.

¹⁵³ Glen Hayes, "The Necklace of Immortality," 311.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 310-312.

¹⁵⁵ Glen Hayes, "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Traditions of Medieval Bengal," 338.

and achieving liberation. This was the theological basis for their aforementioned social control to seek *moksha* above all else.

Embracing this sensuality, *lila*, and *prema*, Sahajiya ritual practice occurred in three stages. The first stage (*pravarta*) utilized standard Caitanya ritual devotions – singing hymns, chanting, and dancing to and with Krishna – in order to develop an alternative spiritual body with the identity of one of Krishna’s followers. After completion, the second (*sadhaka*) and third (*siddha*) stages, which involved coitus and erotic activities, were gradually introduced. As Hayes states, “Underlying the whole process was the need to transform worldly passions and lust into pure divine love.” The ritual amplification of these feelings and emotions, along with the inclusion of various erotic games as part of the sexual ritual help to distinguish the Sahajiya model from most other practitioners of tantra.¹⁵⁶ These stages engaged the senses in a variety of ways – ranging from song and dance to carnal pleasure. Through sensuality and divine play, the Sahajiya believed that they would be liberated.

The social controls of the Sahajiya are difficult to characterize because of their secrecy and lack of primary sources. Their emphasis on sensuality and sexuality makes it seem likely that they on some level disregarded many ethical and moral standards of Hindu society, especially those associated with their personhoods. However, there is little evidence to suggest that they deviated greatly from these social controls. After all, the secrecy with which they practiced must have made it almost a necessity to at least appear to adhere to *dharmic* principles in their public lives. It is difficult to say to what extent the Sahajiya accepted orthodox Hindu social controls, but they were certainly regulated by them. What is undeniable, however, is that they embraced the theological concept of *moksha* above all else.

¹⁵⁶ Glen Hayes, “The Necklace of Immortality,” 313.

Drawing heavily from the importance of *lila* and *prema* in their symbolic universe, the Sahajiya created social controls that were influenced by the more orthodox Hindu tradition and were thought to lead to *moksha*. These various social controls, their bases, and consequences are summarized in the below table:

Table 3. The Basis and Group Effects of Selected Sahajiya Social Controls

Selected Social Control	Basis of Punishment	Group Effect
Punishment for Breaking from Social Norms	<i>Dharma/Svadharm</i> a – Because living in accordance with <i>dharmic</i> principles was thought to sustain the integrity of the universe, those who did not were pushed to the margins of society.	By rejecting many societal norms associated with the principles of <i>dharma</i> and <i>svadharm</i> a, the Sahajiya risked punishment from the larger Hindu community of Bengal. For this reason, they kept many of their practices secret.
Punishment for Lack of Reciprocity	<i>Dharma</i> – Again, deviating from <i>dharmic</i> principles was thought to threaten the integrity of the universe and social integrity, so those who did were pushed to the margins.	The general form of <i>dharma</i> promoted qualities such as non-harmfulness, truthfulness, charity, patience, self-restraint, and compassion. There is no direct evidence to suggest that the Sahajiya rejected these more universal principles, so they likely enjoyed group benefits associated with these cooperative traits.
Punishment for Lack of Skill	<i>Moksha/Samsara</i> – Lack of competency in the sexual rituals of the Sahajiya meant continued suffering in the cycle of <i>samsara</i> .	It is the goal of most, if not all, Hindus to escape from <i>samsara</i> . Because the Sahajiya believed their sexual rituals to be the best method of achieving <i>moksha</i> , they were willing to risk societal rejection. Thus, they may have concentrated on developing their ritualistic skills and neglected more worldly skills, decreasing their group fitness.
Punishment for Hierarchical Violations	<i>Svadharm</i> a – <i>Svadharm</i> a separated groups into class and occupational communities. Individuals that disregarded these responsibilities risked societal rejection and other negative consequences.	These beliefs likely led to the creation of organized and stratified groups that were more efficient than disorganized ones, allowing them greater success. To some degree, the Sahajiya rejected these responsibilities and were possibly accordingly less successful because of it.

As with the Maori, this is by no means an exhaustive list of social controls. Instead, it is a manageable subsection that contributes to the formation of trait-groups. The influence of Maori and Sahajiya social controls and their trait-groups will now be examined.

Trait-Group Formation

As explained in Chapter One, a trait-group can be defined as a set of individuals that influence each other's fitness with respect to a given social trait.¹⁵⁷ In a religious trait-group, the shared social trait is a belief in their tradition's symbolic universe. For this reason, their memberships include those who rigorously adhere to the tradition and those who gain indirect benefits by associating with them through social, tribal, or kin relation. Like any group, they are subject to the forces of MLS, meaning that they are dependent upon competition and are regulated by social controls – in this case, social controls derived from their common symbolic universes. In this section, the trait-groups of the Maori and the Vaisnava Sahajiya will be examined and the effects of their previously mentioned social controls will be demonstrated.

[A] Maori: Kinship

Kinship was an incredibly important concept to the Maori. Their entire cosmos was composed of an enormous “kin,” in which heaven (Rangi) and earth (Papa) were thought to be the first parents of all beings and things, such as the sea, the woods, the birds, and humanity. Similarly, many Maori tribes were thought to have descended from the seven-leading *waka* (canoes) that are said to have carried the seeds of various autonomous tribal nations to the different areas of New Zealand.¹⁵⁸ Later, other *waka* followed.¹⁵⁹ Beyond this more remote level of relation to primal and ancient ancestors, though, the Maori traced their kinship to more recent relatives. A high-born Maori individual, for example, traced their genealogy with great detail and passion, comparing it with their guests, and trying to find common ancestors. Before a young

¹⁵⁷ David Sloan Wilson and Dag Hessen, “The Blueprint of Multilevel Selection,” 155.

¹⁵⁸ In some schools of thought, these *waka* were all thought to be able to trace their ancestry back to *Io*. However, because *Io* may have been created as a response to Western influence, this claim will be largely ignored.

¹⁵⁹ Tui Cadigan, “Land Ideologies,” 123.

couple married, both families were greatly comforted by the finding of a common ancestor – dating back even fifteen generations.¹⁶⁰ This emphasis on kin resulted in the creation of distinct groupings of individuals that can be categorized as trait-groups based on the importance of kin in the Maori symbolic universe.

In a certain sense, it can be said that these kinship-based trait-group were built on family – father, mother, and children all in cohabitation with one another. However, the word for “family” in the Maori language, *whanau*, refers to what is traditionally known to as an “extended family” in the West. The *whanau* was the part of the kinship group that lived intimately together, sharing a house (or two neighboring houses), cultivating common fields, owning small canoes together, etc. Within the *whanau* there was little practical difference between private and joint ownership. In this way, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and children – all cohabitating – formed a cooperative unit.¹⁶¹ Larger cooperative units also existed, occasionally entering into conflict. A *hapu*, for example, consisted of descendants of a common ancestor several generations back, including a few hundred-people living together in a village or a quarter of a village. Similarly, a tribe, or *iwi*, formed the largest unit of relatives who stood in practical relation to one another. Like a *hapu*, an *iwi* derived its name from a single common ancestor, e.g. the *Ngati-Paoa* who were named after an ancestor known as *Paoa*.¹⁶² In this way, the *whanau*,¹⁶³ *hapu*,¹⁶⁴ and *iwi*¹⁶⁵ all traced their descent to common *rangatira*.¹⁶⁶ These various units of

¹⁶⁰ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, “Kinship,” 3.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶³ Extended families, including parents, children, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, and cousins.

¹⁶⁴ Sub-tribe that consisted of a number of extended families that traced descent back over generations to a common ancestor.

¹⁶⁵ The tribe is made up of descendants who can all be traced back to a particular waka captained by a particular chief.

¹⁶⁶ Tui Cadigan, “Land Ideologies,” 125.

kinship formed concentric and overlapping trait-groups in Maori society in part regulated from the social controls stemming from the concept of *tika*.

At every level, Maori trait-groups were also intimately connected to the land, or *whenua*.¹⁶⁷ As previously mentioned, the chief, the tribe, and their land were all thought to share a common *mana*, which was, in part, due to the accumulation of the *tapu* of departed ancestors who had been buried in tribal land. Through burial, ancestors literally imbued ancestral land with a part of their life essence, creating an important theological connection to the land. The Maori further underlined their generational connection to the land through their traditional practice of burying the placenta in their *whenua*. By doing so, they recognized the personal link of new life to land, ancestors, kin, and *atua*.¹⁶⁸ Accordingly, each *hapu* had its own designated area in which it did not tolerate others except by agreement.¹⁶⁹ Owning the sum of these lands, *iwis* also barred entry except by agreement.¹⁷⁰ Land provided not only sustenance, clothing, and shelter, but also genealogical links to *atua*, ancestors, and identity.¹⁷¹ Like ancestors – and in many ways because of ancestors – land contributed to the formation of trait-groups in Maori society, deriving social controls from shared *mana* between kin and land.

With the combined ancestral and geographical forces holding them together, these trait-groups were very tightly knit. In the Maori language, the warmth one feels when they sit in the midst of their kin is called *manaaki*, denoting the solidarity of the kinship group. In this word, exactly what one relative owes to another is expressed. Not only must one feel love for them, but they must also display it through altruistic actions. Thus, through its emphasis on the importance

¹⁶⁷ The Maori word for land, “*whenua*,” is very similar to their word for extended family, “*whanau*” and should not be confused.

¹⁶⁸ Tui Cadigan, “Land Ideologies,” 129.

¹⁶⁹ A *hapu* could not part with a portion of its land without the assent of the *iwi*.

¹⁷⁰ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, “Kinship,” 9 The *hapu* can be said to be the largest unit in which peace in principle prevails.

¹⁷¹ Tui Cadigan, “Land Ideologies,” 125.

of living together and reciprocity, the concept of *manaaki* may be said to create stable kinship groups.¹⁷² When one honored a chief, the chief in turn was expected to honor the tribe. As Prytz-

Johansen states:

Exactly this is the double-sidedness of *manaaki*: the word, indeed, denotes unconditional love for the kinship group, but at the same time it is necessary for each to love and honor the kinship group; for in this way one becomes solidary with the kinship group and gives kinship its complete reality.¹⁷³

Both creating and arising from the kinship group, *manaaki* created communities that were bound together.¹⁷⁴ In this way, cooperation and altruism within Maori trait-groups was enforced by *mana* derived social controls.

With such an emphasis on kinship, marriage played a significant role in dynamics of Maori trait-group interactions. Matrimony was not encouraged between relatives that were too closely related; and, because of this preference, marriages created opportunities for new connections between kinship groups to be forged. By living together and having children, married couples served as sources of new common ancestors.¹⁷⁵ In the highest circles, matrimony sometimes took on a political element, occasionally being used to secure peace between two warring kinship groups. Outside of these circles, though, it was desired that two partners were in some way already related to one another so as to strengthen existing kinship bonds. As such, accurate lineages, which were usually traced patrilineally,¹⁷⁶ were of major concern to the Maori.¹⁷⁷ However, matrimony was a feebler connective force than direct kinship in Maori society, as it could be dissolved by death or wantonness.¹⁷⁸ So, marriage had the ability

¹⁷² Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, "Kinship," 21-22.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷⁴ One also shows *manaaki* to guests.

¹⁷⁵ The Maori did not always marry in order to strength kinship ties. In some cases, they married for love.

¹⁷⁶ Occasionally, lineages were traced maternally if the mother was from a more noble kinship group.

¹⁷⁷ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, "Kinship," 10-16.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

to bind together Maori trait-groups, but the strength of these connections was not assured. Still, though, matrimony played an important role in inter trait-group dynamics.

Marriage could also mean separation from one's kin, a fate almost as bad as death to the traditional Maori. In one proverb, it is recorded that a man named Hutu could have achieved success by marrying Pare, a woman of noble descent, but did not dare to do so as it would have meant separation from his kin. In his refusal, he said to her, "I am alone and your people is great; I am a stranger in your country."¹⁷⁹ The reason for his reluctance can be explained by the great societal emphasis on kinship. If one was separated from their kin, they were thought to lose their *tapu* and become *noa* – the ultimate example of this belief being slaves.¹⁸⁰ Further, because personhood is determined by connection to one's kinship group, a noble person can only exist within a noble kinship group.¹⁸¹ Thus, because the strength of marital bonds was weaker than direct kinship, Hutu feared becoming disconnected from his kin – a common motif in many Maori stories. The fear of becoming kinless clearly demonstrates the importance of *tapu* and strength *tapu* derived social controls on kinship-based trait-groups in Maori society.

Kinship was central to the daily life and societal structure of the Maori. Around living and departed relatives, trait-groups of various sizes formed and were regulated by the social controls associated with concepts such as *tika*, *mana*, *tapu*, and *noa*, which were deeply related to kinship. Individuals were encouraged to live in accordance with their ancestral kin, which is to say they were expected to pursue a *tika* relationship with them. Reciprocal and cooperative relationships were also encouraged between living kin because of the importance of their shared *mana*. Upsetting an *atua* through a *tapu* violation or becoming disconnected from one's kin, on

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 17-19.

¹⁸¹ Roy Perret and John Patterson, "Virtue Ethics and Maori Ethics," 191.

the other hand, could have horrible consequences for oneself and one's tribe. For these reasons, kinship-based trait-groups can be considered to be regulated by social controls derived from their symbolic universe.

[B] Vaisnava Sahajiya: *Varna* and *Jati*

When social groups within Hinduism are discussed, it is difficult to avoid the word "caste." Traditionally, though, caste is a difficult institution to study, as it is in some ways a Western conception. The word caste itself comes from the writings of the Portuguese who entered the west coast of India in 1492.¹⁸² Although some argue that caste has existed from time immemorial, others contend that modern castes are in some way the result of British colonial rule. What can be said confidently, though, is that South Asian society was socially divided into groups that hierarchically related to one another, that membership in these groups depended upon birth, and that rules and restrictions regulated interactions between these groups.¹⁸³ Therefore, to explore trait-groups in orthodox Hinduism and of the Vaisnava Sahajiya, the notion and institution of caste must be deconstructed.

In India, caste is found throughout society and in every religion. According to classical Hindu texts, the origin of the caste system was the self-sacrifice of the primeval man, creating the four *varnas*: Brahmins¹⁸⁴ from his mouth, Kshatriya¹⁸⁵ from his arms, Vaishya¹⁸⁶ from his thighs, and Shudra¹⁸⁷ from his feet.¹⁸⁸ However, these four *varna* do not provide an accurate

¹⁸² Eleanor Zelliott, "Caste in Contemporary India," 248.

¹⁸³ Llewellyn, "Caste: Religion and Society in India," 77-78.

¹⁸⁴ Brahmins normally served a priestly function.

¹⁸⁵ Kshatriyas served as rulers and warriors, protecting the kingdom during times of war and running it during times of peace.

¹⁸⁶ Vaishyas were composed largely of merchants and farmers.

¹⁸⁷ Shudras were the workers of society.

¹⁸⁸ The word *varna* translates to "covering" or "color."

representation of caste, as the categories and rules of the *varna* change according to region.¹⁸⁹

The more useful term here is *jati*. Unlike *varna*, which are four broad categories, there are over four thousand *jatis* in India, which can be grouped very roughly into the *varna* scheme (at least in the north). A *jati* is usually found in one language area and is defined by endogamy (marriage within the group), food practices and dining together, common myths and customs, and somewhat by occupation. Thus, it is the basic form of social organization that forms the building blocks of larger caste groups.¹⁹⁰ For these reasons, *jati* are the ideal trait-groups for study in orthodox Hinduism.

To understand the division of humanity into *jati* in India, it is useful to concentrate on the caste structure of a single linguistic community. In the state of Maharashtra, there is a threefold division: Brahmins, Shudras, and Untouchables (who are not technically a part of the *varna* system, but rather below it). Within the Brahmin *varna*, there are many *jati*, the most dominant being the *Chitpavan* whose name translates to “pure from the pyre” or “pure in heart.” Their central myth is that the god Parashurama created their *jati* from the bodies of shipwrecked sailors by purifying them on the pyre, restoring them to life, and teaching them Brahmin rites. In this way, a specific group (a *jati*) within a larger *varna* is united by common traits – their symbolic universe and *svadharma*. The largest groupings of *jati* in this region are the Marathas, who form about fifty percent of the population, and are landowners, farmers, cultivators, and soldiers.¹⁹¹ Artisan and service *jatis* – Telis (oil pressers), Malis (gardeners), Sutars (carpenters), etc. – are

¹⁸⁹ In the west central and southern parts of India, there are no Kshatriyas or Vaishyas; although soldiers and merchants do exist, they are classified as Shudras. In the northern part of India, the Vaishya have become merchants and the Shudras peasants, farmers, artisans, musicians, painters, ironmongers, tailors, and goldsmiths – anyone who works with their hands.

¹⁹⁰ Eleanor Zelliot, “Caste in Contemporary India,” 247-248.

¹⁹¹ Some Marathas claim to be Kshatriyas.

also grouped with the Marathas in any *varna* classification in Maharashtra.¹⁹² Outside the *varna* structure, are the Untouchable *jatis*, whose position in society is as village servants who bring firewood to the cremation ground, carry the village treasure to the central court, haul off the dead cattle, carry death messages, and take care of the horses of the traveling government officials.¹⁹³ The complexity of the various *jatis* in the state of Maharashtra can be replicated all over India, often with greater numbers of groups involved.¹⁹⁴ Each united by commonalities, they form a diverse and interdependent array of trait-groups, the hierarchy of which are regulated by *dharmic* and specific *svadharmic* social controls.

There are several dominant theories regarding the origin of these caste groupings. Some academics assert that they were formed when tribal groups entered mainstream society, clan becoming class or caste based on access to economic resources.¹⁹⁵ American anthropologist William Wiser (1890 – 1961), though, argues that caste developed as a system for the exchange of labor and other resources. At the center of this network, he asserts, were farmers who tended to be the dominant caste in the village, employing seasonal agricultural laborers and maintaining enduring relationships with members of other castes.¹⁹⁶ However, Gloria Raheja – a specialist in the caste system – contends that caste did not develop along these lines, but rather as a mechanism through which inauspiciousness could be discharged to members of service castes.¹⁹⁷ This stance accords well with the purity and pollution theory of caste, which was dominant in the

¹⁹² Except for Brahmins and Untouchables, little attention is paid to *varna* in Maharashtra, and no one would say that they were a Shudra there.

¹⁹³ Untouchable *jati* included the Mahars, who formed roughly nine percent of the population, and the Chambhars, who were leather workers who ranked above the Mahars.

¹⁹⁴ Eleanor Zelliot, "Caste in Contemporary India," 248-250.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹⁹⁶ Often, these relationships would be passed down in families for generations.

¹⁹⁷ J.E. Llewellyn, "Caste," 82-83.

academic study of India during the 1980's. Moreover, it matches well the supposed role of social controls that promote hierarchy through a theologically informed symbolic universe.

The purity and pollution theory is best elaborated upon by the French anthropologist Louis Dumont (1911 – 1998), who specialized in the cultures and societies of India.¹⁹⁸ Arguing that caste was fundamentally a religious institution, Dumont asserted that its basis is a distinction between purity and impurity, with the Brahmin priests' *jati* at the top of the hierarchy because of their relative purity. In his scheme, the priestly function of the Brahmins is opposed to and encompasses the royal function of the Kshatriya, and these two groups together oppose and encompass the productive function of the lower *varna*.¹⁹⁹ This hierarchical system appears to be associated in the most basic fashion with the different degrees of access that each group had to a highly differentiated pantheon of Hindu deities. Because lower *varna* are believed to be inherently less pure – irrespective of the state of purity achieved by bathing or other means – they are barred from direct contact with some deities, usually those of the higher *varna* and those housed in major temples.²⁰⁰ In this way, adherence to the caste system can be viewed as an internalized sense of religious duty.²⁰¹ Or, in biological terms, as an array of trait-groups organized by social controls derived from myths regarding their inherent levels of purity.

As in India, the caste system played a major role in Bengal, where the Vaisnava Sahajiya movement arose. As Edward Dimock – an expert in Bengali studies – explains, the devotees of Bengali Vaisnavism were in general less concerned with theology and more with the conviction of salvation that stemmed from the realization that Krishna himself had lived among them. In large part, this was due to Caitanya, the founder of the Caitanya school whose charisma inspired

¹⁹⁸ Eleanor Zelliot, "Caste in Contemporary India," 252.

¹⁹⁹ J.E. Llewellyn, "Caste," 82.

²⁰⁰ Lawrence Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy*, 50-51.

²⁰¹ Nathaniel Roberts, "From Village to City," 239-240.

great enthusiasm and devotion among his followers and whose legacy has left a significant impact on Bengali Vaisnavism. Despite the power of Caitanya's personality, divisions and conflicts of loyalty emerged among his followers, worsening after his death. The splinters of his school polarized themselves around his two primary followers: Advaita and Nityananda.²⁰²

While the Advaita branch came to be considered orthodox, the Nityananda branch aligned itself more with tantric communities, expressing its disdain for the caste system. It is from this tradition that the Sahajiya likely found their origin. There is considerable evidence that many of Nityananda's followers had Sahajiya leanings.²⁰³ Thus, it can be said confidently that the Sahajiya – like many other tantric communities – were largely opposed to the institution of caste. In this way the Sahajiya formed their own trait-group that risked rejection from others in Bengali society.

In Indian and Bengali society, the formation of trait-groups can be characterized by the linguistic communities, specific symbolic universes, and position within the larger caste system – possibly denoting their inherent levels of purity. As was the case with the Maori, these trait-groups are regulated by social controls derived from each community's symbolic universe. In the case of more orthodox Hindu trait groups, the concepts of *dharma* and *svadharma* encouraged adherence to societal norms and responsibilities. In the case of the Sahajiya, though, many of these responsibilities – and notably the entire notion of caste – were rejected. So, while the trait groups of orthodox communities fit neatly into the *varna/jati* framework, the trait-groups of the Sahajiya – who may have come from various *varna* and *jatis* – are united by their pursuit of *moksha* through their specific theology and erotic practices. For this reason, the Sahajiya risked

²⁰² There was little love between Nityananda and Advaita, and at least part of the reason seems to have been the matter of caste.

²⁰³ Edward Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, 85-91.

punishment because of larger societal social controls derived from *dharmic* and *svadharmic* principles.

The symbolic universes, social controls, and trait-groups of the Maori and the Vaisnava Sahajiya are culturally distinct but seem to perform analogous roles in their respective societies, organizing and uniting individuals into competitive groups. Similarly, they provide emotional support, group cohesion, and many other important behaviors. These functions and their various implications will be examined in Chapter Three.

Chapter 3. Application and Reconciliation: Creating a Common Epistemology

With an understanding of the symbolic universes, social controls, and trait-groups of the Maori and the Sahajjiya, it is now possible to apply the Religio-Biological Model. However, before doing so, it is necessary to provide a quick recapitulation of some previously mentioned and relative principles. As per the work of Geertz, religions are systems of symbols that act to give objective conceptual form to social and psychological reality, shaping both themselves to it and it to themselves. In this way, they create distinctive dispositions in religious individuals, which adhere to specific biologically evolved psychological processes. As Asad keenly notes, though, symbols alone cannot explain the growth of some religious traditions above others. The specific cultural and historical power dynamics between religious communities, religious institutions, and more secular institutions must also be examined. The success and failure of these competing groups can be modeled by equation (2):

$$\bar{w}\Delta\bar{p} = Cov(W_k, P_k) + E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})]$$

which states that the direction of selection on social traits – religiously or otherwise inspired dispositions – depends crucially on the balance between within-group ($E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})]$) and between-group ($Cov(W_k, P_k)$) selection. If group selection forces exceed those of individual selection ($Cov(W_k, P_k) > E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})]$), then the frequency of that social trait will increase. That is to say, if environmental conditions are such that there is pronounced competition between groups – religious or otherwise – then groups with most well-suited set of social traits (for their environment) will succeed.

In general, prosocial traits aid in the creation of large, cooperative groups. A group that helps and protects its members, for instance, will likely be more successful than one that does

not. However, these prosocial behaviors can be costly for individuals, making groups vulnerable to the domination of cheaters who benefit from group benefits but contribute little. The power of social controls helps to solve this problem, as they lower the relative cost of these social traits by imposing punishments on those who attempt to cheat their group. Religions are especially good at enforcing these punishments as demonstrated by the concepts of *mana* and *tapu* in the Maori tradition and the principle of *dharma* in Hinduism. As each group expresses many social traits, though, it is ultimately their cumulative effect that is predictive of success. A strongly prosocial group, for instance, may be outcompeted or heavily influenced by another less prosocial group on the basis of other specific power dynamics in society. In this way, Asad's critique of Geertz is articulated by MLS.

Apart from offering group benefits, though, religions also provide individual benefits in the form of psychological relief. Per Geertz, religiously derived symbolic universes help to explain the chaos of the universe as well as one's place within it. As discussed in Chapter One, this concept is articulated well by the work of Joseph Bulbulia: "Selection has canalized religious psychology to foster rapid solutions to two recurrent adaptive problems: getting along with others and getting along with ourselves."²⁰⁴ It is this duality of religion that makes it an especially effective manner of enforcing social controls. While most systems of social controls impose significant costs on the individual, religious symbolic universes actually provide some individual benefits, furthering lowering the relative cost of prosocial behavior. This refresher leads us to the application of the Religio-Biological Model.

Drawing from unique environmental inputs, brain-body systems work to interpret sensory input, forming culturally specific symbolic outputs (i.e. symbolic universes) and creating

²⁰⁴ Joseph Bulbulia, "Are There Any Religions?," 81.

religiously based trait-groups. The competition of these trait-groups – both within and between traditions,²⁰⁵ as described by equation (2) – shall be shown to bridge the theoretical gaps between structuralists and post-structuralists:

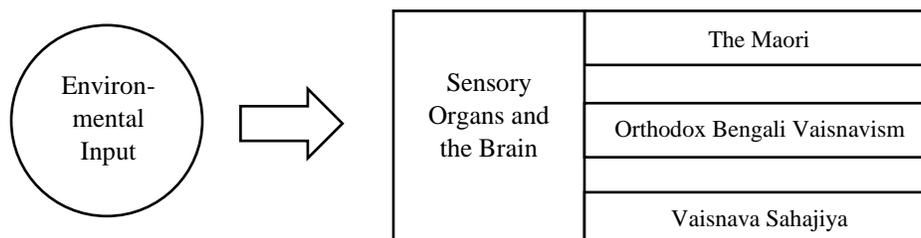


Figure 4. The Religio-Biological Model Applied

Based on the unique environmental inputs and power structures present within their geographic and temporal contexts, the religious traditions of the Maori, the Sahajiya, and orthodox Bengali Vaisnavism arose. It is the competition between groups (within and between traditions) that allows group-level selection forces to outweigh individual level selection forces. In the following two sections, the biological benefits of these religious systems will be explained for both groups and individuals and a possible reconciliation of structuralist and post-structuralist thought will be suggested.

Getting Along with Others: The Power of the Religious Trait-Group

A trait-group is composed of those who share a common trait and all of those who derive indirect benefits from associating with them. Religious trait-groups are usually united by belief in and adherence to the myths and theology that make up their symbolic universe. They are, of

²⁰⁵ Within each larger tradition, there were many smaller trait-groups in competition with one another – represented by the *hapu* and *ivi* of the Maori and the *jati* and *varna* of the Hindu tradition, as well as between the Sahajiya and the orthodox traditions.

course, also composed of those who do not completely believe and/or adhere but continue to benefit from the prosocial behaviors practiced by more rigorous religious adherents nonetheless.

A representative, but by no means complete, list of prosocial and other beneficial behaviors promoted by the social controls of the Maori and the Vaisnava Sahajiya are listed on the following page:

Table 4. The Basis and Group Effects of Selected Maori and Sahajiya Social Controls

Selected Maori Social Control	Basis of Punishment	Group Effect
Punishment for Breaking from Social Norms	<i>Tika</i> – Those who did not live in accordance with their ancestors were pushed to the margins of society.	This resulted in adherence to the ethical ideal of the <i>rangatira</i> , promoting qualities such as industriousness, skill in diplomacy, bravery, hospitality, and knowledge of tribal lands – all of which would provide group benefits.
Punishment for Lack of Reciprocity	<i>Mana</i> – Chiefs who did not give to their people and people who did not give to their chief were thought to be less successful.	By entering reciprocal fellowships, the Maori encouraged cooperation and altruism between the chief, his subjects, and their collective land. In this way, group benefits were provided.
Punishment for Lack of Skill	<i>Mana</i> – Those who were low in <i>mana</i> were treated with less respect.	Because outward success was thought to correlate with <i>mana</i> level, there was likely a level of anxiety that prompted individuals to practice useful skills – battle, fishing, etc. Groups containing individuals who are adept in these skills would likely outcompete those without. ²⁰⁶
Punishment for Hierarchical Violations	<i>Mana/Tapu/Noa</i> – <i>Tapu</i> violations were thought to have dire consequences including illness and even death.	These beliefs likely led to the creation of organized and stratified groups that were more efficient than disorganized ones, allowing them greater efficiency and success. ²⁰⁷
Selected Sahajiya Social Control	Basis of Punishment	Group Effect
Punishment for Breaking from Social Norms	<i>Dharma/Svadharm</i> a – Because living in accordance with <i>dharmic</i> principles was thought to sustain the integrity of the universe, those who did not were pushed to the margins of society.	By rejecting many societal norms associated with the principles of <i>dharma</i> and <i>svadharm</i> a, the Sahajiya risked punishment from the larger Hindu community of Bengal. For this reason, they kept many of their practices secret.
Punishment for Lack of Reciprocity	<i>Dharma</i> – Again, deviating from <i>dharmic</i> principles was thought to threaten the integrity of the universe and social integrity, so those who did were pushed to the margins.	The general form of <i>dharma</i> promoted qualities such as non-harmfulness, truthfulness, charity, patience, self-restraint, and compassion. There is no direct evidence to suggest that the Sahajiya rejected these more universal principles, so they likely enjoyed group benefits associated with these cooperative traits.
Punishment for Lack of Skill	<i>Moksha/Samsara</i> – Lack of competency in the sexual rituals of the Sahajiya meant continued suffering in the cycle of <i>samsara</i> .	It is the goal of most, if not all, Hindus to escape from <i>samsara</i> . Because the Sahajiya believed their sexual rituals to be the best method of achieving <i>moksha</i> , they were willing to risk societal rejection. Thus, they may have concentrated on developing their ritualistic skills and neglected more worldly skills, decreasing their group fitness.
Punishment for Hierarchical Violations	<i>Svadharm</i> a – <i>Svadharm</i> a separated groups into class and occupational communities. Individuals that disregarded these responsibilities risked societal rejection and other negative consequences.	These beliefs likely led to the creation of organized and stratified groups that were more efficient than disorganized ones, allowing them greater success. To some degree, the Sahajiya rejected these responsibilities and were possibly accordingly less successful because of it.

Each of these social controls – with some exceptions in the Sahajiya tradition – help to promote cooperative and successful groups, able to readily compete against other neighboring trait-

²⁰⁶ Roger Kessing, "Rethinking "Mana," 147.

²⁰⁷ Peter Buck, *The Coming of the Maori*, 345-347.

groups.²⁰⁸ The results of these social controls on Maori and Sahajiya trait-groups will now be examined.

Maori trait-groups centered primarily around ideas of kin. As such, many of their social controls were based around correct action towards one's kin. The concepts of *tika* and *mana*, for example, reinforced the concept of *manaaki*,²⁰⁹ which defined the unconditional love expected within the kinship group.²¹⁰ An individual who did not follow a *tika* manner of life (one in accordance with their ancestors) was looked down upon and pushed to the margins of society, as there was thought to be something contemptible about an individual who quarreled with their kin.²¹¹ In large part, this was due to the resulting change in one's *mana*. A non-static quantity, *mana* was believed to increase if an individual lived in a manner that was consistent with one's ancestors and decrease if ancestral norms were violated. Moreover, *mana* levels were thought to directly predict one's achievement in life. One with high *mana* was expected to be successful in battle, fishing, weaving, etc., whereas one with low *mana* was expected to perform poorly. Thus, social controls related to these concepts imposed societal punishments – in the form of lowered respect and expected success – on individuals who violated *manaaki*. In this way, cooperation was encouraged within the trait-groups group in Maori society.

Behaviors that disrespected ancestors and/or tribal elders were also discouraged by the social controls derived from the concept of *tapu*. Those with the purest *tapu* were thought to be the most directly related to the gods and therefore most fit to lead. Those with lower *tapu*, though, also served other important functions, acting as agricultural workers, warriors, and productive members of the tribe. In this way, Maori society was stratified within and between

²⁰⁸ The existence of social controls that do not promote group cooperation will be examined in the following section.

²⁰⁹ Manaaki denotes a reciprocal relationship between kin.

²¹⁰ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, "Kinship," 20-21.

²¹¹ Ibid., 24.

trait-groups.²¹² Maintaining this structure was a fear of committing *tapu* violations, which were thought to result from contact with a foreign life essence that either dominated or was dominated by the *tapu* offender. In ritualistic settings, *tapu* violations were used to control the gods, subjugating their *mana* to one's own. However, pollution of one's own *tapu* or the *tapu* of shared tribal lands was thought to lead to an overall reduction in tribal *mana* levels and therefore a less successful trait-group.²¹³ This belief formed a strong social control against defection from social norms and structures, contributing to an organized and efficient society.²¹⁴ *Tapu* derived social controls contributed to the cohesiveness of the Maori.

The tightly bonded and cooperative nature of Maori trait-groups is made clear by their use of first person pronouns to denote the entire tribe. In one tale, a Maori chief, *Te Ahukaramu*, asks another chief, *Te Rauparaha*, for permission for his tribe, the *Ngatiraukawa*, to come and live in *Kapiti*:

(I) imagined that (we) might carry out (our) plans, so (I) did not listen to what you said when you came up to Maungatautari, to Opepe, but used to say: 'Warriors! Heretaunga will be conquered by *me*, by Ngatiraukawa.' Now, Te Rauparaha! There I, Natirawkawa, was quite mistaken, and you were quite right. (I) imagined that when (I) disregarded what you said, it would be correct of *me*, Ngatiraukawa; but it was injurious to be indifferent. It is so now, that if I, Ngatiraukawa, come to side with you, come to Kapiti, *I* shall always listen to what you say.²¹⁵

In this example, the chief repeatedly uses an "I, the tribe" style of rhetoric, demonstrating the close connection between the individual and the group in Maori society. In another tale, Kairangatira, a Maori warrior who was alone and surrounded by enemies, remarks: "*Ma koutou, ko au; ma taku iwi, ko koutou, a maku te whenau*: You will kill me, my tribe will kill you, and

²¹² Some trait-groups were believed to be inherently more *tapu* because of their more direct relationship to the primal ancestors.

²¹³ Tui Cadigan, *Land Ideologies*, 133.

²¹⁴ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, "Tapu," 179.

²¹⁵ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, "Kinship," 28-29.

the country will be mine.” In this case, the word “mine” is used to express that Kairangatira is the tribe, not only now, but also in the future after his death due to their shared *tapu*.²¹⁶ In this way, the kinship “I” reaches beyond the present, connecting generations of kin to one another.²¹⁷ As demonstrated by the use of first person pronouns, the unity of Maori trait-groups was extended even temporally, resulting in highly cooperative and cohesive groups across time and space.

Similarly, cooperation was encouraged within the Hindu tradition by the concepts of *dharma* and *svadharma*. The most general form of *dharma* promotes prosocial behaviors such as non-harmfulness, truthfulness, charity, patience, self-restraint, and compassion within and across groups, while *svadharma* encourages individuals to tend to their societal responsibilities, differing, of course, with regard to their place in society. Although these concepts occasionally conflicted with one another – as demonstrated by Arjuna’s struggle in the *Bhagavad Gita* – they helped to create a religiously inspired, hierarchically structured, and cooperative society. As discussed in Chapter Two, the most basic units, *jati*, were united by social traits such as endogamy, dining together, common myths and customs, and occupation.²¹⁸ The *Chitpavan* of Maharashtra, for example, were unified by their central myth that the god Parashurama created their *jati* from the bodies of shipwrecked sailors by purifying them on the pyre, restoring them to life, and teaching them Brahmin rites. Loosely, *jati* fit into a *varna*, forming larger trait-groups. These commonalities serve as the basis of many trait-groups within the larger Hindu society, each adhering to the prosocial behaviors promoted by *dharma* and *svadharma*. As with the Maori, cohesion and cooperation were promoted.

²¹⁶ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, “Kinship,” 29.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30. Because the same unbroken “I” describes past, present, and future trait-groups, old insults and friendships were remembered in Maori society.

²¹⁸ Eleanor Zelliot, “Caste in Contemporary India,” 247-248.

According to the purity and pollution theory discussed in Chapter Two, following these norms was religiously motivated, as the distinction between various *jati* and *varna* was based on a distinction between purity and impurity. Thus, adherence to the system can be said to stem from an internalized sense of religious duty.²¹⁹ Or, in biological terms, the social controls derived from concepts of *dharma* and *svadharma*. Failing to adhere to these concepts was thought to result in numerous negative consequences – punishments – including the breakdown of society itself.²²⁰ Moreover, these social controls promoted structure and efficiency. Because they were believed to be inherently less pure, those belonging to lower *varna* and *jati* had less access to the pantheon of Hindu deities, subjugating them to the religious authority of priestly classes. However, like Maori of lower *tapu* and *mana*, Hindus of lower *jati* or *varna* also performed important duties in society, acting as merchants, warriors, and agricultural workers. In this way, cooperation within trait-groups was regulated and maintenance of societal structure was performed.

However, the effectiveness of social controls within any given trait-group is indirectly proportional to the size and complexity of that group. Take, for instance, a group composed of ten individuals whose actions are regulated by a simple social control that punishes theft. As opposed to a larger trait-group with complex and possibly conflicting social controls, it is relatively easy to detect and punish a thief within the ten-person group, providing tangible benefits to each member. As groups increase in size, though, they are less dramatically affected by the actions of individual cheaters *and* the risk to cheating diminishes, as they become more difficult to detect and punish. Thus, the benefits to their group decreases, while the cost of their adherence remains the same. This tension can in part be explained by equation (2):

²¹⁹ Nathaniel Roberts, "From Village to City," 239-240.

²²⁰ Patton Burchett, "Dharma and Karma / Mahabharata."

$$\bar{w}\Delta\bar{p} = Cov(W_k, P_k) + E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})]$$

As groups increase in size, it becomes increasingly more difficult for the forces of between-group selection to overcome those of within-group selection ($Cov(W_k, P_k) > E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})]$), so social controls become increasingly strained.

Maori society demonstrates the effects of this phenomenon. Separated into three categories, corresponding to size and relatedness – *whanau*, *hapu*, and *iwi* – the Maori behave most cooperatively with those with whom they are in the smallest group. Within a *whanau* and a *hapu* cooperation and peace was mostly assured, although exceptions existed.²²¹ However, between *hapus* and *iwi* there was often conflict. Questions of land ownership, for example, occasionally resulted in small wars between *hapus*, although these conflicts would be ended if the *iwi* was involved in a war against another tribe. In recognition of this problem, the Maori preferred their armies to be of a relatively small size, believing that if an army became too big, it would include men who were so loosely related to the leading chief that its overall value would be reduced. The victory of the *rauhokowhita* – the 340 – over a much larger army in one proverb is characteristic of this belief.²²² In this way, larger groups within Maori society were less well regulated by social controls

The tension between group size and social control efficacy is demonstrated most convincingly by the Sahajiya tradition itself. While the majority of orthodox Vaisnava Bengali community adhered to the principles of *dharma* and *svadharma*, the Sahajiya rejected the caste system and social responsibility, pursuing instead their personal *moksha*.²²³ Although the Sahajiya likely still performed many actions that accorded with a *dharmic* way of life – their

²²¹ Jorgen Prytz-Johansen, “Kinship,” 4-5.

²²² *Ibid.*, 9.

²²³ Edward Dimock, *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, 85-91.

membership in the community was secret – their rejection of these principles highlights the limitations of social controls in large groups. From a biological standpoint, the Sahajiya can be considered cheaters, deriving societal benefits from their membership in a larger Hindu society but choosing to seek their own individual goals of salvation instead of contributing to the trait-group. Within their relatively smaller group, though, the Sahajiya were well regulated by their specific social controls and dependent up their initiate community.²²⁴ Fearing the punishment of continued suffering in *samsara*, they adhered strongly to symbolic universe of their smaller trait-group, even risking larger societal rejection.

The social controls that regulated the Maori, the orthodox Bengali Vaisnavas, and the Vaisnava Sahajiya are characteristic of competing trait-groups. Punishing individuals for cheating, they promote prosocial behavior within their groups, leading to the production of large (although not too large), cooperative groups. However, the evolved psychology of religion does more than encourage cooperation with others. It also provides a comprehensible vision of the universe, explaining away the apparent chaos and fulfilling the emotional needs of individuals within groups.

Getting Along with Ourselves: Comprehending One's Place in the Universe

As per the definition of Geertz, religion works to formulate general, uniquely realistic conceptions of the universe, providing a framework in which individuals can place themselves. This formulation meets the emotional needs of individuals by explaining worldly suffering and promising that it can be endured, often for some type of metaphysical reward. Thus, beyond

²²⁴ Glen Hayes, "Possible Selves, Body Schemes, and Sadhana," 691.

group benefits, religions also offer individual ones. The importance of this aspect of religion can also be expressed by equation (2):

$$\bar{w}\Delta\bar{p} = Cov(W_k, P_k) + E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})]$$

Because religions simultaneously provide group and individual benefits, they lower further the relative cost of religious adherence and therefore prosocial behavior. While the spread of a prosocial trait may normally be outweighed by the negative strength of within-group selection ($\bar{w}\Delta\bar{p} = Cov(W_k, P_k) - E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})] < 0$), the presence of individual positive benefits makes their spread more likely ($\bar{w}\Delta\bar{p} = Cov(W_k, P_k) + E_k[Cov(w_{jk}, p_{jk})] > 0$). In this way, the individual benefits offered by religious psychology help to promote group benefits. In their own ways, both the Maori and Vaisnava Sahajiya traditions perform this essential function.

The Maori construct an entire conception of the universe based around kinship relations to provide a conception of the universe. Their ancient primal ancestors, *tupuna*, created the universe and are thought to have a continued – although distant – influence over it. In this way, the Maori place themselves in a continual stream of relatives as old as time itself. The presence of recently deceased ancestors, *atua*, explains daily tragedy and hardship. Grouped into two categories – those who were friendly (unless offended) and those who were evil – *atua* explain why bad things happened to good people. If an individual violated the *tapu* of an *atua* (*hara*), then it was expected that any protection offered by that ancestor would be removed. For this reason, the offending ancestors was thought to be dangerous. When no perceivable *tapu* violation had been committed and tragedy continued to befall an individual, it was assumed that an evil spirit – usually that of a still-born (*atua kahu*) or of Whiro – was to blame.²²⁵ The symbolic

²²⁵ Adele Fletcher, “Sanctity, Power, and the “Impure Sacred,”” 71.

universe of the Maori helped to explain the daily misfortunes and disappointments inherent in human life.

The Maori symbolic universe also provided justification for one's position in society. Because *tapu* levels were thought to directly correlate with relatedness to the *tupuna*, as well as the seven-leading *waka*, an individual's station in life was again related to kin relations. Individuals from more noble *tapu* lines were thought to be more capable of serving priestly functions or as chiefs. As discussed in Chapter Two, metaphysical concepts of *mana*, which were thought to be in some ways dependent upon one's *tapu*, led to the creation of a hereditary system wherein chiefs became transmuted into the aristocratic class.²²⁶ So, a Maori with a relatively ignoble lineage may have accepted their lot in life because of their low levels of *mana* and *tapu*.²²⁷ This system bears some obvious similarities to the caste system within orthodox Hinduism, with the separation of classes based in part on inherent levels of purity and impurity. The *varna* and *jatis* present in various forms all over India and Bengal, to say nothing of the untouchables at the bottom of society, were justified in part by this religiously derived conception of the universe. In this way, the symbolic universe of the Maori – and of orthodox Hinduism – provided a theological explanation for one's social standing.

Although the Sahajiya largely rejected the caste system, their symbolic universe too provided emotional support. Embracing the concepts of *lila* and *prema*, their tradition concentrated heavily on attempts to achieve *moksha* through ritual action. The stages of these rituals engaged the senses in a number of ways. As discussed in Chapter Two, the first stage (*pravarta*) involved the singing of hymns, chanting, and dancing, while the second (*sadhaka*)

²²⁶ Roger Keesing, "Rethinking "Mana," 152.

²²⁷ Because *mana* was not a static quantity like *tapu*, there was some chance for Maori born in less *tapu* lines to advance in society.

and third (*siddha*) stages involved coitus and erotic activities – all in the hopes of developing an alternative spiritual body. These multisensory rituals modified environmental inputs in a manner that resulted in the modification of one’s body schema,²²⁸ leading to identification with a “forgotten” identity as either Krishna or Radha. In this way, these types of rituals allowed practitioners to experience a “sensory” or even neurobiological reality.²²⁹ This release from the worries of the earthly realm surely came with a level emotional relief.

The neurologist Brain McNamara provides us with a possible explanation of the neurological system that operates “behind” the shifts in body schema experienced by the Sahajiya. Arguing that each human being experiences a range of “possible selves,” each connected to a specific neural network that can be modified by “decentering,” he states:

The functionally integrated religion-related brain circuit involves a widely distributed set of neural regions (depending on particular religious behaviors) but nearly always includes the key nodes of the amygdala, the right temporal cortex, and the right prefrontal cortex... In hundreds of clinical cases and a handful of neuroimaging studies, it is a striking fact that the amygdala, large portions of the prefrontal lobes, and the interior temporal cortex are repeatedly implicated in expression of religious experience.²³⁰

This view of the human brain and its relevance to individual emotional experiences involved in religious expression accords well with the assumptions of the Religio-Biological Model.

Through specific evolved structures, the rituals of the Sahajiya allow emotional relief in religious adherents.²³¹ Through this religiously derived and ritualistically enacted “decentering” process, the symbolic universe of the Sahajiya provided a promise that earthly suffering could be endured and eventually transcended in *moksha*.

²²⁸ A body schema can be defined as “a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perception monitoring.”

²²⁹ Glen Hayes, “Possible Selves, Body Schemas, and Sadhana,” 689-691.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 692.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 693.

The symbolic universes of the Maori and Vaisnava Sahajiya similarly provide emotional relief to members of their trait groups through the provision of general orders of existence that explain, justify, and suggest a potential solution to suffering. In the case of the Maori, this solution is honoring one's ancestors and avoiding evil spirits. In the case of the Sahajiya, it is attaining *moksha* through specific ritual practices. The combined individual and group benefits derived from the religiously motivated creation of symbolic universes in any cultural or historical context allows for the creation of larger and more cooperative groups according to equation (2). Moreover, it helps to bridge the gap between Geertz and Asad through the provision of a common epistemological framework.

The ability of religiously derived symbolic universes to provide both group and individual benefits makes them incredibly valuable biological adaptations. Without them, trait-groups may struggle to reach the same level of size and cooperativity. It is for this reason that the Religio-Biological Model very accurately describes the role of evolutionary competition in the formation of religions, providing a common basis for the epistemology of Geertz and Asad and a clear path forwards in Religious Studies.

Conclusion

Before delving directly into the possible reconciliation of structuralist and post-structuralist thought, the major strengths and deficiencies of Geertz and Asad must be re-examined. The description of constructed religion as a truly trans-cultural and trans-historical phenomenon that relies upon symbols to influence the moods and motivations of human beings, appearing uniquely realistic to those within the tradition, does a great deal to describe religion. It can certainly be said to be a collective, communal force that influences the actions of adherents. However, as Asad notes, religious traditions themselves cannot necessarily be said to be trans-cultural and/or trans-historical, as their inception and function is greatly dependent upon existing power structures in each society that continue to shape perception and misperception across and within religious traditions. In these ways both Geertz and Asad contribute much to the field of Religious Studies.

It is through the Religio-Biological Model and its reliance on the human brain and multilevel selection theory, though, that I believe these two paradigms of thought can be united, at least on a basic level. It is true that Geertz's definition of religion fails to properly consider the effect of bias and power dynamics on the creation and re-interpretation of religious traditions. However, the epistemology offered by Asad seems similarly lacking in its inability to offer any concrete, specific, widely applicable information about religion, preferring instead to treat religious communities as distinct from one another and therefore ultimately not trans-cultural or trans-historical. Despite their many contributions, Geertz and Asad collectively fail to capture the most basic force that *does* explain the effects of societal power dynamics and *has* shaped religions in a truly universal manner: evolved biological drives.

Specific processes in the human brain, drawing from the available cultural symbols, lead to the creation of distinct but analogous traditions (systems of symbols). Those of the Maori and Vaisnava Sahajiya, for example, are distinct in that their myths, beliefs, and practices vary, but analogous in so much as their evolved symbolic universes, social controls, and trait-groups fulfill similar biological needs – those for cooperative groups and those for mentally healthy individuals.²³² In this way, religion can be argued to be a specifically human adaptation that allows for the creation of well-regulated, reliably cooperative, and large groups. Competition throughout history among these groups, then, models the power dynamics described by Asad. As one religious trait-group begins to increase in strength, gaining societal power, it may impose its system of symbols on another religious trait-group. This religious shift can be the result of one religious-trait group mapping their system of symbols onto another in an attempt to understand or dominate it. Whatever the motive, the end result is a gradual change in the symbols available for a religious tradition to understand itself and a drift towards the more powerful symbolic conception.

The Maori traditions exhibits this shift well. According to Pulotu, an extensive database of Austronesian religious beliefs and practices, the traditional culture of the Maori experienced significant shifts following colonial contact in 1765. Once dominated by local beliefs in *tupuna*, *atua*, and the numerous other conceptions discussed in Chapter Two, the tradition has become increasingly syncretic with Christianity. In large part, this is due to the imposition of a foreign government system and Western models of education, leading to a shift away from the use of the indigenous language. With this loss of political autonomy, Christianity has come to mix with and

²³² Emerald Muriwai, Carla A. Houkamau, and Chris G. Sibley, “Culture as Cure?,” 14-24. It has been suggested that Maori who regain their culture experience increased mental health.

dominate local traditions.²³³ The fact that this transition occurred peacefully and without many violent conflicts reinforces the idea that it is the competition between systems of symbols that causes religious change over time, according with Asad's preferred method of historical/cultural genealogy discussed in Chapter One.

In an even more dramatic fashion than that of the Maori, the Sahajiya tradition has also experienced significant shifts in their symbolic universe caused by competition with outside groups. Today, in fact, the religious tradition is all but extinct, as both Hayes and Dimock were unable to find a single Sahajiya guru during their time conducting ethnographic research in Bengal. Hayes did succeed, however, in finding adherents to the closely related Baul tradition who assured him that his translations of Sahajiya texts were most probably correct.²³⁴ Like the Sahajiya, the Bauls emphasize freedom from compulsion, from doctrine, and from social caste and aim for harmony between physical and spiritual needs. While they did make extensive use of music and poetry, there is no evidence to suggest that the Bauls practice the sexual rituals of the Sahajiya.²³⁵ In this way, it appears that the less socially acceptable aspects of the Sahajiya tradition – their sexual rituals – have vanished, presumably because the risks posed due to the strong social controls present within the larger Bengali society to individuals did not in the long term outweigh the advantages offered to the trait-group. As with the Maori, the power dynamics and competition of trait-groups influenced the symbolic universe of the Sahajiya.

The production and competition of religious trait-groups proposed by the Religio-Biological Model and observed in the Maori and Vaisnava Sahajiya traditions help to unite Geertz and Asad. Beginning with specific environmental inputs, the sensory organs and the brain

²³³ "Maori," Pulotu.com.

²³⁴ Glen Hayes, "Possible Selves, Body Schemas, and Sadhana," 687.

²³⁵ "Bauls," *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*.

work to create symbolic universes (outputs) that form the core of religious trait-groups. Although culturally and temporally distinct, these groups perform analogous functions in so much as they follow commonly evolved mental dispositions, leading to the production of larger and more cooperative groups than is observed in any other species on earth. Religion, here, is the critical and uniquely human means of promoting and enforcing social controls. In this way, it can certainly be said that religion is:

(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of the general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.²³⁶

Per the critique of Asad, though, these various traditions cannot themselves be said to be trans-cultural or trans-historical, as the symbols upon which they rely are unique to their specific contexts. However, the process underlying their creation, continual reinterpretation, and competition can be said to be universal, as it relies on a commonly evolved organ: the human brain.

As modeled by the Religio-Biological Model, the human brain can be considered the driver of a biological cycle that encapsulates the contributions of both Geertz and Asad. This commonality is precisely where I propose to base a common epistemology within Religious Studies. This synthesis can be represented by following chart:

²³⁶ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as World-View and Ethic," 349.

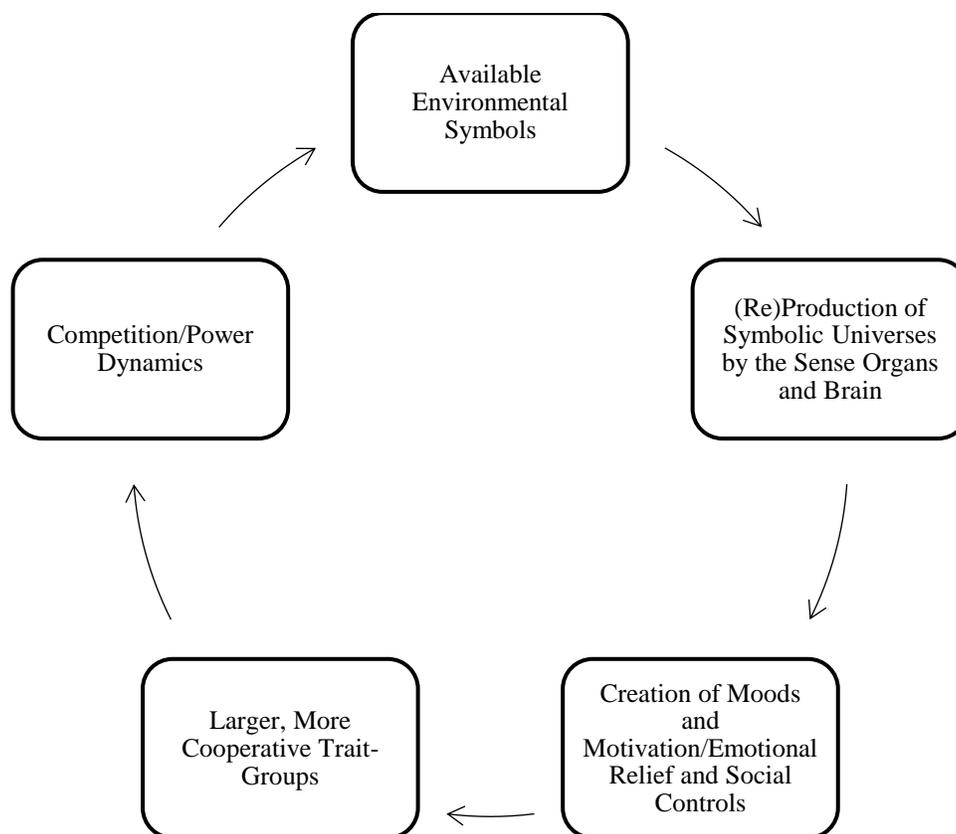


Figure 5. Uniting Geertz and Asad Through Multilevel Selection Theory

Symbolic universes are created by the human sense organs and brain, which lead to the creation of specific moods and motivation in human beings. These moods and motivation provide emotional relief to religious adherents and provide the basis for social controls that allow for the formation of larger and more cooperative trait-groups. Competition and existing power dynamics between these groups, in turn, influences available environmental symbols, which slowly modifies the form of symbolic universes, possibly leading to religious syncretism or evolution. While no single religious tradition can be said to be trans-cultural or trans-historical, the biological process that underlies their creation can certainly be said to be so. Thus, the Religio-Biological Model unites Geertz and Asad.

The consilience of structuralist and post-structuralist thought offered by the Religio-Biological Model is a promising step forward within Religious Studies. It offers a common,

biologically grounded epistemology, which has the potential to incorporate the work of many authors within and outside the field. Thus, the Religio-Biological Model embraces interdisciplinarity and binds together religion, culture, history, and biology.

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