

Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo Study Guide

Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo by Mary Douglas

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Contents

Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	5
Chapter 3.....	6
Chapter 4.....	7
Chapter 5.....	9
Chapter 6.....	11
Chapter 7.....	12
Chapter 8.....	14
Chapter 9.....	16
Chapter 10.....	18
Characters.....	21
Objects/Places.....	24
Themes.....	27
Style.....	30
Quotes.....	32
Topics for Discussion.....	33



Plot Summary

Purity and Danger by Mary Douglas deals with primitive and modern cultures, exploring various ways they organize their social life through specific approaches to rituals, dirt, and pollution.

Prejudice towards primitive cultures as inferior can be attributed to previous approaches dealing with common patterns among them rather than their social structures. The initial views that primitive cultures display fear and lack of understanding because they have to deal with the immediacy of their environment have been discarded. Through their approach to hygiene and pollution, both external and internal community structures are examined. Most cultures have means of protection of their social order through classification and preservation of purity. Food classification and purity is the foremost element in maintaining such purity as part of health, completeness, and holiness. Primitive cultures engage a personal view of the universe that is apt to intervene in their affairs.

Dirt represents danger through disorder that is formless in nature and has the ability to change boundaries. Such boundaries need to be protected from unwarranted entering, where purity ensures the preservation of social order. The boundaries to castes are protected through enforcing virginity and careful restriction of those that can access specific castes while they also reflect various functions of the body, ranging from cleaners to leaders. Society and social order are endangered by transitional and marginal states.

As dirt represents power and creativity, purity stands for rigidity and lack of change. Pollution and dirt form power that can only be harnessed through rituals. Despite the rejection of dirt and pollution by most religions, primitive religions unveil that through paradox and contradiction dirt is needed as part of replacing what has been rejected, incorporating the process of renewal. The necessity of death requires both its rejection and confrontation. These practices expose a realistic approach to life by primitive cultures, who view the world in a unified way where cosmic forces preserve and maintain the social order as part of nature.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Studying purity and pollution involves understanding various religious concepts related to contagion and the sacred. Primitive views have more than just mechanical symbols and contain ethics. Comparative religion has been wrongly assumed to be based on false beliefs in magic. The relationship between science and magic is unclear.

Greek studies of purity and impurity involve classical dramatists. The concept of contagion as part of the Old Testament is assumed to be part of pollution through sin, although a mechanical process. The union between God and people involved struggle. Contact with primitive cultures instilled primitive cultures that used primitive rituals.

Frazer had contempt for primitive society through preconceived judgments, irrational, and childish ideas. Frazer assumed that only advanced civilizations had ethical refinement, and claimed that primitive culture thought through magic and was confused and foolish. According to him, magic had wrong assumptions and led to the inability to distinguish subjective associations and external objective reality. Douglas criticized Frazer for being complacent and having low regard for primitive society.

Smith perceived that magic had certain regularities and thought it more than just a means of avoiding infection. Durkheim viewed ritual as symbolic of social processes and, like Robertson, separated magic from morals and religion, shedding some more light on magic. Earlier Douglas claims that Durkheim did not follow Robertson. Durkheim found opposition between sacred and profane and insisted that rules of separation are features of the sacred. Others were unable to provide a better definition of magic and analyze who professed it.

Douglas also claims Durkheim adopted Smith's definition of primitive religion with values purported by the church and that he followed Smith's attitude to rites. Frazer formed an opinion that the primitive view draws on mechanical symbols and has no ethics incorporated in its religion. The ideas of contagion, either sacred or secular, can be understood in the context of comparing views about humans and their place in the universe.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Douglas examines concepts of hygiene as part of rituals based on practical health concerns, where smells are made tolerable and washings are part of separations to avoid disease and benefit in terms of health and life longevity. Isolation is necessary for recovery and provision of adequate care. Using certain ways of handling food and dirty things is part of symbolic meanings conveyed through customs. These meanings may be dictated by health concerns, but essentially are based on tradition involved in medical materialism. Douglas attributes practical medical knowledge to hygienic rules. Such rules also evolve around certain diets and ways to handle meat. Flesh can transmit disease and its toxic influence has been partly confirmed by pharmacologists. Medical materialism based on practical health routines has been part of medical operations and procedures of various ancient civilizations. Sumerian civilization employed medical operations and procedures for purification in a practical way. Even such experiences as dreams have been explained in a practical way and have been used as an excuse for drug indigestion.

The author delineates various approaches to cleansing that can be based on hygiene or symbolic ritual. Symbolic rituals involving religious purity have been more concerned with various ideas of worship, excluding certain forms of contacts. Laws, rules, and regulations involving handling food, eating, and preparing food were to deal with pollution as well as defilement. While primitive ideas of dirt have various symbolic meanings, contemporary practices incorporate similar approaches dividing dirty and clean, order and disorder. The absence of order pertains to the lack of system. Such system is construed on the basis of selection and rejection based on relativism. Patterns thus created involve stable worlds, harmony, and fitting within certain parameters. Although structures can be altered, assumptions allow for confidence, organization, and schematizing.

Such schematizing can be disrupted by anomalies and ambiguities that incorporate different ways elements interrelate. Anomalies represent differences, while ambiguities allow for different interpretations. Categorizing is part of culture, involving patterns, order, and authority. Culture also implies ways of dealing with anomalies and ambiguities.

Order rejects dirt through the control of the pattern. Pollution should be hence understood as devoid of system and pattern. Douglas claims that these rules are universal and applicable to both primitive and modern cultures. Primitive cultures represent more pattern rules, while modern cultures involve rules that are part of fragmented areas.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Holiness implies setting apart. Blessing involves creating order and prosperity while lack of blessing creates confusion. Prosperity involves conforming to holiness as part of universal pattern of things. Holiness is more than justice and goodness. It is also completeness and perfection. Dirt should be separated from what is holy. Perfection should also be part of the social sphere. Winning required purity and rejection of defilement but also needed blessing.

The rationale for classification of animals by Leviticus into their areas of belonging was to separate them and assign them into specific classes. Genesis of the creation provides description of the right environment for the right types of animals; whereas a fish with fins is considered appropriate to swim in water, earth animals should only hop, walk or run, and animals that have wings are appropriate for the sky. Animals that lack certain characteristic features are regarded as unholy. Such separation is to ensure that holiness and purity can be preserved through adhering to natural order. When animals behave against their rules and perform movements that are against their nature, such as crawling and creeping upon the earth instead of running, they are impure and unholy. Their consumption is considered improper.

Purity can only be achieved when ideas are ordered, boundaries established, and margins kept according to rituals of separation. Pollution and dirt avoidance serve as part of dietary rules as well as protection from foreign influence. Things forbidden to Israelites were to assure their insulation from wrong practices. Only compatible ideas could be adopted.

To maintain holiness is to be safe from incompleteness and lack of wholeness, even in a social context. Such wholeness is essential in various areas of life. Fighting can only be effective if performed in a pure state attained without sin that leads to partiality. Success requires wholeheartedness. Completeness needs to be preserved through work. In addition, holiness implies a completeness that is part of the division of classes, whereas individuals need to adhere to their class as part of universal order.

One of the ways to keep categories of creation separate is to adhere to the rules of morality. Behaviors involving incest and adultery violate the order of things, interfering with separation. According to Douglas, morality is wrongly assumed to protect families, but it is indeed designed to ensure separation.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Rituals as part of primitive culture embrace harmony, order, and meaning. Such features are part of both positive and negative rites. Rites and rituals are part of essential practices to prevent diseases for the Dinka, who attempt to cure malaria with an annual ceremony. Early research contributed to the view that primitive cultures are separated from modern, leading to the emergence of comparative religion. A shortsighted approach to magic and rituals as part of primitive means to deal with things that are little understood has been responsible for the development of comparative religion. Rituals have been regarded as naïve, as they expect external effects. Malinowski drew different conclusions when researching primitive cultures and formed an opinion that rituals derive from emotions. His insights on ordinary speech also influenced linguistics. Douglas claims that rituals have been wrongly assumed to have connection with bringing magical effects. Derogatory approach towards rituals also stems from critical views adopted by Christianity to regard external forms as empty, leading to anti-ritual prejudice.

Our own ideas that secular rites are empty fail to consider that our own culture is embedded in various rituals. Both miracle and magic is expected to bring intervention. Religion needs external as well as internal forms, while rituals are a necessary part of social life. Our social life partly depends on symbolic expressions that are part of rituals and involve writing postcards, condolences, or congratulations.

Rituals help to focus through framing while allowing to control and limit experience. They provide a means to coordinate brain and body. They have symbolic meaning that can link presence with past while changing principles and hence perception. Ritual can also formulate experience through expression just as thoughts can be recognized when expressed formally. When thoughts are expressed they can change.

Rituals require sequentiality. Hence days of the week are only significant in sequence and have meaning only as part of a pattern. Days signify practices, such as when to work and when to rest. Our awareness of the pattern can only be present if we proceed through various parts. Rituals can alter the past to some extent by restating what ought to have been, and in this way, purify. Acts such as incest can be purified through sacrifices. For the Dinka, such sacrifices are performed through cutting victims in half through sexual organs.

Both modern and primitive culture avoid pollution because they fear it creates danger. Symbolic practices can separate certain dangers, such as sex mixing in some cultures that is resolved through seating on the opposite side. Rituals can mediate experience in the same way as money mediates transaction. For rituals to be effective they require faith and confidence. Hence, money can only be effective if it attracts faith. Symbols have power as symbolic practices have meanings at psycho-somatic levels. Some



rituals in form of symbolic practices have been documented to produce beneficial social coexistence. Symbolic acts, such as symbolic tooth removal in a village, led to the recovery involving the entire village, resolving grievances and forming emotional attachment. The effectiveness and meaning of such practices proves that primitive cultures are wrongly assumed to be primitive. Rituals give meaning to existence as part of the ideal social order and cosmic outlines.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Social pollution differs in relation to cosmic pollution. Different points of view on what is pollution stem from differences between modern and primitive cultures. Ritual pollution needs to be understood in the context of the way pollution is understood by primitive cultures and the reason why it is pollution-prone. The effects of pollution involve religious offense. One of the distinctions between primitive and modern culture relates to observing taboo. Primitive people have been regarded to display different behavior from ours in being concerned more with immediate matters and hence unable to engage in deeper contemplation. Such approach led to the belief that primitive cultures are inferior.

Comparing cultures involved standardized assumptions, where individual attitudes have been ignored. Perceiving primitive cultures in terms of social phenomena with common patterns of thought involving social institutions led to difficulties in distinguishing differences in such patterns while attributing undue rationality to modern thought. Levy-Bruhl contrasted primitive mentality with rational thought rather than to compare primitive social and complex modern organization. In this way, certain mysticism in relation to primitive culture has been inspired.

It is more useful to analyze social organizations and different types of solidarities between various types of social organization. Levy-Bruhl viewed cultures as a certain type of adaptation to a particular environment. To understand sacred contagion we need to distinguish cultures where pollution evolved and where it has not. When comparing cultures, their unity and variety should be analyzed through the nature of historical process. If progress is considered to be differentiation, primitive culture is more unified. In modern societies, wealth is distributed through role specializations rather than market considerations, and there are different principles of market competition. Different thought patterns evolved along with different social conditions. Different thought systems are still less complex than various cosmologies.

When analyzing various myths, the advancement of cultures can be explored and classified as pre-Copernican or non-objective. Indian myths incorporating undifferentiated conditions provided a unified view of the world. Primitive world view is subjective and personal; where limitations are not known, it is world-centered and events explain notions of fortune. Specific events relate to cosmic alliances, such as good fortune determined by Hindus through the alignment of stars during birth. In some African tribes even personality is influenced by cosmos. Physical environment is part of human fortune and thus closely bound to such forces. Chinese also recognize happy alignment through the influence of waters and airs as part of Feng Shui. These beliefs lead to the interpretation of the universe through reference humans.



As people have wills and intelligence, they respond emotionally and determine relations. Through such emotional response some primitive cultures may assign personality to inanimate things and try to influence it, expecting a response. Personal powers are engaged in sorcery that is to transform events through gestures and spells. Impersonal universal powers can reveal secrets, make moral judgments, and punish. The universe may also interfere in personal human matters as part of discernment to make moral judgments. Such influence on the lives of persons warrants a response of the universe to uphold the social order.

It is not the confusion of the primitive mind between subjective and objective matters but the deliberate choice to engage in a symbolic action rather than intellectual consistency. Such view is designed to deal with social organization and the concept of primitive culture as part of different a social organization that is mediated not through money, but mysticism. Douglas claims that primitive cultures experience economic reality more directly than modern cultures that have spiritual and wealth advantage.

The distinction between primitive and non-primitive cultures has been inspired by different approaches in anthropology, but the differences also incorporate issues, such as pollution, the existence of taboo, or different way of thinking. Studies examined different way of thinking among primitive cultures and assigned it to different patterns of thought rather than a different social structure and organization. There has been a different effect of cultures on societies. Men-centered religions, such as Christianity, Islam, or Judaism led to technical developments and higher social control. Social awareness and self-consciousness inspired forms of coercion and monetary incentives that augment such control. Primitive cultures experience less social control, such as licenses, passports, and norms, representing a different type of thought. They deal with organizing people in relation to themselves. It can be disputed that they are unaware of themselves and their conditions.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Douglas purports that pollution only involves situations with clearly defined structures, both cosmic and social. Pollution annihilates restrictions and disorder remains unlimited, as there is no pattern that can be enforced. Creating order involves acknowledging disorder, and such disorder is both powerful and dangerous. Through rituals, affective powers can be recognized as disordered patterns can be reached better through unconscious. Only abandoning the rational can provide energy to control powers and truths. Therefore, some tribes send mad people into the bush to destroy the apparent sorcerer's work. Also, people at the margins of society represent danger both to society and to themselves. Other examples of formlessness and dangers involve unborn babies of pregnant women as part of beliefs of some tribes. For the Maoris, menstrual blood represents a symbol of life and a person who could be alive. Van Gennepe, cited by Douglas, associated danger with the passage between rooms and corridors as symbolizing transitional states in society. Passing from one room to another involves danger for those passing as well as those onto whom such danger emanates. Only ritual can control danger, as it separates different states and segregates while declaring a new status. Marginal states, such as criminal activities, incorporate both danger and power.

Witchcraft as part of non-structure involves powers through their ambiguous status. Women with different identities and status can represent dangers and powers. Among the Azande, those parts of their social system that are unstructured pose danger associated with witchcraft. As witches cannot control themselves, they represent threat and need to be suppressed.

Some nationalities that are considered to have unexplained advantages, such as Jews, are deemed to represent power and invite discrimination. Powers in society can also be part of social structure, such as among the Lugbara, where elders who have powers to control juniors can lose them if used for personal gains. Sorcery as part of harmful powers can only be used consciously and deliberately. Sorcery can be both part of authority and other social structures. The availability of powers, such as sorcery, is at the same time open to vulnerability as anyone can take it away. Such powers, as practiced in the Central Africa, are also used to safeguard against unlawful use of secular power. Success based beliefs, such as baraka or mana, represent distribution of positive power without religious justification and earn success through attracting similar incidents. Such power floats freely between the segments of society, changing alliances. As they lack hereditary power, it is difficult to exercise control and impose limits. Beliefs contain powers of dominant structures, and society is equipped with various creative and sustaining powers. Systems with lack of formal power structure expose authority to challenge and invite rivalry among segments. Therefore, pollution is part of ideas and structured society.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Society has internal and external boundaries just like the structure of organisms that relate to social forms. Rituals specify the details of the action for specific reversals. In the same way, the human body is a complex system with functions.

Through the comparison of primitive and modern cultures, different patterns of achieving desires emerge. Primitive cultures have been regarded to manipulate and subordinate women while modern cultures can directly effect external environment. Also, primitive cultures were to have incomplete personalities and psychological shortcomings. Douglas proves that primitive cultures are falsely thought to be both primitive and neurotic. Their treatment of dirt as creative power shows aspects of complexity rather than infantilism.

The body dirt is regarded as being powerful as part of the ritual, such as blood in the Hebrew religion that was to be the source of life and thus could only be touched through sacrifice. The present Lovedu queen has the power to change the weather through the dead body of the previous Lovedu queen in the Drakensberg mountains. The body symbol is a common symbol and rituals are based on such symbols. Boundaries represent danger as they can alter shapes. In this way, ideas can also be changed through margins. As excrements pass the boundary of the body, they present danger. Cultural experience can determine whether menstrual blood is dangerous. Douglas distinguishes four types of pollutions: crossing external boundaries; crossing internal boundaries; the lines' margin; and, the danger from internal contradiction leading to internal conflicts. This chapter outlines the way external boundaries are exposed to danger.

Dangerous impurities can be feared as the Coorgs (Srinivas) culture shows. Their status is assessed as part of purity and impurity within the system of castes. The lowest castes perform duties such as washing clothes or cutting hair that allow the higher castes to be pure. As they focus their beliefs on human body exits and entrances, the Hindu caste system treats sub-castes as minorities with different levels of purity. Such beliefs have little to do with individual desires as excrement is accepted on the street as opposed to during the ritual. External boundaries involve social order rather than personal inclinations.

Higher castes determine pollution through the entry to the caste, which is guarded by mothers. As women become entries, their purity is important and punished. In the same way, cooking is the first stage of digestion and can be subject to pollution. Castes perform symbolic duties that define them and the level of their purity. Food needs to be cleansed from being handled by castes of various degrees of purity through the cooking process. Such ritual has little to do with personal neuroses but it is part of culture and

assumptions that inspire experience. Cultures involve norms, cosmology, and rituals. Primitive cultures may be autoplasmic, but not outside of reality.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

At the beginning of the twentieth century, ritual pollution has been considered to have little to do with morals, and magic has been considered to be part of such rituals. Pollution reflects wrong behaviour whether it is related to morals or not.

Moral situations can be difficult to define, as they can be contradictory as well as uncertain. Pollution rules are unequivocal, being concerned only with facts and events as opposed to moral rules. For the Nuer, some wrong behaviors can be acceptable if they follow another approved behavior. The Nuer may kill in defense of their rights. They are more considerate of adultery than of adulterers who can be killed if caught, while adulterers themselves can be free from guilt through performing a sacrifice.

The Nuer behavior determines their moral code through punishment laws. Some behavior may be subject to pollution beliefs if other sanctions fail. Their moral code reflects moral rules without strict adherence and is more associated with behavioral values that influence the structure of society. Other rules have closer adherence to the moral code and involve homicide and incest.

The Nuer have defined ways in which pollution beliefs reflect the moral code while involving morally ill-defined situations, conflicting moral principles, lack of moral indignation, and lack of practical sanctions. Pollution beliefs are involved in active human punishment. Different parties are considered as injured by different cultures. Among the Nuer it is the husband who risks his life when his wife commits adultery. The danger may also involve the wife and their children, although the adulterer is not exposed to danger.

Different approaches to infidelity involving different punishments in different cultures pertain to the distribution of rights and duties by married couples as well as their different interests. If the wife is endangered in child labor, the seducer is condemned. The wife or the lover is condemned if the husband's life is threatened.

Moral offenses depend on the way the injured party is feeling, but social consequences cannot be reversed. The memory of the wrong can be erased and can encourage the right feeling through reconciliation rites that encourage better attitudes. Society tries to reduce moral offenses to pollution offenses that can be dealt with through ritual. Rituals of purification incorporate the condition of a rite of annulment. External behavior to correct the mistake may provide a contradiction when attempting to alleviate heart through a public act.

Pollutions are dangerous as they are hidden between the act and the thought. Their power is in its danger and they can be extinguished through the ritual that makes no inquiry and seeks no responsibility. For the Nuer, misfortunes are part of offenses but



they don't identify their exact relationship. They deal with them through sacrifice, except for adultery. The adulterer should become known and he needs to offer the beast for sacrifice. Purification alone can be a treatment for moral wrongs. Purification allows for avoiding retribution. Some tribes, such as the Bemba, allow for adultery due to their confidence in purification, and sex pollution rules fail to deter adultery.

The Bemba also believe that the pollution of adultery can be transferred through the fire when not protected, endangering the health of the wife and the child. The protection of fire is achieved through the universal configuration of powers. Social barriers are kept and preserved to prevent from endangering others and themselves.

The relationship between pollution and morals can be complex, with various rules and sub-rules. Social barrier crossing is often treated as pollution, where the offender can pose a danger to others.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Harmony within society is assured externally as well as internally. Internal lines are assured through collaboration. To assure that social life is preserved, sexual collaboration needs to be maintained. The internal lines need to be straight and adulteries as well as incest can destroy such lines. The most important social distinction in primitive cultures is the distinction between sexes. Well organized cultures have stricter rules about the relations between men and women. If sexual roles are directly enforced, sex is pollution-free. The Walbiri of Central Australia use force to ensure preservation with strict rules regarding taking care of the elderly. Seniors have power over the young and women are subjected to men. Women are subject to their husbands and can be beaten and even killed by them without retribution. Women are in no position to play men against one another. There are no beliefs about sex pollution and contact with menstrual blood is not considered to bring any danger. Walbiri men can freely seduce other men's women as women are subjected to men and conflicts are resolved through physical violence. Male dominance is a part of social organization unless it is contradicted by other principles, such as female independence.

Societies where individuals are not coerced to their sexual roles can follow their own personal preferences. If there is no specific government administration, the political structure can have shifting loyalties and the only principle preserved is that of genealogy. As part of certain order imposed, the Nuer apply their own ideas that regulate their relationships and fidelities without the application of justice. The genealogical principle is part of the context at the personal level to claim cattle and wives. The allegiance established through marriage also determines the political structure. For the Nuer, infidelity of the wife is compensated with cattle. The Bedouins treat adultery as dishonor until the dishonored woman is killed. The Nuer can live separately and brothers can take wives after their husbands' death. The threat of free behavior is assured through a cattle transfer that forms alliances.

In South India, the purity of women is part of the entry to the caste. Their sexual purity determines the purity of the caste; therefore, the highest castes are the purest. The Nambudiri Brahmins observe the rule that forbids the division of their estates. Only the eldest sons can marry, and lower-caste women can be kept but never married. Women can be married only after they are released from the control of their guardians, and similar rules are applied in relation to their restricted outside appearance.

Orthodox Brahmins preserve the purity of their women through marrying them before puberty. Other cultures provide provisional marriages to women so that they can be protected as married women by the caste and local courts. Southern Nayar girls have no permanent husbands and can have relationships with many men. They are married before puberty as part of a substitute marriage, and the man who becomes ritual bridegroom provides paternity to children.



Sexual relations influence differences in social structures. Social structures also involve contradictions. Some cultures, such as Hindu in India, and New Guinea, place sex symbolism as central in the cosmology. Others, such as African Nilotes, have less developed symbolism of this type. In New Guinea, the fear of sexual pollution has cultural characteristics, while contrasts exist between the Arapesh or Sepik River and the Mae Enga of the Central Highlands where symmetry between sexes is created. The model of sexual energy is a basis of power. Sexes exercise control in their mutual approaches. Females feed their babies with their own blood while pregnant while males feed their babies with their blood after babies are born. The Mae Enga is organized as a compact, political unit. The Mae Enga men engage in fighting and conflict through marrying women that belong to their enemy tribe. When avoiding female contact they are also free from sexual contamination, as there is no adultery as well as divorces. The Enga stay away from females from early boyhood and purify any such contact. They believe in their superiority and fear the effects of females. Such fear correlates with the belief of balanced power, and abstaining from contact is due to the fear of female dangerous sexuality.

The Lele compete for wives, and wives are essential to enter associations, claim services, and gain various privileges. Men acquire more than one wife, and transferring rights over women is one of the main aspects of social life. The transfer of rights over women is also essential to men's existence. As women are treated more as means of wealth transfer, they are regarded as worthless and women themselves are interested in gaining advantages. Sexual intercourse follows washing by both men and women to preserve virility. Menstruating women needed to be avoided as they present a danger to others.

Both men and women avoid sex before important events such as warfare or planting, considering it as pollution. In the same way, quarreling has been considered destructive of rituals. The Yurok believed that contact with women would destroy their future prosperity and avoided sex where he kept his wealth. The Yurok were found to be similar to Protestants in their discipline and pursuit of wealth, which was contradictory to the pursuit of women.

The Bemba of Northern Rhodesia need to be protected from sexual pollution that can be transferred through fire, and contaminated fire can cause death. The real danger involves adultery, as adulterers cannot be purified without the help of the wife and pose danger. The Bemba women keep their men for economic reasons. Contradictions between men and women create dangerous situations in cultures of the Enga, where men fight the enemy but want to marry their women. The Lele use women while taking their sides against men. The Bemba strive for independence, yet want to keep their husbands. Virginity and purity has been of particular importance both to primitive cultures and Christianity.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Cultures have their own concepts of what is dirty, as positive structural notions need to be acknowledged. Dirt has both destructive and creative powers, although dirt is treated as bad and excluded from various rituals, such as Israeli rejection of blood that could only be part of sacrifices.

The Oyo Yoruba tribe distinguishes between the use of right and left hand, where preference is given to the right hand. Although incest is regarded as pollution among the Bushong, their king practices it as part of sacrifice. These contradictions involve the very nature of dirt with incomplete identity that presents danger before losing such identity. With absent identity, dirt is not dangerous as its place of belonging is defined. Formlessness is part of decay while it is also part of growth.

When changing and losing the form, the margins are broken due to power inherent in cosmos. Rituals that can take control of such power are powerful themselves. While purity is fixed and rigid, it entices with clarity and simplicity. Purity is exposed to contradiction, leads to problems, and enforces solutions. Chastity can be enforced while some practices ensure that what is lost is regained as part of renewal rites.

Rejecting or affirming dirt has little to do with escapism from reality, as consistent dirt-rejecting is part of principles that govern the universe. Power is derived through the ritual frame. Cultures can be classified in various ways. The Lele distinguish between pollution and purity through the classification of animals that are suitable and unsuitable for consumption. Animals are separated according to their area, such as earth, sky, or water and time of hunting. While ambiguities, such as flying squirrels, are identified and rejected, some members are allowed to consume such food as part of renewal rites philosophy. The connection between animal and human world necessitates its exploration as part of good or evil powers. Sorcerers may move animals to the human sphere to exploit them for evil powers.

Some animals, such as the pangolin, represent a symbol of fertility and are used in fertility rites to unify the opposites and create a source of good power. Cults invite confronting categories, where culture is fictive and creative. Discrimination between various categories of animals are adopted and enacted. The pangolin cult that is a symbol of rejection is confronted and it becomes a renewal. Other forms of incidents that are out of natural order involve sorcery, the only reason behind early death.

The Lele consider death as challenge to the metaphysical system. Through the avoidance of metaphysical implications, the pangolin cult may offer reflections as it fails to conform to the pattern, but the whole pattern is also unknown.



Religions recognize death as inevitable as part of cosmic purpose. Primitive and other religions deal with various rewards satisfying desires through various means, such as giving protection from demons and sorcerers through rituals. Religions fail to embrace the entire universe requiring various conditions from the performer. They are also prone to contradictions, offering prosperity on one hand while experimenting with notions and rituals on the other.

The Nyakusa associate dirt with madness, where rituals are to protect from sanity that is part of madness and death. Their pollution conscious approaches lead to restrictions in terms of bodily rejects that pose the same danger as contact with menstrual blood. Dirt is also brought back onto the mourners as a symbol of consumption of previously rejected objects designed to protect against madness. Such protection is assured through symbolic sacrifices, such as that of the Dinka priest, whose preservation of life during his ritual death signifies the preservation of a rational order. As the priest chooses when, how, and where his death should be performed, he avoids the uncertainty of death and grasps its nature. Other tribes, such as the Lele and the Ndembu, perform rituals where death pollution is expressed through changing its symbol from bad to good.

Both animal and vegetable life is part of the order of the universe. When order gets out of line through anomalies, people avoid ambiguous behaviors. Harmony is assured through enforcing morals, punishments, pressures, and rituals. The delusion that death and suffering is nonexistent needs to be corrected while the corruption of the sacred is enforced. Free consent is needed for the fulfillment and accepting of death and its symbols as part of harmony where power for good can be released. Power is an inherent part of rituals, as is contradiction.

Pollution is an integral part of religion as well as ritual. It is an ingrained part of nature; thus it is part of sacred places. To conform to the order of the universe, ambiguities and anomalies should be avoided. As conformity is uncertain there are various pressures in form of moral restraints, rules, and rituals.

The Dinka people try to control death through choosing the time, the manner, and the place of death. By confronting death, the Dinka try to grasp the concept of death, understand its nature, and reverse its nature from being bad to good. In the same way that death is welcomed, dirt may also be desired through bringing it back onto mourners. The contradiction of rejecting death while accepting it is part of protection against madness. Rejecting faeces while accepting it on another occasion is part of the ritual that freely accepts corruption. Sanity can be kept if such ritual is preserved. Even though dirt is associated with madness because mad people eat filth, the Nyakusa separate dirt from purity in the same way as death should be separated from life, otherwise madness can be brought on the living. Elaborate rules are obeyed to protect from dirt.

All religions deal with death. Primitive religions are more materially orientated while religions that provide instrumental solutions tend to be regarded with doubt. As religions fail to provide all answers and solutions, the pollution of death involves paradox and



contradiction to provide answers in relation to the metaphysical gap. Religions as systems of belief offer reflections on a deeper level than it is commonly thought.

The Lele regard sorcery as the cause of early death and the source of all evil; therefore, they try to eliminate sorcerers. The Lele are more concerned with the effects of religion on fertility, cures, and hunting success than with achieving perfection or union. Some attitudes to death, such as those displayed by the Lele, can be difficult to assess as they appear to have a rather pragmatic attitude towards their beliefs through dirt rejection and pangolin cult. For the Lele, distinctions in nature are there to be maintained; thus, pregnant women should eat only earth animals and avoid the creatures of the sky. When these rules are broken it leads to misfortunes. Only rituals can overcome cosmic distinctions. The ritual of killing the pangolin challenges the notion of ambiguity that is caused by its dubious nature of having both lizard and mammal qualities. The animal world is to be explored and the Lele depend on animal spirits for their wellbeing and prosperity.

The dangerous power of dirt involves its variety of forms and the ability to cross the boundaries, along with its loss of identity in the process in the last stage when objects become shapeless rubbish.

Purity as the result of dirt rejection discourages change and leads to contradictions, where limitations are broken through seduction. Purity can be maintained through the replenishment with rubbish as part of replacement of rejected things to assure that existence is maintained, just as weeds are replaced when taken out to form compost for fertility. Maintaining purity requires pollution as part of renewal rites. Such rites stem from realism rather than escapism in primitive cultures.



Characters

James (George) Frazer

Frazer was an anthropologist who wrote the popular and widely published *Golden Bough*. He regarded confusion between uncleanness and holiness as part of primitive thinking. He thought that savages think in a completely different way than modern people, confusing subjective and objective experiences. He treated magic as symbolic action while, in his opinion, ethical refinement was the mark of advanced civilization and regarded magic as separate from morals or religion. He claimed that primitive culture had the manner of thinking dominated by magic and expressed contempt for primitive society. He thought that there is a division between religion and magic while assuming that the primitive view of the universe was part of mechanical symbols. Frazer attempted to show regularities between magical beliefs and classified them while regarding primitive religion as devoid of ethics.

William Robertson Smith

William Robertson Smith is regarded by Douglas as foremost theologian and scholar of the Old Testament, concerned with the relations between man and God. He held the Free Church Chair of Hebrew in Aberdeen in 1879. In 1875 he wrote the article 'Bible' for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and due to the protests by the Free Church, was subsequently suspended and dismissed. His views adhered to German thought while having faith in the Bible as records of revelations. Following his dismissal from Aberdeen he traveled to Syria, did research, and delivered Burnett lectures of which first series were published in the *Religion of the Semites*. He regarded the Babylonian myths as the myths of savage nations, supporting the ethical view of religion. He criticized the Catholic church for deserting the Apostolic tradition, making the concept of Christianity a series of formulae with abstract principles. Robertson Smith's definition of primitive religion was that it was the established church expressing the values of community, and he denied that rites were part of the cult of the community gods. He cut off magic from morals and religion, thus helping to untangle the ideas about magic. Robertson Smith drew a parallel between Roman Catholic ritual and primitive magic. He founded social anthropology and was inspired with the Old Testament. Through his book *The Religion of the Semites* he tried to show the evolutionary status of savage cultures through their functions in a modern society. He used the word *tabu* to restrict the arbitrary use of natural things. He has been less concerned with magic and superstition than Tylor.

Henry Burnett Tylor

Henry Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) developed a theory and gathered evidence that civilization is part of gradual progress as similar to contemporary savagery. In his publications he was interested in the survival of the unfit and vanished cultural ethics.



While ignoring the classification of distinct cultural species he tried to reveal their adaptation throughout history while trying to show the continuity of human culture. He developed a theory that primitive religion evolved from speculative thought. According to Tylor, religion is belief in spiritual beings, and he tried to explain primitive beliefs as part of individual psychology.

Emil Durkheim (1858-1917)

French sociologist and anthropologist.

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986)

Philosopher.

Paul Radin (1883-1959)

American anthropologist.

Thomas Hill Green (1836-1882)

English philosopher and thinker.

Gustav le Bon (1841-1931)

Gustav le Bon was concerned with Benthamite tradition, and developed a theory of crowd psychology that Durkheim drew upon.

Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1857-1939)

French philosopher.

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204)

Jewish rabbi, physician, philosopher.

Robert Ranulph Marett (1866-1943)

British ethnologist.

Nathaniel Micklem (1888-1976)

Theologian.



Objects/Places

Sudan

An African country, where the Azande people live.

Polynesia

In Polynesia there are beliefs regarding the cooking process as part of ingestion, where cooking is susceptible to pollution.

Central Africa

A place where the Bemba live. They have widely developed sorcery and spiritual powers within medicine and believe that malignant spiritual powers are available. The sorcery is necessary there for the roles of authority.

Oxford

A place of philosophical movement no longer accepting revealed religion, where transcendental beliefs are accepted while ethical principles are brought to the fore as the core of true religion. Idealist's religious movement.

Aberdeen

Burnett's lectures in 1891 took place here, a place where Robertson Smith held a free professorial chair.

Israel

Its history is often presented as a struggle between the prophets demanding interior union with God, and the people who slide back to primitive magicality instigated by other primitive cultures. Prophets warn against a narrow view of ritual. Israelites believe that pig food is dangerous for humans. They believed in training in self-control. The cosmology is dominated by the justice of Jehova, the Jewish God.

Nippur

In Nippur, a Sumerian tablet from the third millennium was found with the only medical text regarded as rational while lacking magical elements.



Near East

In the Near East a strong belief in clean and unclean meat is upheld.

Council of Jerusalem

The Council of Jerusalem tried to interpret sanctity in a spiritual way.

Ancient Greece

In the ancient Greece there was a view that the self is a passive victim of external agents, where heroes as described by Homer have been subject to various powers and emotions.

New Guinea

In New Guinea, the sex symbolism has a central place in the cosmology with fear of sexual pollution as cultural characteristic.

Australia

The aboriginal people of Australia incorporate Murinbata cosmology. The aborigines of Arnhemland believe in copulation as part of the initiation ceremonies, especially between prohibited partners.

Central Australia

The aborigines of Central Australia, the Walbiri apply force in their sexual relationships as part of social structure, where women are under control of their husbands, even if it is ruthlessly enforced. They assure care for all members, including the infirm.

Congo

A country where the Lele culture lives.

Lake Nyasa

North of Lake Nyasa live the Nyakusa people.



Somaliland

In Somaliland the division between secular and spiritual power is accepted. The Somali are militant, deriving power from fighting, where the political structure is part of a warrior system. The Somalis are Muslims but believe that fighting between Muslims is wrong. Their holy men mediate between men.

Sepik River

A place of Arapesh people.

The Central Highlands

In the Central Highlands the Mae Enga live.

Northern California

In northern California the Yurok people live who were of interest for anthropologists due to the way they approached purity and impurity. They live by fishing salmon in the Klamath River and are very careful about mixing various types of liquids and waters.



Themes

Pollution

Pollution symbols reveal elaborate cosmologies. Contemplating pollution instigates the examination of matters such as order, form, life, and death. Through the analysis of purity, the concept of dirt in its practical as well as theoretical form can be considered. Further investigations unravel that sacredness is also connected with pollution as indicated by primitive culture experience.

Just like modern cultures connect what is sacred with the need for protection and hunger with fullness, primitive cultures view sanctity and cleanness as related. The sacred is more than prohibition because it is part of universal values that restrict and divide between what is divine and profane. The division between things and actions has its roots in linguistics as the Latin word *sacer* relates both to the gods and restriction while pertaining equally to desecration and consecration. Other cultures incur the same similarities, where the Hebrew root *k-d-sh* derived from separation has the meaning of holy. The paradox of purity and impurity is more than just a mark of primitive thought. Concepts of profane and sacred have been part of various cults, but primitive cultures sought material attributes when assessing matters as good or bad, whereas Douglas gives as an example the notion that contact with corpses may involve danger.

Pollution symbols as part of cooking is due to the crossing of boundaries. In India, such boundaries incorporate a deeper meaning of social divisions. Indian labor involves hereditary division between castes. The purity of castes has a symbolic meaning of pure status that needs to be maintained for the proper functioning of the entire system. As combined work of castes tackles food preparation, the purity structure is related to occupational structure. The cooking process is a cleansing and breaking ritual to preserve and maintain the social order.

Religions

Douglas analyzes and tries to understand religions and uses them to gain understanding of the way concepts of pollution and taboo are understood by various cultures. To do this, she tries to get to the bottom of the essentials of religion while comparing various views about destiny and place in the universe. She considers that to do that it is important to confront our own ideas of contagion.

She analyzes comparative religion as full of medical materialism and analyzes modern views of other religions. These approaches view rituals as empty forms and view other religions as too formal and lacking interior religion. Other religions view the occult as lacking spiritual content. She considers external form as necessary for the existence of religion.



As religion is represented by men of God, hence holy men mediate between men in the same way as they mediate between men and God. Credited with spiritual power, religions display certain powers. Hebrew religion regards blood as the source of life that should be touched only during sacrifice.

As religion deals with morals pollution it also engages the issue of morals at its core. Although pollution rules have no relation with moral rules, they judge behavior as wrong and hence pollution occurs. Pollution is only partly concerned with disapproval of immoral behavior.

The author compares religion to cleanness, as sacredness is also associated with purity. She views contagion as part of religion and society. As powers are part of various structures of ideas, rules of avoidance are apparently the public recognition of boundaries.

Religions also sacralise unclean things that have been rejected in the same way dirt is rejected as being destructive but creative at the same time.

While religions use rituals, Douglas analyzes rituals and the role they play in dirt and pollution. She analyzes the Lele religion as looking at reality in a direct way while denying necessity as well as death in reality.

Most religions promise certain changes in various events but recognize death as necessary. They contemplate death and existence.

Rituals and Primitive Religions

Douglas examines rituals as an inherent part of primitive religions. Primitive religions are less concerned with philosophy and more with material benefits, where ritual and moral conformity is employed. The religions that deal with rituals in an instrumental attract disbelief. Religions that deal with evil only in reference to demonology or sorcery are devoid of the reference to the entire universe. Religions are to deliver prosperity through ritual efficacy. When moral codes are obeyed, prosperity should be achieved. Some primitive religions tend to advocate murder as part of ritual to gain good health and fortune in hunting. Primitive religions may offer material success while protecting themselves from certain experiment. When religions are only concerned with material matters, they are prone to disbelief.

The author indicates that rituals are means to gain the experience of unity. Through rituals, symbolic patterns can be exhibited and meaning given through disparate elements. Ritual is expected to have an automatic effect. To some extent, magic was regarded to be a ritual. Rituals are used for separation as part of crossing forbidden boundaries. Durkheim viewed ritual as a symbol of social processes as part of various beliefs. Rituals involved various rules but always displayed symbolism. Such rules encourage beliefs that there are various dangers associated with their breach.



Douglas purports that ideas of dirt are part of symbolic systems and there is only a slight difference between pollution, and behavior in various parts of the world are similar. Rituals use symbols of anomaly as part of evil and death as well as life and goodness in one unifying pattern. Rituals modify objects and reformulate experiences.

Style

Perspective

Douglas conducted studies among the Lele culture in the Belgian Congo in 1947. She taught at the University College London as well as worked in the US. Her publications, influenced by Roman Catholic beliefs, have been inspired by comparative religions. Her best known books have been *Leviticus* and *The Cultural Theory of Risk*.

In *Purity and Danger* she argues that symbols of purity are deeply rooted as part of religious and cultural tradition. While delving into the roots of certain beliefs about the purity and impurity of food, she unveils the way they have been accepted into everyday practices and rituals. Prohibited foods such as pigs represent more than just health concern. She unravels symbolism in practices that separate, instill notions of boundary and holiness, as that which is whole is pure. Through the issues of purity, sexuality is debated as being of particular importance to the maintenance of social hierarchies. Rituals are more than just common practices. They involve psychological means to resolving most crucial issues of life and death. As part of natural order and cosmic laws, the survival of society is interconnected with nature, where the way community is structured is predetermined. Rituals provide means and solution to the mysteries of life and death, dealing with crossing the boundaries and power. Disorder is as important as order due to its renewal qualities. Boundaries, power, order, and disorder involve symbolism and meaning where ambiguous matters pose danger. Douglas views sorcery in terms of functionalist theory, influencing other social structure views.

Tone

Mary Douglas engages through her insightful, yet intellectual approach. Her anecdotal, yet informative approach inspires with analysis, while her reasoning invites pondering. She delves into philosophical, linguistic, and anthropological issues with aptness and knowledge addressed in a versed and conversational way. In this way, she creates a forum for the debate where various points converge, creating shocking revelations. Her deep analysis unveils concepts entirely different from common points of view. Arguments incorporate problems that involve understanding of reality. Her expression is directed towards accessing truth.

Notions of meaningless elements that involve society and are subjective create tension, where various parts interrelate while all are relevant. A sense of mystery intervenes into that which is sacred. Notions that are outside of our sphere of reality and notions that involve our common everyday life are all part of certain truths that, although obvious, can also quite abstract. What is reinforced can be destroyed. Hence, order can be symbolic as much as it is realistic. The dualism expressed in various polarities delves into regions that unveil power and formlessness.



Douglas claims that as much as nature is part of life, primitive culture is also part of our life, affecting us even though our culture may ignore it. Her dissection of primitive and modern culture challenges our cultural assumptions.

Structure

As Douglas reflects on dirt, she carefully examines ideas relating to dirt and the way they are interrelated. In the course of these examinations, she ventures into themes of order, disorder, existence, formlessness, life, and death. The first chapter involves the examination of what is the essence of dirt and hygiene through the approaches primitive and modern cultures exhibit to such matters. As primitive cultures display the view that what is sacred is clean, Douglas investigates the differences between modern and primitive cultures. She also examines different ways primitive cultures are viewed and judged. Chapter two deals with the nature of dirt as a matter that needs to be excluded from the pattern of order.

Chapter three further analyzes dirt as part of the total unity of the structure, and she orders ideas considering the symbolism of purity in food restrictions. The dietary rules unveil concepts of food restriction and symbolism. As she concludes that the observance of dietary rules involves worship and sacrifice, it leads to the next chapter, where such issues are dealt with through magic and miracle.

Chapter four analyzes rituals as part of magic, along with creativity, harmony, and meaning as part of social order. The importance of taboos incorporates their expression of concern.

Accordingly, chapter five deals with the essence of such social order as part of cosmic influence and the natural order, also considering the way primitive cultures view cosmology as opposed to the modern culture.

Chapter six investigates the relation between order and pattern as part of restriction. Such restriction incorporates human relations and, in particular, sexual relations. The way boundaries are crossed involves various states.

Further, Douglas distinguishes four kinds of pollution that become part of the following chapters, including danger pressing on external boundaries, danger from crossing internal lines, dangers within the margins, and dangers through internal contradictions.

In this way, the book consists of ten chapters related through the final conclusion and analysis. Consistency of arguments incorporates the final analysis.



Quotes

"Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment." p. 2

"The whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship." p.4

"Each primitive culture is a universe to itself." p. 4

"Primitive society is an energized structure in the centre of its universe." p. 5

"The more we know about primitive religions the more clearly it appears that in their symbolic structures there is scope for meditation on the great mysteries of religion and philosophy." p.6

"Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death." p. 7

"Any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions." p. 47

"Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained." p. 50

"For the only way in which pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought keystone, boundaries, margins and internal lines held in relation by rituals of separation." p. 51

"As with society, so with religion, external form is the condition of its existence." p. 77

"Differentiation in thought patterns goes along with differentiated social conditions." p. 97

"Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern." p. 117

"There is a power in the forms and other power in the inarticulate area, margins, confused lines, and beyond the external boundaries." p. 122

"The power which presents a danger for careless humans is very evidently a power inhering in the structure of ideas, a power by which the structure is expected to protect itself." p. 140



Topics for Discussion

To what extent heathen practices represent symbols of pollution?

What are the true principles of power and danger?

Why some believes are acceptable and others not?

What do rituals symbolize?

How does pollution relate to controlled and uncontrolled power?

How primitive cultures approach the unity of death and life?

Why margins represent dangers and powers?