

# 2

## CHAPTER

# INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS



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Since prehistoric times, indigenous or native groups of people throughout the world have practiced their own unique forms of religion. Some of those religions continue to be practiced.

Indigenous religious traditions are generally the traditions that originated with non-literate people. Therefore, these traditions do not depend on scriptures or written teachings, as do most other religions. What they lack in written texts, however, they often make up for in oral material—myths or stories that are passed down from generation to generation.

Indigenous religious traditions tend to belong to tribal people organized in small groups that dwell in villages as opposed to large cities. There are exceptions, however, including the Yoruba of Africa and the Aztecs of Mesoamerica. In this and other ways, indigenous traditions are diverse. It is therefore crucial that we avoid making sweeping generalizations about them.

In light of this vast diversity, this chapter does not attempt to describe all indigenous religious traditions. Instead, it focuses on four rather specific examples: the Aborigines of Australia, the Yoruba, the Plains Indians



In the Apache Sunrise Dance, girls entering puberty are painted white with sacred clay and cornmeal. The rite symbolizes the passage into adulthood.



### Ancestors

For the Australian Aboriginal religion, Ancestors are supernatural beings (or deities) who emerged and roamed the earth during the time of the Dreaming, giving shape to the landscape and creating various forms of life. When the word *ancestors* is lowercased, it refers to the deceased, who can assist the living while requiring religious devotion (as among the Yoruba, for example).

of North America, and the Aztecs. Once we have considered some particular features of each of these religions, we will reflect on general themes that tend to be common to indigenous religious traditions.

## RELIGION OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

The Aborigines, the native people of Australia, were largely unaffected by outsiders until the arrival of Europeans some two hundred years ago. The Aborigines maintained traditions extending many thousands of years into the past. In some areas, notably in the northern and central regions of Australia, those traditions remain largely intact today.

Australia is a continent of great diversity. Its geography ranges from lush forested mountains to harsh deserts, and those differences have produced a variety of social groups that speak about forty separate languages and have differing customs. Australia's religious life is diverse as well, but it possesses enough common elements that we can speak of one Aboriginal religion while acknowledging its varying manifestations.

### The Dreaming: The Eternal Time of the Ancestors

The foundation of Aboriginal religion is the concept of the Dreaming. According to Aboriginal belief, the world was





Ayers Rock is a sacred place for Australian Aborigines.

originally formless. Then at a certain point in the mythic past, supernatural beings called **Ancestors** emerged and roamed about the earth. The Ancestors gave shape to the landscape and created the various forms of life, including the first human beings. They organized humans into tribes, specified the territory each tribe was to occupy, and determined each tribe's language, social rules, and customs. When the Ancestors had finished and departed from the earth, they left behind symbols of their presence, in the form of natural landmarks, rock paintings, and so on.

This mythic period of the Ancestors is called **the Dreaming**. In a very real sense, this period lives on, for the Aborigines believe that the spiritual essence of the Ancestors

remains in the various symbols they left behind. The sites at which these symbols are found are thought to be charged with sacred power. Only certain individuals are allowed to visit these sites and they must approach the sites in a special way. Rather than traveling the shortest route, visitors follow the paths that were originally taken by the Ancestors in the Dreaming. Their ritual approach reenacts the mythic events of the Dreaming, and through it the Aborigines re-create their world as it existed in the beginning. This re-creation gives them access to the endless sources of sacred power of these sites. The Aborigines inhabit a mythic geography—a world in which every notable landmark, whether it be a rock outcropping, a watering hole, or a cave,

#### **Dreaming, the**

The mythic time of Australian Aboriginal religion when the Ancestors inhabited the earth.





Aboriginal rock art evokes the Dreaming.

### totem

A natural entity, such as an animal or a feature of the landscape, that symbolizes an individual or group and that has special significance for the religious life of that individual or group; a common motif among Australian Aborigines and other indigenous peoples.

is believed to have great religious significance. Aboriginal cosmology—or understanding of the nature of the universe—thus plays a constant role in Aboriginal religion.

The spiritual essence of the Ancestors is also believed to reside within each individual. An unborn child becomes animated by a particular Ancestor when the mother or another relative makes some form of contact with a sacred site. Usually this animation involves a ritual that draws the Ancestor's spiritual essence into the unborn child.

Through this connection each Aborigine is a living representation of an Ancestor. This relationship is symbolized by a **totem**—the natural form in which the Ancestor appeared in the Dreaming. The totem may be an animal, such as a kangaroo or snake, or a rock formation or other feature of the landscape. An individual will always be identified in certain ways with the Ancestor. The system

of belief and ritual based on totems is called totemism. Totemism is a motif that is common to many primal traditions.

The Ancestors of the Dreaming also continually nourish the natural world. They are sources of life of all kinds. For a particular Ancestor's nourishing power to flow forth into the world, the human beings associated with that Ancestor must perform proper rituals.

The supernatural, the human world, and the world of nature are thus considered to be delicately interrelated. Aboriginal religious life seeks to maintain harmonious relationships among these three aspects of reality. Such harmony is itself a form of spiritual perfection.





## ACTIVITY

Empathy—seeing something from another’s perspective—helps us to gain the insight we need to understand and appreciate the diversity of world religions. Striving to understand the Aboriginal concept of a mythic geography offers a good opportunity for practicing empathy. Think of a favorite outdoor area, such as a place in the wilderness, a beach, a park, or your backyard. Imagine that every notable landmark has great religious significance and that your every move within the area is undertaken as if it were a religious ritual. Now describe the area and your experience of being there.

## Animating the Power of the Dreaming: Aboriginal Religious Life

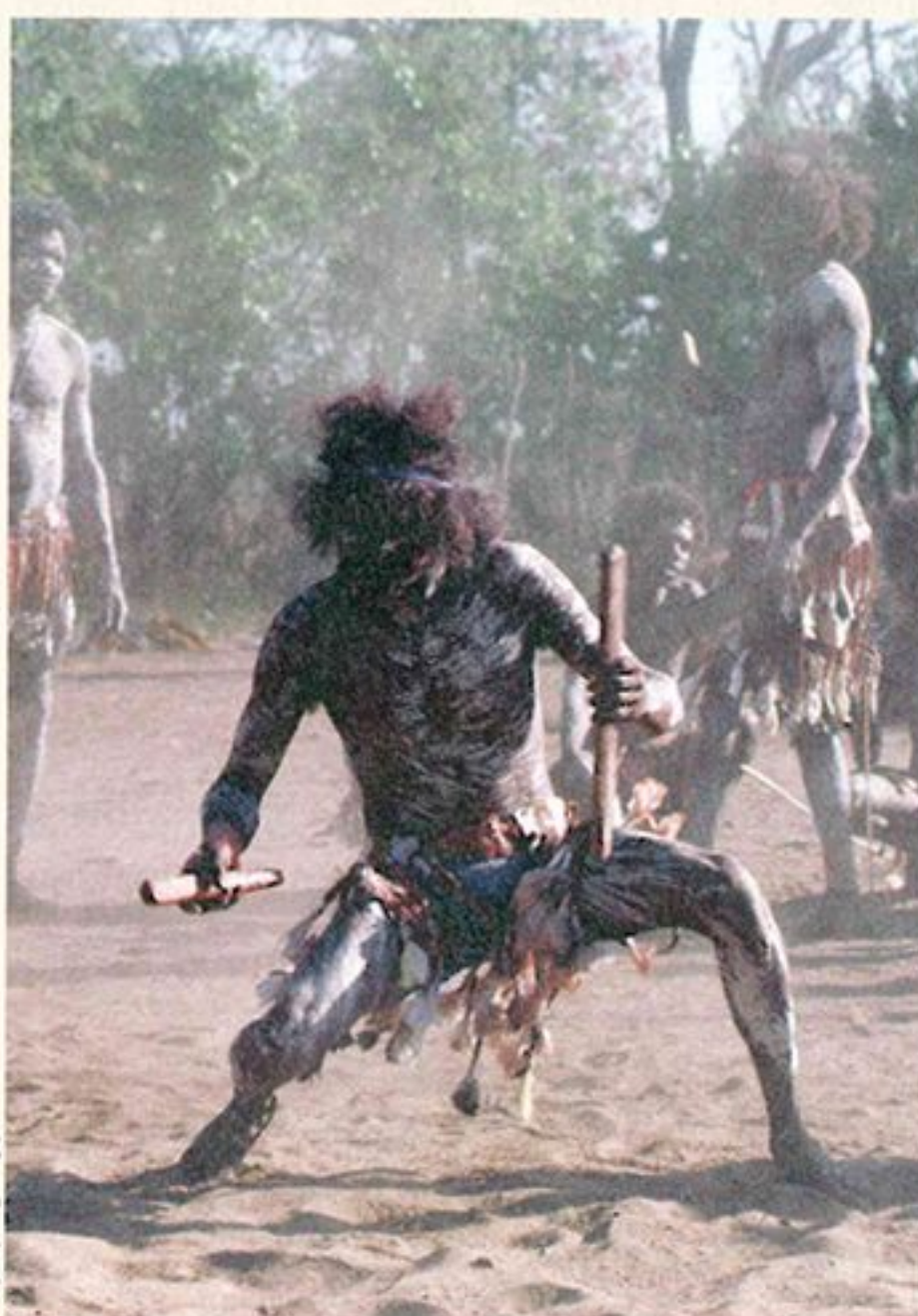
Aboriginal religion is the entire process of re-creating the mythic past of the Dreaming in order to tap into its sacred power. This process is accomplished primarily through ritual, the reenactment of myth. It also involves maintaining the structure of society as it was originally established by the Ancestors. This, in turn, requires the performance of certain rituals, such as those of initiation.

For Aborigines, ritual is essential if life is to have meaning. It is only through ritual that the sacred power of the Dreaming can be accessed and experienced. Furthermore, Aborigines believe that the rituals themselves were taught to the first humans by the Ancestors in the Dreaming.

Behind every ritual lies a myth that tells of certain actions of the Ancestors during the Dreaming. For example, myths that describe the creation of the kangaroo,



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*Left:* Aboriginal men paint initiates’ bodies in preparation for ceremonies that will bring the young people to awareness of their role in tribal life.

*Right:* An initiation dance.



### taboo (sometimes spelled tabu)

A system of social ordering that dictates that specific objects and activities, owing to their sacred nature, are set aside for specific groups and are strictly forbidden to others; common to many indigenous peoples, including the Australian Aborigines.

a chief food source of the Aborigines, spell out precisely how and where the act of creation took place. Rituals that reenact these myths are performed at the corresponding sacred sites in order to replenish the local population of kangaroos.



### ACTIVITY

Every society has rituals that reenact origins, just as the Aborigines do. Some contemporary rituals are religious in nature, whereas others involve patriotism and other aspects of society. List as many such rituals as you can, briefly explaining how each is a reenactment of an original event.

#### **Taboo:** **The Basis of Aboriginal Social Structure**

Aboriginal society is carefully structured. Certain people are forbidden to participate in certain rituals. The basis of this structure is the concept of **taboo**, which dictates that certain things and activities, owing to their sacred nature, are set aside for specific members of the group and are forbidden to others. Violation of this principle has on occasion been punishable by death.

The sites and rituals associated with certain Ancestors are for men only. Others, such as those connected with childbirth, are for women only. Restrictions are also based on maturity and on an individual's amount of religious training. Usually the older members of the tribe are in charge of important rituals.

Young people achieve religious maturity and training in part through the elaborate initiation rituals practiced throughout Aboriginal Australia.



### ACTIVITY

To what extent does your society apply restrictions similar to those of the Aboriginal concept of taboo?

#### **Initiation:** **Symbolic Death, Spiritual Rebirth**

Even before birth, each Aborigine possesses the spiritual essence of her or his totemic Ancestor. Initiation rituals awaken young people to this spiritual identity and, at the same time, redefine their social identity within the tribe. The rituals bring about the symbolic death of childhood, which prepares the way for the spiritual rebirth that is a necessary step toward adulthood. Throughout the rituals, myths of the Dreaming are taught to the young people. Through the rituals and myths, young Aborigines learn the essential truths about their world and how they are to act within it.

Both boys and girls undergo initiation, though usually the rites are especially elaborate for boys. As an example, consider the male initiation rites practiced in the nineteenth century by the Dieri tribe of south-central Australia.

The initiation rituals of the Dieri took place around a boy's ninth birthday (though the age could vary) and lasted for months. In the first ritual, intended as a symbolic death, the initiate's two lower middle teeth were knocked out and buried in the ground.

Other rituals followed, including circumcision (removal of the foreskin of the penis), which for many Aboriginal tribes is the symbolic death par excellence. According to one myth, two Ancestors had shown the Dieri in the Dreaming how to circumcise with a stone knife.



The main initiation ritual was called the Wilyaru. The initiate stood with his eyes closed as men took turns cutting their forearms and letting their blood fall on him, until he became caked with dried blood. This blood served to connect the boy symbolically with his relatives. Next, the boy's neck and back were struck with wounds that were intended to leave scars, yet another symbol of death. At this point, the boy was given a bull-roarer, a sacred instrument consisting of a piece of wood attached to a long string made from human hair. The bull-roarer re-created the sound of the deities and, because of its great power, was taboo for women.

These initiation rituals were followed by a period of months during which the boy lived alone in the wilderness, until his wounds healed and the blood wore off his skin. When he returned to his tribe, he was greeted with much rejoicing and celebration. His rites of initiation completed, the boy had become a man.

It might be difficult for an outsider to understand the reasons for these various rituals. This difficulty illustrates the great power of myth. Aboriginal myth creates a reality that is unique to the Aborigines, a world of their own in which such initiation rituals not only make sense but are essential if life is to have meaning. The power of myth, and the performance of ritual to reenact myth, are basic features of all primal traditions.



### ACTIVITY

What experiences have served as rituals of initiation for you, marking your passage from childhood to adulthood?

## AN AFRICAN TRADITION: THE RELIGION OF THE YORUBA

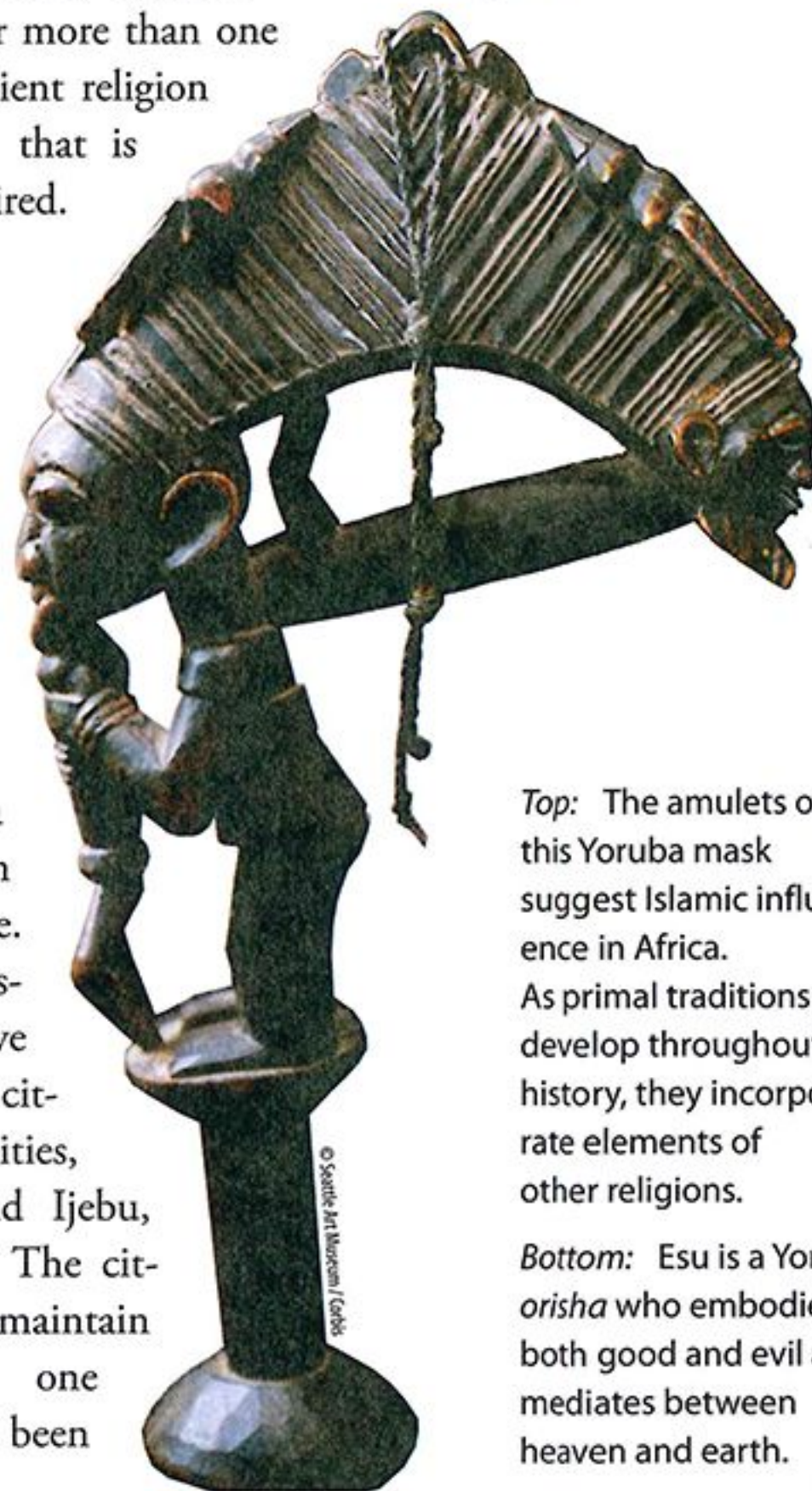
Africa, the second largest continent in terms of landmass, is home to about a billion people and several hundred religions, including the religion of the Yoruba. Though hardly representative of all African religions, the Yoruba tradition is similar enough to some others to serve as a good example. Yoruba society, today consisting of about thirty million people, has endured for more than one thousand years. Its ancient religion has produced artwork that is famous and much admired.

### The Yoruba and Their Universe

The Yoruba live in the western regions of central Africa, in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Yoruba designates not a unified nation but rather a group with a common language and culture. Throughout their history, the Yoruba have favored living in cities. Some of those cities, such as Ife, Oyo, and Ijebu, have been quite large. The cities have tended to maintain independence from one another. Ife has always been



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*Top:* The amulets on this Yoruba mask suggest Islamic influence in Africa. As primal traditions develop throughout history, they incorporate elements of other religions.

*Bottom:* Esu is a Yoruba orisha who embodies both good and evil and mediates between heaven and earth.



**orishas** (aw-ree-shahs'; Yoruba: "head source")

The hundreds of various Yoruba deities who are the main objects of ritual attention, including Orisha-nla, the creator god; Ogun, the god of iron and of war; and Esu, the trickster figure.

### trickster figure

A type of supernatural being who tends to disrupt the normal course of life, found among many indigenous peoples; for example, Esu among the Yoruba and Inktemi among the Lakota.

### diviners

Ritual practitioners who specialize in the art of divination; very important among the Yoruba.

### divination

The use of various techniques, such as throwing bones or shells and then interpreting the pattern in which they fall, for gaining knowledge about an individual's future or about the cause of a personal problem; important among many religions worldwide, including that of the Yoruba.

the center of Yoruba religion, because it was there, the Yoruba believe, that the god Orisha-nla first began to create the world.

Yoruba cosmology depicts reality as being divided into two separate worlds: heaven and earth. Heaven is the invisible home of the gods and the ancestors. Earth is the world of normal experience, the visible home of human beings, who are descended from the gods. Earth is also populated by a deviant form of human beings, witches and sorcerers, who can cause disastrous harm if not controlled.

The purpose of the Yoruba religion is to maintain the balance between the human beings of earth and the gods and ancestors of heaven, while guarding against the evil deeds of sorcerers and witches.

## Gods and Ancestors: The Inhabitants of Heaven

Indigenous religious traditions commonly hold a belief in both a supreme god and a host of less powerful deities. The supreme god of the Yoruba is Olorun, and the many deities the Yoruba worship are known as *orishas* (aw-ree-shahs'). The supreme god, lesser deities, and ancestors all inhabit heaven.

### Olorun, the High God

The Yoruba believe that Olorun is the primary, original source of power in the universe. All other life forms ultimately owe their existence to him. But Olorun is distant and remote, and not involved in human affairs. He is therefore worshipped hardly at all, except in prayer. No shrines or rituals are assigned to him, and no sacrifices are made on his behalf. Instead, many other gods, the *orishas*, function as mediators between Olorun and human beings.

## Orishas

The *orishas* are lesser deities, compared with the supreme Olorun, but are nonetheless truly significant. All are sources of sacred power and can help or harm human beings, depending on how well the rituals designed to appease them are carried out.

Hundreds of *orishas* exist. Some are worshipped by all Yoruba, others by only one family group. An especially significant *orisha* is Orisha-nla, whom most Yoruba believe created the earth. Ogun, the god of iron and of war, has a special status. Originally he was a human being, the first king of the city of Ife. After he died he became a god, and now he inhabits the border area between the ancestors and the rest of the *orishas*. The most complex *orisha* is Esu, who contains both good and evil properties. Precisely because of this, Esu mediates between heaven and earth. Worship of Esu is included in the worship of any other *orisha*, and Esu has a place in every shrine.

Esu's dual nature as both good and evil, and his corresponding role as mediator between heaven and earth, make him a **trickster figure**, a sort of mischievous supernatural being. Tricksters are significant in many indigenous religious traditions throughout the world.

### The Ancestors of the Living

The heavenly ancestors are deceased humans who have acquired supernatural status. Like the *orishas*, the ancestors possess sacred power that can help or harm the living. Therefore they too are worshipped through rituals at special shrines.

There are two types of ancestors. Family ancestors gained their supernatural status by earning a good reputation and living to an old age and are now worshipped only by their own families. Deified ancestors were



important human figures known throughout Yoruba society and are now worshipped by large numbers of people.



## ACTIVITY

Deceased ancestors are worshipped in many religious traditions. Are they worshipped in any way in your society? Explain your answer.

### Connecting Heaven and Earth: Ritual Practitioners

Several types of ritual practitioners mediate between the gods and ancestors in heaven, and the human beings on earth. For whatever religious need a worshipper is attempting to fulfill, there is a specialist who can facilitate communication with the appropriate deity or ancestor.

For example, the head of a family is responsible for worshipping the family's ancestors and does so in the home at the family shrine. The king, or chief, of a city is in charge of the city's annual festivals and performs a host of other religious functions. The many priests oversee the various rituals carried out at the shrines of each *orisha*.

Among the priests who engage in specialized services are **diviners**. Those priests practice the art of **divination**, through which one's future can be learned. Becoming a diviner requires years of training, and the role is usually passed from parent to child. Divination is an extremely important aspect of Yoruba religion because knowledge of one's future is considered essential for determining how to proceed with one's life. The procedure involves an intricate system of hundreds of wisdom stories, which the diviner knows by memory. The diviner determines which of the stories are relevant for an individual, and from those stories interprets the individual's future.

Another ritual specialist mediates between the ancestors and the living. Wearing an elaborate ceremonial mask and costume, this specialist becomes a living representation of an ancestor by dancing at festivals. When an important person dies, the specialist imitates that person and conveys comforting messages from the deceased to the living.

The prevalence of these ritual practitioners clearly illustrates the importance of mediating, and thereby maintaining balance, between heaven and earth. Most indigenous religious traditions share the understanding that the boundaries between the human and the supernatural realms are very thin and can easily be crossed.

## RELIGION OF THE NORTH AMERICAN PLAINS INDIANS

Interpreting the latest evidence, scholars believe that humans first came to North America perhaps as early as forty thousand years ago, with significant populations arriving from ten to twenty thousand years ago. They migrated from Asia, probably by crossing over the Bering Strait (situated between Russia and Alaska). They gradually spread out and eventually inhabited large regions of both North and South America.

Those first inhabitants of America, or Native Americans, formed many cultural groups, each with its own religion. For example, the peoples of the North American Plains comprised more than thirty tribes speaking seven distinct languages.

The Plains are vast, stretching from the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba southward to the Gulf of Mexico, bordered on the west by the Rocky Mountains and on the east by the Mississippi River. The culture we now associate with this area formed relatively recently, after the arrival of horses from Europe in the seventeenth century. Domestic horses enabled





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Native Americans of the Northern Plains participate in a reenactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, in which the Lakota played a leading role. Such interest in history and other cultural aspects has become a common feature of the revitalization of Native American traditions.

the Plains Indians to become great hunters of bison and other game. Numerous tribes migrated into the Plains region, exchanging ideas with one another. This exchange was aided by the use of a common sign language understood by all the tribes. The religion of the Plains is therefore somewhat representative of American Indian religion in general. Today this religion serves as the model of pan-Indian religion, a recent and popular movement uniting many tribes from across North America. As a result, Plains religion continues to be of vital interest to native peoples throughout North America.

The Plains peoples shared a number of religious features, including basic beliefs resembling those of the large and influential Lakota tribe. All the tribes performed two basic rituals: the vision quest and the Sun Dance.

### Basic Beliefs of the Lakota

The Lakota are also known as the Western Sioux, although *Sioux* originated as a pejorative label, from an enemy tribe's term for "snakes." These people inhabited eastern Montana and Wyoming, the western regions of the Dakotas, and parts of Nebraska. This is an especially important tribe for a number of reasons. The Lakota are remembered for having led a confederacy of tribes that defeated Custer and his troops in the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876. In 1890, as the wars between Indians and whites came to an end, more than two hundred Lakota were massacred at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. Today about seventy thousand Lakota live on reservations in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Montana, and North and South Dakota.



The Lakota name for the supreme reality is **Wakan Tanka** (wah'khan tankh'ah), sometimes translated as Great Spirit or the Great Mysterious, but literally meaning "most sacred." Wakan Tanka actually refers to sixteen separate deities. The number sixteen is derived from the number four (multiplied by itself), which is the most sacred number in Plains religion. It refers to the four compass directions (north, south, east, and west), which are especially relevant to peoples living in the wide-open regions of the Plains.

The creation of the world and the arrival of the first human beings are explained in detailed myths that celebrate the activities of the various supernatural beings involved. One of those beings is Inkтоми (whose name means "spider"), the Lakota trickster figure. As the mediator between the supernatural and human worlds, Inkтоми taught the first humans their ways and customs. Inkтоми also serves another important function. Numerous stories tell about Inkтоми's mistakes and errors of judgment, and offer an important moral lesson for children: Do not behave as Inkтоми did!

Basic to most religions are beliefs regarding death and the afterlife, or human destiny.

The Lakota believe that four souls depart from a person at death, one of which journeys along the "spirit path" of the Milky Way. The soul meets an old woman, who judges it and either allows it to continue to the other world of the ancestors, or sends it back to earth as a ghost. Meanwhile parts of the other souls enter unborn children and are reborn in new bodies.



## ACTIVITY

Imagine yourself living in the open wilderness of the North American Plains. Why, do you suppose, did the Lakota understand their supreme reality as being closely related to the four compass directions?

### The Vision Quest

The **vision quest** is common to many indigenous religious traditions throughout the world. It is a primary means for an individual to gain access to spiritual power that will ensure greater success in activities such as hunting, warfare, and curing the ill.

**Wakan Tanka**  
(wah'khan tankh'ah; Lakota: "most sacred")

Lakota name for the supreme reality, often referring collectively to sixteen separate deities.

### vision quest

A means of seeking spiritual power through an encounter with a guardian spirit or other medium, usually in the form of an animal or other natural entity, following a period of fasting and other forms of self-denial; common to many indigenous peoples, including the Lakota and other tribes of the North American Plains.



For many Native American tribes, spiritual and physical purification in a sweat lodge is part of the preparation for setting out on a vision quest.



# A YOUNG MAN'S VISION QUEST

*John Fire / Lame Deer (1903 to 1976) was born on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. In his lifetime, he was a rancher, a rodeo cowboy, and a reservation police officer, but he is best known as a Lakota Sioux holy man. In this excerpt from his autobiography, Lame Deer describes his boyhood experience of a vision quest, or hanblechia (Lakota for "crying for a vision").*

I was all alone on the hilltop. I sat there in the vision pit, a hole dug into the hill, my arms hugging my knees as I watched old man Chest, the medicine man who had brought me there, disappear far down in the valley. He was just a moving black dot among the pines, and soon he was gone altogether.

(Lame Deer and Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*, page 11)

Night was coming on. I was still lightheaded and dizzy from my first sweat bath in which I had purified myself before going up the hill. I had never been in a sweat lodge before. I had sat in the little beehive-shaped hut made of bent willow branches and covered with blankets to keep the heat in. Old Chest and three other medicine men had been in the lodge with me. I had my back against the wall, edging as far away as I could from the red-hot stones glowing in the center. As Chest poured water over the rocks, hissing white steam enveloped me and filled my lungs. I thought the heat would kill me, burn the eyelids off my face! But right in the middle of all this swirling steam I heard Chest singing. So it couldn't be all that bad. I did not cry out "All my relatives!"—which would have made him open the flap of the sweat lodge to let in some cool air—and I was proud of this. I heard him praying for me: "Oh, holy rocks, we receive your white breath, the steam. It is the breath of life. Let this young boy inhale it. Make him strong."

The sweat bath had prepared me for my vision-seeking. Even now, an hour later, my skin still tingled. But it seemed to have made my brains empty. Maybe that was good, plenty of room for new insights. . . .

Sounds came to me through the darkness: the cries of the wind, the whisper of the trees, the voices of nature, animal sounds, the hooting of an owl. Suddenly I felt an overwhelming presence. Down there with me in my cramped hole was a big bird. The pit was only as wide as myself, and I was a skinny boy, but that huge bird was flying around me as if he had the whole sky to himself. I could hear his cries, sometimes near and sometimes far, far away. I felt feathers or a wing touching my back and head. This feeling was so overwhelming that it was just too much for me. I trembled and my bones turned to ice. . . .

Slowly I perceived that a voice was trying to tell me something. It was a bird cry, but I tell you, I began to understand some of it. . . .

I heard a human voice too, strange and high-pitched, a voice which could not come from an ordinary, living being. All at once I was way up there with the birds. The hill with the vision pit was way above everything. I could look down even on the stars, and the moon was close to my left side. It seemed as though the earth and the stars were moving below me. A voice said, "You are sacrificing yourself here to be a medicine man. In time you will be one. You will teach other medicine men. We are the fowl people, the winged ones, the eagles and the owls. We are a nation and you shall be our brother. You will never kill or harm any one of us. You are going to understand us whenever you come to seek a vision here on this hill. You will learn about herbs and roots, and you will heal people. You will ask them for nothing in return. A man's life is short. Make yours a worthy one."

I felt that these voices were good, and slowly my fear left me. I had lost all sense of time. I did not know whether it was day or night. I was asleep, yet wide awake. Then I saw a shape before me. It rose from the darkness and the swirling fog, which penetrated my earth hole. I saw that this was my great-grandfather, Tahca Ushte, Lame Deer, old man chief of the Minneconjou. I could see the blood dripping from my great-grandfather's chest where a white soldier had shot him. I understood that my great-grandfather wished me to take his name. This made me glad beyond words.

We Sioux believe that there is something within us that controls us, something like a second person almost. We call it *nagi*, what other people might call soul, spirit or essence. One can't see it, feel it or taste it, but that time on the hill—and only that once—I knew it was there inside of me. Then I felt the power surge through me like a flood. I cannot describe it, but it filled all of me. Now I knew for sure that I would become a *wicasa wakan*, a medicine man. Again I wept, this time with happiness.

I didn't know how long I had been up there on that hill—one minute or a lifetime. I felt a hand on my shoulder gently shaking me. It was old man Chest, who had come for me. He told me that I had been in the vision pit four days and four nights and that it was time to come down. He would give me something to eat and water to drink and then I was to tell him everything that had happened to me during my *hanblechia*. He would interpret my visions for me. He told me that the vision pit had changed me in a way that I would not be able to understand at that time. He told me also that I was no longer a boy, that I was a man now. I was Lame Deer.

(Pages 14–16)



Both men and women experience this quest, though men do so more frequently.

The vision quest is carried out under the supervision of a medicine man or woman, a spiritual leader who issues specific instructions beforehand and interprets the content of the vision afterward. Before setting out on the quest, the participant undergoes a ritual of purification in the sweat lodge.

The sweat lodge is used on numerous occasions and is a common element among Plains Indians and Native American traditions in general. It is a dark and airtight hut made of saplings and covered with animal skins. The structure of the lodge is intended to represent the universe. Heated stones are placed in the center, and the medicine man or woman sprinkles water over them. The resulting hot steam causes the participant to sweat profusely, leading to both physical and spiritual purification.

Once purified in this fashion, the vision quester goes off alone to a place far from the camp, usually to a hilltop. There he or she endures the elements for a set number of days, without food or water. Depending on the instructions from the medicine man or woman, the quester might perform certain rituals, carefully structured around a central spot.

A vision comes to the quester eventually, usually near the end of the stay. It arrives in the form of an animal or some other object or force of nature. A message is often communicated along with the vision. When the individual returns to camp, the medicine man or woman interprets the vision and the message. The lessons derived from the vision quest influence the rest of the person's life.

On some occasions the participant acquires a guardian spirit, which can be in the form of an animal, an inanimate object, or a ghost. The guardian spirit continues to protect and instruct the person, especially at times of great need.

The vision quest expresses two dimensions of religion: the quest itself is a religious ritual, and the moment of receiving the vision or guardian spirit is a form of religious experience.

## The Sun Dance

Whereas the vision quest focuses on the individual, the **Sun Dance**, another ritual common to all tribes of the Plains, is undertaken for the benefit of all. It occurs at the beginning of summer and is, in part, a celebration of the new year. In the past, it also functioned as a preparation for the great annual bison hunt.

A sacred leader presides over the Sun Dance. This leader is usually a medicine man, though the Blackfeet, who inhabit Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Montana, choose a woman of outstanding moral character. Leading the Sun Dance is both a great honor and a grave responsibility.

For all tribes, the major task in preparing for the Sun Dance is the construction of the lodge in which the ceremony is held. A cottonwood tree is carefully selected, felled, and ritually carried to a chosen spot, where it is set upright. This tree becomes what scholars

## Sun Dance

Ritual of the Lakota and other tribes of the North American Plains that celebrates the new year and prepares the tribe for the annual bison hunt; performed in the late spring or early summer in a specially constructed lodge.



This nineteenth-century painting on buckskin depicts the performance of a Sun Dance.



*axis mundi*  
(Latin: “axis of  
the universe”)

Common to many religions, an entity such as a mountain, tree, or pole that is believed to connect the heavens and the earth and is sometimes regarded as the center of the world; for example, the cottonwood tree of the Plains Indians’ Sun Dance.

**Tenochtitlan**  
(te-nohch-teet’lahn)

Capital city of the Aztec empire, believed to be the center of the world. Home of the Great Temple, or Serpent Mountain. Site of present-day Mexico City.

call the *axis mundi*, the axis or center of the universe—itself an important and common theme for indigenous religious traditions. As the connecting link between the earth and the heavens, the tree also represents the supreme being. The lodge is constructed of twenty-eight poles, representing the twenty-eight days of the lunar month, placed in a circle around the tree. The finished lodge is representative of the universe with its four compass directions.

The performance of the Sun Dance features long periods of dancing while facing in the direction of the sun, which is venerated for its life-giving powers. Music and drumbeats accompany the dancing. Some of the dancers skewer the flesh of their chests and attach themselves to the tree with leather thongs. They then pull back from the tree as they continue dancing, until eventually their flesh tears. Because they believe their bodies are the only things they truly own, the dancers regard bodily mutilation as the only suitable sacrifice to offer to the supreme being.

This practice of bodily mutilation once compelled the U.S. government to outlaw the Sun Dance. It is now again legal and is commonly practiced in its traditional form among tribes of the North American Plains.



## ACTIVITY

The Indians of the Northern Plains traditionally lived off the land, depending on hunting and fishing to feed themselves. What elements of the vision quest and Sun Dance rituals are related to that lifestyle?

## A MESOAMERICAN RELIGION: THE AZTECS AND THEIR LEGACY

In some ways, the Aztec tradition defies the common description of indigenous religious tradition. Instead of living in small village-dwelling groups, the Aztecs were a highly developed civilization with a population of about fifteen million. Many Aztecs were urban, living in the city of **Tenochtitlan** (te-nohch-teet’lahn), which is now Mexico City, or in one of the four hundred towns that spread across Mesoamerica, from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea. But like other indigenous traditions, Aztec religion emphasized the interrelationship between myth and ritual, as its practice of human sacrifice makes vividly clear. Aztec religion influenced Catholicism, which came to Mesoamerica with the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. The Aztec influence can still be seen today in some modern Mexican religious practices. This sort of influence on later religions is a rather common trait of indigenous religious traditions.

### The Aztecs and Mesoamerican Culture

Mesoamerica included most of present-day Mexico and extended southward to present-day Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Native Americans appear to have arrived there about twenty thousand years ago, although scholars lack firm evidence. From about four thousand years ago until about five hundred years ago (around the time Columbus arrived in the New World), the area was home to a sophisticated and diverse Mesoamerican culture, which included civilizations such as the Olmec (1500 to 200 BC), the Maya (AD 200 to 900), the Toltec (AD 900 to 1100), and the Aztec (AD 1325 to 1521).





At the pyramid-shaped Great Temple, in the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, worship was dedicated to a god of rain and fertility and to a god of war and sacrifice.

## The Toltec Tradition: The Foundation of Aztec Religion

The Aztecs were relative latecomers to Mesoamerica, having migrated into the region from the northwest. By the time of their arrival, great cultural achievements had already come to pass. Those achievements offered the foundations on which the Aztecs built their own great civilization. The strongest influence came from the Toltecs. The Aztecs believed that the Toltec god **Quetzalcoatl** (kwet-suhl-kuh-wah'til) (Feathered Serpent) had presided over a

golden age of cultural brilliance. The god's earthly devotee Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (Our Young Prince the Feathered Serpent) ruled as priest-king. He provided the Aztecs with the perfect role model for their own authority figures.

The Aztecs looked back to this golden age of the Toltecs as a mythic pattern for the ideal civilization. The Toltec tradition especially influenced religion. Aztec children were taught to recite, "Truly with him it began, truly from him it flowed out, from Quetzalcoatl—all art and knowledge"



**Quetzalcoatl**  
(kwet-suhl-kuh-wah'til; Nahuatl: Feathered Serpent)

Mesoamerican creator god worshipped at Teotihuacan and by the Toltecs; believed by the Aztecs to have presided over a golden age. Quetzalcoatl's earthly representative was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (Nahuatl: Our Young Prince the Feathered Serpent), a legendary Toltec priest-king.

(quoted in Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, page 44). Aztec cosmology attributed the creation and ordering of the world to Quetzalcoatl.



### ACTIVITY

The Aztecs looked back to the Toltec tradition as a kind of golden age, providing them with a mythic pattern for the ideal civilization. In what ways do you and your society look to past traditions for cultural ideals?

### Teotihuacan: Place of Origins

It seems that even long before the rise of the Toltecs, Quetzalcoatl was worshipped in the great city of Teotihuacan (tay-oh-tee-wuh-kon') (AD 100 to 700), whose population once exceeded two hundred thousand. Today known mainly for its monumental Pyramid of the Sun and Pyramid of the Moon, Teotihuacan is the most visited archaeological site in the Americas. Aztec myth identified Teotihuacan, located just thirty miles northeast of the Aztecs' own capital city, Tenochtitlan, as the origin of the entire cosmos, in terms of both space and time. The myth goes as follows:

It is told that when yet [all] was in darkness, when yet no sun had shone and no dawn had broken—it is said—the gods gathered themselves . . . there at Teotihuacan. They spoke . . . : “. . . Who will take it upon himself to be the sun, to bring the dawn?”

(Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 7, part 8, page 4)

### Cosmology: Time and Space

The Aztecs' cosmology was thoroughly interrelated with their pessimistic view of time, their perspective on the human condition, and their ritual of human sacrifice.

### Age of the Fifth Sun

As indicated by the creation myth that was cited previously, the Aztecs believed that the sun was created at Teotihuacan. In fact, the present sun, they thought, was the fifth sun. Four previous suns and their ages had already been destroyed, and a similar fate was anticipated for this one. The only way of delaying the end of the age was to nourish the sun continually through human sacrifices.

This remarkable pessimism was enhanced by the belief that the fifth sun was the last that would ever shine. Each of the five suns had occupied its own cosmic location: the center, the west, the north, the south, and, in the case of the fifth sun, the east. The Aztecs understood the universe to be built around this structure of the center plus four cardinal directions. Aztec cosmology thus featured a close correspondence between time and space.



### ACTIVITY

The Aztec cosmology is marked by a deep pessimism regarding the future. How does your society view the future? What can human beings offer to “nourish” the present so as to ensure a sound future?

### Four Directions and the *Axis Mundi*

The Aztecs understood the spatial world as having four quadrants extending outward from the center of the universe (the *axis mundi*), which connected the earthly realm



to the many-layered heavenly realm above and the many-layered underworld below. The ancient city of Teotihuacan had been arranged that way, apparently with a cave as the original *axis mundi*. Following on this pattern, the Aztecs designed Tenochtitlan to be the center of their world. At the point where the four directions met stood the Great Temple, known by the Aztecs as Serpent Mountain.

It is not surprising that the Aztecs' great temple should be called a mountain—the mountain is commonly a type of *axis mundi* for indigenous religious traditions around the globe. It is also not surprising that the temple should bear the name *Serpent*: recall that the Toltec god was called Feathered Serpent. However, worship at Serpent Mountain was devoted especially to a god of rain and fertility and to a god of war and sacrifice.

## The Human Role in Sustaining the Cosmos

The Aztecs understood the human condition as being vitally linked to cosmology. Two divine forces, one concentrated in the head, the other in the heart, were believed to nurture the human being with basic needs. Because of the potency of these divine forces, each human being was regarded as a sort of *axis mundi*, connecting the earthly realm to the divine. The human body, especially the head and the heart, was also regarded as potent nourishment for the sun and the cosmos.

So, it was said, when he arrived . . . he ascended by himself, of his free will, to the place where he was to die. . . .

And when he had mounted all the steps, when he had reached the summit, then the priests fell upon him; they



Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Mexico / Ian Marzoni/Metacore / Bridgeman Images



Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence, Italy / Bridgeman Images

**Left:** The Aztecs understood the universe to have five parts: a center and four directions. This painting portrays the founding of the city of Tenochtitlan.

**Right:** This illustration from an Aztec manuscript shows how the Aztecs offered up the hearts and heads of their warriors and captives in order to gain the favor of the gods and to delay the end of the Age of the Fifth Sun.



threw him on his back upon the sacrificial stone. Then [one] cut open his breast, seized his heart, and raised it as an offering to the sun.

For in this manner were all [these] captives offered up. But his body they did not roll down; rather, they lowered it. Four men carried it.

And his severed head they strung on the skull-rack.

(Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 2, part 3, page 68)

This account illustrates some of the ways human sacrifice fit into the Aztecs' overall cosmology and understanding of the human condition. The heart, with its abundance of divine force, was offered as nourishment to the sun. Similarly, the head was offered to the sky. The warrior's willingness to ascend the temple's stairs suggests his acceptance of his role in sustaining the fragile cosmos. According to Aztec belief, moreover, this role would allow him to enter the highest heaven upon death.

Sacrifices like this one were carried out at least once every twenty days. Usually the victims were captive warriors, as in the account cited here; in fact, the need for sacrificial victims motivated much of Aztec warfare. Sometimes the victims were slaves, including, though rarely, women and children.



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### ACTIVITY

Considering the Aztec ritual of human sacrifice offers a challenging opportunity to see things from another's perspective. Explain how human sacrifice is part of the Aztecs' ordered and sophisticated religious worldview, given their cosmology and understanding of the human condition.

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## The Mastery of Language

Aztec religion was not fixated on human sacrifice. The rich culture of the Aztecs provided many means of fulfilling religious needs. For example, a great deal of religious power was believed to be conveyed through the mastery of language.

The Aztecs spoke Nahuatl (nay'wah-tuhl), a naturally expressive language capable of high achievements in poetry and other forms of speech. Specialists called "knowers of things" could communicate with the gods and make offerings through language, thus providing an alternative to sacrifice. The Aztecs also favored wit, commonly employing riddles in their ordinary speaking. Knowing the answers to riddles meant that one came from a good family. Here are two examples:

What is it that is a small blue gourd bowl filled with popcorn? One can see from our little riddle that it is the heavens.

(Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 6, part 7, page 237)

What is that which we enter in three places [and] leave by only one? It is our shirt.

(Page 239)



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### ACTIVITY

In your experience, how has the mastery of language helped to convey religious power? How does the significance of speech in the Aztec tradition compare with the significance of speech in another religious tradition you are familiar with?

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## From Aztec Empire to Catholic Mexico

The fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 to Hernán Cortés and his Spanish army was due in part to the religion of the Aztecs. The Aztec king Moctezuma II (commonly, though incorrectly, known as Montezuma) is said to have believed that the Spanish leader was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the long-lost priest-king of the Toltecs. Our Young Prince the Feathered Serpent had disappeared from earth long ago but was expected to return, possibly in 1519. By an amazing coincidence, Cortés—wearing a feathered helmet—arrived in Mesoamerica that year. Moctezuma welcomed Cortés as

the returning Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, providing him with gifts.

The end of the Aztec empire in no way marked the end of Aztec culture. Tenochtitlan has survived as the huge metropolis Mexico City, and Aztec culture has survived in religious forms.

The popular veneration of the Virgin of Guadalupe began, according to legend, in 1531 on the outskirts of the fallen city of Tenochtitlan when a dark-skinned apparition of the Virgin Mary appeared to an Aztec convert to Catholicism named Juan Diego. The hill on which she appeared was considered the sacred place of the Aztec mother goddess Tonantzin, who had been worshipped

In Mexico today, Christian families decorate the graves of their ancestors on the Day of the Dead. The Aztecs practiced similar rituals.



for centuries. Some Mexican Indians today continue to refer to the Virgin Mary as Tonantzin.

The popular Día de los Muertos, Day of the Dead, also shows the survival of Aztec religious culture. This celebration, held at the end of October and beginning of November, joins the living and the dead through festive and spiritually meaningful rituals. The Aztecs set aside time each year to perform similar rituals devoted to the same basic purpose.

## COMMON THEMES, DIVERSE TRADITIONS

Though primal religions exhibit great diversity, many of them also share specific elements, including totemism, taboo, the trickster figure, the vision quest, and the *axis mundi*.

The four examples of indigenous religions presented in this chapter also share certain general themes. For these religions, the boundaries between the supernatural and the human worlds are thin and easily crossed. Among the Australian Aborigines, for example, the sacred power of an Ancestor of the Dreaming is believed to enter an individual at the time of conception. The Yoruba commonly turn to divination to acquire knowledge of their destinies from the *orishas*. In both traditions, communication between the ancestors and the living is thought to take place regularly.

A related theme is the all-encompassing nature of religion. In indigenous societies, the secular and the sacred are not separate.

Rather, the universe is full of religious significance, and humans constantly draw on its sacred and life-giving powers. This is vividly illustrated by the lack of specific terms for religion in Native American languages; religion pervades life, so there is no need to set it apart.

Another common theme is change. Too often, students of religion have regarded indigenous traditions as static monoliths. In fact, typically these religions have constantly been changing. For example, the religions of the Plains peoples altered markedly when horses arrived from Europe in the sixteenth century. Although Aztec religion is largely a thing of the past, its legacy continues to affect Latin American religious life. Australian Aborigines are well equipped to accommodate modern changes: once a new tradition has been accepted, they agree that the Ancestors established it long ago, in the period of the Dreaming, and the innovation becomes part of their eternal reality.

One powerful consequence of this ongoing change is the remarkable adaptability of indigenous peoples. Though it is commonly asserted that these cultures will inevitably disappear from the face of the earth, the indigenous religious traditions are not necessarily doomed. On the contrary, native peoples seem to be increasing their level of participation in their traditional ways. These traditions now bear the imprint of modernity, but their ancient foundations live on.



## CHAPTER REVIEW

1. What themes are shared by the indigenous religions studied in this chapter?
2. What elements of the natural and human world did the Ancestors create or establish in the period of the Dreaming?
3. What survives in the symbols left behind by the Ancestors?
4. Explain the terms *totem* and *taboo*.
5. Why is ritual essential if Aboriginal life is to have meaning?
6. How did Aboriginal rituals originate?
7. What purposes are served by Aboriginal initiation rituals?
8. Identify two acts of Dieri initiation rituals that symbolize death.
9. In what part of Africa do the Yoruba live?
10. Why has the city of Ife always been the center of Yoruba religion?
11. Briefly describe the Yoruba understanding of the cosmos.
12. Who is Olorun, and what is his role in Yoruba religion?
13. What are the *orishas*? Explain their significance in the religious life of the Yoruba.
14. Name and briefly describe at least two of the *orishas*.
15. What is a trickster figure?
16. Describe the two types of Yoruba ancestors.
17. Describe the role of Yoruba ritual practitioners.
18. What is divination, and why do the Yoruba regard it as essential?
19. According to the interpretation of the latest evidence, when and how do scholars think human beings first came to North America?
20. Why is the religion of the Plains Indians of vital interest among native peoples throughout North America?
21. What is Wakan Tanka?
22. Who is Inktomi?
23. Briefly describe Lakota beliefs regarding death and the afterlife.
24. What do individuals try to access by going on a vision quest?
25. Briefly describe the structure and function of the sweat lodge.
26. Describe a typical vision experienced by a person who undertakes a vision quest.
27. Among the Blackfeet tribe, who presides over the Sun Dance?
28. What is the *axis mundi* in general? What is the *axis mundi* in the Sun Dance?
29. Why do some participants in the Sun Dance skewer their chests and dance until their flesh tears?
30. In what ways does the Aztec tradition differ from a typical indigenous religious tradition? In what ways is the Aztec tradition like other indigenous religious traditions?



31. What geographical area did Mesoamerica include?
32. According to Aztec cosmology, what god created and ordered the world? What ancient city is the origin of the cosmos?
33. Who was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl? What was his significance for the Aztecs?
34. What did the Aztecs call their present age? What did they anticipate its fate to be?
35. How did the Aztecs understand the spatial world?
36. Why did the Aztecs regard each human being as a sort of *axis mundi*?
37. What were the special religious capabilities of the Aztec knowers of things?
38. What historical coincidence contributed to the fall of Tenochtitlan to the Spaniards?
39. How does the popular Day of the Dead show the survival of Aztec religious culture?