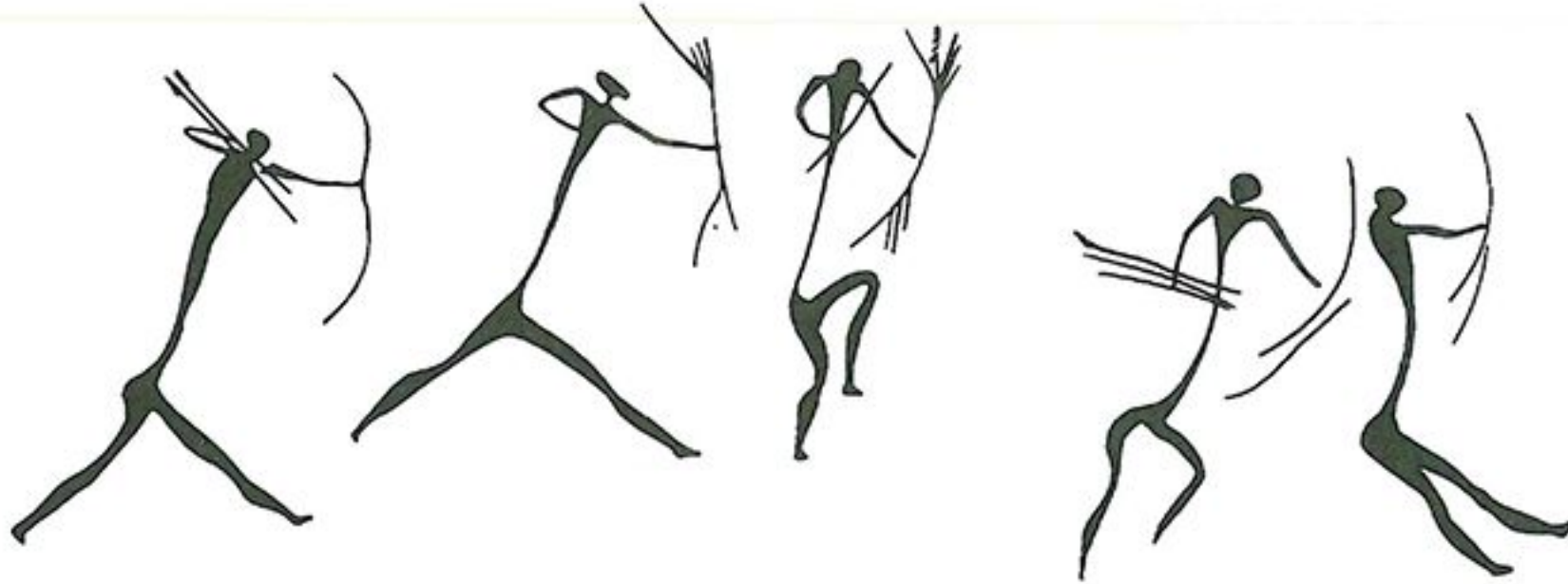




---

## CHAPTER IX

### THE PRIMAL RELIGIONS



*They had what the world has lost: the ancient,  
lost reverence and passion for human personality joined with the ancient,  
lost reverence and passion for the earth and its web of life.*

*Since before the Stone Age  
they have tended that passion as a central, sacred fire.  
It should be our long hope to renew it in us all.*

---

*Detail of cave paintings in Lascaux.*

---





## THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

**T**HIS BOOK HAS DEALT WITH THE MAJOR HISTORICAL RELIGIONS, which have sacred texts and a cumulative tradition that unfolds. These religions now pretty much blanket the earth, but chronologically they form only the tip of the religious iceberg, for they span a scant four thousand years as compared with the three million years or so of the religions that preceded them. During that immense time span, people lived their religion in an importantly different mode which must have shaped their sensibilities significantly. We shall call that mode *primal* because it came first; but alternately we shall refer to it as *tribal* because its groupings were invariably small, and *oral* because writing was foreign to them. This mode of religion continues in Africa, Australia, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, Siberia, and among the Indians of North and South America.

We can begin by putting behind us the nineteenth century prejudice that later means better, a view that holds for technology, but not for religion. If God does not evolve, neither (it seems) does *homo religiosus*; not in any important respect. Everything that we find flowering in the historical religions, monotheism for example, is prefigured in the primal ones in faint but discernible outlines. One of the things that is prefigured is the distinction between the sacred and the profane. It is important to note this at the outset, for as this chapter unfolds we shall find that it will be difficult to put one's finger on what is specifically religious in tribal life because religion tends to blanket everything. Even so, the distinction between sacred and profane is detectable, and the Australian aborigines are the ideal group for demonstrating this fact, for in ways they are the "oldest" inhabitants on our planet. This is because Australia is the only continent that did not undergo the Neolithic experience which elsewhere began around 10,000 B.C. and witnessed the invention of farming and tooled stone imple-

ments. The division between the sacred and the profane appears among aborigines in their notion of "the Dreaming," which they contrast with ordinary life. Ordinary life is measured out in time; the seasons cycle, and generations come and go.

Meanwhile, the backdrop for this unending procession is stable. Time does not touch it, for it is "everywhen." Legendary figures people this backdrop. They are not gods; they are much like human beings, while at the same time being larger than life. What gives them their exceptional stature is that they instituted the paradigmatic acts of which daily life is woven. They molded and modeled life's essential structures – male and female; human, bird, fish, and the like – and its essential activities such as hunting, gathering, war, and love.

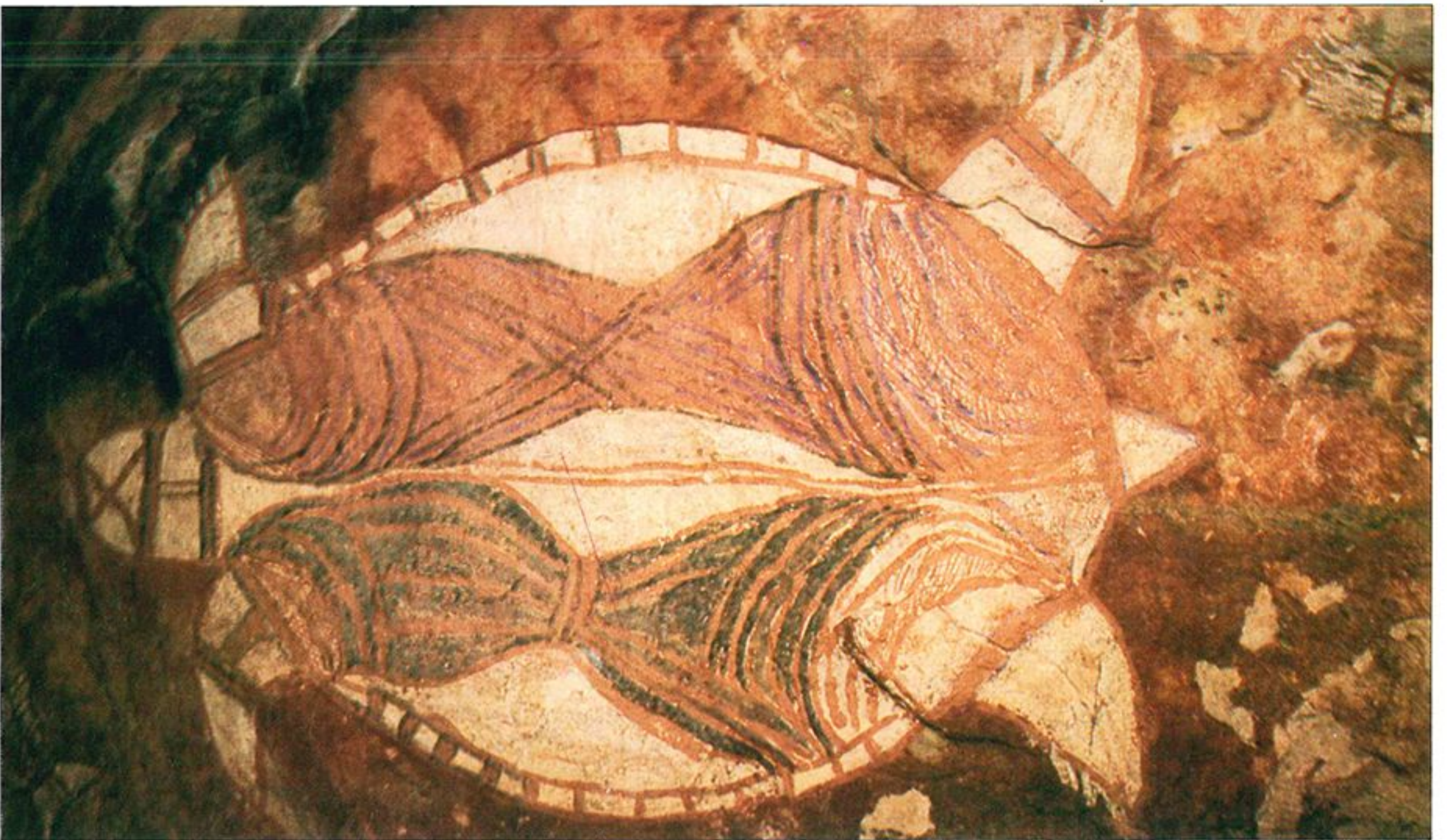
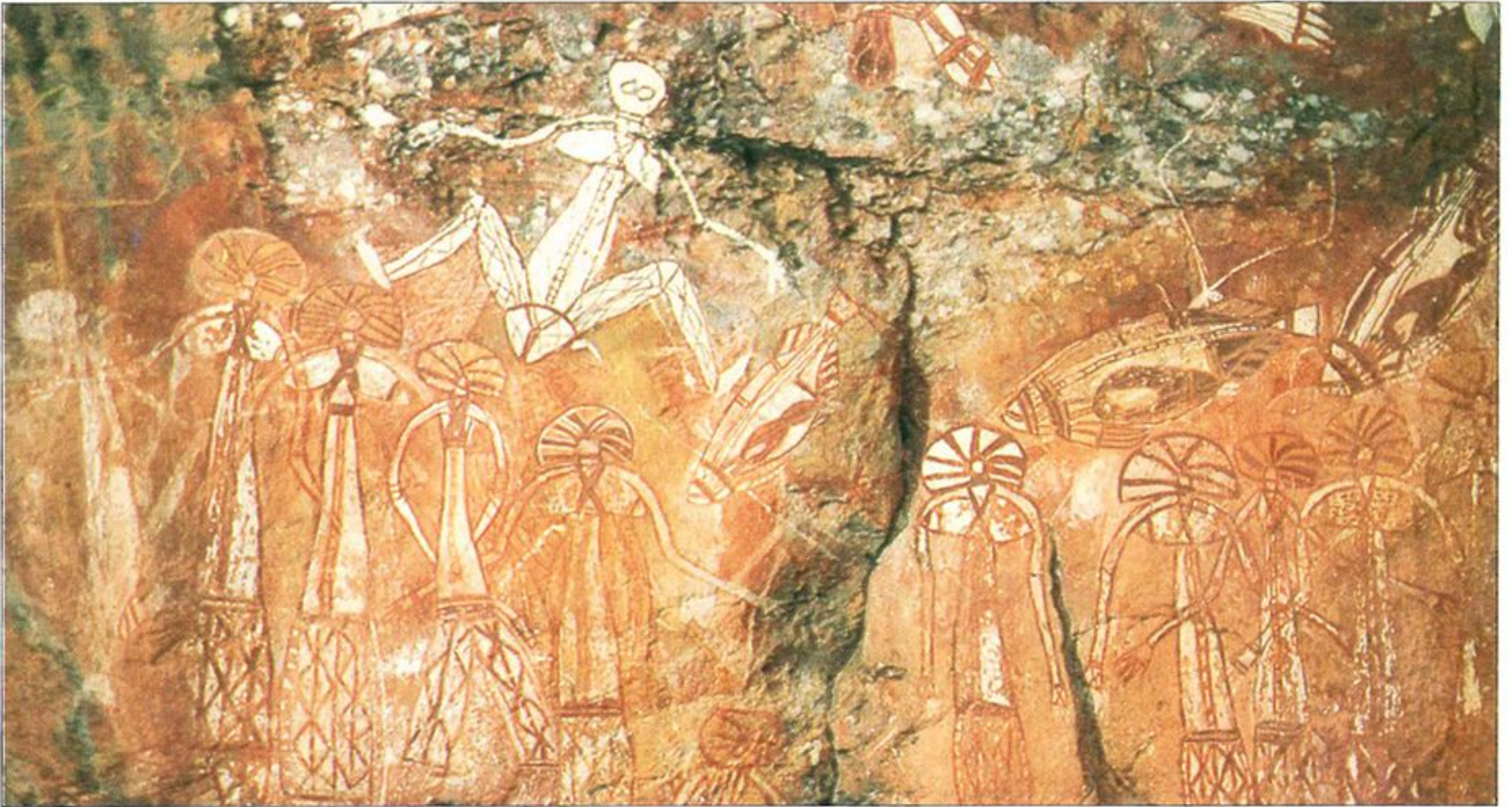
We are inclined to say that when the Arunta go hunting they mime the exploits of the first and archetypal hunter, but this distinguishes them from their archetype too sharply. It is more accurate to say that they fit so completely into the mold of their archetypes that each *becomes* the First Hunter; no residue remains. Similarly with other activities, from basket weaving to lovemaking. Only while they are conforming their actions to the model of some archetypal hero do the Arunta feel that they are truly alive, for in those roles they are immortal. When they fall from those roles their lives become meaningless, for time devours their doings and reduces them to nothing. Aboriginal religion turns not on worship but on identification; the participation in, and acting out of, archetypal paradigms. There are no priests or congregations; only the Dreaming and conformance thereto.

Having singled out the aborigines to establish that even in the relative undifferentiation of primal societies the sacred can be spotted, we shall hereafter refer to individual tribes only to illustrate characteristics that all tribes possess – ones that serve to set them apart from the historical religions.





THE PRIMAL RELIGIONS







## ORALITY, PLACE, AND TIME



**O**RALITY. LITERACY IS UNKNOWN TO THE PRIMAL RELIGIONS where it has not been introduced from without, for tribal peoples regard writing, not as a supplement to speaking, but as a threat to the virtues of exclusive orality.

To understand why they do so we can begin with speech's vitality. Speech is alive – literally alive – because speaking *is* the speaker. It is not the whole of the speaker, but it is the speaker in one of his or her living modes. This shows speech to be alive by definition, as we see when we realize that it cannot exist – as can writing – disjoined from the speaker. It possesses *in principle* life's qualities, for its very nature is to change, adapt, and invent. Indissolubly contextual, speaking adapts itself to speaker, listener, and situation alike. This gives it an immediacy, range, and versatility that is, well, miraculous. Original wording breathes new life into familiar themes. Rhythm can enter (together with intonations, pauses, and accentuations) until speaking phases into chanting and storytelling becomes a high art. Dialect and delivery add their contributions, and when animal postures and gaits are mimed and their noises simulated, theater is born.

These virtues are obvious, but the overriding advantage of speech over writing is what it does for memory. Having libraries to fall back on, literate peoples grow slack in recall. To provide a glimpse of what life without writing would be like, we might try visualizing our

forebears as bands of blind Homers who gather each evening around their fires. Everything that their ancestors learned with difficulty, from healing herbs to stirring legends, is now stored in their collective memory, and there only. Would they not revere and rehearse their heritage endlessly, each supplementing and correcting the accounts of others.

What is important for us to understand is the impact of this ongoing, empowering seminar on its participants. Everyone feeds the living reservoir of knowledge while receiving from it its answering flow of information that stocks and shapes their lives. If exclusive orality protects human memory, it also guards three other endowments. The first of these is the capacity to experience the sacred through non-verbal channels. Because writing traffics in explicit meanings, historical religions look to their texts for God's clearest (if not exclusive) revelations. This marginalizes other windows to the divine. Oral traditions do not do this. The invisibility of their texts – which is to say their myths – leaves their eyes free to notice other sacred conduits, virgin nature and sacred art being the chief of these.

Second, because writing has no limits it can proliferate to the point where trees obscure the woods. Minds are swamped by information and have difficulty seeing what is important.

This danger doesn't beset tribal peoples. They remember what is important and forget the rest.

Finally, orality safeguards community. It is impossible to be lonely in societies where there are no news-





papers to hide behind, no computer screens to be glued to, no teledramas to watch by oneself in lonely, isolated apartments. Tribally speaking, language means people and interacting with them.

#### PLACE VERSUS SPACE.

A second distinguishing feature of primal religion is its embeddedness in place. Place is not space. Space is abstract, whereas place is concrete. A cubic yard of space is identical wherever we imagine it, but no two places are alike.

Historical religions have sacred sites, to be sure, but none of them are embedded in place per se to the extent that tribal religions are. An anecdote from the Onondaga tribe in upstate New York illustrates this.

Oren Lyons was the first Onondagan to go to college. On returning to his reservation for his first vacation, his uncle took him canoeing on their lake where he set out to interrogate him. "Well, Oren," he said. "You've been to college; you must be pretty smart. Let me ask you a question. Who are you?" Taken aback, Oren fumbled for an answer. "What do you mean, who am I? Why, I'm Oren Lyons. You know that." Unimpressed, his uncle repeated his question. Successively, this nephew proposed that he was an Onondagan, a human being, a man, a young man — to no avail. When he had been reduced to silence and asked to be told who he was, his uncle said, "You see that bluff over there? Oren, you are that bluff. And that huge pine on the other shore? You are that pine. And this water that supports our canoe? Oren, you are this water."

Generalizing from this anecdote, when the Australian Kurnai go on walkabouts, it is likewise specific, concrete items that interest them. The springs and major trees and rocks that they encounter are not interchangeable with others of their kind; each triggers memories of the legendary events they were a part of. It would be wrong to confuse this investment in individual things with disinterest in the big picture. In fashioning their dwellings to the world's shape, the Navajos draw the entire world



into their homes. The pillars that support their roofs are named for, and thus identified with, the deities that support the entire cosmos: Earth, Mountain Woman, Water Woman, and Corn Woman.

#### ETERNAL TIME.

Primal time is not linear, as in the messianically forward-looking religions of the West. It is not even cyclical as the Asian religions tend to image it, revolving in

---

*Page 233: Aboriginal rock paintings in Australia. Top: A scene from a traditional legend. Below: Painting of a sea turtle. This page above: Corn Mother. Native American tribes of the southwestern United States often use such figures to represent the nurturing, female spirit of the Earth.*

---





THE ILLUSTRATED WORLD'S RELIGIONS

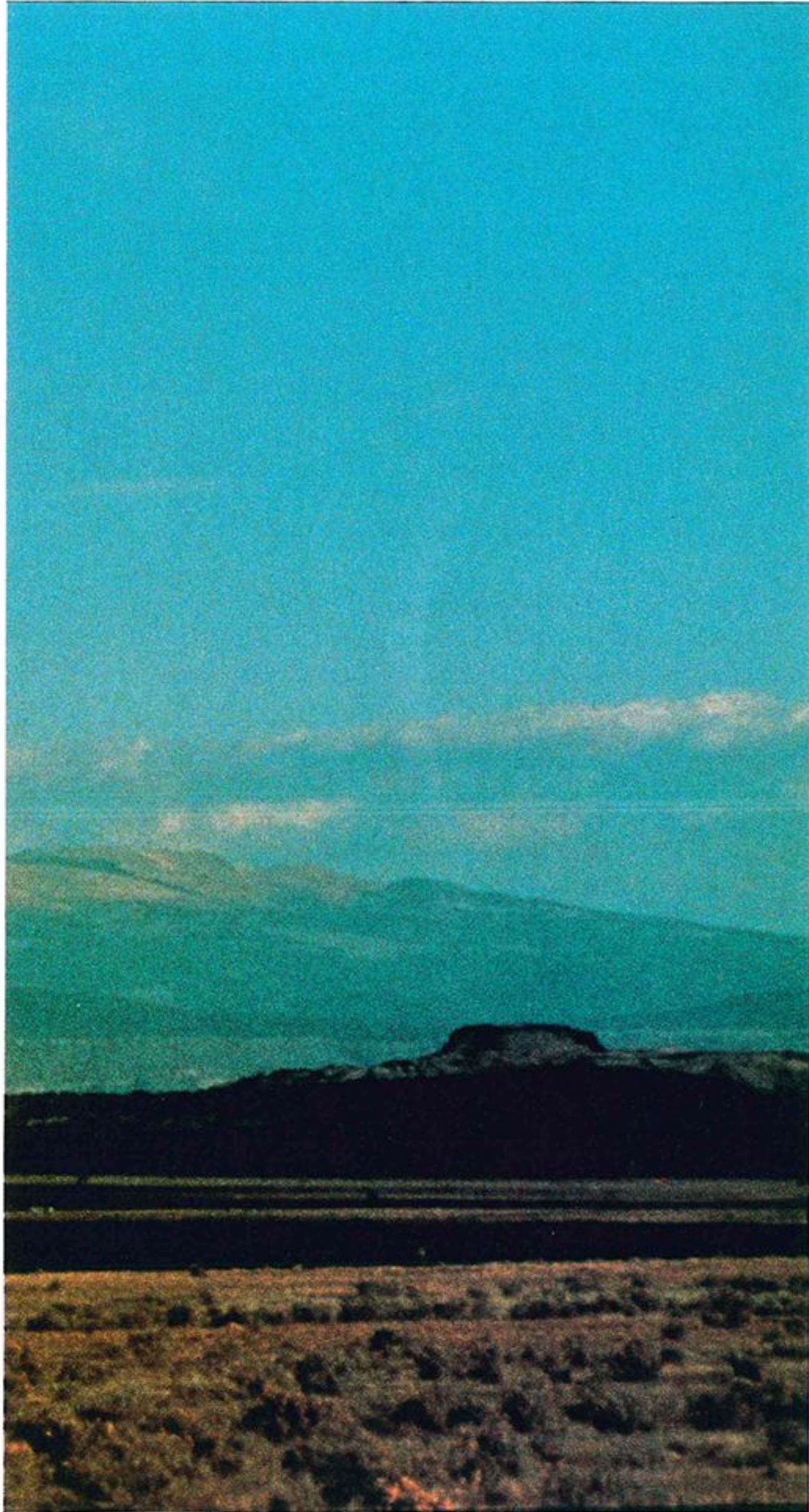
---







## THE PRIMAL RELIGIONS



the way the world turns and seasons cycle. Primal time is atemporal; an eternal now. To speak of a temporal or timeless time is paradoxical, but the paradox can be relieved if we see that primal time focuses on causal rather than chronological sequence. For primal peoples, "past" means preeminently, closer to the originating source of things. That that source precedes the present is of secondary importance.

The word source refers here to the gods who, where they did not actually create the world, ordered it and gave it its viable structure. Those gods continue to exist, but that does not shift interest to the present, for the past continues to be considered the Golden Age. Before creation suffered ravages of time and mismanagement, the world was as it should be. That is no longer the case, for a certain enfeeblement has occurred which requires that steps be taken to restore the world to its original condition. These steps are rites of renewal, which primal religions regularly enact. The annual Sun Dance of the Plains Indians, for example, is called the Dance for World and Life Renewal.

If we stopped here we would have said nothing distinctive about the primal view of time, for historical religions have rites of renewal as well. They all have solstice festivals of some sort to reverse the winter's darkness, and "easters" to abet nature's rebirth. For a feature of the primal view of time that the historical religions have largely abandoned we can turn to the way proximity to the divine source tends, in tribal eyes, to be a badge of worth. Thus animals are frequently venerated for having been created before humans, and among animals the otter's relative stupidity leads the Winnebagos to infer that it was created last. This principle applies to the human species as well. Its pioneers are more celebrated than their descendants who are regarded as something of epigones. Primal peoples respect their elders enormously.

We turn now to other features of primal religion that are embedded in its worldview.

---

*Mt. Taylor, sacred mountain to the Navajos.*

---





## THE PRIMAL WORLD

A FITTING PLACE TO ENTER the primal world is with the embeddedness of primal peoples in that world. This starts with their tribe, apart from which they sense little independent identity. To be separated from the tribe threatens them with death, not only physically but psychologically as well. The tribe, in turn, is embedded in nature so solidly that the line between the two is not easy to establish. In the case of totemism it cannot really be said to exist. Totemism binds a human tribe to an animal species in a common life. The totem animal guards the tribe which, in return, respects it and refuses to injure it, for they are "of one flesh."

Totemism itself is not universal among tribal peoples, but they all share its nonchalance concerning the animal/human division. Animals and birds are frequently referred to as "peoples," and in certain circumstances animals and humans can exchange forms and convert to their opposite numbers. The division between animal and vegetable is equally tenuous, for plants have spirits like the rest of us. This drift reaches its logical term when we note that even the line between animate and "inanimate" is perforated. Rocks are alive. Under certain conditions they are believed to be able to talk, and at times they are considered divine.

Turning from the world's structure to human activities, we are again struck by the relative absence of compartmentalizations between them. In American Indian languages there is no word for art because everything is art. Equally, everything is (in

its way) religion. A hunter, for example, does not set out simply to forestall his tribe's hunger. He launches on a sequence of meditative acts, all of which – whether preparatory prayer and purification, pursuit of the quarry, or the sacramental manner by which the animal is slain and subsequently treated – are sacred.

The final absence of sharp divisions that we shall note is the most telling. Nothing in the primal world separates it from a categorically different Other with which it is contrasted, be that Other God (as distinct from his creation), Nirvana (as distinct from samsara), or whatever. The primal world is a single cosmos that sustains its embryos like a living womb. Because those embryos assume that the womb exists to nurture them, they have no disposition to challenge it, refashion it, or escape from it. It is not a place of exile or pilgrimage, though pilgrimages take place within it. Its space is not homogeneous; the home has a number of rooms, we might say, some of which are normally invisible. But together they constitute a single domicile. Primal peoples are concerned with maintaining personal, social, and cosmic harmony, and with attaining specific goods – rain, harvest, children, health – as people always are. But the overriding goal of salvation that dominates the historical religions is virtually absent from them, and life after death tends to be a shadowy semi-existence in some vaguely designated place in their single domicile.

Left: *Niniganni, the python goddess of the Baga tribe in Guinea.* Right: *Detail of a cave painting in Spain.*

