

Chapter 2 INDIGENOUS SACRED WAYS

Chapter Overview

Whereas a great many people have at least heard of some of the major global religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, fewer may be familiar with the religions and sacred ways of traditional **indigenous** peoples, or the descendants of the original inhabitants of lands now controlled by larger political systems.

The goals of this chapter are to:

1. introduce and explain what an indigenous religion is
2. help students appreciate why it is difficult to understand these religions and the current perils of their existence
3. present key common features of indigenous religions with particular emphasis on their views of humanity's relationships with spirits, creation, and power

The sacred ways of indigenous peoples that are passed down from generation to generation are referred to as Indigenous Religions. Their followers constitute roughly 4% of the world's population. While globalization has diluted sacred ways in some cases, it has also helped them to spread internationally. This chapter gives an overview of the sacred beliefs of indigenous people, especially in light of the challenges posed to them by globalization and the limitations of traditional western scholarship.

Understanding indigenous sacred ways

Indigenous sacred ways have traditionally been little understood by outsiders. Many indigenous traditions have been practiced in secret, and until recently, those who have attempted to comprehend them had little preparation or background for doing so. For instance, anthropologists who tried to ferret out the native sacred ways did so from a Western non-spiritual perspective. Recognizing that such inquirers did not accept the truth of their beliefs and practices, native peoples protected the sanctity of their ways from nonbelievers hiding them, or going underground. A good example of this for students is the quotation by Gerhardus Cornelius Oosthuizen. “[The] Western worldview is closed, essentially complete and unchangeable, basically substantive and fundamentally non-mysterious... This closed worldview is foreign to Africa, which is still deeply religious... not closed but... unlimited in its qualitative varieties and is truly mysterious.” In order to protect their beliefs, some indigenous peoples have used the tactic of giving false information to outside inquirers.

Indigenous spirituality may be seen as a **lifeway**, or particular approach to all of life, rather than something expressed only at certain times or places. In most native cultures, spiritual lifeways are shared orally, without formal sacred scriptures. In addition, the practices and teachings of indigenous peoples are transmitted internally from one generation to the next. Because of this dynamic, outsiders may experience barriers to comprehending indigenous religious beliefs and practices. However, today there are encouraging indications that some common ground between these religions and those on the outside is emerging. In particular, some traditional elders are beginning to share their core values regarding reverence for the earth with others because of their concerns about current ecological developments. Members of global religions (and others) are coming to a new appreciation for the profundity and value embedded in indigenous sacred ways, particularly with respect to the environment.

Cultural diversity

Even though the central sections of this chapter focus on common characteristics of indigenous religions, it is equally important for students to see that these religions are quite distinct. It may be useful to emphasize to them that this is a central issue and problem in the study of native religions, and that indeed some scholars question whether “indigenous” is a useful category at all.

As a whole, indigenous forms of spirituality exhibit traditions that developed within a spectrum of cultural, religious, and material diversity. Some indigenous cultures have been highly developed whereas others still embody a basic strategy of survival (e.g., Australian Aborigines). Groups whose material culture is simple nonetheless may have highly complex **cosmogonies** or models of the origins of the universe and their purpose in it. Diversity manifests itself in other areas as well. Such groups may live in somewhat sheltered ancestral enclosures or large contemporary urban areas. They also vary in the degree of adaptation to and absorption of the dominant religions in their regions (e.g. indigenous African religious traditions fused with Christianity in the context of slavery, such as **Vodou**.)

Despite the real differences in cultural origins, indigenous traditional ways do manifest some common characteristics. It would be overgeneralizing to ascribe specific beliefs to all native peoples, but there are some concepts and ways of approaching the universe that are common to many of them. Several recurring themes are the subjects of the following sections.

The circle of right relationships

Many indigenous religions hold that everything in the universe, all forms of life, is interrelated and interdependent. This belief pervades all of the common themes explained in the chapter. Often, but not always, the symbol for this interrelationship or unity is the circle. Since this form has no beginning and no endpoint, it can symbolize the ongoing cycle of birth, youth, maturity, death. It can also symbolize the return of the seasons, or the cyclical movements of the sun, moon, planets and stars.

Relationships with spirit

The cosmos is thought to contain and be affected by numerous divinities, spirits, and also ancestors. Many indigenous peoples worship Supreme Being, who is believed to have created the cosmos. This Being may be found in aspects of nature and is represented variously as male, female, or even androgynous. Even though the Great Power is present in all places and things, the Power remains transcendent, that is, unseen and mysterious. Another aspect of the spirit realm involves the many unseen powers that are a part of daily life and work. This Great Spirit is also sometimes thought to be collectively present in the souls of human beings, and thus ancestor worship is an important aspect of some indigenous beliefs.

Kinship with all creation

Although spiritual power may remain unseen, all aspects of the tangible world are believed to be imbued with spirit. Spiritual forces may be associated with venerable mountains or canyons, or they may be seen as animal spirit helpers, or personified elemental forces, or deceased ancestors who are still concerned about the lives of their relatives. Reverent believers can call upon these spirits as helpers, intermediaries between the people and power, and as teachers. Acquiring and maintaining right relationships with this aspect of the spirit world can constitute a

sacred partnership.

Relationships with power

Cultivating proper relations with spiritual energy or power is another common aspect among these religions. Sometimes a specific site is believed to concentrate spiritual power. Another source of spiritual power can be special sacred practices. Using ritual objects and artifacts can be important. Wearing clothing made of the fur of particular animals, for examples, may increase one's spiritual power. Visions or sharing a sacred pipe are still other practices involved with one's relation to spiritual power. Some groups consider women to have particular natural power, often especially during their menstrual periods. If spiritual power is used for egoistic motives, the power can turn on the one possessing it. One's relationship with spiritual power is a sacred trust. Acquiring power is not an end in itself. It is to be used for the good of others and the environment.

Spiritual specialists

The indigenous worldview is that the Supreme Being is present in all places and fills all things, and anyone can interact with it. Yet, spiritual specialists within these religions dedicate themselves through special training and initiation to participate in activities involved with the world of the spirits. These sacred roles can take several forms: storytellers, poets, tricksters or sacred fools, sacred clowns and dancers, priests and priestesses.

Storytellers and other sacred roles

Storytellers play a central role in indigenous religions, for it is they who memorize and transmit the sacred traditions. Some storytelling traditions were lost during times when indigenous groups were subject to colonial rule. Poets and musicians may also play a key role in preserving and transmitting traditions.

Secret societies for men and women are also common among indigenous religions. Members are initiated into secret traditions that may involve donning ceremonial dress as part of a ritual to establish contact with particular spirits. Although men's and women's secret societies are separate, their rituals ultimately refer to the eternal **Dreaming** in which male and female are not differentiated.

Sacred dancers likewise make the unseen powers visible through symbolic body movements.

In indigenous societies with some degree of social stratification, there may be specially trained priests and priestesses who are responsible for specific rituals that ensure a smooth relationship with the spirit world.

Mystical Intermediaries

Most distinctive among the spiritual specialists are the shamans. **Shaman** is a Siberian word that scholars use to refer to this group generically. They are mystical intermediaries between the nonphysical and physical world who have attained this status either through heredity, a special gift, or initiation through certain religious ordeals. Initiation typically involves a death and rebirth experience. Archaeological research indicates that the practices of the shaman probably date back twenty to thirty thousand years. Native Americans speak of the mystical intermediary as a **medicine person** whose **medicine** power derives from an outside source. The shaman is often involved in physical, psychological and social healing. Shamans may travel to the spirit world in order to learn what spirits may be responsible for problems in the human world. It should be

interesting for students to learn that modern medicine is beginning to adopt some of the approaches taken by these visionaries, who saw the physiological health of the individual as an expression of his or her psychological and sometime spiritual health.

Most native religions see the shaman as a sacred and important person. They view the rites of passage that she or he must endure as very dangerous rituals that are not to be taken lightly. Mystical intermediaries may undergo rites of purification, isolation, and bodily torment in order to make contact with the spirit world. Usually they have a guide or mentor to help them along the spiritual journey; the role may be hereditary or seen as a special gift. A shamanic vision is not to be used merely for personal edification but rather is given to be used with the group to see how the social order and the planet can be improved.

Group observances

Humans can help maintain the natural harmony of the world by practicing ritual observances. These rituals are community-centered as are indigenous ways in general. Specific rituals aid the community in perceiving the extraordinary dimensions of the world within the realm of the ordinary. Some of these rituals follow the major points of passage in the human life cycle: birth, naming, puberty, marriage, and death. Some rituals support the group's strategies for survival. Other rituals are about the beginnings and sacred history of the people. Communities can also assemble for spiritual renewal and ritual purification. Even pilgrimages to sacred sites are frequently communal. An awareness of the place and community-centeredness of indigenous faiths and their rituals increases one's sensitivity to the plight of those who are driven out of, or forcibly taken from, their native communities. Such people lose not only their individual identity, but also their relationship to a tightly knit group and meaningful religious rituals. Such awareness also helps explain the reluctance of some groups to share their rituals with non-indigenous people who wish to participate; a sincere New Ager who wishes to join a sweat lodge ceremony for a few days, for example, may have little understanding of or connection with the community that performs the ritual.

Indigenous groups whose communities are broken up by outside forces lose the power of their group rituals. To reestablish communal ritual among African-Americans, Professor Maulana Ron Karenga created the celebration of Kwanzaa, based on African "first fruits" harvest festivals.

Individual observances

Balancing the communal dimension of ritual observance is individual observance. For native sacred ways, it is considered important for individuals to experience a personal connection with the realm of the spirits. Such connections are open to all people. Shamans have a privileged relationship with the spirit realm, however, native religions have also been nicknamed democratized shamanism stressing the idea that everyone has the opportunity to connect with the spirits. Undergoing a **vision quest** (typically around the time of puberty) is a common means of access to the other world, and may be a means of establishing a relationship with a guardian spirit.

Globalization

Local spiritual traditions have suffered immensely from the onslaught of globalization processes. People are seeing the land they are supposed to be caretakers of taken over by others who demonstrate little regard for the environment or land. Traditional sacred lifeways are thus being compromised and languages are being lost. Global religions are devaluing and suppressing

indigenous ways. However, while traditional spiritual wisdom has been obliterated in many parts of the world, many indigenous groups are negotiating the challenges of globalization in various constructive ways. In particular, many are playing a key role in environmental preservation and conservation efforts.

Development issues

Contemporary issues involving indigenous religions revolve primarily around one central concern: the near obliteration of these responses to the sacred throughout the world. Barriers to understanding these faiths discussed in the earlier part of this chapter demonstrate indigenous reactions to outside pressures and oppression. The lands of these people have been seized, and development projects have often displaced indigenous peoples. Indigenous people have had their lands exploited by multinational companies for precious natural resources with devastating spiritual and economic consequences. Attempts have been made to transform, or rather conform, their cultural identities and to replace their pathways to the sacred with other schemes of salvation.

An irony amid this tragedy is that the indigenous world view which reveres all creation, recognizes the interdependence of all circles of life, and understands humanity’s relationship to mother earth as reciprocal-nurturing rather than domineering-subduing, may be precisely the necessary outlook to adopt in order to slow down and eventually stop the present ecological ravaging of the planet. Some indigenous people believe that their traditional sacred ways are not only valid, but actually essential for the future of the world.

Key Terms

Cosmogony	Lifeway	Shaman
Dreamtime (Dreaming)	Medicine person	Vision quest
Indigenous	<i>Orisa</i>	

Review questions

1. Why are some indigenous ways practiced secretly? What challenges have scholars faced in understanding and accurately representing indigenous sacred ways?
2. What do indigenous sacred ways in different parts of the world have in common?
3. How do indigenous sacred ways have an ecological perspective?
4. What types of spiritual specialists are there in indigenous sacred ways?
5. What effects do the rituals of indigenous sacred ways seem to have? For example, storytelling, drumming, initiations, healing, self-sacrifice, and vision quests?
6. What are some of the effects of the clashes between indigenous and industrial societies?

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways do indigenous approaches to the sacred differ from those of other religions with which you are familiar?
2. What do you see as the benefits and disadvantages of non-indigenous people attempting to adopt indigenous religious practices?
3. Can indigenous sacred ways be reconciled with modern industrial and commercial pressures? Why, or why not?
4. In what ways may the processes of globalization affect indigenous sacred ways?
5. How have development projects affected indigenous peoples, and how have they

responded?

Class Activities/Assignments

1. Ask students to research the history of their city, county, or state to discover whether there has been, or still is, an indigenous religion there. If so, what native religion? What are its major characteristics? Which of those characteristics are explained in this chapter?
2. Envision that you are an outsider to your own religion, an outsider with no understanding of your religious beliefs and practices. Single out a specific religious practice with which you are familiar. Then, imagine what this practice could look like to you as an outsider. What conclusions might you draw about what is going on and why?
3. Stage a debate between two groups of students, one taking the view that it is acceptable, even desirable, for non—indigenous peoples to participate in or adapt for their own use Native American traditions such as the sweat lodge, the other taking the view that outsiders have no place participating in or appropriating such rituals.
4. Carefully analyze two Walt Disney films that featured aspects of indigenous sacred ways; namely, *The Lion King* and *Pocahontas*. Which characteristics of indigenous sacred ways were depicted? Were they portrayed accurately or not? If not, what harm may come from inaccurate presentations of this sort?
5. Research the origins and celebration of the festival of Kwanzaa.

Recommended Films

“*Monday’s Girls*.” BBCTV, 1993. 49 minutes. Depicts initiation rituals that prepare young women in Nigeria for marriage. Focuses on two young women, one of whom enthusiastically participates, and another who is uncomfortable with some aspects of the rites.

“*The Priest and the Nganga: The Traditional Medicine of Douala*.” Princeton, NJ : Films for the Humanities & Sciences, Inc., 1992. 28 minutes. A Catholic priest narrates this depiction of traditional healing ceremonies in Cameroon.

Additional Class Discussion/Essay Questions

1. What is the significance of the subtitle of this chapter, “Everything is alive?”
2. What is an indigenous religion? What are some major obstacles to understanding these religions?
3. How does the treatment of indigenous peoples by more dominant religions and cultures illustrate the negative side of religions?
4. Discuss the importance of the circle as a symbol for indigenous religions, using at least one specific example.