says. In the distance a bright stream of orange lava slides down a hill, a slow-motion waterfall of fire. You watch at least an hour as the sky becomes completely dark. Now the only light comes from the flowing lava and a few flashlights. It is, you think, like being present at the time of creation: this land is being born.

The next morning in the lobby you see the Hawaiian woman again. "Well, did you see Pele last night?" she asks, smiling. You smile back. For the rest of your stay you wonder about Pele, about what else might remain of native Hawaiian religion. Isn't hula, you ask as you think back over what you've read, an expression of Hawaiian beliefs? Why do people make offerings of ti leaves? How much of the ancient religion lives on?

DISCOVERING INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

The practice of native religions takes place throughout the world. Among the Ainu in far northern Japan, the Inuit (Eskimo) in Canada, the aboriginal peoples of Australia, the Maori of New Zealand, and the many indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas, religious teachings have been passed on primarily by word of mouth rather than through written texts. In some areas, the ancient religious ways of traditional peoples may not be easily apparent, but certain characteristics may live on in local stories and customs.

There is no agreement on how to speak of these ancient religious ways. Various terms include *traditional, aboriginal, indigenous, tribal, nonliterate, primal, native, oral,* and *basic.* Each term is inadequate. For example, although the word *native* is used frequently in the Americas, that term in Africa—with its memories of Offices of Native Affairs—can be offensive. The words *oral* and *nonliterate* describe correctly the fact that most indigenous religions were spread without written texts. But there have been exceptions: the Mayans and Aztecs, for example, had writing systems, and even many native religions without writing systems have had their sacred stories and beliefs written down by scholars at some point. The distinction between oral religions and others is also blurred by the fact that religions that have written texts are also, to a large degree, transmitted orally—for example, through preaching, teaching, and chanting. The term *traditional* would be suitable, except that all religions but the very newest have many traditional elements. Some terms, such as *primal* and *basic,* may be viewed as derogatory (like the older term *primitive religions*). The word *indigenous* has the advantage of being neutral in tone. (It means the same thing as *native,* except that it comes from Greek rather than Latin.) There is no easy solution. Although *indigenous* comes closest to capturing these ancient religions, we will use several of the preceding terms interchangeably throughout the text.

Indigenous religions are found in every climate, from the tropical rain forest to the arctic tundra, and some are far older than today's dominant

religions. Because most of them developed in isolation from each other, there are major differences in their stories of creation and origin, in their beliefs about the afterlife, in their marriage and funeral customs, and so on. In fact, there is as much variation among indigenous religions as there is, for example, between Buddhism and Christianity. In North America, for instance, there are several hundred Native American nations and more than fifty Native American language groups. The variety among indigenous religious traditions is stunning, and each religion deserves in-depth study. But because of the limitations of space, this book must focus on shared elements; regrettably, we can barely touch on the many differences. (You can complement your study of basic patterns by making your own study of a native religion, especially one practiced now or in the past by the indigenous peoples of the area in which you live.)

Past Obstacles to the Appreciation of Indigenous Religions

Up until the early part of the twentieth century, scholars focused more on religions that had produced written texts than on those that expressed themselves through orally transmitted stories, histories, and rituals. This lack of attention may have been due in part to the relative ease of studying religions with written records. Religions with written records don't necessarily require travel or physically arduous research. Moreover, when scholars have mastered reading the necessary languages, they can study, translate, and teach the original writings either at home or to students anywhere.

There has also been a bias toward text-based religions because of a misconception that they are complex and oral religions are simple. Greater research into oral religions, however, has dispelled such notions of simplicity. Consider, for example, the sandpaintings of the Navajo people and the ceremonies of which the paintings are a part. "In these ceremonies, which are very complicated and intricate, sandpaintings are made and prayers recited. Sandpaintings are impermanent paintings made of dried pulverized materials that depict the Holy People [gods] and serve as a temporary altar. Over 800 forms of sandpaintings exist, each connected to a specific chant and ceremony."[1]

Indigenous religions have, of course, created much that is permanent, and sometimes even monumental. We have only to think of the Mayan pyramids in Yucatán and the great city of Teotihuacán, near Mexico City. But native religions often express themselves in ways that have less permanence: dance, masks, wood sculpture, paintings that utilize mineral and plant dyes, tattoo, body painting, and memorized story and chant. Perhaps we have to begin to see these transitory expressions of religious art as being equal in stature to more permanent sacred writings and artistic creations. In speaking of African art, one scholar has called it the "indigenous language of African belief and thought," even saying that African art "provides a kind of scripture of African religion."[2]

The Modern Recovery of Indigenous Religions

We know about native religious traditions through the efforts of scholars from a number of disciplines, particularly anthropology. One pioneer was Franz Boas (1858–1942), a professor at Columbia University and curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Other notable contributors to this field include Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), Raymond Firth (1901–2002), Mary Douglas (1921–2007), and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (mentioned in Chapter 1).

The ecological movement has also made our study of indigenous religions more pressing. Environmentalist David Suzuki argues that we must look to native peoples and religions for insightful lessons in the relationship between human beings and nature. In his introduction to the book *Wisdom of the Elders*, he writes that the earth is rapidly moving toward what he calls "ecocrisis." He quotes the ecologist Paul Ehrlich in saying that solutions will have to be "quasi-religious." Suzuki argues that "our problem is inherent in the way we perceive our relationship with the rest of Nature and our role in the grand scheme of things. Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson proposes that we foster *biophilia*, a love of life. He once told me, 'We must rediscover our *kin*, the other animals and plants with whom we share this planet.'"[3]

These masked dancers in Papua New Guinea celebrate spirits of their ancestors.

Some of this interest derives, of course, from a sometimes romanticized view of native peoples and their relationship with nature. We should recognize that some native peoples, such as the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest, have viewed nature as dangerously violent, and others have seriously damaged their natural environment. Despite such cases, one finds in many indigenous religions extraordinary sensitivity to the natural elements.

The development of photography and sound recording has helped the recovery of native religious traditions. Photography captures native styles of life and allows them to be seen with a certain immediacy. Ethnomusicology involves the recording of chants and the sounds of musical instruments that might otherwise be lost. Gladys Reichard, a specialist who pioneered study of the ritual life of the Navajo (Diné), has written that chanters in the Navajo religion need to memorize an "incalculable" number—that is, thousands—of songs.[4] The fact that listeners can replay such recordings has no doubt added to the appreciation of this music.

Little Big Mouth, a medicine man, sits in front of his lodge near Fort Sill, Oklahoma. The photo dates to around 1900.

Artists in many cultures, trying to go beyond their own limited artistic traditions, have found inspiration in native wood sculpture, masks, drums, and textile design. Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), for example, often spoke of the strong influence that African religious masks had on his work. By the early 1900s, West African masks had found their way to Paris and the artists there. A scholar describes the effect of one African work on several artists who were close friends. "One piece . . . is a mask that had been given to Maurice Vlaminck in 1905. He records that [André] Derain was 'speechless' and 'stunned' when he saw it, bought it from Vlaminck and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse, who were also greatly affected by it."[5] French artist Paul Gauguin moved to Tahiti and the Marquesas to find and paint what he hoped was a fundamental form of religion there, and some of his paintings allude to native Tahitian religious belief.[6] Gauguin thereby hoped to go beyond the limited views of his European background. The work of such artists as Picasso and Gauguin helped to open eyes to the beauty produced by indigenous religions.

Of course, the religious art of native peoples needs no authentication from outsiders. And outsiders present a problem: they tend to treat native religious objects as purely secular works of art, while people within an indigenous religious tradition do not make such a distinction. Indigenous religions exist generally within **holistic** cultures, in which every object and act may have religious meaning. Art, music, religion, and social behavior within such cultures can be so inseparable that it is hard to say what is distinctly religious and what is not. Although we can find a similar attitude among very pious practitioners of the dominant world religions, for whom every act is religious, people in modern, industrial cultures commonly see the secular and religious realms as separate.

> All our histories, traditions, codes were passed from one generation to another by word of mouth. Our memories must be kept clear and accurate, our observation must be keen, our self-control absolute.
>
> —Thomas Wildcat Alford, Shawnee[7]

Fortunately, the bias that once judged native religions to be "primitive" manifestations of the religious spirit—as opposed to the literate, so-called higher religions—is disappearing. It is an inescapable fact that the span of written religions is relatively brief—barely five thousand years—yet scientists now hold that human beings have lived on earth for at least a million (and possibly two or three million) years. Although we do not know how long human beings have been manifesting religious behavior, we believe it goes back as long as human beings have been capable of abstract thought.

STUDYING INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS: LEARNING FROM PATTERNS

The study of indigenous religious traditions presents its own specific challenges. Happily, oral traditions are being written down, translated, and published. Yet our understanding of these religions depends not only on written records but also on field study by anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and others.

It would be ideal if we could study and experience each native religion separately; barring that, however, one workable approach is to consider them collectively as "sacred paths" that share common elements. Thus, in this chapter we will concentrate on finding patterns in native religions—while keeping in mind that beyond the patterns there is enormous variety. The patterns we identify in indigenous religions will also enrich our encounter with other religions in later chapters. Three key patterns we will consider are the human relationship with nature, the framing of sacred time and space, and the respect for origins, gods, and ancestors.

1. Human Relationships with the Natural World

Most indigenous religions have sprung from tribal cultures of small numbers, whose survival has required a cautious and respectful relationship with nature. In the worldview of these religions, human beings are very much a part of nature. People look to nature itself (sometimes interpreted through traditional lore) for guidance and meaning.

Some native religions see everything in the universe as being alive, a concept known as *animism* (which we discussed briefly in Chapter 1). The life force (Latin: *anima*) is present in everything and is especially apparent in living things—trees, plants, birds, animals, and human beings—and in the motion of water, the sun, the moon, clouds, and wind. But life force can also be present in apparently static mountains, rocks, and soil. Other native religions, while more theistic, see powerful spirits in nature, which temporarily inhabit natural objects and manifest themselves there.

In an animistic worldview, everything can be seen as part of the same reality. There may be no clear boundaries between the natural and supernatural and between the human and nonhuman. Everything has both its visible ordinary reality and a deeper, invisible sacred reality. Four Oglala Sioux shamans, when asked about what was *wakan* ("holy," "mysterious"), said, "Every object in the world has a spirit and that spirit is *wakan*. Thus the spirit[s] of the tree or things of that kind, while not like the spirit of man, are also *wakan*."[8] To say that nature is full of spirits can be a way of affirming the presence of both a universal life force and an essential, underlying sacredness.

Among many peoples, particular objects—a specific rock, tree, or river—are thought of as being animated by an individual spirit that lives within. And in some native traditions, we find deities that care about and influence a whole category of reality, such as the earth, water, or air. Among the Yoruba

of Africa, storms are the work of the deity Shangó, a legendary king with great powers who climbed to heaven (see Chapter 11). The Igbo (Ibo) pray to Ala, an earth-mother deity, for fertility of the earth. Women also pray to her for children, and men pray to her to increase their crops. In the Ashanti religion, Ta Yao is the god of metal. The work of blacksmiths and mechanics is under his charge.[9]

In a world that is animated by spirits, human beings must treat all things with care. If a spirit is injured or insulted, it can retaliate. Human beings must therefore show that they respect nature, especially the animals and plants that they kill to eat. Human beings must understand the existence and ways of the spirit world so that they can avoid harm and incur blessings. (We will revisit this spirit world later, when we discuss trance states and the spiritual specialist, the shaman.)

Native American religions are noted for their reverential attitude toward the natural world; human beings and animals are often pictured as coming into existence together, and the sun, moon, trees, and animals are all considered kin. Hehaka Sapa, or Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux, although he had become a Christian, explained the sense of relationship to nature that he had experienced when he was growing up among his people in South Dakota. In his autobiography, which he dictated in 1930, he points out that his community, which traditionally lived in *tipis* (circular tents made of animal skins and poles), arranges itself in a circle—as does all nature, which is constantly making circles, just like the sun, the moon, and the whirlwind.

Native American religions often express the kinship bond between human beings and animals in ritual. (To a lesser extent, some other religions do this, as well). Åke Hultkrantz, a Swedish scholar, clarifies with an example the meaning of many dances that imitate animals. "Plains Indian dances in which men imitate the movements of buffaloes . . . are not, as earlier research took for granted, magic rituals to multiply the animals. They are rather acts of supplication in which Indians, by imitating the wild, express their desires and expectations. Such a ritual tells us the Indian's veneration for the active powers of the universe: it is a prayer."[10]

Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours.
—Black Elk, Oglala Sioux[11]

In many Native American religious traditions, there is little distinction between the human and animal worlds; rather, there is a sense of kinship. To exploit nature mindlessly is even thought to be as sacrilegious as harming one's own mother. As Smohalla of the Nez Perce people said, "You ask me to plow the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's breast? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest."[12]

Native religions also frequently embrace an ethic of restraint and conservation concerning nature's resources. One is expected to take only what one needs and to use all the parts of an animal or plant. In traditional Hawai`i, for example, fishing in certain areas would be temporarily forbidden (*kapu*, or taboo) in order to allow the fish population to be replenished. Of course, the ideal is never universally maintained, and even native peoples have sometimes been unaware of the destructive effects of their actions. Consider, for example, the devastation of the beaver by native peoples in

North America who sold the pelts to European traders, or the cutting of most sandalwood trees by native Hawaiians for sale in China. Given examples like these, it is clear that native peoples who did not live in harmony with nature could not long survive.

It is difficult, perhaps, for urban human beings today to experience fully the intimate connection with the rest of nature that has been a common aspect of native religions. The predominant contemporary view sees human beings as fundamentally different from other animals. Perhaps this tendency is a result of our modern culture, which emphasizes the skills of writing and reading. We also have little connection with the origins of our food, and we live and work indoors. Electric light diminishes our awareness of day and night and obstructs the light of the moon and stars. Except for insects, rodents, and the most common birds, we seldom see wildlife firsthand. Traffic noise drowns out the sounds of wind, rain, and birdsong.

In contrast, consider the sense of kinship with animals found, for example, among the Haida people of the Pacific Northwest: "the Haida refer to whales and ravens as their 'brothers' and 'sisters' and to fish and trees as the finned and tree *people*."[13]

Another example of contrast is apparent in the way the BaMbuti, forest dwellers of central Africa, perceive their forest. Outsiders might find the darkness and thick foliage frightening. But, as one anthropologist has written, for the people who live within it and love it, the forest "is their world. . . . They know how to distinguish the innocent-looking *itaba* vine from the many others it resembles so closely, and they know how to follow it until it leads them to a cache of nutritious, sweet-tasting roots. They know the tiny sounds that tell where the bees have hidden their honey; they recognize the kind of weather that brings a multitude of different kinds of mushrooms springing to the surface.... They know the secret language that is denied all outsiders and without which life in the forest is an impossibility."[14]

Sacred Time and Sacred Space

Our everyday lives go on in ordinary time, which we see as moving forward into the future. Sacred time, however, is "the time of eternity." Among the Koyukon people of the Arctic it is called "distant time," and it is the holy ancient past in which the gods lived and worked.[15] Among Australian aborigines it is often called "dream time," and it is the subject of much of their highly esteemed art.

Sacred time is cyclical, returning to its origins for renewal. By recalling and ritually reliving the deeds of the gods and ancestors, we enter into the sacred time in which they live. Indigenous religions even tend to structure daily lives in ways that make them conform to mythic events in sacred time; this creates a sense of holiness in everyday life.

Like ordinary time, ordinary space exists in the everyday. Sacred space, however, is the doorway through which the "other world" of gods and ancestors can contact us and we can contact them. Sacred space is associated

A solitary figure experiences the center of Ireland's Drombeg Stone Circle. In this sacred space, particular stones are aligned with the setting sun on the winter solstice (December 21 or 22).

with the center of the entire universe, where power and holiness are strongest and where we can go to renew our own strength.

In native religions, sacred space may encompass a great mountain, a volcano, a valley, a lake, a forest, a single large tree, or some other striking natural site. For Black Elk and his people, after the Lakota had moved west, it was Harney Peak in South Dakota. In Australian aboriginal religion, Uluru (Ayers Rock) has served as this sacred center. In Africa, Mount Kilimanjaro and other high mountains have been considered sacred spaces.

Sacred space can also be constructed, often in a symbolic shape such as a circle or square, and defined by a special building or by a boundary made of rope or of rocks, such as Stonehenge in England. It can even be an open area among trees or buildings, such as the great open space between the temples of Teotihuacán, near Mexico City.

Respect for Origins, Gods, and Ancestors

Origins Most indigenous religions have cosmic tales of their origins that are regularly recited or enacted through ritual and dance. Some tell how the world originated from a supernatural realm. According to other emergence stories, the earth rose out of previous earths or from earlier, more chaotic material forms. Often the land and creatures emerged from watery depths. In a Hopi creation story the earth, before it took shape, was mist.

Stories of the origin of a tribe may be connected with its story of the earth's creation. Among the Acoma Pueblo, there is a story of two sisters who lived entirely underground. Eventually they climbed up the roots of a tree and into the sunlight through a hole in the ground, to become the first human beings on earth. One became mother of the Pueblo.[16]

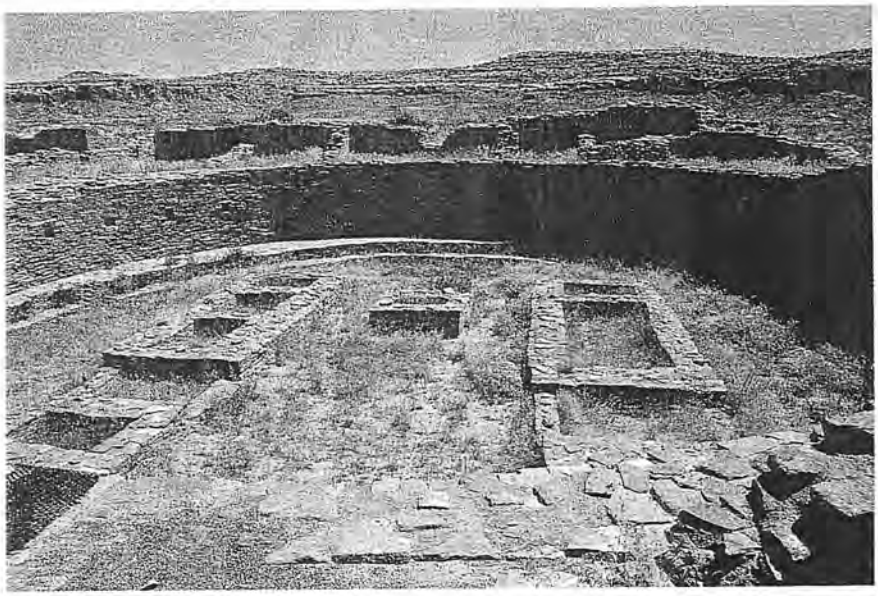
Gods Native religions frequently speak of a High God who is superior to all other deities and is considered to be wise, ancient, and benevolent. The Inuit speak of a Great Spirit living in the sky who is female and to whom all human spirits eventually return. In a few African religions, too, the High God is female, neuter, or androgynous; and in some religions there are two complementary High Gods, characterized as male/female, brother/sister, or bad/good. The BaKuta of central Africa speak of the twins Nzambi-above and Nzambi-below, although in their myths the lower twin disappears and Nzambi-above becomes the High God.[17]

In some African religions, stories of the High God, who is almost always the creator of the world, offer some explanation for the ills of the world or the distance between human beings and the divine. Many African religions tell how the High God created the world and then left it—sometimes out of dismay at human beings or simply for lack of interest. "Many people of central and southern Africa say that God (Mulungu) lived on earth at first, but men began to kill his servants and set fire to the bush, and so God retired to heaven on one of those giant spiders' webs that seem to hang from the sky in morning mists. In Burundi, however, it is said that having made good children God created a cripple, and its parents were so angry that they tried to kill God and he went away."[18] The High God in African religions, however, is not always remote. The Diola, for example, believe in direct, prophetic revelation from the High God, and the Igbo and Shona have oracles from the supreme being. While monotheism is common in African religions, it can express itself in many ways.

Although indigenous religions often revere a High God, altars and imagery dedicated to a High God are not common. Large temples, temple ritual, and priesthoods have been found in a few cultures, such as in Mexico and western Africa, but these elements are rare. Instead, in their prayer, ritual, and art many native religions tend to focus on lesser deities, especially those associated with the forces of nature. More commonly, ceremonies in indigenous religions are performed at small-scale shrines or meeting places. Sometimes the religious ceremonies occur indoors, such as in a sweat lodge or *kiva* (a submerged meeting hall). At other times they occur outdoors, at a river bank, beside a rock formation, or in a grove of trees.

Ancestors Many indigenous religions make little distinction between a god and an ancestor. Both are important, because living people must work with both for success in life. Spirits of ancestors must be treated well out of love for them, but also out of respect for their power. Some native religions, such as the Navajo, have not wished closeness with the spirits of the dead, fearing them. But more commonly the dead are venerated. In African religions, ancestor spirits are commonly thought to bring health, wealth, and children if they are pleased, and disease and childlessness if they are not. The way to appease angry ancestors is through ritual, sometimes including sacrifice. The ancestors often are thought to live in an afterlife that is a state of existence much like earthly life. Belief in reincarnation is

Religion of the Pueblo Peoples



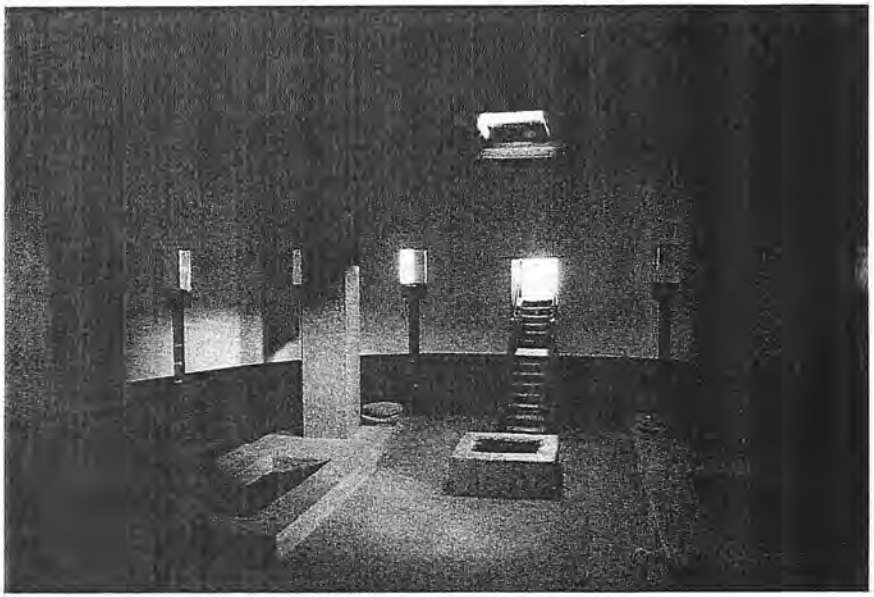
One of the great sights of the world is the group of multistoried buildings hidden high up in the cliffs at Mesa Verde, Colorado. Inhabited for more than 700 years, the now-empty buildings give an unparalleled view into the life of the Ancestral Pueblo peoples (also called Hisatsinom and Anasazi). Visitors can walk down from the top of the cliff, via narrow stone paths and stairs, to visit some of the houses and to experience the plazas that were once used for ceremonial dance. Visitors can then climb down a wooden ladder to enter a *kiva,* a dark and womb-like ritual chamber beneath the surface. There they can see the *sipapu,* the hole in the floor that is a symbol of the emergence of human beings into this world. The kiva and sipapu show how thoroughly oriented to the earth the religion practiced here was.

The cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde are only one site in what was—and still is—a wide-ranging culture. The territory of this culture includes large parts of what are now Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado. Similar cliff dwellings may be seen at the Canyon de Chelly in Arizona and at Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico. In New Mexico one may also visit the great spiritual center of Chaco Canyon, once a flourishing city. Tens of thousands of pilgrims would come here regularly, and as many as forty thousand would be present at the time of the twice-yearly solstices. This site is sacred to the Pueblo peoples even today.

The religious life of the Ancestral Pueblo peoples is not fully known, but some evidence comes from traces of ancient roads and from archeology, petroglyphs, and paintings. Some of their buildings were oriented to coincide with the solstices and equinoxes. The presence of kivas suggests that ceremony took place there, and in some of the kivas the remains of wall paintings have been found. Remaining petroglyphs show elements from nature, including stars and the moon, and in the period from about 1200–1250 C.E. there was a profuse growth of the cult and imagery of *kachinas*—benevolent guardian spirits who are believed to appear among the people on ceremonial occasions (and whom we will discuss in a moment).*

When the large settlements, such as the one at Mesa Verde, were abandoned, their people moved to villages—primarily in modern-day northeastern Arizona and northwestern New Mexico—but they took with them

*Note: This text uses the time designations B.C.E. ("before the common era") and C.E. ("of the common era") in place of the Christianity-centered abbreviations B.C. ("before Christ") and A.D. (*anno Domini*, "in the year of the Lord").



The image on the previous page shows what remains of a kiva at Chaco, an important ancestral site for the Pueblo peoples. The image above, a reconstruction at the Aztec Ruins National Monument, shows how a functioning kiva may have looked.

their religious beliefs, images, and ritual, especially the cult of the kachinas. The traditional style of multistoried buildings continued, as well, suggesting to the Spanish colonizers the name by which the peoples are still commonly known: *pueblo* in Spanish means "village." (The Pueblo peoples who live in New Mexico are sometimes called the Eastern Pueblos; those in Arizona are called the Western Pueblos.)

Many mountains, lakes, and rivers in the region are sacred to the Pueblo peoples. Kachinas are believed to live there, and the souls of the dead are sometimes believed to travel there. The Taos Pueblos believe that Blue Lake is the home of their ancestors, and it is a place of pilgrimage.

The Pueblo peoples share many features of their architecture, governance, and religious practice, but there are also great differences among them in all these areas. Each of the more than two dozen pueblos governs itself independently, and multiple languages are spoken: Keresan, Zunian, three Tanoan dialects (Tiwa, Tewa, Towa), and Hopi. The independence of each pueblo may have actually been to its advantage, helping each unique culture to survive. Despite the pressures to change, the Pueblo peoples have kept their identities intact—particularly through fidelity to their religious beliefs and practices.

Each pueblo has its own religious traditions. Here we will touch on just a few. The stories of human origins differ among the peoples and clans, but many tell of human emergence from a lower world, of assistance from supernatural beings in learning to live, of help from animals, and of wanderings before final settlement. Among the seven Keresan-speaking pueblos, for example, the story of origins tells of how people moved upward through four different-colored worlds. Standing in an eagle's nest on top of a tree, with the help of a woodpecker and a badger, they made a hole large enough to climb up into this world.

Religious traditions are passed on through initiation ceremonies, male and female secret societies, and special rites conducted by priests. We get a sense of the complexity simply by considering the religious societies of the Zuñis. The Zuñis have six religious societies (dedicated to the sun, rainmakers, animal deities, war gods, guardian spirits, and priests of the guardian spirits), and each society has its own calendar, ceremonies, and ritual objects. Religious symbolism is equally complex. Among the Zía, for example, four is a sacred number. It

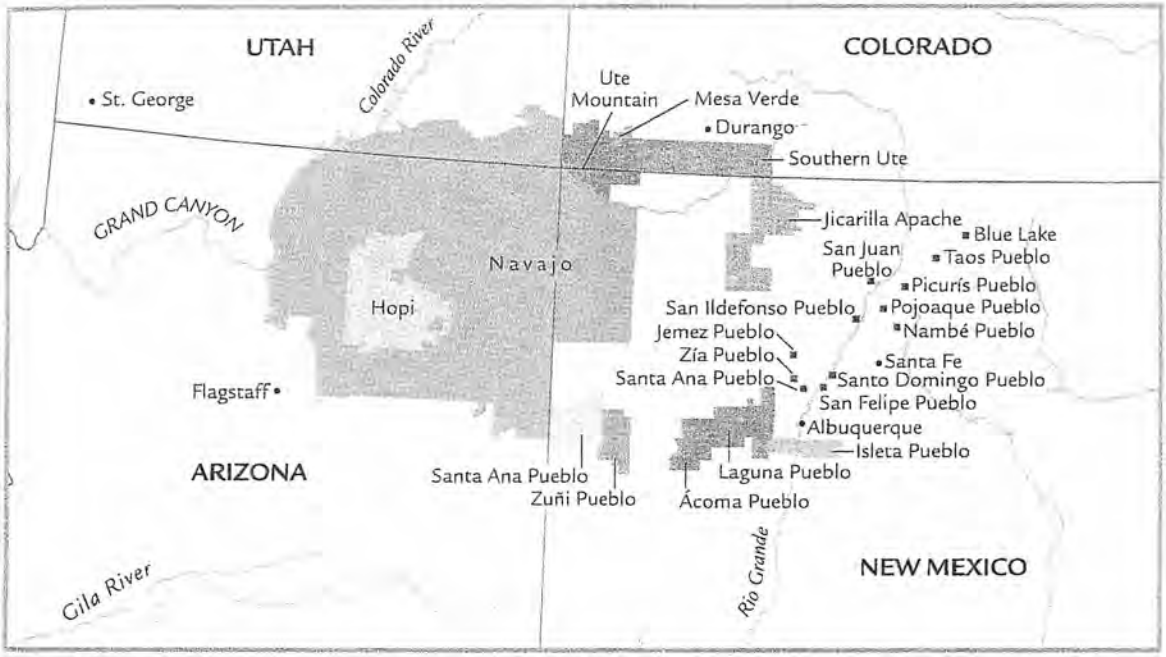


FIGURE 2.1 *The Pueblo peoples and other Native American tribes of the American Southwest.*

symbolizes the four seasons, four directions, and four stages of life (infancy, youth, adulthood, old age). It is used in many designs found in Zía art. (The state flag of New Mexico, which shows a crosslike symbol made of four lines in each of the four directions, is based on a Zía design).

Some of the Pueblo peoples, influenced by Christianity, are monotheists; but many retain a belief in the

found sometimes, as in native Tahitian religion and in many African religions, from the Diola of Senegal to the BaKongo of the Congo region. In traditional Hawaiian religion, it was believed that the spirits of the dead went to an underworld, while the spirits of cultural heroes ascended into the sky.

SACRED PRACTICES IN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

In native societies, everyday religious activity and practice are significant because their primary purpose is often to place individuals, families, and groups in "right relationships" with gods, ancestors, other human beings, and nature. Rituals are the basic way in which human beings ensure they are living in harmony with each other and with nature. Rituals are frequently devoted to major aspects of human life: key events in the life cycle, rules

traditional deities, and they sense no disharmony. The Great Spirit, they believe, can take many forms. Among the Hopis, for example, more than thirty gods are recognized. Perhaps the most important are Tawa, the sun god, prayed to each morning; Mu-yao, the moon god, imagined as an old man; Sotuqnangu, god of the sky, who sends clouds and lightning; and Kokyang Wuuti, called Spider Woman in English, who is thought of as a loving grandmother.

Among all the Pueblo peoples there is a belief in guardian spirits, who play a role something like angels and patron saints. These are the kachinas. They are not gods, but are the spirits of ancestors, birds, animals, plants, and other beings. They are believed to have once lived among the people, then to have retreated to their own world; but they return yearly. They are represented by human beings when the human beings are dressed in specific masks and costumes.

One of the most complex systems of belief in guardian spirits is found among the Hopis, where traditional religion has been least affected by other cultures. From February through the summer, dancers represent the spirits, and more than two hundred different masked figures appear in the dances. In the Hopi language they are called *katsinam* (singular: *katsina*). Bird and animal spirits are based on many birds and animals, including the deer, badger, sheep, cow, horse, hummingbird, and eagle; and nature spirits express the rain cloud, rainbow, moon, and fertile earth. Some figures show human characteristics, such as warriors, corn-grinding maidens, guards, clowns, and children. There is also a wide variety of ogrelike figures. Each has a name, special costume, and specific mask. The Zuñi recognize similar guardian spirits, whom they called *koko*.

The Hopi and the Zuñi are also well known for their painted representations of these spirits, called *tithu* (singular: *tihu*). (Outsiders know the figurines as "kachina dolls.") They are re-creations in miniature of the masked kachina figures that dance in the villages. The tithu were originally created to be given as gifts from the masked dancers to girls in the villages—a form of religious teaching through images. But they have become collectors' items, cherished by outsiders.

Dances are an especially significant part of the life of all the pueblos. They retell the stories of creation, emergence, and migration, and they are performed throughout the year under the sponsorship of the religious societies. Dances also include practical purposes—to ensure rainfall, fertility of the earth, and good harvest, or to achieve a bountiful hunt and protection from danger. We get an idea of their purposes from some of their names, such as Corn Dance, Snake Dance, and Elk Dance. Visitors who have the privilege of observing these and other Pueblo ceremonies come away with a renewed appreciation for the variety of religious paths and a sense of amazement at the persistence through the centuries of such beautiful, ancient ways.

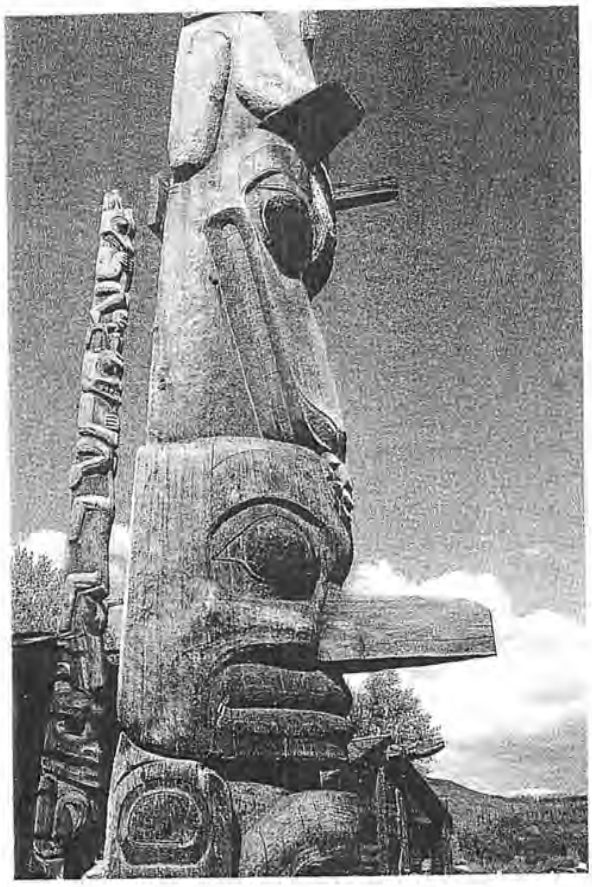
concerning certain kinds of behavior, sacrifice, and access to the spirit world. In addition, artifacts such as masks and statues are an essential part of specific rituals.

Life-Cycle Ceremonies

In indigenous societies, the human journey through life is aided and marked by rites of passage. In addition to being important to the individual, these rites also help hold the society together by renewing bonds and admitting new members to the community.

Rites of passage mark an important life event, such as the birth of a child. In some native religions, a woman about to give birth goes off by herself to bear her child at a sacred site or in a house built for that purpose. Birth is considered a powerful time for the mother and child, and the blood associated with it is believed to have dangerous power.

> Read myths. They teach you that you can turn inward, and you begin to get the message of the symbols. Read other people's myths, not those of your own religion, because you tend to interpret your own religion in terms of facts—but if you read the other ones, you begin to get the message.
>
> —Joseph Campbell[19]



Some indigenous peoples of western Canada erect a totem pole to honor an ancestor. Images on the totem pole are related to the ancestor's life story.

After the birth, the newborn is often celebrated with a public event that may occur immediately or anytime from a week to a year after the actual birth. In some parts of Africa, babies do not become members of the community until they receive their names in a special public ceremony that is accompanied by song, dance, and a meal. A name is chosen carefully because of the influence it is thought to have on the child's future.

Special rituals also mark a person's entry into adulthood. They may include a period of instruction in sex, adult responsibilities, and tribal history and belief. They often involve an initiation ritual that may be experienced in seclusion or in the company of other initiates. Rites can include a symbolic death—painful and frightening—meant to turn a boy into a man. Across Africa, circumcision for boys in their early teens is a common rite for entering adulthood.

In western Africa, initiation societies oversee coming-of-age rituals. "The Poro [a secret initiation society] is for boys, controlled by a hierarchy of elders, different in each village, which meets in a sacred grove where the clan founder was buried. The purpose of the initiation is the rebirth of the youths, who are said to be swallowed by the Poro spirit at the beginning and returned to their parents as reborn at the end of the initiation."[20] A parallel initiation society exists for girls, who receive sexual instruction and training in the skills necessary for marriage.

A girl's first menstrual period may also be marked publicly. For example, among the Apache, a four-day ceremony marks a girl's *menarche* (first menstruation). During the ceremony, which is elaborate, the girl performs a dance, receives a massage from her female sponsor, kneels to receive the rays of the sun, and circles repeatedly around a ceremonial cane.

In Native American religions, a common ritual of early maturity is the "vision quest," or "dream quest," which may involve prolonged fasting and some kind of preliminary cleansing, such as washing or undergoing a sweat bath. Details of the construction of the sweat lodge and the attendant ritual can include cutting willow branches, during which tobacco might be offered; gathering sticks, rocks, moss, and sweet grass; making an altar and heating a stone; rubbing smoke over the body; marking the ground; and saying appropriate prayers at each stage.

For years before the vision quest, the young person may receive training to prepare for the experience. Commonly, a tribal religious specialist will

The Igbo: An Indigenous Religion in Transition

Today, at least six million Igbo (or Ibo, pronounced *ee'-bo*) live in western Africa, mostly in the nation of Nigeria. While there are some variations among tribes, traditional Igbo people worship the goddess of the earth (Ala) and various spirits (*alusi*), such as the spirit of the river, the spirit of the yam, and the spirit of the hearth. Many Igbo worship a High God (Chukwu, or Chineke), conceived of as the creator. They also venerate the souls of ancestors, who are believed to have power over the lives of their descendants. The Igbo believe that each person has a unique spirit (*chi*), which plays a major role in determining the person's fate.

Within Igbo religion, special rituals mark significant life events. Daily ritual takes place in the home at a central shrine with wooden images of ancestors. These images receive regular offerings of food, drink, and sometimes the blood of sacrificial animals. Religious rites mark the naming of children, marriage, planting, and harvest. The most important and complex rituals occur at funerals, when the Igbo believe they must help the deceased enter the spirit world contentedly. For these ceremonies, the Igbo have developed elaborate masks for use in religious dances and masquerades.

This photo from the 1930s gives a sense of how masks play a role in traditional Igbo dance.

Christian missionaries began to work among the Igbo in the mid-nineteenth century. Throughout the British colonization of Nigeria in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church, sent many missionaries to the region. Catholic missionaries, who arrived after 1880, were also successful with conversions. As a result, Christian belief and practice have strongly influenced Igbo religion. Sometimes Christianity has displaced traditional beliefs and practices. But more commonly, in varied forms of religious syncretism (blending), the two religions have mixed and sometimes even produced new independent religions.

Many parallels between traditional Igbo faith and Christianity assisted the mixing of the two religions. The High God of the Igbo resembles the Creator Father God of Christianity. Igbo spirits of nature resemble Christian angels, and souls of Igbo ancestors intercede on behalf of the living, as do Christian saints. Igbo belief in an individual's spirit resembles Christian belief in the soul.

Although Christianity prohibits traditional Igbo polygamy, other elements of older practice remain. Igbo who worship at Christian churches on Sunday may visit traditional priests and shrines during the week in order to seek the advice and help of the spirits. And the souls of ancestors continue to receive veneration. Masquerades are used even for celebrating Christmas, a major national holiday in Nigeria.

What has happened among the Igbo is quite typical of what has happened throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Christianity is becoming the dominant religion, but its flavor is African.

create a sacred space by ritually marking the four directions of the compass and the center. The sacred space, set apart from the community, should be a place of natural beauty.

The seeker remains in the sacred space until a vision, or dream, comes. Although the vision quest is often a part of the coming-of-age ceremonies for males, among some peoples it is also employed for females. The vision quest may be used at other times, too—particularly when the individual or the group must make an important life decision.

There, when I was young, the spirits took me in my vision to the center of the earth and showed me all the good things in the sacred hoop of the world.
—Black Elk, speaking of his vision quest at age nine.[21]

In indigenous societies, as in many other cultures, marriage is a ritual that not only publicly affirms and stabilizes a union but also cements economic arrangements and, through the ceremony, ensures fertility. In both Africa and North America, however, marriage in tribal cultures often has been a practical arrangement. Among Native American peoples, marriage has frequently been celebrated simply as a social contract that is worked out by the families. Monogamy has been the norm, but divorce is acceptable when a marriage is not successful. In indigenous African religions, marriage is sometimes marked by rituals to unite the two lineages and transfer the power of fertility; but often its religious aspect "is not distinctive. It is regarded as the normal sequel to rites of adolescence, whose purpose was to prepare for this state."[22]

As the final passing from this life, death is accompanied by rituals that serve to comfort close relatives, assist the spirit of the dead person in moving on, and protect the living from bad influences that could come from an unhappy spirit. Because the spirit of the dead person may be sad to leave the family circle, it must be helped to make its trip to the spirit world. Relatives and friends assist by placing clothing, food, money, and favorite objects with the body. In the case of a chief or other notable person, the body may be embalmed or mummified for public display until a large funeral can be arranged. In the past, great African chiefs have had wives, children, and servants buried alongside them. Among Native American tribes, the sacrifice of relatives and attendants to accompany a dead leader has also occurred. For example, after the death of the Natchez leader Tattooed Serpent in 1725, two of his wives and six others, after preparation by fasting, were strangled as a part of the funeral ritual.[23] In Native American religions, bodies of the dead are usually buried, but sometimes they are placed on platforms or in trees.

Taboo and Sacrifice

A **taboo** is a rule that forbids specific behavior with regard to certain objects, people, animals, days, or phases of life. Taboos represent a codification of the social and religious order. In our language, *taboo* means, often negatively, something that is prohibited. This is essentially the viewpoint of an outsider. From inside native religions, a taboo is often better seen as a way of protecting the individual and of safeguarding the natural order of things.

The Vision Quest

Among the Ojibwa, who live in the northern plains and Great Lakes area of North America, fasting was often expected of children as preparation for a great fast upon reaching puberty. Girls were expected to make a special fast at menarche, but boys were expected, in addition, to undertake a vision quest. "The Ojibwa boy was led deep into the forest, where a lofty red pine tree was selected. In this tree, a platform of woven sticks covered with moss was placed upon a high branch as a bed upon which the youth was to conduct the fast. Perhaps a canopy of branches would be prepared to shelter him from the wind and rain. Left alone in this place, the youth was strictly warned not to take any kind of nourishment or drink. He was to lie quietly day and night on this platform in a patient vigil for his vision."[24] He might be checked secretly by elders and would be allowed to go home if he could not continue, but he would have to return the following year. "When visions rewarded the fast, they commonly took the form of a journey into the world of the spirits, a spiritual journey on a cosmic scale. During this journey the visionary was shown the path upon which his life should proceed. He was associated with one or more spirit beings who would serve as his guardians and protectors throughout his life."[25] The boy would also gather, or later be given, physical symbols of his guardian spirits, which he would keep for the rest of his life to remind him of his quest and the spirits' protection.

Taboos frequently relate to sex and birth. Blood, too, is always an element of mysterious power—both helpful and dangerous. For example, in some but not all groups, menstruating women are expected to remain separate from everyone else, since menstrual blood is considered powerful and dangerous. In contrast, a few cultures (such as the Apache) hail a girl's menarche as a time when she has power to heal illness.

Probably because of the blood involved during childbirth, a woman in some native cultures must remain alone or in the company of women only during the birth—not even the woman's husband may be present. In traditional Hawai'i, for example, women of high rank gave birth in isolation, at the site of special large stones used only for this purpose. Indigenous societies also frequently forbid a husband from resuming sexual relations with his wife for some time after childbirth—this period can even last until the child is weaned.

Like birth, death is also surrounded by taboos concerning the spirit of the dead person, who may seek to reward or take revenge on the living because of the way he or she was treated in life. The afterlife can be a shadowy, uncertain realm that the departing spirit is reluctant to enter, especially if the spirit is leaving a happy family circle. Proper rituals must be performed, accompanied by public mourning, to avoid angering the dead person's spirit.

A number of taboos regulate other social behavior. One common taboo relates to rank: people of high position, such as chiefs, nobility, priests, and shamans, must be treated with extraordinary care because of their special powers; taboos protect them from insult or inappropriate action. In traditional Hawaiian culture, for example, the shadow of a commoner could not

Traditional Hawaiian Religion

The essentials of traditional Polynesian culture and religion were brought to Hawai`i by settlers who came over the sea from islands in the southern Pacific Ocean. Because of the great navigational skills of the Polynesians, their culture spread widely.

Before contact with westerners, the Polynesian people of Hawai`i had a well-developed belief system, made of many strands. Their belief system spoke of a primeval darkness (*po*), in the midst of which a separation had occurred, forming the sky and the earth. In the space between the two, all the varied forms of life emerged. (This emergence is beautifully detailed in the *Kumulipo*, the most elaborate of the Hawaiian chants of creation.) The primal deities of sky and earth were Wakea and his female consort Papa. But the Hawaiian religion also spoke of thousands of other deities (*akua*) who were descendants of the earliest gods. Some of these deities may have arisen from the memory of divinized ancestors, and others may have been the personification of specific aspects of nature. Their worship seems to have arisen at different times on different island groups, and systematization took place only slowly, never being static, but growing in layers.

Of the thousands of deities that eventually were said to exist, several dozen were commonly invoked, and the greatest deities had priesthoods dedicated to their worship. Among the most important were Ku and Lono, gods who were in many ways complementary. Ku, with several manifestations, was a god of vigorous action. He was the patron, for example, of digging, bird catching, and fishing. In a darker aspect he was also patron of war.

The second god, Lono, was a god of peace, associated with rain, fertility, love, and the arts. Although a large part of the year was dedicated to Ku, the winter period was a time of truce, under the protection of Lono. During this time the temples dedicated to Ku were temporarily closed. The four-month period dedicated to Lono began when the Pleiades first appeared above the horizon in the night sky—something that happened between late October and late November. This period was called *Makahiki* (literally, "eye movement"), a term which referred to the appearance and movement of the stars. The time was given over to religious services, dance, sports contests, and leisure. During Makahiki, priests of Lono collected offerings in his name. To announce the presence of Lono, his priests bore around each island a white banner made of *kapa* (bark cloth). It was attached to a long pole that had at its top the face of Lono or his birdlike symbol. (The people of Hawai`i thought of Captain James Cook as Lono because the explorer's ship arrived in January during Makahiki, and also because his ship, with its white sails, had a startling resemblance to the banner of Lono.)

Two other gods of importance were Kane and Kanaloa, traveling companions or brothers who came together from their homeland of Kahiki to the Hawaiian islands. The two were said to have introduced and planted all bananas in Hawai`i.[26] Kane was protector of the water but was seen in many other aspects of nature—particularly in thunder and the rainbow. Houses often had a shrine to Kane, the heart of which was a phallic stone, and at it Kane received daily prayer. Kanaloa was associated with the sky and the ocean—particularly with ocean fishponds, marine life, the tides, and sailing.

These major gods (with the possible exception of Kanaloa) had their own temples. In the lunar calendar followed by the Hawaiians, ten days in each lunar month were sacred to one of these four gods and most work was forbidden on those days.[27] Fishing and the planting and harvesting of food plants were regulated by this calendar.

The goddess Pele was also a major subject of devotion. She was worshiped as a goddess of fire, active in volcanoes. Tales about her describe her arrival in Hawai`i at the small island of Ni`ihau, east of Kaua`i; her volcanic activity on Kaua`i, O`ahu, and Maui; and the final movement of her irascible spirit to the Big Island of Hawai`i, where volcanoes are still active. Pele was so important that she also had her own priests and, later, priestesses. Other popular goddesses included Pele's younger sister Hi`iaka, of whom Pele was sometimes jealous; Hina, goddess associated with the moon; and Laka, the patron of hula.

Just as deities had many aspects, they could also manifest themselves in varied shapes (*kinolau*, "multiple selves"). Pele, for example, might show herself as a girl, a white dog, a volcano, fire, or an old woman with long hair. (The ethnobotanist Isabella Abbott recounts a characteristic tale told her by her father. He said that once he gave an old lady a ride in his truck and offered

Offerings such as coconuts and fruit are sometimes wrapped in leaves of the ti plant and placed on an offering platform (lele) *at a heiau. The platform here is at Pu`u o Mahuka on the island of Oahu.*

her a cigarette. Before he had a chance to light her cigarette, however, it had lit by itself and the old lady was smoking it. Then suddenly she disappeared.)

Deceased ancestors were, and are, also thought of as having elements of divinity. Known as *`aumakua,* they act as powerful family guardians. Like the gods, they might appear in varied forms—the best-known shapes being those of animals such as sharks, dogs, owls, turtles, and giant lizards (*mo`o*).

Places of worship varied in size—from enormous stone temples to small wayside shrines, temporary altars, and the site of sacred objects in the home. Many temples and shrines were used for specific purposes, such as treating the sick or requesting good fishing, rain, or an increase of crops. The design of temples, called *heiau,* was derived from that of temples in Tahiti and the Marquesas, and seems to have become more elaborate over time. The heiau generally were outdoor stone platforms, often enclosed by walls. In the heiau, images of the deities (*ki`i*) were set up, food offerings were placed on wooden platforms, and priests performed carefully memorized chants.

A complex system of classification came to exist in all traditional Hawaiian society, and religion provided the taboos (*kapu*). The social divisions seem to have grown stricter and more complex over the centuries, and stern sanctions—often death—reinforced the prohibitions. Society was strongly hierarchical—made of nobles (*ali`i*) of descending grades, common people (*maka`ainana*), and slaves (*kauwa*). Men and women had quite different social roles and ate separately. Women lived apart during their menstrual period. Possibly because of fears about the dangerous power of menstrual blood, prohibitions were imposed on what women could eat, what they could touch, and the kind of work they could perform. They could not eat pork, coconuts, or most kinds of bananas, and they were not allowed to raise or prepare *kalo* (taro), the primary food.

Underpinning the entire social system was a notion of spiritual power, called *mana.* Nobles, who were considered to be representatives of the gods, were believed to have the greatest mana; but their mana had to be protected. Commoners, for example, had to crouch or prostrate themselves when close to nobles.

In 1819, King Kamehameha the Great, who had unified the islands, died. In the same year, his son King Kamehameha II ate with women, an act that represented a clear and public rejection of the old system of prohibitions. (This act was influenced by several decades of Western contact.) Many heiau were destroyed and allowed to fall into ruin, most images of the gods were burned, and the religious priesthoods officially ended. The following year, Protestant Christian missionaries arrived from Boston, and Christianity stepped into the vacuum.

Traditional religion, however, did not entirely die out. Elements of it remain alive even today. Among the clearest are widespread reverence for Pele, veneration of ancestors, and belief in guardian spirits. Blessings and dedications, although performed by modern ministers, are often done in traditional style with sea water and ti leaves (*ki*), and hula and traditional musical instruments are occasionally used during Christian services. Prayerful chants in Hawaiian are performed at the beginning of hula, the goddesses Laka and Hi`iaka

Although hula is often thought of as entertainment, much of it tells the stories of Hawaiian gods and goddesses.

are often invoked, and the dances frequently retell the stories of the goddesses and gods. Public prayer at dedications is expected, and one frequently hears the prayer leader address both God (Akua) and "our `aumakua." There have also been theoretical attempts at integrating the traditional native polytheism with monotheism, by saying that the many traditional deities are angels or are just aspects of the one God.[28]

The revival in recent decades of hula, Hawaiian language, and traditional arts has brought about a new interest in ceremonies of the traditional religion. A good number of heiau have been repaired and even rebuilt, including several large ones on Maui and the Big Island of Hawai`i. Some traditional religious services have been conducted at the reconstructed heiau, and there may be further attempts to restore traditional religious practices.[29]

Do not kill or injure your neighbor, for it is not him that you injure. Do not wrong or hate your neighbor, for it is not him that you wrong, you wrong yourself. Moneto, the Grandmother, the Supreme Being, loves him also as she loves you.

—Shawnee rules[30]

fall on a member of the nobility. In a strongly hierarchical native culture, such as in many African groups, the health of the people and the fertility of the land are believed to depend on the health of the sacred king. To maintain his health, the king is protected by taboos—particularly regarding the people with whom he may associate. Because of these taboos and the fear his role inspires, the sacred king may live a life quite separate from his subjects.

Foods and food sources in many cultures are governed by taboos. Among some African peoples, commoners have been forbidden to touch or eat the food of a king. In traditional Hawai`i, women were forbidden to eat certain foods.

Antisocial actions may also be subject to taboo. In Native American religions, taboos and rules encourage a sense of harmony with other members of one's people. Strong taboos against adultery and stealing within the

tribal unit, for example, are enforced by shame, warnings, shunning, and expulsion, often administered by a tribal council. Nevertheless, although harmony is important, warfare against another people has at times been considered justified.

When a taboo has been broken or a spirit must be placated, the person or group must atone for the lapse, often through sacrifice. The usual offering is food and drink. A **libation** (the act of pouring a bit of drink on the ground as an offering) may be made or a portion of a meal set aside for a spirit. An animal may be sacrificed and its blood poured out on the ground or on an altar as an offering of the life force to the deity. Sacrificial animals ordinarily are food animals, such as chickens, pigs, and goats.[31] After the sacrifice, all the participants (including ancestral and nature spirits) may eat the cooked animal—thus pleasing the spirits by feeding them and including them in the meal.

Although it has been rare, human sacrifice (and sometimes cannibalism) has occurred in some native cultures. The sacrifice of human beings was practiced (at least for a time) for specific purposes in Aztec religion, Hawaiian religion, and among tribal peoples of New Guinea; it was much less common among native peoples of North America and Africa.

Before leaving the topic of taboos, it might be good to note that taboos exist plentifully in every society, including our own. Many are associated with sex, marriage, and parenthood. In modern societies, for example, taboos exist against polygamy, incest, and marriage between close relations. Such taboos may seem "natural" to the society that enforces them but "unusual" to outsiders. Taboos are not inherently valid across groups and societies; they are culturally determined.

Shamanism, Trance, and Spiritual Powers

As we have seen, native religions take for granted that a powerful and influential but invisible spirit world exists and that human beings can access it. A **shaman** acts as an intermediary between the visible, ordinary world and the spirit world. The shaman can contact this realm, receive visions of it, and transmit messages from it, often to help or heal others. As one commentator remarks, "The shaman lies at the very heart of some cultures, while living in the shadowy fringes of others. Nevertheless, a common thread seems to connect all shamans across the planet. An awakening to other orders of reality, the experience of ecstasy, and an opening up of visionary realms form the essence of the shamanic mission."[32] Sometimes the spirits speak through the shaman, who knows entry points to their world. The spirits may be reached in dreams or trances by climbing a sacred tree, descending through a cave into the underworld, flying through the air, or following a sacred map.

The shaman understands the primordial unity of things and experiences a shared identity with animals and the rest of nature. Thus the shaman can interpret the language of animals, charm them, and draw on their powers.

> I enter the earth. I go in at a place like a place where people drink water. I travel a long way, very far. When I emerge, I am already climbing threads [up into the sky]. I climb one and leave it, then I climb another one. . . . You come in small to God's place. You do what you have to do there. . . . [Then] you enter, enter the earth, and you return to enter the skin of your body.
>
> —Bushman trance dancer[33]

A shaman carries a golden pot during an equinox ceremony in Equador.

The shaman gains the powers of animals and the rest of nature by wearing items taken from important animals, such as deer antlers, lion skins, and eagle feathers.

Part of becoming a shaman involves having one or more encounters with the spirit realm in the form of a psychological death and rebirth. A person may have experienced some great loss—of sight, of a child, or of something equally precious. He or she may have had a mental breakdown, been terribly sick, or suffered a serious accident and come close to dying. Upon recovering from such an extreme experience, this person can have new powers of insight and healing, which can lead to becoming a shaman. Those who have experienced vivid dreams and visions that are thought to be manifestations of the spirit world are also sometimes trained as shamans.

The shaman often blends the roles of priest, oracle, psychologist, and doctor. A common English term for the shaman is *medicine man*, yet it stresses only the therapeutic role and obscures the fact that shamans are both female and male. In Korean and Japanese native religious paths, in fact, shamans are frequently female.

The shamanic trance state that brings visions, both to the shaman and to others, can be induced in several ways: weakening the visual boundaries (for example, by sitting in the darkness of a cave or hut for prolonged periods), fasting, experiencing sensory deprivation, making regular rhythmic sounds (such as drumming, rattling, bell ringing, and chanting), and dancing in a repetitive way, especially in circles. The ingestion of natural substances is also common; peyote cactus, datura, cannabis (marijuana), coca, opium, and the

Isaac Tens Becomes a Shaman

Isaac Tens, a shaman of the Gitksan people of northwest Canada, spoke to an interviewer in 1920 about how he had become a shaman. On a snowy day at dusk, when he was gathering firewood, he heard a loud noise, and an owl appeared to him. "The owl took hold of me, caught my face, and tried to lift me up. I lost consciousness. As soon as I came back to my senses I realized that I had fallen into the snow. My head was coated with ice, and some blood was running out of my mouth."[34] Isaac went home, but he fell into a trance. He woke up to find medicine men working to heal him. One told him that it was now time for him, too, to become a *halaait* (medicine man). Isaac refused. Later, at a fishing hole, he had another fainting spell and fell into a trance again. He was carried home. When he woke up, he was trembling. "My body was quivering. While I remained in this state, I began to sing. A chant was coming out of me without my being able to do anything to stop it. Many things appeared to me presently: huge birds and other animals. They were calling me."[35] Soon Isaac began to treat others.

mushroom *Amanita muscaria* have all been used to induce trance states, both by the shaman alone and sometimes by participants in a ceremony.

Some Native American peoples have used a **calumet**—a long sacred pipe—for smoking a special kind of tobacco that is far stronger than commercial cigarette tobacco; it is so strong, in fact, that it can have a hallucinatory effect. The bowl of the pipe is usually made of clay but sometimes of bone, ivory, wood, or metal, and the stem is made of wood. Many pipes are also made of stone. (A red stone, popular among Plains Indians and Eastern Woodlands Indians for this purpose, was quarried in Pipestone, Minnesota.) The calumet is an object that gives protection to the person who carries it. The pipe is smoked as part of a shared ceremony that establishes strong bonds among all the participants, and oaths sworn at these ceremonies have the greatest solemnity.

Rituals involving the use of peyote have developed primarily within the past two centuries in some native North American tribes.[36] The practice seems to have moved north from Mexico, where peyote grows easily and has long been used for religious purposes. When the fruit of the peyote cactus is eaten, it elicits a psychedelic experience that lasts six or more hours and produces a forgetfulness of the self and a sense of oneness with all of nature. Ceremonies commonly begin in the early evening and last until dawn.

Among North American tribes, the rituals involving peyote are often mixed with Christian elements. For example, a member of the Native American Church described his preparation for the ceremony: "First we set up an altar—a Mexican rug and on it a Lakota Bible in our own language. We use only the revelations of St. John in our meetings. It's . . . full of visions, nature, earth, stars. . . . Across the Bible we put an eagle feather—it stands for the Great Spirit. . . . On the left is a rawhide bag with cedar dust to sprinkle on the fire. That's our incense."[37] The blending of elements, he says, is intentional, because it illustrates that, at their core, all religions are the same. It is interesting to note

The powwow provides opportunities for Indian nations to share their dances and to pass age-old stories to new generations.

that although the ordinary use of peyote is illegal, its religious use by the Native American Church has been legally upheld.

In native African religions and their Caribbean offshoots, powerful but invisible spiritual forces are believed to be able to do either great good or tremendous evil. These powers are directed by diviners and healers through incantations, figurines, and potions in what is sometimes called **sympathetic magic.** Magic in the hands of certain individuals can be used, as one commentator remarks, "for harmful ends, and then people experience it as bad or evil magic. Or they may use it for ends which are helpful to society, and then it is considered as good magic or 'medicine.' These mystical forces of the universe are neither evil nor good in themselves, they are just like other natural things at [our] disposal."[38]

Spiritual powers and trance states are believed to make it possible to look into the past and future, a process called **divination** (from the Latin *divus*, "god," and *divinare*, "to foretell"). Looking into the past is thought to help determine the causes of illness and other misfortune, while looking into the future can guide an individual to act wisely. It is a common belief in African religions that an individual has a predetermined future that can be discovered through divination.

The general worldview common to native religions allows for a number of specialized religious roles. A diviner looks for causes of sickness, depression, death, and other difficulties. A healer works with a person afflicted with physical or mental illness to find a cure. A rainmaker ends drought.

Malevolent sorcerers manipulate objects to cause damage; they may take fingernails, hair, clothes, or other possessions of the victim, then burn or damage them, or bury an object in the victim's path, in order to cause harm. Witches need only use their spiritual powers. "Another belief is that the spirit of the witches leaves them at night and goes to eat away the victim, thus causing him to weaken and eventually die. It is believed, too, that a witch can cause harm by looking at a person, wishing him harm or speaking to him words intended to inflict harm on him."[39] Of course, the powers of these sorcerers and witches are also employed for good ends as well.

Artifacts and Artistic Expression in Indigenous Religions

The masks, drums, statues, rattles, and other objects that are important in native religions were once seen as curiosities to be collected and housed in anthropological museums. Today, however, we view them differently; we realize that we must respect both their importance to the cultures that produced them and their inherent artistic value. The arts of native religions are not created by "artists" as "art" but as functional objects to be used in particular settings and special ways. Navajo sandpaintings, for example, are often photographed and reproduced in books as though they were permanent works of art. In fact, when used by a healer, they are temporary creations that are made and then destroyed as a part of the ritual. And unlike art in most industrialized cultures, sacred objects and images in native religions are not separate endeavors but an essential part of the religious expression itself. Although modern secular culture does not usually think of dance or tattoo or body painting as religious expression, in many native religions these art forms all fulfill that role.

This small section of an early Mayan painting in Guatemala shows the son of the corn god, patron of kings, making a sacrifice. The painting was probably done about 100 B.C.

In religions that do not rely on the written word, artistic expressions take on unique significance because they are filled with meaning and remind practitioners of the specifics of the oral tradition. Statues and paintings, of course, are common in a great many religions, both oral and written. Dance, which takes on particular importance in native religions, incorporates religious objects such as carved and painted masks, headdresses, costumes, ornaments, and musical instruments. In native Hawaiian religion, *hula kahiko* (ancient hula) is danced in conjunction with chanting to honor the gods. Instruments for marking rhythm and *lei* (wreaths of flowers or other plants worn around the head, wrists, and ankles), when used in hula, are considered religious objects.

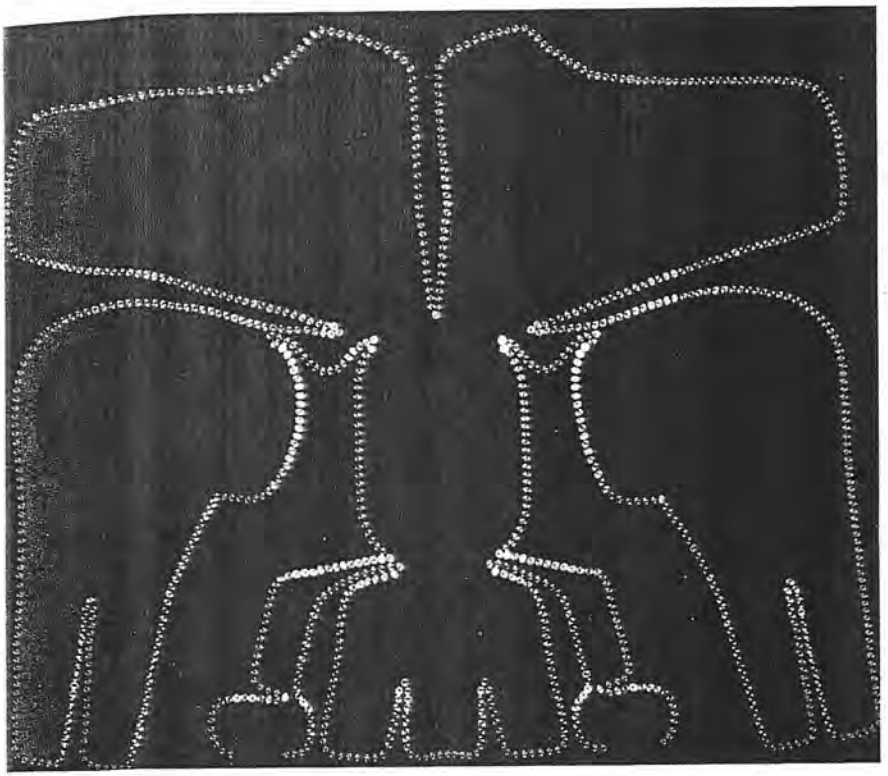
Chants, too, are essential, for they repeat the sacred words and re-create the stories of the religious traditions. To be used properly in religious ceremonies, they must be memorized carefully. Chanters must not only have prodigious memories and be able to recall thousands of chants, they must also be able to create special variations on traditional chants and oral texts for individual occasions.

Masks play a significant role in native religions, especially when used in dance. When a dancer is wearing a mask and any accompanying costume, the spirit is not merely represented by the masked dancer. The dancer actually becomes the spirit, embodied on earth, with the spirit's powers. Among the BaPunu in Africa, for example, dancers not only wear masks but walk on stilts—the overall effect must be intense. Particularly complex masks have been produced in the Pacific Northwest by such tribes as the Haida, Tsimshian, and Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka`wakw).[40] Some of their masks, especially those depicting animal spirits, have movable parts that make them even more powerful for those who wear and see them.

Besides masks and statues, other forms of wood carving can manifest religious inspiration. Perhaps the most famous of all wood carvings is the carved pole, commonly called a *totem pole*, found in the Pacific Northwest. The totem pole usually depicts several totems, stacked one upon the other. A **totem** is an animal figure—such as the bear, beaver, thunderbird, owl, raven, and eagle—that is revered for both its symbolic meaning and its clan symbolism. The totem animals may be memorials to ancestors or may represent badges of kinship groups, with specialized meaning for the individual or the family responsible for the totem pole.[41] Some totem poles are a part of the structure of a traditional wooden house or lodge. Others—apparently a later development—are raised to stand alone, frequently to mark an important event.

Other important art forms that can have religious meaning are weaving, beading, and basketry. These creations may seem to have less obvious religious significance, but the imagery used is frequently of religious derivation, particularly figures from tribal myths, nature deities, and guardian birds and animals.

Feathers and featherwork also feature prominently in many native religions because of their powerful association with flight and contact with the world above and beyond our own. Richard W. Hill, in an essay on the religious meaning of feathers, remarks that "some cultures associate certain birds with spiritual or protective powers. Birds are believed to have



Sacred images are reinterpreted on this contemporary blanket from the Pacific Northwest coast. The white borders, which originally would have been made of shells, are today made of buttons.

delivered songs, dances, rituals, and sacred messages to humankind. Feathers worn in the hair blow in the wind and evoke birds in flight. For followers of the Ghost Dance religion of the late nineteenth century, birds became important symbols of rebirth."[42] Feathers are worn in the hair, made into headdresses, and attached to clothing. In Native American cultures, they are also attached to horse harnesses, dolls, pipes, and baskets.

The symbols that appear in myths and in dreams are the basic vocabulary of native religious art. Common symbols include a great mountain located at the center of the universe, the tree of life, the sun and moon, fire, rain, lightning, a bird or wings, death's head and skeleton, a cross, and a circle. These images, however, often appear in unusual forms; for example, lightning may be represented by a zigzag, the sun may appear like a swastika, and the tree of life may look like a ladder. Colors are universally used with symbolic meaning, although the exact meaning differs from culture to culture.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: GODS IN HAWAI`I

On the southernmost island of the Hawaiian Islands lies Pu`uhonua `o Honaunau ("place of refuge"). It was once a sanctuary for Hawaiians who had done something that was kapu (taboo, forbidden). They could be purified and escape punishment if they could reach this place, or one of its sister sanctuaries, by water or land.

The ki`i at Pu`uhonua `o Honaunau mark this place of refuge as sacred ground.

Seeking refuge from the frenzy of life in Honolulu, I fly to the Kona airport and drive my rental car down the Big Island's southwest coast to Pu`uhonua `o Honaunau, now run by the United States National Park Service. After a short walk toward the shore, I see the tall, long stone wall of the sanctuary. Closer to the ocean are its heiau (temples), made of large, nearly black lava rock. Most dramatic to my outsider's eyes are the tall carved wooden images (in Hawaiian, called ki`i, and in English, commonly called tikis) that once no doubt beckoned to the refugee who sought out this place at the ocean's edge. The offering platform and thatched houses near the ki`i have been restored so that I can see what it might have been like when this was a sacred site within traditional Hawaiian religion. Because the official kapu system was dissolved in 1819 by King Kamehameha II, it is no longer a place for seeking sanctuary—at least officially.

Even on this sunny day, the stone wall, the tall images, and the stark landscape speak not of the "peace and comfort" we may typically associate with a refuge but rather of power, law, and awesome majesty. The ground is hard, black lava rock and white coral, and except for the coconut trees here and there amid the few structures, there is little green vegetation. Ocean waves lap at the shore, but an almost eerie quiet reigns.

Late afternoon: I'm the only person here. It is not hard for me to imagine being a native who has fled from home and now awaits a priestly blessing in order to be made safe for returning home. I sense that the Hawaiian religion drew its power from the land, from this very place. The rocks that make up the heiau are petrifications of fire, water, air, and earth. This is not the tour director's tropical fantasyland. Nor, I realize, is it a place of living religious practice. But that doesn't matter to me today. What I sense in the land is still alive.

As I drive back up the hill toward the main road, I see a small directional sign that says Painted Church. Ready for an experience of contrast, I follow its arrow and soon arrive at Saint Benedict's Catholic Church—a tiny, white wooden structure that has elements of Gothic style. A sign near the door says that its interior was painted a century ago by a Belgian missionary priest. The church sits on a grassy hillside, with a small cemetery spreading out below. I ascend the wooden stairs of the church and walk in.

The interior is "tropical Gothic." Ten small windows have pointed Gothic arches. The wooden pillars look like candy canes, painted with red and white swirls; their tops turn into palm trees, with fronds like painted feathers on the pastel sky of the ceiling. Behind the altar is a mural of Gothic arches, stretching back into an imaginary distance, creating the pretense of a European cathedral. On one side wall, Saint Francis experiences a vision of Jesus on the cross. In another painting, Jesus is being tempted by Satan. The other wall shows a man on his deathbed, his face bathed in heavenly light. A cross of execution, the pains of death—these are not pleasant experiences, but they are softened by the way they are depicted here.

Back outside, from the top of the stairs, I see the shining ocean below and can even see, at the edge of the ocean, the Hawaiian place of refuge that I had visited not long before. This little church, charming as it appears, presents old familiar themes: a High God, a sacrificial victim, an offering of blood, a restoration of justice. The themes may not be obvious, but they are there. This, I reflect, is the religion that replaced the native Hawaiian religion; the cycle of replacement evident here is typical, I think, of what has happened to so many other native religious traditions. Does it make all that much difference how religions die and rise? I am deep in thought as I pass a stone grotto enclosing a statue of Mary and then walk past the resident priest's small house. From inside come the sounds of a baseball game and a roaring crowd. "Strike two!" a voice shouts. Passing a flowerbed of honeysuckle, and preparing to return to big-city life, I get in my car and drive away.

The walls of Saint Benedict's Catholic Church were painted by a missionary to suggest the grandeur (and perhaps superiority) of the missionary's religion.

INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS TODAY

Native religions show many signs of vitality. Some indigenous religions are spreading and even adapting themselves to urban life. For example, religions of the Yoruba tradition are practiced not only in western Africa, their place of origin, but also in Brazil and the Caribbean, and they are growing in cities of North America (see Chapter 11). Awareness of indigenous religions is also becoming widespread, and respect for them is taking many shapes. In some countries (such as Mexico, Ecuador, and Peru) we can see a growth in governmental protection of the rights of

Halloween: "Just Good Fun" or Folk Religion?

Many of us think of native religions as having little connection to our everyday life. Yet elements of them persist in modern culture. Their oral nature is apparent when we see how the manner of practice is taught—not in books of instruction, but by word of mouth and by example. Halloween is an excellent example of this, but other festivals also invite examination.

- *Halloween* means the evening before All Hallows (All Saints) Day, which falls on November 1. Although Halloween gets its name from Christianity, the celebration is, in fact, a continuation of *Samhain* (pronounced *sa´-win*), the new-year festival celebrated in pre-Christian England and Ireland. There is a strong theme of death and rebirth, as winter comes on and the old year disappears. It was believed that spirits of ancestors roamed free at this time and needed to be fed and placated. We see this underlying the practice of children going door to door, receiving food. We also see it in the many Halloween costumes that suggest death (skeletons) and communication with the spirit world (angels, devils, and religious figures).
- Although Christmas has a Christian name and purpose, the origins of this festival, too, are pre-Christian. It began as a festival of the winter solstice, when the days are the coldest and shortest in the northern hemisphere. People compensated by celebrating a holiday of extra light, warmth, and abundance. The lighted Christmas tree and the evergreen wreaths and decorations have nothing to do with the story of Jesus' birth; rather, they are clear symbols of fertility and life, which the celebrants hope will persist through a cold winter. The giving of presents is related to this idea of abundance, and the Christian Saint Nicholas has been transformed over the past two hundred years into the grandfatherly Santa Claus. Like a shaman or wizard, Santa Claus flies through the air, carried by his magical reindeer, dispensing presents from his overflowing bag to children all around the earth.
- Easter's Christian meaning is mixed with elements that derive from the Jewish Passover, but underlying this tradition are symbols of fertility and new life—eggs, flowers, and rabbits. (The name *Easter* comes from an Old English term for a spring festival in honor of Eastre, goddess of the dawn.) Easter has maintained a close tie to nature in that it is always celebrated at the time of a full moon.

The faces of these carved Halloween pumpkins are not unlike those on masks used in indigenous ceremonies across the world.

We can see in these examples of contemporary folk religion the "universal language" of religious symbols. It is the same language, whether found in folk religion, native religions, or the other religions that we will take up in the chapters ahead.

indigenous peoples. Native peoples themselves are often taking political action to preserve their cultures. In many places (such as Hawai`i, New Zealand, and North America) a renaissance of native cultures is under way. Sometimes this involves primarily cultural elements, but where the indigenous religions are still practiced those religions are increasingly cherished and protected.

In some places, however, indigenous religions appear fragile. There are four principal threats to their existence: the global spread of popular culture, loss of natural environments, loss of traditional languages, and conversion to other religions.

Television, radio, films, airplanes, and the Internet are carrying modern urban culture to all corners of the earth. (American television reruns that are broadcast in Mali are just one example.) Change is also evident in the realm of clothing. Traditional regional clothing began to disappear a century ago, as western styles became the standard. Western business wear is now worn in all the world's cities, and informal clothing—baseball caps and T-shirts—is seen everywhere. Some cultures are trying to hold on to their traditional clothing, especially for formal occasions. (This is common in Korea, the Philippines, and Japan.) Architecture, too, is becoming standardized, as the "international style"—with its plate glass, aluminum, and concrete—takes the place of traditional styles. As modern urban culture spreads across the earth, it tends to dominate everyone's worldview. It would be hard to convince today's young people to undergo the deprivation of a vision quest, when all they need to visit other worlds is a television, a computer, or an airplane ticket. But everywhere we go, we find hamburgers, pizza, rap, rock, and jeans. (Some even believe that popular culture is becoming a religion of its own, displacing all others.)

Another great threat to indigenous religions is their loss of traditional lands and natural environment. Because so much personal and group meaning comes from the natural environment, its degradation or loss can be devastating to a native people's identity. Logging interests are a problem almost universally, but especially in Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Brazil, Alaska, and western Canada. Much of northern Thailand, where many native peoples live, has already been badly deforested, and the logging companies are now beginning the same process in Myanmar, another home of indigenous peoples. Fights are intense over conservation, land ownership, and governmental protection. Luckily, there have been gains (such as in New Zealand and Australia), where aboriginal rights to land have been recognized.

A third threat is the loss of native languages. It has been estimated that of the approximately six thousand languages that are spoken in the world today, in a hundred years only three thousand will remain. A comparison of Native American languages once spoken and still in use illustrates well how many languages and dialects have already been lost. In the United States and Canada, only about 500,000 indigenous people still speak their native languages. A single example of this phenomenon is the Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka`wakw) of

The Green Movement: A New Global Indigenous Religion?

All indigenous religions honor nature in some way. These religions sometimes associate natural forces such as wind, rain, volcanoes, and earthquakes with invisible spirits living beyond the earth. Other traditions see these forces as residing more visibly in mountains, trees, rivers, the moon, and the sun. Whatever form it is conceived as, nature commands respect, and people are expected to show their respect by working harmoniously with their environment.

In contrast with indigenous religions, major religions have traditionally shown limited concern for nature. However, this is changing. Today, many major religions have begun to display a new sensitivity to the earth. The Tibetan religious leader, the Dalai Lama, speaks frequently of the need to show compassion and respect for all living things—not just for human beings. The first Catholic pope elected in this century, Benedict XVI, labeled acts that harm the environment as "sinful." Increasingly, presidents and prime ministers, whatever their religions, as well as ordinary citizens, are making calls to protect the environment, participating in what has become a worldwide Green Movement.

The first phase of the Green Movement in the United States came more than a hundred years ago, when the federal government began to create national parks. People had become aware that the treasures of the scenic natural world needed protection. The second phase began fifty years ago, with the publication of books like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which warned about the dangers of pesticides. Works like Carson's gave scientific underpinning to growing ecological concern. The third phase is now under way, as environmentalism gains popular support around the world. Individuals, schools, businesses, and governments deliberately "move from gray to green." Part of the world's energy now comes from sunshine, wind, ocean waves, and plants. Construction materials for buildings now include bamboo, reused brick, and recycled wood. A common watchword is *sustainability*, and a well-known mantra is "reduce, recycle, reuse." After decades of being considered a fringe movement of flaky "tree-huggers," environmentalism is entering the mainstream. Industries that were once opposed to environmental needs are beginning to realize the commercial benefits of "going green," and they are at last using their enormous power to make real change.

Indigenous peoples are now also becoming an explicit and vocal part of the Green Movement. For example, in Brazil the Yanomamö (Yanomami) have demonstrated in Brasilia to protect their native lands from roads and mining. In Kenya, Wangari Maathai (b. 1940) is now called "Tree Mother of Africa" because of her work as founder of the Green Belt Movement, which has planted more than 40 million trees. For her efforts, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.

Those who espouse the Green Movement most likely don't see themselves as embracing a religion, but the movement has many hallmarks of religion. Its statements of political principles form a list of commandments and virtues, which include not only sustainability and biodiversity but also consensus, grass-roots democracy, and non-violence. Its priests are the world's scientists and environmental experts, and its prophets are environmental activists. It promotes a way of life, and it holds promise of rewards and punishments for all inhabitants of this earth.

Whether or not the Green Movement comes to be seen as a world religion makes little difference. If the multinational Green Movement can change human behavior for the good of all, it will be accomplishing as much as many recognized religions. Somewhat ironically, the Green Movement, by leading the world's citizens back to a respect for nature, is also leading people to a new appreciation of the indigenous religions that are built on such respect.

British Columbia. Although their population has been rising, and is now as high as 5,000, only about 250 people speak the native language. Clearly, the loss of a native language endangers the continued transmission of a religion that expresses itself in that language.

A fourth threat is the spread of proselytizing religions, particularly Christianity and Islam. In the Pacific, native cultures are undergoing a

revival, but few elements of the native religic ultures remain unchanged from their earlier forms. Christiar since the nineteenth century by missionaries (particularly Me olic, and, more recently, Mormon), has replaced some beliefs a Lothers. Christianity has spread widely in sub-Saharan Afr past hundred years, creating both mainstream Western deno 1 independent African churches. As a result, there are now embers of the Anglican Church than there are white members. Islam has also gained many converts in Africa.

Despite the threats to their existence, indigenous religions continue to thrive in several forms throughout the world. In their purest form, they live on in those pockets where modern influence has penetrated the least, such as in Borneo and the Amazon River Basin. They may also coexist, sometimes in diluted form, alongside other religions. In Taiwan, Korea, and Japan, for example, shamanism exists side by side with Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions. (Because the shamans there are often female, their native religious practices allow them roles that are not open to them in the adopted religions.) Indigenous religions have also intermixed with mainstream religions. In the Caribbean, the gods of African religions have sometimes been combined with forms of French and Spanish Catholicism in the religions of Voodoo and Santería (see Chapter 11). In Central America, people who are otherwise practicing Catholics also worship deities of earlier native religions. We see similar types of synthesis in Mexico and the southwestern United States.

In North America, in the Pacific, and in Africa, people have continued or are attempting to restore the practices of their ancestral ways. In New Zealand, for example, Maori culture is experiencing a revival in canoe building, tattooing, dance, and wood sculpture. This attempt at revival is complicated by debates over such issues as land ownership and the introduction of Maori language into schools and public life. In Hawai`i, a renaissance of Hawaiian culture, language, and hula necessarily means retelling the stories of the gods and goddesses of Hawaiian mythology. Some schools now teach all their lessons in Hawaiian, and hula schools are flourishing. Citizens of many native nations in North America are instructing their young in traditional dance and other religious practices. Nevertheless, how to deal with a traditional belief in deities in the face of some dominant monotheistic religions presents intriguing questions. One result, as in the Native American Church, is that beliefs and practices now often incorporate both oral and text-based traditions.

Interest in indigenous religions is a potential restorative for cultures that have moved quickly from their traditional rural homes to homes in the city. In native traditions, we see religion before it was compartmentalized. These holistic traditions make us aware of the religious dimensions that can be found in our own everyday life, and they expand our sensitivity to nature. Their remembrance of the sacred past makes holy the present and the future.