Here and there around the globe, pockets of people still follow local sacred ways handed down from their remote ancestors and adapted to contemporary circumstances. These are the traditional indigenous peoples—descendants of the original inhabitants of lands now controlled by larger political systems in which they may have little influence. Their distribution around the world, suggested in the map overleaf, reveals a fascinating picture with many indigenous groups surviving in the midst of industrialized societies, but with globalization processes altering what is left of their traditional lifeways.

Indigenous peoples comprise at least four percent of the world’s population. Some who follow the ancient spiritual traditions still live close to the earth in nonindustrial, small-scale cultures; many do not. But despite the disruption of their traditional lifestyles, many indigenous peoples maintain a sacred way of life that is distinctively different from all other religions. These enduring ways, which indigenous peoples may refer to as their “original instructions” on how to live, were almost lost under the onslaught of genocidal colonization, conversion pressures from global religions, mechanistic materialism, and the destruction of their natural environments by the global economy of limitless consumption.

To what extent can [indigenous groups] reinstitute traditional religious values in a world gone mad with development, electronics, almost instantaneous transportation facilities, and intellectually grounded in a rejection of spiritual and mysterious events?

Vine Deloria, Jr.

Much of the ancient visionary wisdom has disappeared. To seek paying jobs and modern comforts such as electricity, many people have shifted from their natural environments into urban settings. There are few traditionally trained elders left and few young people willing to undergo the lengthy and rigorous training necessary for spiritual leadership in these sacred ways. Nevertheless, in our time there is a renewal of interest in these traditions, fanning hope that what they offer will not be lost. While globalization has on the one hand tended to absorb and dilute indigenous sacred ways, it has also helped to spread them internationally.
Understanding indigenous sacred ways

Outsiders have known or understood little of the indigenous sacred ways, many of which have long been practiced only in secret. In Mesoamerica, the ancient teachings have remained hidden for 500 years since the coming of the conquistadores, passed down within families as a secret oral tradition. The Buryats living near Lake Baikal in Russia were thought to have been converted to Buddhism and Christianity centuries ago; however, almost the entire population of the area gathered for indigenous ceremonies on Olkhon Island in 1992 and 1993.

In parts of aboriginal Australia, the indigenous teachings have been underground for 200 years since white colonialists and Christian missionaries appeared. As aborigine Lorraine Mafi Williams explains:

> We have stacked away our religious, spiritual, cultural beliefs. When the missionaries came, we were told by our old people to be respectful, listen and be obedient, go to church, go to Sunday school, but do not adopt the Christian doctrine because it takes away our cultural, spiritual beliefs. So we’ve always stayed within God’s laws in what we know.

Not uncommonly, the newer global traditions have been blended with the older ways. For instance, Buddhism as it spread often adopted existing customs, such as the recognition of local deities. Now many indigenous people practice one of the global religions while still retaining many of their traditional ways.

Until recently, those who attempted to ferret out the native sacred ways had little basis for understanding them. Many were anthropologists who approached spiritual behaviors from the nonspiritual perspective of Western
science or else the Christian understanding of religion as a means of salvation from sinful earthly existence—a belief not found among most indigenous peoples. There is a great difference between the conceptual frameworks of African traditional religions and the thinking of Western scholars. Knowing that researchers from other cultures did not grasp the truth of their beliefs, native peoples have at times given them information that was incorrect in order to protect the sanctity of their practices from the uninitiated.

Academic study of traditional ways is now becoming more sympathetic and self-critical, however, as is apparent in this statement by Gerhardus Cornelius Oosthuizen, a European researching African traditional religions:

[The] Western worldview is closed, essentially complete and unchangeable, basically substantive and fundamentally non-mysterious; i.e. it is like a rigid programmed machine. … This closed worldview is foreign to Africa, which is still deeply religious. … This world is not closed, and not merely basically substantive, but it has great depth, it is unlimited in its qualitative varieties and is truly mysterious; this world is restless, a living and growing organism.³

Indigenous spirituality is a lifeway, a particular approach to all of life. It is not a separate experience, like meditating in the morning or going to church on Sunday. Many indigenous languages have no word for “religion.” Rather, spirituality ideally pervades all moments. There is no sharp dichotomy between sacred and secular domains. As an elder of the Huichol in Mexico puts it:

Everything we do in life is for the glory of God. We praise him in the well-swept floor, the well-weeded field, the polished machete, the brilliant colors of the picture and embroidery. In these ways we prepare for a long life and pray for a good one.⁴
In most native cultures, spiritual lifeways are shared orally. There are no scriptures of the sort that other religions are built around (although some written texts, such as the Mayan codices, were destroyed by conquering groups). Instead, the people create and pass on songs, proverbs, myths, riddles, short sayings, legends, art, music, and the like. This helps to keep the indigenous sacred ways dynamic and flexible rather than fossilized. It also keeps the sacred experience fresh in the present. Oral narratives may also contain clues to the historical experiences of individuals or groups, but these are often carried from generation to generation in symbolic language. The symbols, metaphors, and humor are not easily understood by outsiders but are central to a people’s understanding of how life works. To the Maori of New Zealand, life is a continual dynamic process of becoming in which all things arise from a burst of cosmic energy. According to their creation story, all beings emerged from a spatially confined liminal state of darkness in which the Sky Father and Earth Mother were locked in eternal embrace, continually conceiving but crowding their offspring until their children broke that embrace. Their separation created a great burst of light, like wind sweeping through the cosmos. That tremendously freeing, rejuvenating power is still present and can be called upon through rituals in which all beings—plants, trees, fish, birds, animals, people—are intimately and primordially related.

The lifeways of many small-scale cultures are tied to the land on which they live and their entire way of life. They are most meaningful within this context. Many traditional cultures have been dispersed or dismembered, as in the forced emigration of slaves from Africa to the Americas. Despite this, the dynamism of traditional religions has made it possible for African spiritual ways to transcend space, with webs of relationships still maintained between the ancestors, spirits, and people in the diaspora, though they may be practiced secretly and are little understood by outsiders.

Despite the hindrances to understanding of indigenous forms of spirituality, the doors to understanding are opening somewhat in our times. Firstly, the traditional elders are very concerned about the growing potential for planetary disaster. Some are beginning to share their basic values, if not their esoteric practices, in hopes of preventing industrial societies from destroying the earth.

Cultural diversity

In this chapter we are considering the faithways of indigenous peoples as a whole. However, behind these generalizations lie many differences in social contexts, as well as in religious beliefs and practices. Some contemporary scholars even question whether “indigenous” is a legitimate category in the study of religions, for they see it as a catchall “other” category consisting of varied sacred ways that do not fit within any of the other major global categories of organized religions.

To be sure, there are hundreds of different indigenous traditions in North America alone, and at least fifty-three different ethnolinguistic groups in the Andean rainforests. And Australian aboriginal lifeways, which are some of the world’s oldest surviving cultures, traditionally included over 500 different clan groups, with differing beliefs, living patterns, and languages.

Indigenous traditions have evolved within materially as well as religiously
diverse cultures. Some are descendants of civilizations with advanced urban technologies that supported concentrated populations. When the Spanish conqueror Cortés took over Tenochtitlán (which now lies beneath Mexico City) in 1519, he found it a beautiful clean city with elaborate architecture, indoor plumbing, an accurate calendar, and advanced systems of mathematics and astronomy. Former African kingdoms were highly culturally advanced with elaborate arts, such as intricate bronze and copper casting, ivory carving, goldworking, and ceramics. In recent times, some Native American tribes have become quite materially successful via economic enterprises, such as gambling complexes.

Among Africa’s innumerable ethnic and social groupings, there are some indigenous groups comprising millions of people, such as the Yoruba. At the other extreme are those few small-scale cultures that still maintain a survival strategy of hunting and gathering. For example, some Australian aborigines continue to live as mobile foragers, though restricted to government-owned stations. A nomadic survival strategy necessitates simplicity in material goods; whatever can be gathered or built rather easily at the next camp need not be dragged along. But material simplicity is not a sign of spiritual poverty. The Australian aborigines have complex cosmogonies, or models of the origins of the universe and their purpose within it, as well as a working knowledge of their own bioregion.

Some traditional peoples live in their ancestral enclaves, though not untouched by the outer world. The Hopi people have continuously occupied a high plateau area of the southwestern United States for between 800 and 1,000 years; their sacred ritual calendar is tied to the yearly farming cycle. Tribal peoples have lived deep in the forests and hills of India for thousands of years, utilizing trees and plants for their food and medicines, although since the twentieth century their ancestral lands have been taken over for “development” projects and encroached upon by more politically and economically powerful groups, rendering many of the seventy-five million Indian tribespeople landless laborers.
Other indigenous peoples visit their sacred sites and ancestral shrines but live in more urban settings because of job opportunities. The people who participate in ceremonies in the Mexican countryside include subway personnel, journalists, and artists of native blood who live in Mexico City.

In addition to variations in lifestyles, indigenous traditions vary in their adaptations to dominant religions. Often native practices have become interwoven with those of global religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. In Southeast Asia, household Buddhist shrines are almost identical to the spirit houses in which the people still make offerings to honor the local spirits. In Africa, the spread of Islam and Christianity saw the introduction of new religious ideas and practices into indigenous sacred ways. The encounter transformed indigenous religious thought and practice but did not supplant it; indigenous religions preserved some of their beliefs and ritual practices but also adjusted to the new sociocultural milieu. The Dahomey tradition from West Africa was carried to Haiti by African slaves and called Vodou, from vodu, one of the names for the chief nonhuman spirits. Forced by European colonialists to adopt Christianity, worshippers of Vodou secretly fused their old gods with their images of Catholic saints. More recently, emigrants from Haiti have formed diaspora communities of Vodou worshipers in cities such as New York, New Orleans, Miami, and Montreal, where Vodou specialists are often called upon to heal sickness and use magic to bring desired changes.
Despite their different histories and economic patterns, and their geographical separation, indigenous sacred ways have some characteristics in common. Perhaps from ancient contact across land-bridges that no longer exist, there are similarities between the languages of the Tsalagi in the Americas, Tibetans, and the aboriginal Ainu of Japan. Similarities found among the myths of geographically separate peoples can be accounted for by global diffusion through trade, travel, communications, and other kinds of contact, and by parallel origin because of basic similarities in human experience, such as birth and death, pleasure and pain, and wonderment about the cosmos and our place in it.

Certain symbols and metaphors are repeated in the inspirational art and stories of many traditional cultures around the world, but the people’s relationships to, and the concepts surrounding, these symbols are not inevitably the same. Nevertheless, the following sections look at some recurring themes in the spiritual ways of diverse indigenous cultures.

The circle of right relationships

For many indigenous peoples, everything in the cosmos is intimately interrelated. These interrelationships originate in the way everything was created. To Australian aborigines, before time began there was land, but it was flat and devoid of any features. Powerful ancestral beings came forth from beneath the surface and began moving around, shaping the land as they moved across it. In this Dreamtime, the ancestral figures also created groups of humans to take care of the places that had been created. The people thus feel that they belong to their native place in an eternal sacred relationship.

A symbol of unity among the parts of this sacred reality is a circle. This is not used by all indigenous people; the Navajo, for instance, regard a completed circle as stifling and restrictive. However, many other indigenous peoples hold the circle sacred because it is infinite—it has no beginning, no end. Time is circular rather than linear, for it keeps coming back to the same place. Life
revolves around the generational cycles of birth, youth, maturity, and physical death, the return of the seasons, the cyclical movements of the moon, sun, stars, and planets. Rituals such as rites of passage may be performed to help keep these cycles in balance.

To maintain the natural balance of the circles of existence, most indigenous peoples have traditionally been taught that they must develop right relationships with everything that is. Their relatives include the unseen world of spirits, the land and weather, the people and creatures, and the power within.

**Relationships with spirit**

The cosmos is thought to contain and be affected by numerous divinities, spirits, and also ancestors. Many indigenous traditions worship a Supreme Being who they believe created the cosmos. This being is known by the Lakota as “Great Mysterious” or “Great Spirit.” African names for the being are attributes, such as “All-powerful,” “Creator,” “the one who is met everywhere,” “the one who exists by himself,” or “the one who began the forest.” The Supreme Being is often referred to by male pronouns, but in some groups the Supreme Being is a female. Some tribes of the southwestern United States call her “Changing Woman”—sometimes young, sometimes old, the mother of the earth, associated with women’s reproductive cycles and the mystery of birth, the creatrix. Many traditional languages make no distinction between male and female pronouns, and some see the divine as androgynous, a force arising from the interaction of male and female aspects of the universe. In African traditional religions, the Supreme Being—whether singular or plural—may have humanlike qualities, but no gender. This great Source is so awesome that no images are used to represent it.

Awareness of one’s relationship to the Great Power is thought to be essential, but the power itself remains unseen and mysterious. An Inuit spiritual adept described his people’s experience of:

*a power that we call Sila, which is not to be explained in simple words. A great spirit, supporting the world and the weather and all life on earth, a spirit so mighty that [what it says] to mankind is not through common words, but by storm and snow and rain and the fury of the sea; all the forces of nature that men fear. But Sila has also another way of [communicating]; by sunlight and calm of the sea, and little children innocently at play, themselves understanding nothing. ... When all is well, Sila sends no message to mankind, but withdraws into endless nothingness, apart.*

To traditional Buryats of Russia, the chief power in the world is the eternally blue sky, Tengry. African myths suggest that the High God was originally so close...
to humans that they became disrespectful. The All-powerful was like the sky, they say, which was once so close that children wiped their dirty hands on it, and women (blamed by men for the withdrawal) broke off pieces for soup and bumped it with their sticks when pounding grain. Although southern and central Africans believe in a high being who presides over the universe, including less powerful spirits, they consider this being either too distant, too powerful, or too dangerous to worship or call on for help.

It cannot therefore be said that indigenous concepts of, and attitudes toward, a Supreme Being are necessarily the same as that which Western monotheistic religions refer to as God or Allah. In African traditional religions, much more emphasis tends to be placed on the transcendent dimensions of everyday life and doing what is spiritually necessary to keep life going normally. Many unseen powers are perceived to be at work in the material world. In various traditions, some of these are perceived without form, as mysterious presences, who may be benevolent or malevolent. Others are perceived as having more definite, albeit invisible, forms and personalities. These may include deities with human-like personalities, the nature spirits of special local places, such as venerable trees and mountains, animal spirit helpers, personified elemental forces, ancestors who still take an interest in their living relatives, or the nagas, known to the traditional peoples of Nepal as invisible serpentine spirits who control the circulation of water in the world and also within our bodies.

Ancestors may be extremely important. Traditional Africans understand that the person is not an individual, but a composite of many souls—the spirits of one’s parents and ancestors—resonating to their feelings. Rev. William Kingsley Opoku, International Coordinator of the African Council for Spiritual Churches, says:

*Our ancestors are our saints. Christian missionaries who came here wanted us to pray to their saints, their dead people. But what about our saints? … If you are grateful to your ancestors, then you have blessings from your grandmother, your grandfather, who brought you forth.*

Continued communication with the “living dead” (ancestors who have died within living memory) is extremely important to some traditional Africans. In libation rituals, food and drink are offered to the ancestors, acknowledging that they are still in a sense living and engaged with the people’s lives. Failure to keep in touch with the ancestors is a dangerous oversight, which may bring misfortunes to the family.

The Dagara of Burkina Faso in West Africa are familiar with the *kontombili,* who look like humans but are only about one foot (thirty centimeters) tall, because of the humble way they express their spiritual power. Other West African groups, descendants of ancient hierarchical civilizations, recognize a great pantheon of deities, the *orisa* or *vodu,* each the object of special cult worship. The *orisa* are embodiments of the dynamic forces in life, such as Oya, powerful goddess of change, experienced in winds; Osun, *orisa* of fresh waters, associated with sweetness, healing, love, fertility, and prosperity; Olokun, ruler of the mysterious depths of consciousness; Shango, a former king who is now honored as the stormy god of electricity and genius; Ifa, god of wisdom; and Obatala, the source of creativity, warmth, and enlightenment. At the beginning of time, in Yoruba cosmology, there was only one godhead, described by psychologist Clyde Ford as “a beingless being, a dimensionless point, an infinite container of everything, including itself.”
Osun and the Power of Woman

Olodumare, the Supreme Creator, who is both female and male, wanted to prepare the earth for human habitation. To organize things, Olodumare sent the seventeen major deities. Osun was the only woman; all the rest were men. Each of the deities was given specific abilities and specific assignments. But when the male deities held their planning meetings, they did not invite Osun. “She is a woman,” they said.

However, Olodumare had given great powers to Osun. Her womb is the matrix of all life in the universe. In her lie tremendous power, unlimited potential, infinities of existence. She wears a perfectly carved, beaded crown, and with her beaded comb she parts the pathway of both human and divine life. She is the leader of the ajé, the powerful beings and forces in the world.

When the male deities ignored Osun, she made their plans fail. The male deities returned to Olodumare for help. After listening, Olodumare asked, “What about Osun?” “She is only a woman,” they replied, “so we left her out.” Olodumare spoke in strong words, “You must go back to her, beg her for forgiveness, make a sacrifice to her, and give her whatever she asks.”

The male deities did as they were told, and Osun forgave them. What did she ask for in return? The secret initiation that the men used to keep women in the background. She wanted it for herself and for all women who are as powerful as she is. The men agreed and initiated her into the secret knowledge. From that time onward, their plans were successful.

According to the mythology, this being was smashed by a boulder pushed down by a rebellious slave, and broke into hundreds of fragments, each of which became an orisa. According to some analysts, orisa can also be seen as archetypes of traits existing within the human psyche. Their ultimate purpose—and that of those who pay attention to them as inner forces—is to return to that presumed original state of wholeness.

The spirits are thought to be available to those who seek them as helpers, as intermediaries between the people and the power, and as teachers. A right relationship with these spirit beings can be a sacred partnership. Seekers respect and learn from them; they also purify themselves in order to engage their services for the good of the people. As we will later see, those who are considered most able to call on the spirits for help are the shamans who have dedicated their lives to this service.

Teachings about the spirits also help the people to understand how they should live together in society. Professor Deidre Badejo observes that in Yoruba tradition there is an ideal of balance between the creativity of women who give and sustain life, and the power of men who protect life. Under various internal and external pressures, this balance has swung toward male dominance, but the stories of feminine power (see Box) and the necessity for men to recognize it remain in the culture, teaching an ideal symmetry between female and male roles. In many indigenous cultures, women appear as powerful beings in myths and they are thought to have great ritual power.

Kinship with all creation

In addition to the unseen powers, all aspects of the tangible world are believed to be imbued with spirit. Josiah Young III explains that in African traditional religion, both the visible and invisible realms are filled with spiritual forces:
The visible is the natural and cultural environment, of which humans, always in the process of transformation, are at the center. The invisible connotes the numinous field of ancestors, spirits, divinities, and the Supreme Being, all of whom, in varying degrees, permeate the visible. Visible things, however, are not always what they seem. Pools, rocks, flora, and fauna may dissimulate invisible forces of which only the initiated are conscious.9

Within the spiritually charged visible world, all things may be understood as spiritually interconnected. Everything is therefore experienced as family. In African traditional lifeways, “we” may be more important than “I,” and this “we” often refers to a large extended family and ancestral village, even for people who have moved to the cities. In indigenous cultures, the community is paramount, and it may extend beyond the living humans in the area. Many traditional peoples know the earth as their mother. The land one lives on is part of her body, loved, respected, and well known. Oren Lyons, an elder of the Onondaga Nation Wolf Clan, speaks of this intimate relationship:

[The indigenous people’s] knowledge is profound and comes from living in one place for untold generations. It comes from watching the sun rise in the east and set in the west from the same place over great sections of time. We are as familiar with the lands, rivers and great seas that surround us as we are with the faces of our mothers. Indeed we call the earth Etenoha, our mother, from whence all life springs. … We do not perceive our habitat as wild but as a place of great security and peace, full of life.10

Some striking feature of the natural environment of an area—such as a great mountain or canyon—may be perceived as the center from which the whole world was created. Such myths heighten the perceived sacredness of the land. Western Tibet’s Mount Kailas, high in the Himalayas, is seen by the indigenous people of that area as the center of the earth, a sacred space where
the earthly and the supernatural meet. Spiritual specialists therefore climb the mountain seeking visions.

The Western Apache remember vivid symbolic narratives about the exploits of people in specific places in their environment and contemplate them to make their minds smooth, steady, and resilient. Dudley Patterson’s grandmother taught him:

*Wisdom sits in places. It’s like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don’t you? Well, you also need to drink from places. You must remember everything about them. You must learn their names. You must remember what happened at them long ago. You must think about it and keep on thinking about it. Then your mind will become smoother and smoother. Then you will see danger before it happens. You will walk a long way and live a long time. You will be wise. People will respect you.*

Because of the intimate relationship indigenous peoples have with their particular environments, forced removal from that environment can be devastating. Pushed onto the most marginal lands by colonizers, nation-states, or multinational companies who regard land as a valuable commercial resource rather than a sacred place, indigenous peoples may feel they have lost their own identity. New Zealand traditional elders, who were systematically forced off their ancestral homeland from the nineteenth century onward, explain:

*It is important to know where we come from, to know where we belong. To identify who I am I identify my mountain, my river, my lands, our tribal and subtribal community. Knowing these things helps to bring about and to keep together the healing, the wellbeing of our people. We have suffered the loss of our lands, our connection to the land. We belong to the mountains, to the sea, to the forest. With the loss of the land, there has been a tremendous alienation from who we are. As a people we are currently in a renaissance, in a reclamation of our cultural identity, our land works, our traditional practices, our healing methods, because without these things we become a lost people, we become invisible, we become submerged into the dominant culture.*

In contrast to the industrial world’s attempts to own and dominate the earth, native peoples consider themselves caretakers of their mother, the earth. They are now raising their voices against the destruction of the environment, warning of the potential for global disaster. Nepali shamans who have undertaken the difficult pilgrimage to Lake Mansarovar at the base of revered Mount Kailas report that the lake level is low and the spirits are unhappy. Their prophecies indicate difficult times ahead unless we humans take better care of our planetary home. Some indigenous visionaries say they hear the earth crying. Contemporary Australian aboriginal elder Bill Neidjie speaks of feeling the earth’s pain:

*I feel it with my body, with my blood.
Feeling all these trees, all this country …
If you feel sore … headache, sore body that mean somebody killing tree or grass.
You feel because your body in that tree or earth. … You might feel it for two or three years.*
You get weak … little bit, little bit … because tree going bit by bit … dying.¹³

The earth abounds with living presences, in traditional worldviews. Rocks, bodies of water, and mountains—considered inanimate by other peoples—are personified as living beings. Before one can successfully climb a mountain, one must ask its permission. Visionaries can see the spirits of a body of water, and many traditional cultures have recognized certain groves of trees as places where spirits live, and where spiritual specialists can communicate with them. As a Pit River Indian explained, “Everything is alive. That’s what we Indians believe.”¹⁴

All creatures may be perceived as kin, endowed with consciousness and the power of the Great Spirit. Many native peoples have been raised with an “ecological” perspective: they know that all things depend on each other. They are taught that they have a reciprocal, rather than dominating, relationship with all beings. Hawaiian kahuna (shaman–priest) Kahu Kawaiʻi explains:

> How you might feel toward a human being that you love is how you might feel toward a dry leaf on the ground and how you might feel toward the rain in the forest and the wind. There is such intimacy that goes on that everything speaks to you and everything responds to how you are in being—almost like a mirror reflecting your feelings.¹⁵

Trees, animals, insects, and plants are all to be approached with caution and consideration. If one must cut down a tree or kill an animal, one must first explain one’s intentions and ask forgiveness. Those who harm nature may themselves be harmed in return. Tribal peoples of Madhya Pradesh in central India will avoid killing a snake, for they feel that its partner would come after them to seek revenge. When a Buryat cuts a tree to build a house, he must first offer milk, butter, rice, and alcohol to the spirits of the forest and ask their forgiveness. In 1994, a half-French, half-Buryat businessman returned to Buryatia and started to build a guesthouse in a picturesque place that had long been considered sacred to the god Huushan-baabay. When the businessman began cutting trees, he was warned by the traditional people that he would not be successful. Nonetheless, he proceeded and finished the guesthouse. Three months later, it burned down.

Respect is always due to all creatures, in the indigenous worldview. The Yup’ik of southwestern Alaska know animals as thinking, feeling fellow beings. In fact, they may be even more sensitive and aware than humans. No one should handle the geese’s eggs or goslings, lest the human smell should frighten the adults and they abandon the babies, to be eaten by predators. In Yup’ik belief, if humans treat animal populations carefully as guests, they will come back in plentiful numbers the following year to intentionally offer themselves to the Yup’ik hunters.
In the challenging environment of the Koyukon people of northern Canada, all interactions between humans and animals are conducted carefully according to a respectful moral code so that the animals will allow themselves to be caught. The animal spirits are very easily offended, not by animals being killed but by disrespect shown to the animals or their remains. Killing must be done prayerfully and in a way that does not cause suffering to the animal; wounded animals must be found and put out of their misery. If displeased, the spirits can bring bad luck in the hunt for that species or perhaps illness or even death for the hunters. But if humans maintain good relationships with the animals, they will give themselves freely to the hunters and keep coming back year after year. It is the natural world that is dominant, not humans.

There are many stories of indigenous peoples’ relationships with nonhuman creatures. Certain trees tell the healing specialists which herbs to use in curing the people. Australian aboriginal women are adept at forming hunting partnerships with dogs. Birds are thought to bring messages from the spirit world. A crow, a wild yak, and a pack of silver wolves revealed the sacred path to Mount Kailas in Tibet, revered as the center of the outer world and also of our inner world, the doorway through which other realms can most easily be reached. A Hopi elder said he spent three days and nights praying with a rattlesnake. “Of course he was nervous at first, but when I sang to him he recognized the warmth of my body and calmed down. We made good prayer together.”

Relationships with power

Another common theme in indigenous lifeways is developing an appropriate relationship with spiritual energy.

All animals have power, because the Great Spirit dwells in all of them, even a tiny ant, a butterfly, a tree, a flower, a rock. The modern, white man’s way keeps that power from us, dilutes it. To come to nature, feel its power, let it help you, one needs time and patience for that. … You have so little time for contemplation. … It lessens a person’s life, all that grind, that hurrying and scurrying about.

Lame Deer, Lakota nation

In certain places and beings, the power of spirit is believed to be highly concentrated. It is referred to as mana by the people of the Pacific islands. This is the vital force that makes it possible to act with unusual strength, insight, and effectiveness.

Tlakaelel, a contemporary spiritual leader of the descendants of the Toltecs of Mexico, describes how a person might experience this power when looking into an obsidian mirror traditionally made to concentrate power:

When you reach the point that you can concentrate with all your will, inside there, you reach a point where you feel ecstasy. It’s a very beautiful thing, and everything is light. Everything is vibrating with very small signals, like waves of music, very smooth. Everything shines with a blue light. And you feel a sweetness. Everything is covered with the sweetness, and there is peace. It’s a sensation like an orgasm, but it can last a long time.
Sacred sites may be recognized by the power that believers feel there. Some sacred sites have been used again and again by successive religions, either to capitalize on the energy or to co-opt the preceding religion. Chartres Cathedral in France, for instance, was built on an ancient ritual site. In New Zealand, the traditional Maori people know of the revivifying power of running water, such as waterfalls (now understood by scientists as places of negative ionization, which do indeed have an energizing effect). The Maori elders have told the public of the healing power of a certain waterfall on North Island; the area is now dedicated to anyone who needs healing.

Because power can be built up through sacred practices, the ritual objects of spiritually developed persons may have concentrated power. Special stones and animal artifacts may also carry power. A person might be strengthened by the spiritual energy of the bear or the wolf by wearing sacred clothing made from its fur. Power can also come to one through visions, or by being given a sacred pipe or the privilege of collecting objects into a personal sacred bundle.

In some cultures women are thought to have a certain natural power; men have to work harder for it. Women’s power is considered mysterious, dangerous, uncontrolled. It is said to be strongest during menstruation. Women are secluded during their menstrual periods in many cultures, not necessarily because they are considered polluting. Among the Yurok of northern California, houses have a separate back room for women who are menstruating so that they can concentrate on their inner selves, becoming inwardly stronger and purified by the flow of blood. In certain rituals in which both men and women participate, women’s menstrual blood is often thought to diminish or weaken the ritual or the men’s spiritual power. In most Native American nations that have sweat lodge ceremonies for ritual purification, menstruating women are not allowed to enter the lodge. A few cultures, such as the Ainu of Japan, have prized menstrual blood as a potent offering returned to the earth.
Gaining power is both desirable and dangerous. If misused for personal ends, it becomes destructive and may turn against the person. To channel spiritual power properly, native peoples are taught that they must live within certain strict limits. Those who seek power or receive it unbidden are supposed to continually purify themselves of any selfish motives and dedicate their actions to the good of the whole.

**Spiritual specialists**

In a few remaining hunting and gathering tribes, religion is a relatively private matter. Each individual has direct access to the unseen. Although spirit is invisible, it is considered a part of the natural world. Anyone can interact with it spontaneously, without complex ceremony and without anyone else’s aid.

More commonly, however, the world of spirit is thought to be dangerous. Although everyone is expected to observe certain personal ways of worship, such as offering prayers before taking plant or animal life, many ways of interacting with spirit are thought to be best left to those who are specially trained for the roles. These specialists are gradually initiated into the secret knowledge that allows them to act as intermediaries between the seen and the unseen.

**Storytellers and other sacred roles**

Specialists’ roles vary from one group to another, and the same person may play several of these roles. One common role is that of storyteller. Because the traditions are oral rather than written, these people must memorize long and complex stories and songs so that the group’s sacred traditions can be remembered and taught, generation after generation. The orally transmitted epics of the indigenous Ainu of Japan are up to 10,000 “lines” long. Chants of the Yoruba orisa comprise 256 “volumes” of 800 long verses each.

These Yoruban chants about the orisa include an explanation of the genesis of the earth, with its center in what is now the Nigerian city of Ife. When time began, where the earth now exists there was only a vast watery area, with a dim and misty atmosphere, the domain of Olokun. The other orisa lived in an upper world of light until Obatala decided to go down to see if some solid land could be created so that the orisa could inhabit the earth. He had a sacred chain of gold made for his descent, and carried a shell of sand, a white hen, a palm nut, and a black cat. He climbed down to the watery world by means of the chain, but it was too short. Thus he poured the sand downward and then released the hen, who by scratching in the sand created the contours of the earth. Obatala settled on the land and planted his palm nut, which flourished and sent its seed far and wide, developing the plant life of the earth. At first he was alone, with only the black cat as his companion, but as the story continues, many things happen, accounting for the features of the earth and its inhabitants as we know them today. The golden chain is a common mythological symbol of a World Axis connecting heaven and earth; the palm tree also commonly appears in myths of the World Tree, giver and protector of the first forms of life on earth.

Such stories are important clues to understanding the universe and one’s place in it. What is held only in memory cannot be physically destroyed, but if a tribe is small and all its storytellers die the knowledge is lost. This happened on a large scale during contacts with colonial powers, as indigenous people...
were killed by war and imported diseases. Professor Wande Abimbola, who is trying to preserve the oral tradition of the Yoruba, has made thousands of tapes of the chants, but there are few people who can understand and interpret their meaning. Loss of traditional languages is not only a loss of cultural identity; it is a loss of symbolic layers of meaning embedded in languages.

There are also contemporary bards who carry the energy of ancient traditions into new forms. In Africa, poets are considered “technicians of the sacred,” conversing with a dangerous world of spirits. Players of the “talking drums” are highly valued as communicators with the spirits, ancestors, and Supreme Being. As the Akan of Ghana say:

The thumb, finger with mouth, wake up and speak!  
The thumb armed with sticks for drumming  
Is more loquacious and more eloquent  
Than a human being sleeping;  
Wake up and come!19

Drumming creates a rhythmic environment in which the people can draw close to the unseen powers. By counterposing basic and complex cross-rhythmic patterns with a “return beat,” Yoruba drummers create a tension that draws listeners into the unfilled spaces between the beats.

“Tricksters” such as foxes often appear in the stories of indigenous traditions. They are paradoxical, transformative beings. Similarly, sacred clowns may endure the shame of behaving as fools during public rituals in order to teach the people through humor. Often they poke fun at the most sacred of rituals, keeping the people from taking themselves too seriously. A sacred
fool, called *heyoka* by the Lakota, must be both innocent and very wise about human nature, and must have a visionary relationship with spirit as well.

*Life is holiness and everyday humdrum, sadness and laughter, the mind and the belly all mixed together. The Great Spirit doesn’t want us to sort them out neatly.*

*Leonard Crow Dog, Lakota medicine man*

Another coveted role is that of being a member of a secret society in which one can participate by initiation or invitation only, whether to enhance one’s prestige or to draw closer to the spirit world. When serving in ceremonial capacities, members often wear special costumes to hide their human identities and help them take on the personas of spirits they are representing. In African religions, members of secret societies periodically appear as impersonators of animal spirits or of dead ancestors, demonstrating that the dead are still watching the living, warning transgressors and protecting the village.

The all-male Oro secret society in some Yoruba tribes uses this authority to enforce male domination, fearsomely “roaring” by swinging a piece of wood on a cord.

Women also have their secret societies, whose activities are yet little known by outsiders. Among aboriginal peoples of Australia, the men’s and women’s groups initiate members into separate but interrelated roles for males and females. For instance, when boys are separated from the tribe for circumcision by the men’s secret society, the women’s secret society has its own separation rituals and may stage mock ritual fights with the men’s society. But men’s and women’s rituals ultimately refer to the eternal Dreaming, in which there is no male/female differentiation.

Sacred dancers likewise make the unseen powers visible. Body movements are a language in themselves expressing the nature of the cosmos, a language that is understood through the stories and experiences of the community. Such actions keep the world of the ancestors alive for succeeding generations.

In some socially stratified societies there are also priests and priestesses. These are specially trained and dedicated people who carry out the rituals that ensure proper functioning of the natural world, and perhaps also communicate with particular spirits or deities. Though West African priests or priestesses may have part-time earthly occupations, they are expected to stay in a state of ritual purity and spend much of their time in communication with the spirit being, paying homage and asking for guidance.

Indigenous groups may be led by people who combine spiritual and social duties. The Cheyenne Nation of the North American plains is believed to have been established by its visionary hero, Sweet Medicine, in the 1700s. One of its salient features is a council of forty-four men chosen from various groups in the Cheyenne family to be peace chiefs. When they join the council, the peace chiefs are to make a complete break with their past, in which they might have been warriors, and give up violence as a means of settling disputes. Instead, they have been instructed by Sweet Medicine that, if there are any fights, “You are to do nothing but take your pipe and smoke.” The chiefs meet to arbitrate disputes by smoking the peace pipe together; the goal is to smoke the pipe with their enemies. The chiefs’ homes also become places of refuge, for they are to help the people however they can. At a community meal, they are the last to be fed.
Mystical intermediaries

There is another distinctive type of spiritual specialist found among many indigenous peoples. They are called by many names, but the Siberian and Saami word “shaman” is used by scholars as a generic term for those who offer themselves as mystical intermediaries between the physical and the non-physical world for specific purposes, such as healing. Archaeological research has confirmed that shamanic methods are extremely ancient—at least 20,000 to 30,000 years old. Shamanic ways are remarkably similar around the globe.

These mystical intermediaries may be helpers to society, using their skills to benefit others. They are not to be confused with sorcerers, who practice black magic to harm others or promote their own selfish ends, interfering with the cosmic order. Spiritual power is neutral; its use depends on the practitioner. What Native Americans call “medicine power” does not originate in the medicine person. Black Elk explained:

*Of course it was not I who cured. It was the power from the outer world, and the visions and ceremonies had only made me like a hole through which the power could come to the two-leggeds. If I thought that I was doing it myself, the hole would close up and no power could come through.*

There are many kinds of medicine. One is the ability to heal physical, psychological, and spiritual problems. Techniques used include physical approaches to illness, such as therapeutic herbs, sweat-bathing, massage, cauterization, and sucking out toxins. But the treatments are given to the whole person—body, mind, and spirit, with emphasis on healing relationships within the group—so there may also be divination, prayer, chanting, and ceremonies in which group power is built up and spirit helpers are called in. If an intrusion of harmful power, such as the angry energy of another person, seems to be causing the problem, the medicine person may attempt to suck it out with the aid of spirit helpers and then dry-vomit the invisible intrusion into a receptacle.
These healing methods are now beginning to earn respect from the scientific medical establishment. Organizations of registered shamans practice in recognized clinics in Russia, Korea, and China. In the United States, medicine people are permitted to attend indigenous patients in some hospitals, and the National Institute of Mental Health has paid Navajo medicine men to teach young Indians the ceremonies that have often been more effective than Western psychiatry in curing the mental health problems of Navajos.

In addition to healing, certain mystical intermediaries are thought to have gifts such as being able to talk with plants and animals, control the weather, see and communicate with the spirit world, and prophesy. A gift highly developed in Africa is that of divination, using techniques such as reading patterns supposed to be revealed by a casting of cowrie shells. According to Mado Somé of the Dagara, “Divination is a way of accessing information that is happening now, but not right where you live. … The cowrie shells work like an intermediary between us and the other world.”23 Since everything is interrelated, divination is a system for finding the point at which harmony has been disrupted and how the break can be healed.

The role of shaman may be hereditary or it may be recognized as a special gift. Either way, training is rigorous. In order to work in a mystical state of ecstasy, moving between ordinary and nonordinary realities, shamans must experience physical death and rebirth. Uvavnuk, an Inuit shaman, was spiritually initiated when she was struck by a lightning ball. After she revived, she had great power, which she dedicated to serving her people.

Other potential mystical intermediaries undergo rituals of purification, isolation, and bodily torment until they make contact with the spirit world. Igjugarjuk from northern Hudson Bay chose to suffer from cold, starvation, and thirst for a month in a tiny snow hut in order to draw the attention of Pinga, a helping female spirit:

My novitiate took place in the middle of the coldest winter, and I, who never got anything to warm me, and must not move, was very cold, and it was so tiring having to sit without daring to lie down, that sometimes it was as if I died a little. Only towards the end of the thirty days did a helping spirit come to me, a lovely and beautiful helping spirit, whom I had never thought of; it was a white woman; she came to me whilst I had collapsed, exhausted, and was sleeping. But still I saw her lifelike, hovering over me, and from that day I could not close my eyes or dream without seeing her. … She came to me from Pinga and was a sign that Pinga had now noticed me and would give me powers that would make me a shaman.24

For many mystical intermediaries, initiation into the role is not a matter of their own choice. The spirit enters whom it will. Tsering, an aged Nepali dhami (shaman), relates:

We never wanted to become dhamis. In fact, we tried hard to get the gods to leave us. We pleaded, performed worship ceremonies, even carried manure around with us to offend them, but nothing seemed to work. When calamities
began to hit my family—when my brother died falling off the roof and our best horse drowned in the river—I realized I had no choice and had to make the initiatory journey to Kailas.25

Once there, the new dhamsi had to plunge naked with unbound hair into the freezing Lake Mansarovar in order to commune with the spirits. Then, when they returned to their village, the deities who had possessed them insisted that they prove their spiritual connection by terrible feats, such as drinking boiling oil. Thereafter, those dhamsi were respected as authorities.

In addition to becoming familiar with death, a potential mystical intermediary must undergo lengthy training in spiritual techniques, the names and roles of the spirits, and secrets and myths of the tribe. Novices are taught both by older shamans and reportedly by the spirits themselves. If the spirits do not accept and teach the shaman, he or she is unable to carry the role.

The helping spirits that contact would-be mystical intermediaries during the death-and-rebirth crisis become essential partners in their sacred work. Often it is a spirit animal who becomes the shaman’s guardian spirit, giving him or her special powers. The shaman may even take on the persona of the animal while working. Many tribes feel that healing specialists need the powers of the bear; Lapp shamans metamorphosed into wolves, reindeer, bears, or fish.

Mystical intermediaries may have the ability to enter parallel, spiritual realities at will in order to bring back knowledge, power, or help for those who require it. An altered state of consciousness is needed. Techniques for entering this state are the same around the world: drumming, rattling, singing, dancing, and in some cases hallucinogenic drugs. The effect of these influences is to open what the Huichol shamans of Mexico call the narieka—the doorway of the heart, the channel for divine power, the point where human and spirit worlds meet. It is often experienced and represented artistically as a pattern of concentric circles.

The “journey” then experienced by mystical intermediaries is typically into the Upperworld or the Lowerworld. To enter the latter, they descend mentally through an actual hole in the ground, such as a spring, hollow tree, cave, animal burrow, or special ceremonial hole regarded as a navel of the earth. These entrances typically lead into tunnels that, if followed, open into bright landscapes. Reports of such experiences include not only what the journeyer saw but also realistic physical sensations, such as how the walls of the tunnel felt during the descent.

The shaman enters into the Lowerworld landscape, encounters beings there, and may bring something back if it is needed by the client. This may be a lost guardian spirit or a lost soul, brought back to revive a person in a coma. The mystical intermediary may be temporarily possessed by the spirit of departed relatives so that an afflicted patient may finally clear up unresolved tensions with them that are seen as causing illness. Often a river must be crossed as the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead. A kindly old man or woman may appear to assist this passage through the Lowerworld. In cultures that
An Interview with Nadezhda Ananyevna Stepanova

One of the remaining traditional shamans of Buryatia, Nadezhda Ananyevna Stepanova comes from a family of very powerful shamans. Her mother tried to prevent her from becoming a shaman. Buddhist lamas had spread the impression that shamans were to be avoided, saying that they were ignorant, primitive servants of dark, lower spirits. The reputation of shamans has also been recently damaged by pseudo-shamans—some of whom have certain extrasensory powers and others of whom are simply cheats. But when a shaman receives a true spiritual call, to deny that pull is dangerous. Nadezhda explains:

As a child I knew when I would fall ill, and I could repeat by heart anything the teacher said or anything I read in a book, but I thought that was normal. When I was twenty-six, I was told I would be a shaman, a great shaman. When I told Mother, she said, “No, you won’t.” She took a bottle, went to her native town, and then came back. “Everything will be taken away; you won’t become a shaman,” she said. I didn’t understand. The year I was said to become a shaman, I became seriously ill, and Mother was paralyzed. Usually paralyzed people have high blood pressure, but hers was normal. The doctors were surprised, but I understood then: We were both badly ill because she went against the gods. Nobody could heal me. Then one seer said, “You must cure.” I replied, “I don’t know anything about curing.” But a voice inside me said, “If you don’t become a shaman, you will die. You will be overrun by a lorry with a blue number.” I began to collect materials about medicine, about old rites. Then I could do a lot, for all we need is seeing and feeling. I was initiated by the men shamans of all the families, each praying to his god in a definite direction, for every god has his direction. I sat in the middle. Every shaman asked his gods to help me, to protect me, to give me power. The ritual was in early March. It was very frosty and windy, and I was only lightly dressed, but I wasn’t cold at all. The wind didn’t touch me. I sat motionless for about four hours, but I was not cold.

I began to cure. It is very difficult. You go through pain, through the tears of children and adults. I am able to see whether I will be able to cure a specific person. The main thing to me is to help a person if I can. I pray to my gods, ask them for mercy, I ask them to pay attention, to help. I feel the pain of those who come to me, and I want to relieve it. I have yodo—bark from a fir tree scratched by a bear; its smoke purifies. I perform rituals of bringing back the soul; often they work. My ancestors are very close to me; I see them as well as I see you.

Last year in the island Olkhon in Lake Baikal, there was a great gathering of shamans from Tchita, Irkutsk, Ulan-Ude, Yakutiya, and Buryatia to pray to the great spirits of Baikal about the well-being and prosperity of the Buryat land. For a long time these spirits were not turned to. They were forgotten by the people, and they fell asleep. They could not take an active part in the life of people; they could not help them any more. Teylagan, the prayer of the shamans for the whole Buryatia, was to awaken the great spirits.

It was a clear, clear sunny day, without a cloud. When the prayer began, it started to rain. It was a very good sign. There had been a long drought before. The Olkhon shamans had tried to call rain, but they couldn’t. But when everyone gathered and three sheep were sacrificed, then they could, and the shamans of that district were grateful.

We had always prayed to thirteen northern nainkhats, the great spirits of this area. But when the Buddhists came, persecution began, and people prayed secretly, only for their families. They could not pray for the whole Buryat nation, and they did not. They forgot. Shamans were killed. Then the atheistic Soviet regime tried to make us forget the faith, and we forgot. The most terrible thing about them was that they wanted to make people forget everything, to live by the moment and forget their roots. And what is man without roots? Nothing. It is a loss of everything. That is why now nobody has compassion for anybody. Now we are reaping the fruit: robbery, drinking, drugs. This is our disaster. That is why we must pray to our own gods.

When we had the teylagan, on the first day three blue pillars rose from earth to the sky—it was a prayer to Ehon-Bahve, the head spirit of Baikal, and to all three gods. The second day we prayed to the bird-god, and there were very many birds flying and a rainbow in the sky.”
have subdued the indigenous ways, this mystical process is retained only in myths, such as the Greek story of Orpheus in the underworld. But in existing shamanic cultures, the rituals used by shamans are still sought after, for they may effectively heal people’s problems.

**Group observances**

Indigenous ways are community-centered. Through group rituals, traditional people not only honor the sacred but also affirm their bonds with each other and all of creation. Humans can help to maintain the harmony of the universe by their ritual observances.

In order to maintain the natural balance and to ensure success in the hunt or harvest, ceremonies must be performed with exactitude. For instance, there is a specific time for the telling of specific stories. Chona, a Tohono O’odham (Papago) medicine woman, told anthropologist Ruth Underhill:

> I should not have told you this [the origin of Coyote, who helped to put the world in order, with a few mistakes]. These things about the Beginning are holy. They should not be told in the hot time when the snakes are out. The snakes guard our secrets. If we tell what is forbidden, they bite.27

Rituals often take people out of everyday consciousness and into awareness of the presence of the sacred. In such altered states, participants may experience a heightened group consciousness that powerfully binds individuals together as a community.

Each group has its own ways of ritual dedication to the spirits of life, but they tend to follow certain patterns everywhere. Some honor major points in the human life cycle, such as birth, naming, puberty, marriage, and death. These rites of passage assist people in the transition from one state to another and help them become aware of their meaningful contribution to life. When a Hopi baby is twenty days old, it is presented at dawn to the rays of Father Sun for the first time and officially given a name. Its face is ritually cleansed with sacred cornmeal, a ceremony that will be repeated at death for the journey to the Lowerworld.

Girls commonly go through a special ceremony marking their first menstruation, which signals the end of childhood and preparation for becoming wives and mothers. For both boys and girls, the rituals of reaching puberty typically involve separation from the community, then a transition phase in which they are secluded with no clear identity and prepared for adulthood, and finally a third phase in which they are reincorporated into the community with a new adult identity. Madonna Swan of the Lakota reports that she was secluded in part of her grandmother’s cabin for her first moon ceremony, and that each day her grandmother would coach her in domestic skills and ethical principles. Her grandmother and mother daily bathed her in water with purifying sage and green cedar, and prayed for her in this fashion:

> Grandfathers above and in the four directions, make Madonna a good woman. Help her to treat guests with hospitality. Grandfathers, help her to be a good worker. Grandfathers, and Maka Ina (Mother Earth), help Madonna to be a good mother. I pray that the food she cooks in her life will be good for those that eat it. Grandfathers, help her to be a good wife and live with the same man all her life. Grandfathers, bless her with healthy children.28
The Sun Dance Way of Self-Sacrifice

Sacrificing oneself for the sake of the whole is highly valued in most indigenous traditions. Through purification ceremonies, the people attempt to break through their small selves in order to serve as clear vehicles for the energy of the Great Spirit. In the Americas a powerful ceremony for these purposes is the sun dance. Among the Oglala Lakota, participants may dance for four days without food or water, looking at the sun and praying for blessings for the people. They say the ceremony as they practice it was first given to them through a vision received by a man named Kablaya.

In diverse forms, sun dances are now performed at many sites each spring and summer, most of them on the midwestern and northern plains of North America. In theory, only those who have had visions that they should perform the dance should do so. Some come in penance, for purification; others offer themselves as vehicles to request blessings for all people or for specific people who need help. It is not considered proper to dance for one’s own needs.

Dancers make a commitment to do the dance for a certain number of times. Some sun dances include women dancers; some who dance are children. Non-indigenous people are generally barred from dancing.

The power of the sun dance requires that everything be handled in a sacred way. Dancers must do vision quests and purify themselves in sweat lodges before the ceremony begins. In spite of thirst and exhaustion, those in some sun dances continue to participate in sweat lodges each day of the dance. A tree is chosen to be placed at the center of the circle (among the Lakota, it is always a cottonwood, which when cut crosswise reveals a multipointed star pattern representing the sun). The tree’s sacrifice is attended with ritual prayers. Participants may string prayer flags onto its branches before it is hoisted in the center of the dancing circle.

Sacred tree at the center of an area prepared for a Mexican version of the sun dance: Tonal Mitotianilitzli. Cloth strips tied to the tree carry prayers for the people.
During the dance itself, the participants are guided through patterns with symbolic meanings. The choreography varies from one group to another. The Sioux sun dancers do not move around the circle except to shift slightly during the day so that they are always facing the sun. In Mexico the patterns continually honor the powers of the four directions by facing each one in turn.

As they dance, the dancers blow whistles traditionally made from the wing bones of the spotted eagle, but now often whittled from hollow sticks. When giving instructions for the dance, Kablaya reportedly explained, “When you blow the whistle always remember that it is the voice of the Spotted Eagle; our Grandfather, Wakan Tanka, always hears this, for you see it is really His own voice.”

At a recent sun dance held in Mexico, one participant* reports:

When the energy of the Dancers was probably at their lowest and most exhausted, nearing the end of a very long and hot and sunny day, an eagle flew overhead and kept circling the Dance for maybe five minutes, flying back and forth, and again and again to the sound of the Dancers’ whistles and the Huehuetl drum. It brought tears to the eyes of many. The Dancers just kept whistling and saluting and greeting the huge and graceful bird. I have often seen an eagle fly over our circle during the Dance for a minute, but never have we seen one just keep circling and returning so long. It was truly breathtaking, like a message from the Creator that all was well, and our prayers were heard.

A group of people support the dancers by singing special sacred songs and beating a large drum. If their energy flags, so does that of the dancers. A woman sun dancer says that after a while, “The drum is no longer outside of you. It is as if in you and you don’t even know that you’re dancing.”

The dancers also support each other in ways such as using the feathers they carry to fan those whose energy seems low. There may also be communal vision ceremonies.

Each dancer is the carrier of a sacred pipe. Between rounds, the pipes may be shared with group onlookers who are led into the circle and who pass them around among the dancers to strengthen them with the power of the smoke. Nondancers may also be led into the circle for a special healing round on the third or fourth day. By that time, the dancers have been so purified and empowered that they can all act as healers, using their eagle feathers as instruments to convey the divine power.

The suffering that each dancer willingly undergoes is heightened during piercing. For those whose visions suggest it—and whose tribes use piercing, for some do not—at some point during the dance incisions are made in the skin of their chest, back, or arms and sharpened sticks are inserted. There are then various ways of tearing through the skin. One reserved for chiefs is to drag buffalo skulls from ropes attached to the piercing sticks, symbolizing their carrying of the burdens of the people. More often, ropes are thrown over the trees and attached to the piercing sticks. Each person who pierces is then pulled upward, “flying” by flapping eagle wings, until the sticks break through the skin. It is thought that the more a person asks to do when making the sacrifice the more difficult it will be to break free. One Lakota dancer was instructed in a vision that he should be hung from the tree for a whole night. They had to pierce him in many places in order to distribute his weight, and then pull him down in the morning.

Why must the dance involve so much suffering? A Lakota sun dancer explains, “Nobody knows why, but suffering makes our prayers more sincere. The sun dance tests your sincerity, pushes your spirit beyond its limits.” And as the dance goes on, many of the dancers transcend their physical agony and experience an increasing sense of euphoria. A Mexican dancer explains:

It’s not pain. It’s ecstasy. We get the energy from the sun and from the contact with Mother Earth. You also feel the energy of the eagles [who often fly overhead], all the animals, all the plants that surround you, all the vegetation. That energy comes to sustain you for the lack of food and water. Also when you smoke the pipe it serves as food or energy; the smoke feeds you energy so that you can continue. And every so often we put our palms to the sun to receive the energy from the sun. You can feel it in your whole body, a complete bath of energy.

*Names of individual dancers interviewed are not given here, to preserve their privacy and the sacredness of the dance.
There are also collective rituals to support the group’s survival strategies. In farming communities these include ways of asking for rain, of insuring the growth of crops, and of giving thanks for the harvest. In the Great Drought of 1988, Sioux holy man Leonard Crow Dog was asked by three nonindigenous Midwestern communities to perform rainmaking ceremonies for them, thus honoring the power of the traditional medicine ways.

Ritual dramas about the beginnings and sacred history of the people engage performers and spectators on an emotional level through the use of special costumes, body paint, music, masks, and perhaps sacred locations. These dramas provide a sense of orderly interface among humans, the land, and the spiritual world. They also dramatize mysticism, drawing the people toward direct contact with the spirit world. Those who have sacred visions and dreams are supposed to share them with others, often through dramatization.

According to legend, the Plains Indians were given the sacred pipe by White Buffalo Calf Woman as a tool for communicating with the mysteries and understanding the ways of life. The bowl of the pipe represents the female aspect of the Great Spirit, the stem the male aspect. When they are ritually joined, the power of the spirit is thought to be present as the pipe is passed around the circle for collective communion with each other and with the divine.

Groups also gather for ritual purification and spiritual renewal of individuals. Indigenous peoples of the Americas “smudge” sites and possessions, cleansing them with smoke from special herbs, such as sage and sweetgrass. Many groups make an igloo-shaped “sweat lodge” into which hot stones are carried. People huddle together in the dark around the stone pit. When water is poured on the stones, intensely hot steam sears bodies and lungs. Everyone prays earnestly. Leonard Crow Dog says of the inipi (sweat lodge):

The inipi is probably our oldest ceremony because it is built around the simplest, basic, life-giving things: the fire that comes from the sun, warmth without which there can be no life; inyan wakan, or tunka, the rock that was there when the earth began, that will still be there at the end of time; the earth, the mother womb; the water that all creatures need; our green brother, the sage; and encircled by all these, man, basic man, naked as he was born, feeling the weight, the spirit of endless generations before him, feeling himself part of the earth, nature’s child, not her master.30

Pilgrimages to sacred sites are often communal. Buryats gather on top of Erde, the mountain where the spirit of the earth lives, and all join hands to encircle it; a great energy is said to appear in the huge circle. The Huichol Indians of the mountains of western Mexico make a yearly journey to a desert they call Wirikuta, the Sacred Land of the Sun. They feel that creation began in this place. And like their ancestors, they gather their yearly supply of peyote cactus at this sacred site. Peyote has the power to alter consciousness: it is a spirit who helps them to communicate with the spirit world.

When indigenous groups are broken up by external forces, they lose the cohesive power of these group rituals. Africans taken to the New World as slaves lost not only their own individual identity but also their membership in tight-knit groups.
In an attempt to re-establish a communal sense of shared spiritual traditions among African Americans, Professor Maulana Ron Karenga created Kwanzaa, a contemporary celebration based on indigenous African “first fruits” harvest festivals. Using symbolic objects to help create a special atmosphere (such as candles, corn, fruits and vegetables, and a “unity cup,” all called by their Swahili names), families and groups of families meet from December 26 to January 1 to explore their growth over the past year. They look at their own experiences of the “seven principles”—unity, self-determination, collective work, family centeredness, purpose, creativity with limited resources, and confidence—and reward each other for progress by giving gifts.

**Individual observances**

In indigenous sacred ways, it is considered important for each person to experience a personal connection with the spirits. The people acknowledge and work with the spirits in many everyday ways. For instance, when searching for herbs, a person is not to take the first plant found; an offering is made to it, with the prayer that its relatives will understand one’s needs. Guardian spirits and visions may be sought by all the people, not just mystical specialists. The shaman may have more spirit helpers and more power, but visionary experiences and opportunities for worship are available to all. Indigenous traditions have therefore been called “democratized shamanism.”

Temples to the spirits may exist, but one can also worship them anywhere. Wande Abimbola observes:

> Big temples aren’t necessary to worship the orisa, even though there are temples for most orisa in Africa. If you are a devotee of Ifa, you can carry the objects of Ifa in your pocket. If you want to make an offering to Ogun, put any piece of iron on the floor and make an offering to it.31

To open themselves for contact with the spirit world, individuals in many indigenous cultures undergo a **vision quest**. After ritual purification, they are sent alone to a sacred spot to cry to the spirits to help them in their journey. Prepuberty or the onset of puberty is commonly thought to be the best time for vision quests, for children are closest to the spirit world. Among the Dene Tha, children are informally encouraged to go out to the bush before the age of puberty and spend time alone, seeking a spirit helper:

> When you are young, you go alone in the bush and you stay there and an animal comes to you. He talks to you just like we do now [sitting next to each other], and he tells you about him and with his power he gives you his power to heal other people. With it you heal people. If it tells you all how he is from beginning to end, you help someone, you cure him. If he does not tell everything, and you do not know all about him, then, when you help someone, you cure him, but you get the sickness.32

In West Africa, the gods and the spirits of the dead appear to the living in masquerades. The mysteries of spirit are made semivisible by costumed initiates.
Adults may also make vision quests before undertaking a sacred mission, such as the sun dance. Indigenous Mexican leader Tlakaelel describes the vision quest as he observes it:

You stay on a mountain, desert, or in a cave, isolated, naked, with only your sacred things, the things that you have gained, in the years of preparation—your eagle feathers, your pipe, your copal [tree bark used as incense]. You are left alone four days and four nights without food and water. During this time when you are looking for your vision, many things happen. You see things move. You see animals that come close to you. Sometimes you might see someone that you care about a lot, and they’re bringing water. You feel like you’re dying of thirst, but there are limits around you, protection with hundreds of tobacco ties. You do not leave this circle, and this vision will disappear when they come to offer the water or sometimes they will just drop it on the ground. Or someone comes and helps you with their strength and gives you messages.33

One is not supposed to ask for a vision for selfish personal reasons. The point of this individual ordeal, which is designed to be physically and emotionally stressful, is to ask how one can help the people and the planet.

Globalization

Local spiritual traditions have suffered immensely from the onslaught of globalization processes. People are seeing the land they are supposed to be caretakers of taken over by others who have destroyed the natural environment; they are losing their grounding in local communities and lifeways, losing their languages, being devalued and suppressed by global religions, and becoming embroiled in nonlocal economic systems.
Sadly, traditional spiritual wisdom has been largely obliterated in many parts of the world by those who wanted to take the people’s lands or save their souls with some other path to the divine. Under the slogan “Kill the Indian and save the man,” the American founder of the boarding-school system for native children took them away from their families at a young age and transformed their cultural identity, presenting the native ways as inferior and distancing the children from normal participation in the traditional sacred life. They were exposed to the “modern” worldview, which does not believe in miracles, supernatural healings, or divine intervention—thus contradicting thousands of years of received wisdom in their own tradition.

A similar policy of attempted acculturation was conducted between the 1880s and 1960s with Australian aboriginal children. Taken away from their parents by force, the “stolen generation” were often abused or used as slaves. Five children of Eliza Saunders were taken away by social workers while she and her husband were looking for employment. She recalls, “You walk miles and miles and find they’re not there. It’s like your child has been killed.” One of her children, the Green Party politician Charmaine Clarke, managed to run away from foster care after eleven years and rejoin her mother, but she says of her missing family history, “When myself and my brothers and sisters go home, we five have to sit there quite mute and just listen, observe. Because we were never there.” In 1998, Australian citizens tried to apologize for this “attempted genocide,” with some 300,000 signatures in Sorry Books and hundreds of emotional multiracial ceremonies in churches, schools, and cities across Australia.

In Africa, despite globalized social contexts, traditional religion is still strong among some groups, such as the Yoruba, whose priest-diviners are still respected, and to whom the orisa reportedly contacted in trance still reveal the nearness and importance of the invisible forces. However, in contemporary urban African areas, the traditional interest in the flow of the past into the present, with value placed on the intensity of present experience, has been rapidly replaced by a Westernized view of time in which one is perpetually anxious about the future. This shift has led to severe psychological disorientation and social and political instability. Those whose spiritual cultures have been merged with world religions such as Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity are now examining the relationship of their earlier tradition to the intercultural missionary traditions. African scholars have noted, for instance, that to put God in the forefront, as Christians do, does violence to the greater social importance of ancestor spirits in African traditional religions.

However, indigenous groups have not just suffered passively and become extinct. They are negotiating with modernity and globalization in various ways. In some cases, contact with the rest of the world has been turned to advantage without loss of the traditional culture. The Dene Tha of northwestern Alberta, Canada, now live in houses built by the government and ride snowmobiles instead of their traditional dog sleds, but as hunters they still seek spiritual aid from “animal helpers” and find important meaning and guidance in their visionary experiences. In a Maasai village near Nairobi in Kenya, elders came together and started a small museum.
The Orang Asli of Malaysia: Traditions Being Lost

In peninsular Malaysia, about 147,412 indigenous people known as the Orang Asli (original peoples) still maintain some of their traditional ways. Among them are a subgroup known as the Jakun, inhabitants of what was once an extensive peat swamp forest. Traditionally the Jakun lived by hunting and gathering, as well as cultivating small plots temporarily before moving on after harvesting the crops. They lived simply, with great respect for the forest, the forest animals, and the invisible spirits around them. Now, however, much of the peat swamp forest has been logged, drained, and converted into oil palm or rubber plantations. Destruction of the sponge-like peat swamp forest has brought increased flooding to the Jakuns’ traditional home along the Bebar River, so severe that the Department of Orang Asli Affairs shifted them to a permanent settlement on higher ground in Kampung Simpai. Their children have been sent to distant boarding schools along with Malay children; there they are exposed to popular culture, and have become very fond of televisions, cell phones, and Western clothing. The Orang Asli remain one of the poorest sectors within Muslim-majority Malaysia.

In the past, the lives of the Jakun were governed by a series of taboos. For example, they were not to chop down unfamiliar trees or joke or shout in the forest, lest the spirit of a tree might possess or curse them. No animals thought to have the quality of badi (sacred spirits or spirits of the dead) should be killed or harmed, lest those spirits might retaliate in a manner resembling the way in which the animal was harmed.

Through these and other such taboos, the people were traditionally taught to live carefully, always mindful of the spirits around them. Thus they behaved respectfully everywhere, whether in the forest, in the river, or at home. Abu Bin Le, a fifty-three-year-old man who is now helping in the Heritage Garden Project sponsored by the European Commission and the United Nations Development Program to document and conserve indigenous medicinal plants and promote sustainable use of the forest, decries the loss of reverence among the younger generations:

Kids these days do not believe because [the dire results of breaking taboos] have not happened during their lifetime. The forests surrounding our village are gone, so there are no spirits left. Maybe just a few, but not as many as in the old days. Back then, we had forests, vast tracts of forests. Many spirits dwelled in the forests. Now that the forests are gone, it is unlikely that it would happen. When there were many spirits, we could not break taboos.

Seventeen-year-old Habib feels little connection to the spirits of the forests. He says:

It is not instilled in us. Besides, there isn’t much of a forest left anyway, just acres of oil palm plantation. I remember when the forests still surrounded our houses when I was young.

Despite the loss of many traditional taboos, certain precautions are still followed, such as one prescribing that children are not to be scolded or teased to the point where they cry uncontrollably. Children are treated gently because many of the younger generations remember or heard of a dangerous storm which followed the breaking of the taboo about teasing children. Twenty-four-year-old Ann, great-granddaughter of the late village bomoh (shaman), was there when the storm happened:

Piran, who was then a little boy, was playing with a frog, but then his uncle took the frog away from him. He started crying and was inconsolable. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, there was thunder. The sky became dark and it started to pour. Piran’s mother quickly grabbed Piran and ran towards her house, but it was as if the lightning was trailing them from behind. They ran into a local shaman’s house who quickly performed jampi [communication with the spirits]. At once, the rain stopped and the sky became clear and sunny again.

Sanisah Dep, thirty-eight-year-old granddaughter of the late village bomoh, was also there:

I was horrified by what I saw. It was like a storm, but it was different from the usual storms we have here. As she ran, it was as if a group of dark clouds was hovering over her, chasing her. The uncle was teasing the child, so it happened. Now whatever the children want, we try to give or we pacify the child immediately.
In older times, there were bomohs who knew how to heal people, how to communicate with the spirits, and how to conduct the necessary rituals. But few of these elders are left. Sanisah lived next door to her grandfather, the village bomoh, and is certain that his death in 1997 was a result of his being unable to perform the obligatory ceremony to please the spirits:

Grandfather was an old man, in his eighties. Even so, he was still very strong, and was as fit as a fiddle. He was the village head and shaman, and many people respected him and sought his advice and help. Then early in 1997 the forest surrounding our houses was cleared to make way for Phase 2 of the community oil palm plantation. He was very upset with the village committee for clearing the forest behind his house, as he had asked them to spare a small portion of the forest, for this was where he did the bela kampung ritual for the wellbeing of his family and the village. He warned them that if they cleared the area where he conducted the bela kampung, the spirits would be angry and there could be repercussions later on. No one listened to him and the forest was cleared and the oil palm planted.

About two to three months after that, Grandfather was still hale and hearty and called all his grandchildren and great-grandchildren to a small feast in his house. All of a sudden, Grandfather gave a loud cry; he said that his head was very painful. I ran to get help. When I returned, I saw him sprawled on the floor of his house, his face tilted sideways, stiff. Unable to talk, he gestured to us to find his shaman tools so that he could perform jampi. We did not know where he kept them, as he never told us. Unable to help him, we rushed him to the hospital, about 40 kilometers away, but he died upon reaching it. The doctors told us that his kidneys were damaged. I am not convinced, as Grandfather was very healthy. This happened all of a sudden, shortly after failing to perform the bela kampung when the time was due.

Now there is no bomoh left in Kampung Simpai. There is still a bomoh in a nearby village, however, and his help was called for in November 2006 when a twelve-year-old Jakun girl contracted dengue hemorrhagic fever. The doctors at the nearest hospital said there was little chance of her recovery. To save her, her family took her to the bomoh. The girl recovered. She observed all traditional taboos until a special putus ubat ceremony was held for the whole extended family, to complete the healing and thank the spirits. Its climax was bathing of the girl and her father with coconut water mixed with water over which the bomoh had done jampi. In the photo shown here, the girl’s maternal aunt is holding a pelepas made from coconut leaves, representing the suffering and disease that needed to be purged from the patient’s body. The patient tore it into two, marking the end of her illness.

Though earlier generations lived with little chance for work, with even rice a luxury, some of the old people are nostalgic about the past. Abu says:

“We Orang Asli open up small portions of the forest for our swidden plots, say ten acres. But now the plantations have opened up thousands of acres of forest. It’s so vast that one cannot see anything but oil palm. I remember hearing birds chirping and monkeys making funny noises. Our community was not only a community of people, but also of animals. We do miss the sounds of the animals in the morning. All we hear now is the rumbling of the lorries carrying the oil palm fruit.”
In a traditional hut, they collected various Maasai artifacts—such as spears, swords, iron ore, shields, knives, hides and skins, gourds, and beadwork—in a bid to preserve their culture and traditions and, at the same time, use the museum as a tourist attraction to create income for community development. African-derived religions are increasingly appropriating new communication technologies to transmit their ideologies outside Africa, as in Internet websites such as OrishaNet.org.

Indigenous sensitivities are also playing a role in environmental preservation. In Kenya, local indigenous communities, when faced with the threat of destruction of their sacred forest of Ruiga, managed to protect the land from illegal logging an human encroachment by having it designated a natural monument under the Antiquities and Monuments Act. One of the world's best-preserved indigenous forests, Ruiga has traditionally been protected by the local people through myths and taboos. For instance, cutting trees within the forest was forbidden because it was thought that if a tree were cut, it would bleed and cry, and also bring a curse on the family of the person who cut it. Children were taught that there was a deep but invisible lake in the heart of the forest; any trespassers wold probably drown in it. Now a community-based organization is charged with protecting, conserving, and preserving the sacred forest, and also with guiding visitors from around the world who come to see it.

On the other hand, there may be strong resistance to selling sacred knowledge to outsiders. While indigenous traveling teachers are swamped with eager students from other cultures who are fascinated with shamanism, elders of the Lakota tribes have urged all indigenous nations to use every means possible to prevent the exploitation of their spiritual traditions by “‘the New Age movement,’ ‘the men’s movement,’ ‘neo-paganism cults,’ ‘shamanism’ workshops—a scandalous assortment of pseudo-Indian charlatans, ‘wannabes,’ commercial profiteers, cultists and ‘New Age shamans.’”

Even outsiders who value the sacred teachings may disrupt or alter the indigenous practices. Osage theologian George Tinker describes what often happens in North America:

> The first Indian casualty today in any such New Age spiritual-cultural encounter is most often the strong deep-structure cultural value of community and group cohesion that is important to virtually every indigenous people. ... Well-meaning New Agers drive in from New York and Chicago or fly in from Austria and Denmark to participate in annual ceremonies originally intended to secure the well-being of the local, spatially configured community. These visitors see little or nothing at all of the reservation community, pay little attention to the poverty and suffering of the people there and finally leave having achieved only a personal, individual spiritual high.

### Development issues

In collision or collusion with larger societies, indigenous peoples have often been victims of disastrous development projects. In the United States, reservations on which thousands of Navajos and Hopis were living were found to be sitting on the largest coal deposit in the country—the 4,000-square-mile “Black Mesa.” In 1966, the Navajo and Hopi tribal councils signed agreements allowing Black Mesa to be strip-mined by utility companies to provide elec-
tricity for southwestern cities, and, presumably, economic development for the tribes. Since then the sacred land has been devastated, ancient archaeological sites have been destroyed, thousands of Navajos have been displaced, and aquifers are drying up as 1.3 billion gallons of pure water per year have been used to pump the coal slurry to a power plant hundreds of miles away. It is now thought that the government-established tribal councils—themselves not considered genuine representatives of the tribal peoples—were being advised by an attorney who was secretly employed by the coal company. The Black Mesa Trust is pressing for legal action that would impose limits on future damage to the area and curb tactics being used to pressurize the indigenous people. Cherokee attorney Jace Weaver points out that there are difficulties in protecting the rights of indigenous people on religious grounds because the legal definition of “religion” is limited. He writes, “Lacking a concept of the holy, our legal system finally is incapable of comprehending Native religious freedom and land claims.”

In Zimbabwe, thousands of traditional self-sufficient Vaduma people were displaced when their ancestral lands were flooded to create a huge artificial lake for irrigating an area hundreds of miles away. Jameson Kurasha of the University of Zimbabwe describes the effects on the Vaduma:

> When the “idea” of development was imposed on them, families were separated by a massive stretch of water. Now the Murinye Mugabe families are alienated from each other. They are now peoples without a tangible past to guide and unite them because their past [i.e. ancestors] are either buried or washed away by the lake. They are basically a people without a home to point to. The separation has left a cultural damage that will never be restored.

In Malaysia, the indigenous Orang Asli people and anthropologists, sociologists, and development workers who are familiar with their situation feel that the Malaysian government is intentionally but discreetly forcing the people from their traditional homelands so that it can appropriate the timber-rich land. So long as the Orang Asli live in the forests, especially if they were granted land rights to their ancestral lands, the individual state governments cannot get access to the timber revenues. Critics think this is why the government is making efforts to “integrate” the Orang Asli into Malay culture in the name of “development,” including relocation, education, and Islamization, in order to detach them from their spiritual affinity to their land.

Exploitation by multinational companies of the natural resources on land occupied by indigenous groups has sometimes been cloaked in talk of helping the local economy, but often the results have been devastating for indigenous peoples, spiritually as well as economically. In Nigeria, oil production accounts for eighty-seven percent of the government’s foreign revenue. Multinational companies’ activities to extract the oil have involved burning the waste gases, leaking oil pipelines, dumping waste products, and oil slicks for decades, causing extensive destruction of animal and plant life, soil damage, air and water pollution, and health problems among the indigenous peoples. The efforts of one severely affected group, the Ogoni, to protest this situation were met with harassment, and ultimately the leaders were killed by the government. The Ogoni have continued their opposition nevertheless. Not only have their traditional lifeways been disrupted with the destruction of their environment, but also, more significantly from their point of view, they feel they must try to protect their ancestors’ graves on their homesteads, plus their sacred groves and natural holy places. They feel their ancestors will not
Having come from the Maasai tribe in Kenya and now being a professor at the University of Egerton, Damaris Parsitau is looked up to as a mentor for Maasai girls and women. When she makes scholarly presentations at international academic conferences (she is shown here at a conference in Oxford, England), she helps to dispel stereotypes of Maasai as being primitive because these tall, proud people have traditionally lived as nomadic pastoralists and only recently were persuaded to abandon their traditions of training young men as warriors. Many still refuse to wear Western clothing. Damaris explains that her life straddles both worlds:

I am not living a traditional Maasai lifestyle, although I feel like I am a true Maasai woman. My grandparents practiced Maasai culture and tradition. To date, some of my relatives still practice traditional culture. Having said this, it is important to note that I am a child of both worlds. I was brought up by my parents who practiced some aspects of Maasai traditional culture and a bit of modernity. My mother was a Presbyterian and I was baptized in this church at the age of twelve. My father was more of a traditional man who embraced modernization. He sent his children to school, built a modern house for his family, but also kept a large herd of cattle, sheep, and goats and owned huge tracts of land where his livestock grazed.

Yet despite being a university professor, and one who has embraced modernity, I am still a Maasai girl deep down. What does being a Maasai mean to me? I am proud of my Maasai culture and tradition. It is my heritage, my identity, and who I am. It has given me my roots, a sense of belonging and community, and I take great pride in my cultural and traditional heritage. I speak my mother tongue (Maa) and love Maasai food—milk, meat (although I love my vegetables as well)—and mode of dress. Occasionally I don my Maasai attire during functions like weddings, graduation ceremonies, fundraising activities, and other community-based events.

I have raised my children as Maasai and I try to pass on to them some of our best cultural aspects as a minority group—a sense of community, respect for others, kindness, and compassion. For example, being mean and unkind to others is frowned upon, and people are encouraged to eat together and share what they have with others. Children are taught to respect each other, elders, seniors, women, and the weak. My parents opened their home to many needy people and my father was engaged in community work, while my mother worked with women. I have passed these values to my children, and we do what we can to help others. I have taught them to respect people irrespective of whether they are poor or rich, good-looking or not. I abhor prejudice of all kinds and am not willing to judge others on account of race, ethnicity, class, color, etc.

Stories of tradition are taught and followed in our family. Once a year we all meet so that our children can know and connect with each other and learn from each other. However, as an educated Maasai woman, I come across many stereotypes. Many people find it hard to believe that I am Maasai and many wonder how a woman from such a “primitive” tribe is so well-schooled and intelligent, well-traveled, and teaches at university. The Maasai are regarded as unschooled, backward, and primitive because they resist modernization and Westernization. But I am amazed at how smart and knowledgeable indigenous people are and how they connect powerfully with nature and their spirituality. For example, the Maasai are well known all over Kenya for their knowledge of indigenous medicines for treating both humans and animals.

My Maasai culture and background enables me to respect and even embrace other people’s cultures, traditions, and spiritualities. I practice yoga and meditation for relaxation—not very Maasai-like. Yet I don’t see much conflict between being a Maasai woman and a modern woman at the same time.
forgive them if they do not stand up to the oil business’s desecration of their graves and sacred sites.

Modern development schemes—as well as outright plunder of natural resources for profit—are being called into question by land-based traditional peoples around the world, and attempts have begun to re-establish the validity of the ancient wisdom. In India, officials in the Ministry of Environment and Forests are acknowledging that the remaining sacred groves of the indigenous peoples are treasure houses of biodiversity and should not be destroyed. In such areas, it is often the shamans who teach the tribal people the importance of protecting the trees and vegetation.

Some indigenous peoples feel that their traditional sacred ways are not only valid, but actually essential for the future of the world. They see these understandings as antidotes to mechanistic, dehumanizing, environmentally destructive ways of life. Rather than regarding their ancient way as inferior, intact groups such as the Kogi of the high Colombian rainforest feel they are the elder brothers of all humanity, responsible for keeping the balance of the universe and re-educating their younger brothers who have become distracted by desire for material gain.

Differences of opinion and lifestyle between native people who live traditionally and those who have embraced industrial materialistic culture have led to rifts within the communities. There are people for and against selling mineral rights to community land for economic gain. Some indigenous people also question the ethics of developing gambling casinos as a base for economic self-sufficiency. But gaming has interesting precedents in many world religions and was traditionally part of sacred rites in many indigenous cultures. Ceremonial throwing of dice has been symbolically associated with the cycles of death and rebirth, and the movement of the sun, moon, and stars. The chance turn of the dice or wheel of fortune often appears in myths as a metaphor for balance in the continual shifts between happiness and sorrow. Gaming rituals were used by some tribes to help the movement of the seasons and the shifts between night and day, to influence the weather, to assist in hunting, and to restore health. Addictive gambling is a different matter, for it can be disastrous for individuals and their families.

In traditionally matriarchal societies, some women’s groups are trying to save traditional social structures. The Igbo-speaking peoples (also known as Ibo)—numbering more than thirty million in Nigeria and the diaspora—have a basically matriarchal social structure and theology. Theirs has traditionally been an economy of cooperation and exchange, with the land associated with dead ancestors and therefore never to be sold. With particular reference to the Igbo, Adi Amadiume, Professor of African Studies at Dartmouth College, proposes a theory of matriarchal versus patriarchal economics:

> It is the relational matriarchal model that contains the ideal economic theory of African traditional religions; this is a theory of community, exchange, reciprocity, and sharing. This relational matriarchal theory is based on the ideology of Umunne, those who share the spirit of common motherhood, who eat out of one pot, and are bound by the prohibition of Ibenne, a taboo of same blood where love and not self-interest rules. ... Social values of exchange are better expressed in matriarchy than in linear patriarchy because patriarchy promotes competition rather than exchange.

Women played a major role in trying to resist colonial invasion. Igbo and neighboring Ibibio matriarchs led the Women’s War of 1929 against the
The International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers has been created as a project of the Center for Sacred Studies. The grandmothers form a global alliance for prayer, education, and healing of the earth for the sake of the next seven generations. From left to right, they are Clara Shinobu Iura and Maria Alice Campos Freire (Amazonian rainforest, Brazil), Margaret Behan (Arapaho/Cheyenne, Montana, USA), Rita Pitka Blumenstein (Yup’ik, Alaskan tundra, USA), Beatrice Long Visitor Holy Dance and Rita Long Visitor Holy Dance (Oglala Lakota, Black Hills, South Dakota, USA), Bernadette Rebienot (Omyene, Gabon, Africa), Mona Polacca (Havasupai/Hopi/Tewa, Arizona, USA), Agnes Baker Pilgrim (Takelma Siletz, Grants Pass, Oregon, USA), Julieta Casimiro (Mazatec, Huautla de Jimenez, Mexico), Flordemayo (Mayan, highlands of Central America/New Mexico), Aama Bombo/Buddhi Maya Lama (Tamang, Nepal), and Tsering Dolma Gyaltong (Tibetan).

destructive effects of a cash-crop economy, taxation, and capitalist market forces, as well as the religious and social marginalization of women. Today, Igbo women are fighting against patriarchal state and international structures, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to resist what they regard as culture-fragmenting competitive economic policies.

Personal visions and ancient prophecies about the dangers of a lifestyle that ignores the earth and the spiritual dimensions of life are leading native elders around the world to gather internationally and raise their voices together. They assert indigenous spiritual insights and observations about the state of the planet, political matters, and contemporary lifestyle issues.

Indigenous elders who are now speaking out seek converts not to their path but to a respect for all of life, which they feel is essential for the harmony of the planet. A respected elder of the Hopi nation, the late Thomas Banyacya, made a stirring appeal to the United Nations in 1992, in which he explained Hopi prophecies about our times. According to the prophecies, the creator made a perfectly balanced world but when humans turned away from spiritual principles for selfish reasons, the world was destroyed by earthquakes. The few survivors developed the second world, but repeated their mistakes, and the world was destroyed by the Ice Age. The few people who survived spoke one language and developed high technologies but when they turned away from natural laws and spiritual principles, the third world was destroyed by a great flood which is remembered in the ancient stories of many peoples. Now we are living in the fourth world. According to Hopi time lines, we are in the final stages of decay. Showing a rock drawing of part of the Hopi prophecy, Thomas Banyacya explained:

There are two paths. The first with high technology but separate from natural and spiritual law leads to these jagged lines representing chaos. The lower path is one that remains in harmony with natural law. Here we see a line that represents a choice like a bridge joining the paths. If we turn to spiritual
harmony and live from our hearts we can experience a paradise in this world.
If we continue only on this upper path, we will come to destruction.42

Many people have said that indigenous peoples are myths of the past, ruins that have died. But the indigenous community is not a vestige of the past, nor is it a myth. It is full of vitality and has a course and a future. It has much wisdom and richness to contribute. They have not killed us and they will not kill us now. We are stepping forth to say, “No, we are here. We live.”

Rigoberta Menchú of the K’iche Maya43

Key terms

cosmogony  A model of the origins of the universe.

Dreamtime (Dreaming)  The timeless time of Creation, according to Australian aboriginal belief.

indigenous  Native to an area.

lifeway  An entire approach to living in which sacred and secular are not separate.

medicine person  An indigenous healer.

orisha  Yoruba term for a deity.

shaman  A man or woman who has undergone spiritual ordeals and can communicate with the spirit world to help the people.

vision quest  A solitary ordeal undertaken to seek spiritual guidance about one’s mission in life.

Review questions

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

Discussion questions

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