

2 Primal Religious Traditions

The Nature of Primal Religions

Since prehistoric times, small groups of people throughout the world have practiced their own unique forms of religion. Some of those religions continue to be practiced, especially among the native inhabitants of Australia, Africa, and the Americas. We refer to those religions as primal because they tended to come before the religious traditions we will study in the remaining chapters of this book.

Beginning our study with these first religions is a good idea for two reasons. One is that primal religions provide special insight into the mythic and ritual dimensions of religion. Primal peoples have tended to preserve a mythic orientation toward life. Their myths, and the rituals that re-enact them, remain essential sources of knowledge and power for all aspects of their lives.

The other reason for studying primal religions first is that all religions stem, more or less directly, from primal beginnings. For example, the ancestor of Judaism, the religion of the ancient Israelites, was in its early stages a primal religion, exhibiting features similar to those discussed in this chapter. Other religions, such as Hinduism in India and Shinto in Japan, are also rooted in the primal traditions of early peoples.

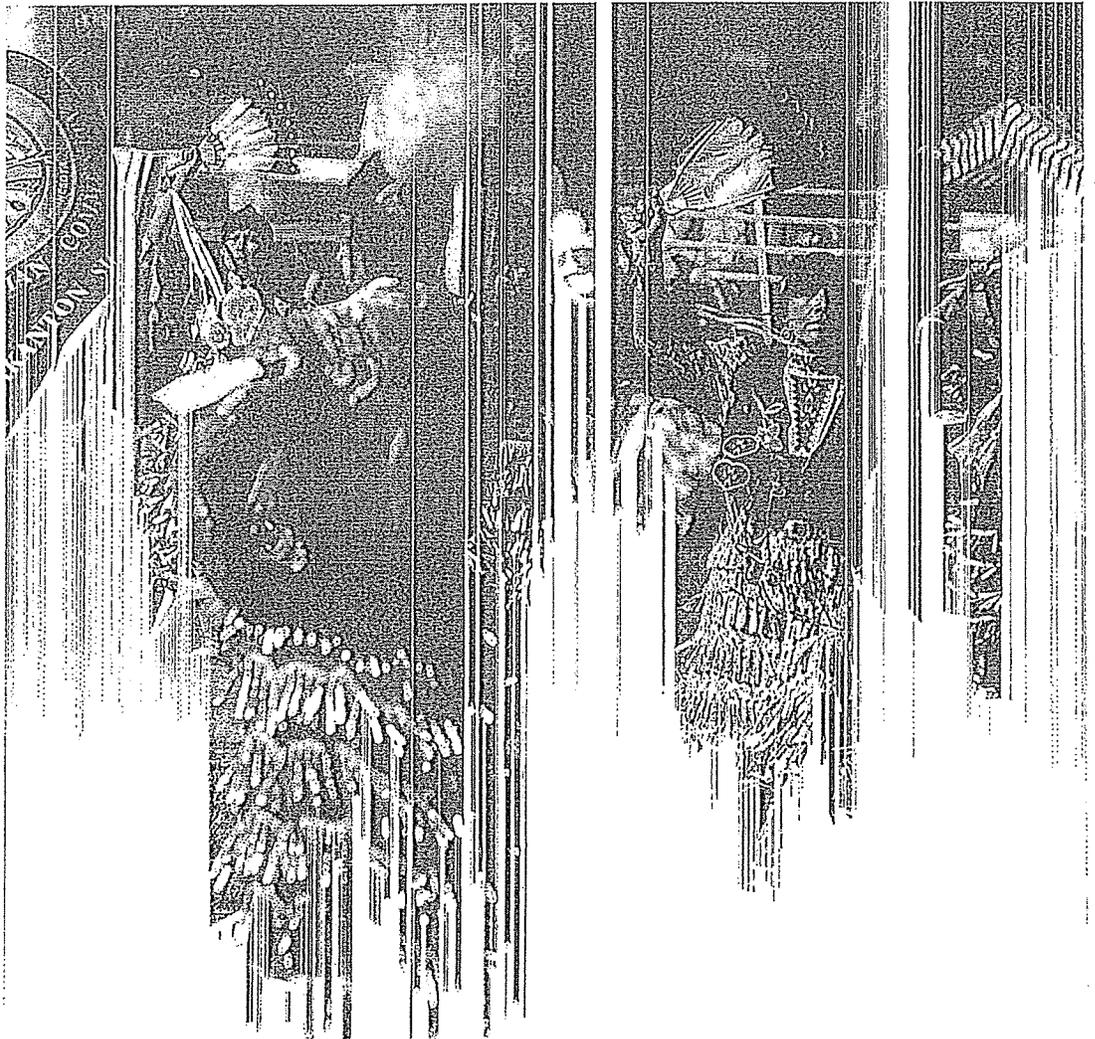
Along with having originated first, primal religions are generally the traditions of nonliterate people, which means that they do not

depend on scriptures or written teachings, as do most other religions. What they lack in written texts, however, they often make up for in oral material—myths or stories that are passed down from generation to generation.

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

In the light of this vast diversity, this chapter does not attempt to describe all primal religions. Instead it focuses on four rather specific examples: the Aborigines of Australia, the Yoruba, the Plains Indians of North America, and the Aztecs. Once we have considered some particular features of each of these traditions, we will reflect on general themes that tend to be common to primal religions.

Native American women perform a jingle dance that is part of their traditional religious practice.



Religion of the Australian Aborigines

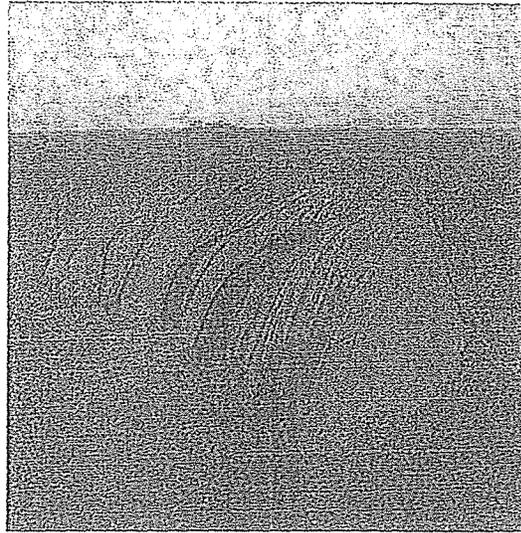
The Aborigines, the native people of Australia, were largely unaffected by outsiders until the arrival of Europeans some two hundred years ago. The Aborigines maintained traditions extending many thousands of years into the past. In some areas, notably in the northern and central regions of Australia,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

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

The Dreaming: The Eternal Time of the Ancestors

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

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



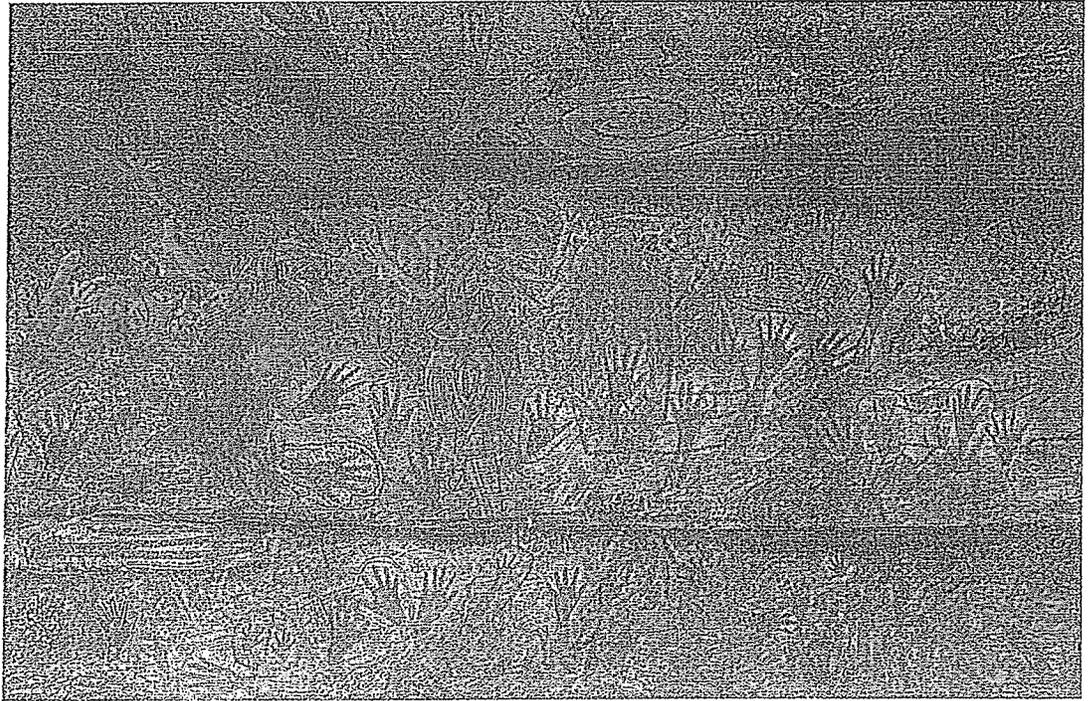
Ayers Rock is a sacred place for Australian Aborigines.

in the various symbols they left behind. The sites at which these symbols are found are thought to be charged with sacred power. Only certain individuals are allowed to visit them, and they must be approached in a special way. Rather than traveling the shortest routes to the sites, visitors follow the paths that were originally taken by the Ancestors in the Dreaming. Their ritual approach re-enacts the mythic events of the Dreaming, and through it the Aborigines re-create their world as it existed in the beginning. This re-creation gives them access to the endless sources of sacred power of these sites. The Aborigines inhabit a mythic geography—a world in which every notable landmark, whether it be a rock outcropping, a watering hole, or a cave, is believed to have great religious significance. Aboriginal cosmology—or understanding of the nature of the universe—thus plays a constant role in Aboriginal religion.

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

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

Aboriginal rock art evokes the Dreaming.



Through this connection each Aborigine is a living representation of an Ancestor. This relationship is symbolized by a **totem**—the natural form in which the Ancestor appeared in the Dreaming. The totem may be an animal, such as a kangaroo or snake, or a rock formation or other feature of the landscape. An individual will always be identified in certain ways with the Ancestor. The system of belief and ritual based on totems is called totemism. Totemism is a motif that is common to many primal traditions.

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

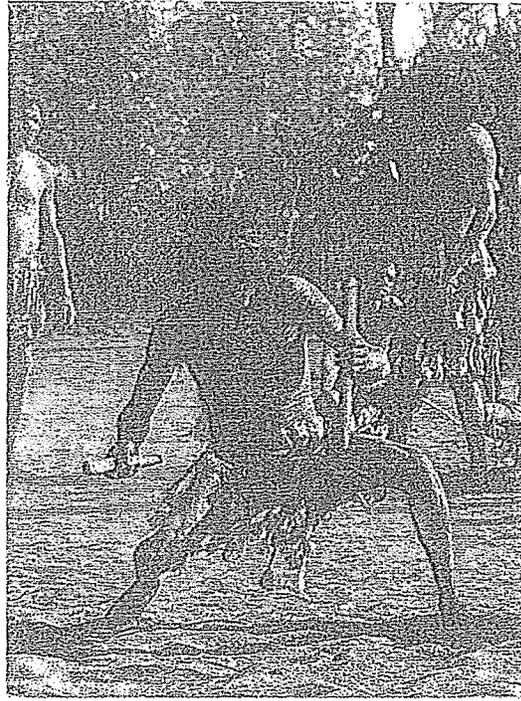
The supernatural, the human world, and the world of nature are thus considered to be delicately interrelated. Aboriginal religious life seeks to maintain harmonious relationships among these three aspects of reality. Such harmony is itself a form of spiritual perfection.

Animating the Power of the Dreaming: Aboriginal Religious Life

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

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

Behind every ritual lies a myth that tells of certain actions of the Ancestors during the Dreaming. For example, myths that describe the creation of the kangaroo, a chief food source of the Aborigines, spell out precisely how and where the act of creation took place.



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

Right: An initiation dance.

Rituals that re-enact these myths are performed at the corresponding sacred sites in order to replenish the local population of kangaroos.

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

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

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

Young people achieve religious maturity and training in part through the elaborate ini-

tiation rituals practiced throughout Aboriginal Australia.

**Initiation:
Symbolic Death, Spiritual Rebirth**

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

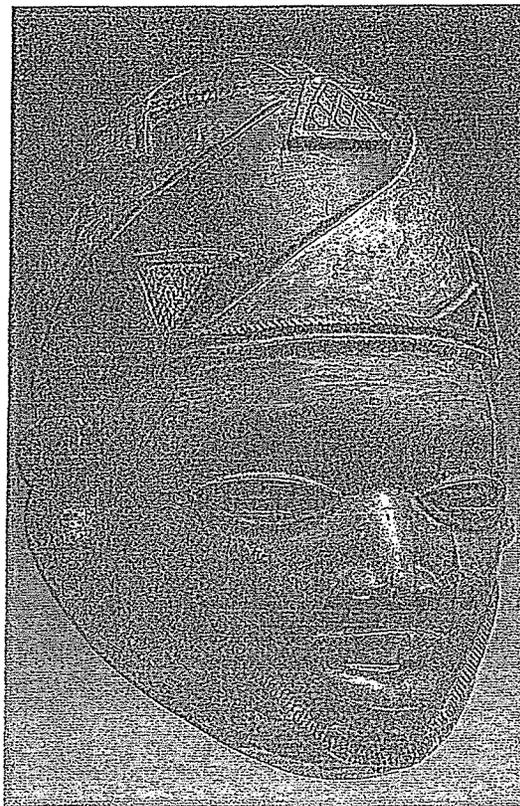
Both boys and girls undergo initiation, though usually the rites are especially elaborate for boys. As an example, consider the male initiation rites practiced in the nineteenth century by the Dieri tribe of south-central Australia.

The initiation rituals of the Dieri took place around a boy's ninth birthday (though the age

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

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

The amulets on this Yoruba mask illustrate the impact of Islam in Africa. As primal traditions develop throughout history, they incorporate elements of other religions.



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

could vary) and lasted for months. In the first ritual, intended as a symbolic death, the initiate's two lower middle teeth were knocked out and buried in the ground.

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

The main initiation ritual was called the Wilyaru. The initiate stood with his eyes closed as men took turns cutting their forearms and letting their blood fall on him, until he became caked with dried blood. This blood served to connect the boy symbolically with his relatives. Next, the boy's neck and back were struck with wounds that were intended to leave scars, yet another symbol of death. At this point the boy was given a bull-roarer, a sacred instrument consisting of a piece of wood

attached to a long string made from human hair. The bull-roarer re-created the sound of the deities and, because of its great power, was taboo for women.

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

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

An African Tradition: The Religion of the Yoruba

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

The Yoruba and Their Universe

The Yoruba live in the western regions of central Africa, in Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Yoruba designates not a unified nation, but rather a group with a common language and

culture. Throughout their history the Yoruba have favored living in cities. Some of those cities, such as Ife, Oyo, and Ijebu, have been quite large. The cities have tended to maintain independence from one another. Ife has always been the center of Yoruba religion, because it was there, the Yoruba believe, that the god Orisha-nla first began to create the world.

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

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

Gods and Ancestors: The Inhabitants of Heaven

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

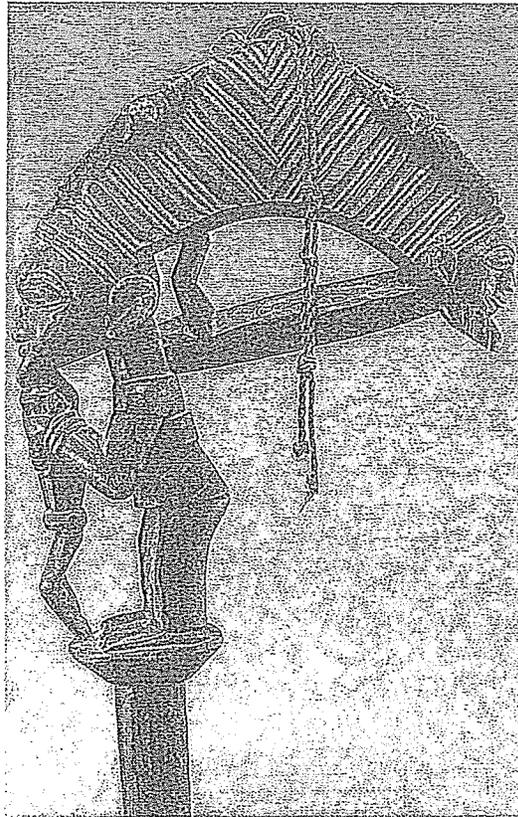
Olorun, the High God

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

Orishas

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

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



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

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

The Ancestors of the Living

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

There are two types of ancestors. Family ancestors gained their supernatural status by earning a good reputation and living to an old age, and are now worshiped only by their own families. Deified ancestors were very important human figures known throughout Yoruba society, and are now worshiped by large numbers of people.

Connecting Heaven and Earth: Ritual Practitioners

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

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

Among the priests who engage in specialized services are **diviners**. Those priests practice the art of **divination**, through which one's future can be learned. Becoming a diviner requires years of training, and the role is usually passed from parent to child. Divination is an

extremely important aspect of Yoruba religion because knowledge of one's future is considered essential for determining how to proceed with one's life. The procedure involves an intricate system of hundreds of wisdom stories, which the diviner knows by memory. The diviner determines which of those stories are relevant for an individual, and from those stories interprets the individual's future.

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

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

Religion of the North American Plains Indians

Humans first came to North America some twenty thousand to thirty thousand years ago. They migrated from Asia by crossing over the Bering Strait (situated between Russia and Alaska), which is now water but at that time was dry land. They gradually spread out and eventually inhabited large regions of both North and South America.

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

The Plains are vast, stretching from the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan,

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



Sacred eagle feathers make up part of this Native American's ceremonial dress.

and Manitoba southward to the Gulf of Mexico, bordered on the west by the Rocky Mountains and on the east by the Mississippi River. The culture that we now associate with this area formed relatively recently, after the arrival of horses from Europe in the seventeenth century. Domestic horses enabled the Plains Indians to become great hunters of buffalo and other game. Numerous tribes migrated into the Plains region, exchanging ideas with one another. This exchange was aided by the use of a common sign language understood by all the tribes. The religion of the Plains is therefore somewhat representative of Native American religion in general. Today this religion serves as the model of pan-Indian religion, a recent and popular movement uniting many tribes from across North America. As a result, Plains religion continues to be of vital interest to native peoples throughout North America.

The Plains peoples shared a number of religious features, including basic beliefs similar to

those of the large and influential Lakota tribe. All the tribes performed two basic rituals, the vision quest and the Sun Dance.

Basic Beliefs of the Lakota

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

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

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

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

The Vision Quest

The vision quest is common to many primal traditions throughout the world. It is a primary means for an individual to gain access to spiritual power that will ensure greater success in activities such as hunting, warfare, and curing the ill. Both men and women experience this quest, though men do so more frequently.

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

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

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

A vision comes to the quester eventually, usually near the end of the stay. It arrives in the form of an animal or some other object or

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



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

force of nature. A message is often communicated along with the vision. When the individual returns to camp, the vision and the message are interpreted by the medicine man. The lessons derived from the vision quest influence the rest of the person's life.

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

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

The Sun Dance

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

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

Dance is both a great honor and a grave responsibility.

For all tribes the major task in preparing for the Sun Dance is the construction of the lodge in which the ceremony is held. A cottonwood tree is carefully selected, felled, and ritually carried to a chosen spot, where it is set upright. This tree becomes what scholars call the *axis mundi*, the axis or center of the universe—itsself an important and common theme for primal traditions. As the connecting link between the earth and the heavens, the tree also represents the supreme being. The lodge is constructed of twenty-eight poles, representing the twenty-eight days of the lunar month, placed in a circle around the tree. The finished lodge is representative of the universe with its four compass directions.

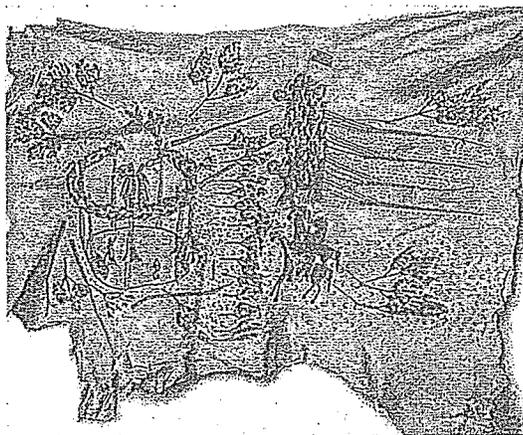
The performance of the Sun Dance features long periods of dancing while facing in the direction of the sun, which is venerated for its life-giving powers. Music and drumbeats accompany the dancing. Some of the dancers skewer the flesh of their chests, and attach themselves to the tree with leather thongs.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

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

A Mesoamerican Religion: The Aztecs and Their Legacy

In some ways the Aztec tradition defies the common description of primal religious tradition. Instead of a small group of people, the

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



This diagram painted on buckskin shows how a Sun Dance lodge is constructed.

Aztecs were a great civilization with a population of about fifteen million. Many Aztecs were urban, living in the city of Tenochtitlan (te-nohch-teet'lahn), which is now Mexico City, or in one of the four hundred towns that spread across Mesoamerica, from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea. But like other primal traditions, Aztec religion emphasized the interrelationship between myth and ritual, as its practice of human sacrifice makes vividly clear. Aztec religion was also primal in the sense that it predated Catholicism, which came to Mesoamerica with the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. The Aztec influence can still be seen today in some modern Mexican religious practices.

The Aztecs and Mesoamerican Culture

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

The Toltec Tradition:

The Foundation of Aztec Religion

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

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

The Aztecs looked back to this golden age of the Toltecs as a mythic pattern for the ideal civilization. The Toltec tradition especially influenced religion. Aztec children were taught to recite, "Truly with him it began, truly from him it flowed out, from Quetzalcoatl—all art and knowledge" (quoted in Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, page 44). Aztec cosmology attributed the creation and ordering of the world to Quetzalcoatl.

Teotihuacan: Place of Origins

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

It is told that when yet [all] was in darkness, when yet no sun had shone and no dawn had broken—it is said—the gods gathered themselves . . . there at Teotihuacan. They spoke . . . :

" . . . Who will take it upon himself to be the sun, to bring the dawn?" (Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 7, part 8, page 4)

Cosmology: Time and Space

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

H

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

Age of the Fifth Sun

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

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

Four Directions and the *Axis Mundi*

The Aztecs understood the spatial world as having four quadrants extending outward from the center of the universe (the *axis mundi*), which connected the earthly realm to the many-layered heavenly realm above and the

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

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

The Human Role in Sustaining the Cosmos

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

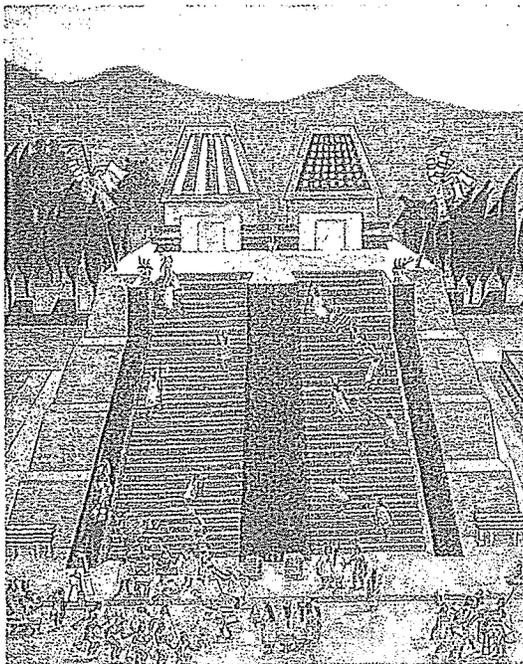
The Ritual of Human Sacrifice

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

And when he had mounted all the steps, when he had reached the summit, then the priests fell upon him; they threw him on his back upon the sacrificial stone. Then [one] cut open his breast, seized his heart, and raised it as an offering to the sun.

For in this manner were all [these] captives offered up. But his body they did not roll

1
The Aztec cosmology is marked by a deep pessimism regarding the future. How does your society view the future? What can human beings offer to "nourish" the present so as to ensure a sound future?



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

down; rather, they lowered it. Four men carried it.

And his severed head they strung on the skull-rack. (Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 2, part 3, page 68)

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

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

The Mastery of Language

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

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

What is it that is a small blue gourd bowl filled with popcorn? One can see from our

little riddle that it is the heavens. (Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, book 6, part 7, page 237)

What is that which we enter in three places [and] leave by only one? It is our shirt. (Page 239)

From Aztec Empire to Catholic Mexico

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

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

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

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

J

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

K

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

Common Themes, Diverse Traditions

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

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

A related theme is the all-encompassing nature of religion. In primal societies the secular and the sacred are not separate. Rather, the universe is full of religious significance, and



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

The Seven Dimensions of Religion: Primal Religious Traditions

Dimension	Examples
Experiential	receiving a vision or guardian spirit during a vision quest
Mythic	Aboriginal Ancestors and the Dreaming, trickster figures (such as Esu and Inktomi), Teotihuacan as the place of cosmic origins
Doctrinal	totemism, Yoruba theology of Olorun and the <i>orishas</i> , Lakota belief in four souls of the dead person, Aztec belief that the Age of the Fifth Sun would soon end
Ethical	moral lessons learned from the errors of Inktomi (the Lakota trickster figure)
Ritual	Aboriginal rites of initiation, the Sun Dance, Aztec human sacrifice
Social	taboo as the basis of social structure
Material	totems, bull-roarers, Yoruba masks, the sweat lodge, the Sun Dance lodge, the Great Temple (Serpent Mountain) of Tenochtitlan

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

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

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

Chapter Review

1. Why are some forms of religion called primal? Describe some of the characteristics of primal religions.
2. What elements of the natural and human world did the Ancestors create or establish in the period of the Dreaming?
3. What survives in the symbols left behind by the Ancestors?
4. Explain the terms *totem* and *taboo*.
5. Why is ritual essential if Aboriginal life is to have meaning?

6. How did Aboriginal rituals originate?
7. What purposes are served by Aboriginal initiation rituals?
8. Identify two acts of Dieri initiation rituals that symbolize death.
9. In what part of Africa do the Yoruba live?
10. Why has the city of Ife always been the center of Yoruba religion?
11. Briefly describe the Yoruba understanding of the cosmos.
12. Who is Olorun, and what is his role in Yoruba religion?
13. What are the *orishas*? Explain their significance in the religious life of the Yoruba.
14. Name and briefly describe at least two of the *orishas*.
15. What is a trickster figure?
16. Describe the two types of Yoruba ancestors.
17. Describe the role of Yoruba ritual practitioners.
18. What is divination, and why do the Yoruba regard it as essential?
19. When and how did human beings first come to North America?
20. Why is the religion of the Plains Indians of vital interest among native peoples throughout North America?
21. What is Wakan Tanka?
22. Who is Inktomi?
23. Briefly describe Lakota beliefs regarding death and the afterlife.
24. What do individuals try to gain access to by going on a vision quest?
25. Briefly describe the structure and function of the sweat lodge.
26. Describe a typical vision experienced by a person who undertakes a vision quest.
27. Among the Blackfeet tribe, who presides over the Sun Dance?
28. What is the *axis mundi* in general? What is the *axis mundi* in the Sun Dance?
29. Why do some participants in the Sun Dance skewer their chests and dance until their flesh tears?

L
In general, primal religions understand the boundaries between the human and the supernatural realms to be very thin, and easily crossed. Drawing from the religious traditions of the Aborigines, the Yoruba, the Indians of the Northern Plains, and the Aztecs, identify as many examples as you can that illustrate this understanding.

30. In what two ways does the Aztec tradition defy the description of a primal religious tradition? In what ways is the Aztec tradition like other primal religious traditions?
31. What geographical area did Mesoamerica include?
32. According to Aztec cosmology, what god created and ordered the world? What ancient city is the origin of the cosmos?
33. Who was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl? What was his significance for the Aztecs?
34. What did the Aztecs call their present age? What did they anticipate its fate to be?
35. How did the Aztecs understand the spatial world?
36. Why did the Aztecs regard each human being as a sort of *axis mundi*?
37. What were the special religious capabilities of the Aztec knowers of things?
38. What historical coincidence contributed to the fall of Tenochtitlan to the Spaniards?
39. How does the popular Day of the Dead show the survival of Aztec religious culture?
40. What three themes are shared by the primal religions studied in this chapter?

Glossary

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

axis mundi (Latin: "axis of the universe"). Common to many religions, an entity such as a mountain, tree, or pole that is believed to connect the heavens and the earth, and is sometimes regarded as the center of the world; for example, the cottonwood tree of the Plains Indians' Sun Dance.

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

many religions worldwide, including that of the Yoruba.

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

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

orishas (aw-ree-shahs'; Yoruba: "head-source"). The hundreds of various Yoruba deities who are the main objects of ritual attention, including Orisha-*l^a*, the creator god; Ogun, the god of iron and of war; and Esu, the trickster figure.

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

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

taboo (sometimes spelled *tabu*). A system of social ordering that dictates that specific objects and activities, owing to their sacred nature, are set aside for specific groups and are strictly forbidden to others; common to many primal peoples, including the Australian Aborigines.

Tenochtitlan (te-nohch-teet'lahn). Capital city of the Aztec empire, believed to be the center of the world. Home of the Great Temple, or Serpent Mountain. Site of present-day Mexico City.

totem. A natural entity, such as an animal or a feature of the landscape, that symbolizes an individual or group and that has special significance for the

religious life of that individual or group; a common motif among Australian Aborigines and other primal peoples.

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

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

Wakan Tanka (wah'khan tankh'ah; Lakota: "most sacred"). Lakota name for the supreme reality, often referring collectively to sixteen separate deities.