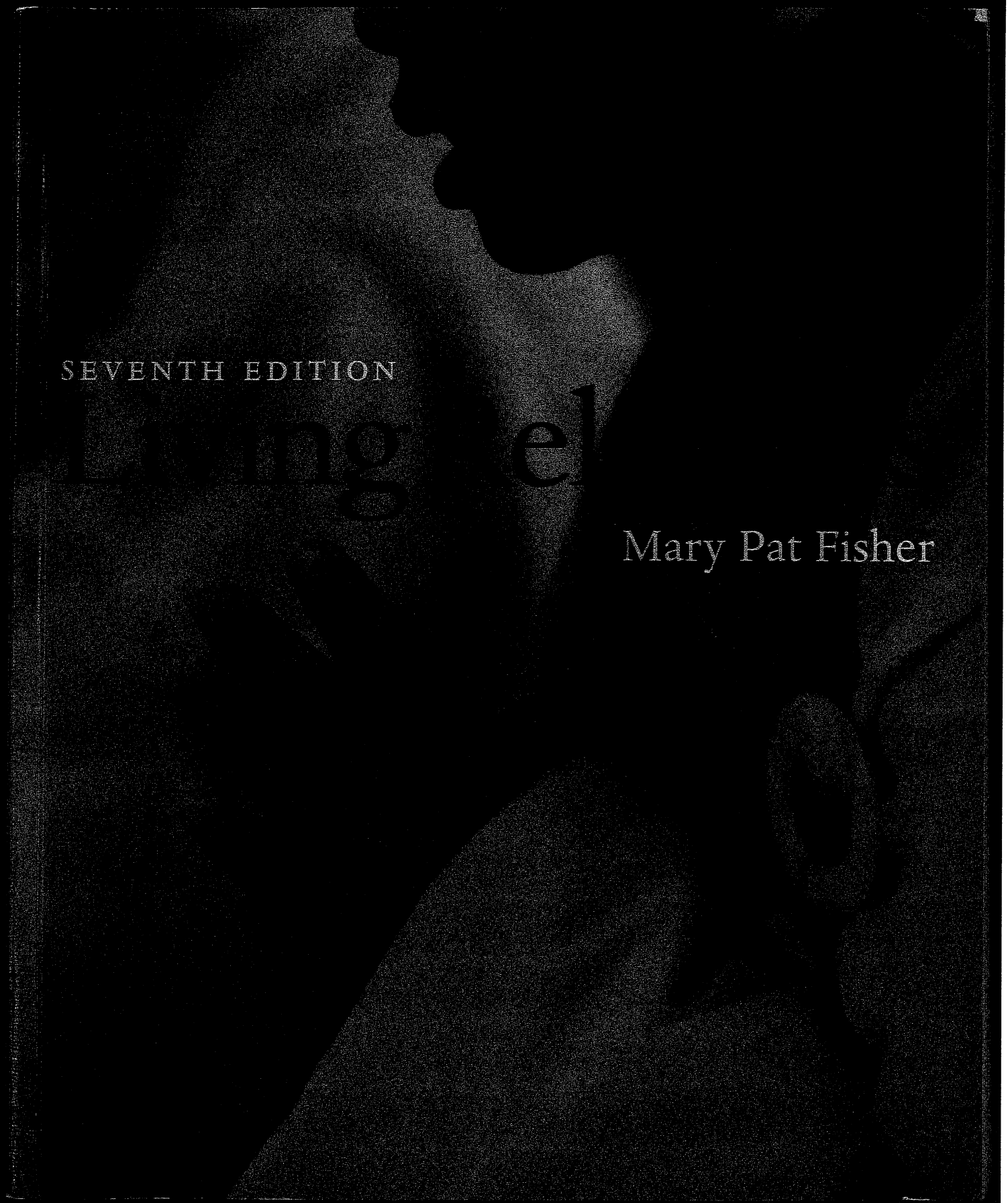
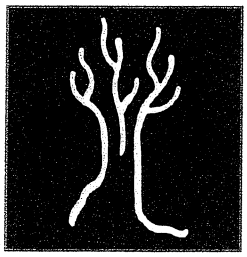

SEVENTH EDITION
Mary Pat Fisher



CHAPTER 2

INDIGENOUS SACRED WAYS

"Everything is alive"

KEY TOPICS

- **Understanding indigenous sacred ways** 33
- **Cultural diversity** 36
- **The circle of right relationships** 38
- **Spiritual specialists** 49
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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** people—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 opposite, reveals a fascinating picture with many indigenous groups surviving in the midst of industrialized societies.

Indigenous people comprise at least four percent of the world population. Some who follow the ancient spiritual traditions still live close to the earth in non-industrial, small-scale cultures; many do not. But despite the disruption of their traditional lifestyles, many indigenous people maintain a sacred way of life that is distinctively different from all other religions. These enduring ways, which indigenous people 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.

Much of the ancient visionary wisdom has disappeared. To seek paying jobs and modern comforts such as electricity, many people have shifted from their

> *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.*[1]

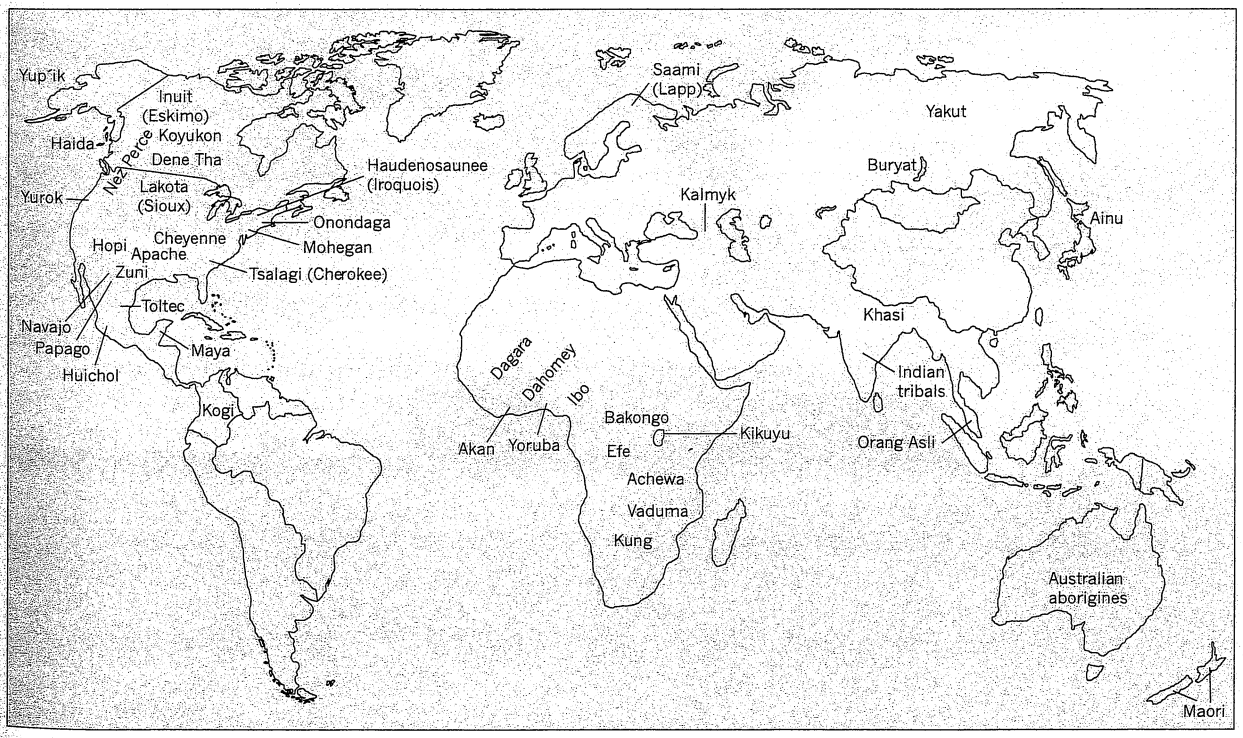
natural environments into urban settings. There are few traditionally trained elders left and few young people willing to undergo the lengthy and rigorous training necessary for spiritual leadership in these sacred ways. Nevertheless, in our time there is a renewal of interest in these traditions, fanning hope that what they offer will not be lost.

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*



The approximate distribution of indigenous groups mentioned in this chapter.

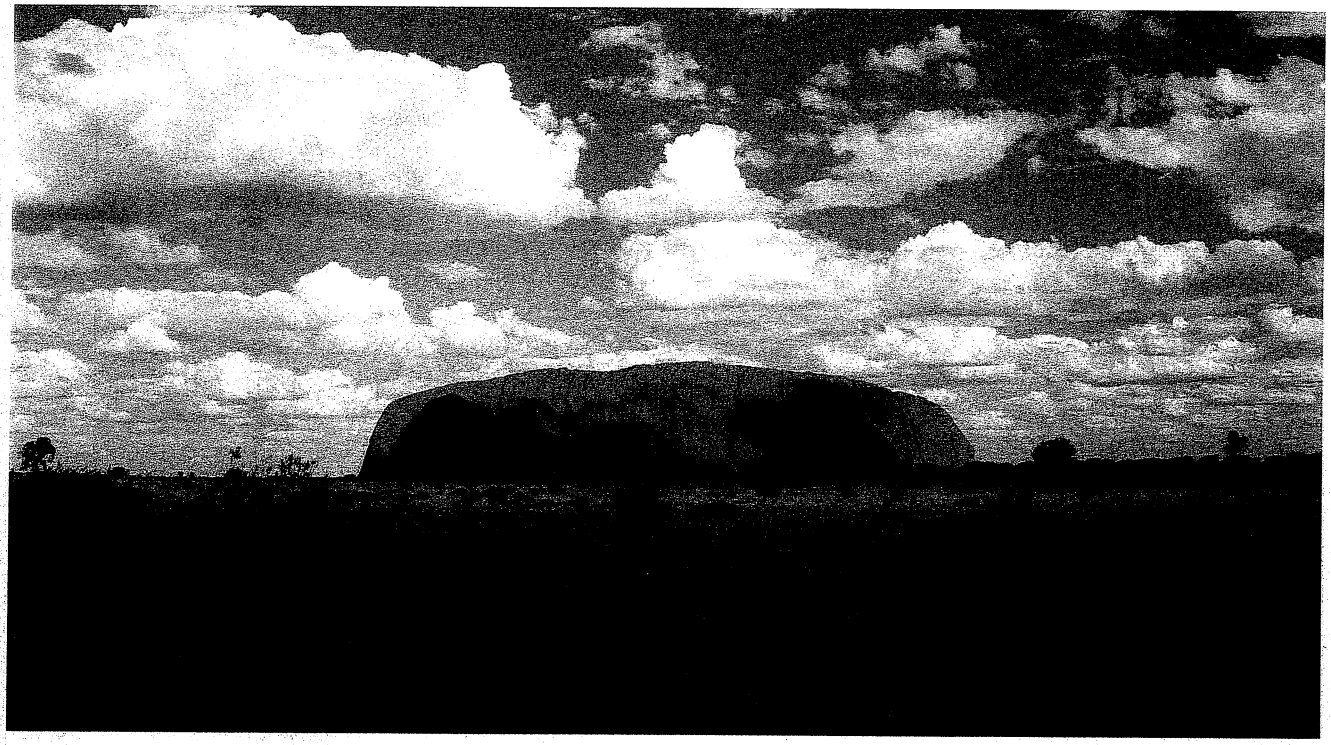
because it takes away our cultural, spiritual beliefs. So we've always stayed within God's laws in what we know.[2]

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 people. Knowing that researchers from other cultures did not grasp the truth of their beliefs, the 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]



Uluru (Ayers Rock), a unique mass rising from the plains of central Australia, has long been considered sacred by the Aboriginal groups of the area, and in its caves are many ancient paintings.

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. Rather, spirituality ideally pervades all moments. 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). This characteristic helps to keep the indigenous sacred ways dynamic and flexible rather than fossilized. It also keeps the sacred experience fresh in the present. These oral accounts are often rich in symbols, metaphors, and humor which are not easily understood by outsiders but which 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. Oral narratives also may contain clues to the historical experiences of individuals or groups, but these are often carried from generation to generation in symbolic language.

Theft of Light, p. 50
TSIMSHIAN NATION

The lifeways of many small-scale cultures are tied to the land on which they live and their entire way of life; they are meaningful only within this context. The people generally respect the rights of others to their own ways and make no attempt to convert outsiders to theirs. Traditional worldviews are not inevitably linked to materially simple ways of life. 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 they still seek spiritual help from "animal helpers" and find important meaning and guidance in their visionary experiences.

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. Secondly, those of other faiths are beginning to recognize the value of indigenous ways, which were in the past suppressed by global religions. Thirdly, many people who have not grown up in native cultures are attempting to embrace indigenous spiritual ways, finding their own traditions lacking in certain qualities for which they long, such as love for the earth. However, 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.*[5]

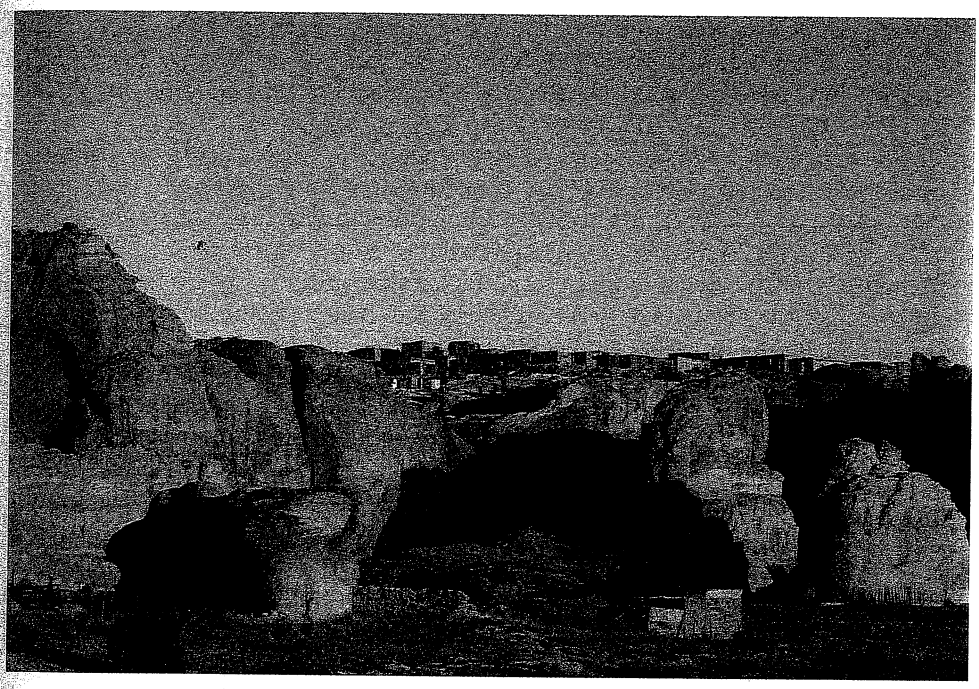
Indigenous traveling teachers are swamped with eager students. But many native peoples are wary of this trend. They feel that their sacred ways are all they have left and worry that even these may be sold, stolen, and ruined. Elders of the Lakota tribes have urged all indigenous nations to use every means possible to prevent the exploitation of their spiritual traditions, declaring in part:

> *Whereas individuals and groups involved in "the New Age Movement," in "the men's movement," in "neo-paganism" cults and in "shamanism" workshops all have exploited the spiritual traditions of our Lakota people by imitating our ceremonial ways and by mixing such imitation rituals with non-Indian occult practices in an offensive and harmful pseudo-religious hodgepodge, and whereas the absurd public posturing of this scandalous assortment of pseudo-Indian charlatans, "wannabes," commercial profiteers, cultists and "New Age shamans" comprises a momentous obstacle in the struggle of traditional Lakota people for an adequate public appraisal of the legitimate political, legal and spiritual needs of real Lakota people. . . .*
>
> *Therefore we urge all our Indian brothers and sisters to act decisively and boldly in our present campaign to end the destruction of our sacred traditions, keeping in mind our highest duty as Indian people: to preserve the purity of our precious traditions for our future generations, so that our children and our children's children will survive and prosper in the sacred manner intended for each of our respective peoples by our Creator.*[6]

Cultural diversity

In this chapter we are considering the faith-ways 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 tribal traditions in North America alone, and at least fifty-three different ethnolinguistic groups in the Andean jungles. 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.



The indigenous community of Acoma Pueblo—built on a high plateau in New Mexico—may be the oldest continuously occupied city in the United States.

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. And some indigenous groups are using modern technologies such as the Internet to promote their concerns.

At the other extreme are those few 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 people live in their ancestral enclaves, somewhat sheltered from the pressures of modern industrial life, though not untouched by the outer world. Tribal peoples have lived deep in the forests and hills of India for thousands of years, utilizing the trees and plants for their food and medicines, although within the twentieth century their ancestral lands were taken over for "development" projects and encroached upon by more politically and

economically powerful groups, rendering many of the seventy-five million Indian tribal people landless laborers. 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.

Other indigenous people 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. 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 non-human spirits. Forced by the European colonialists to adopt Christianity, worshippers of Vodou secretly fused their old gods with their images of Catholic saints. In Cuba, Yoruba slaves did the same, resulting in the practices known as **Santeria** (see Chapter 12).

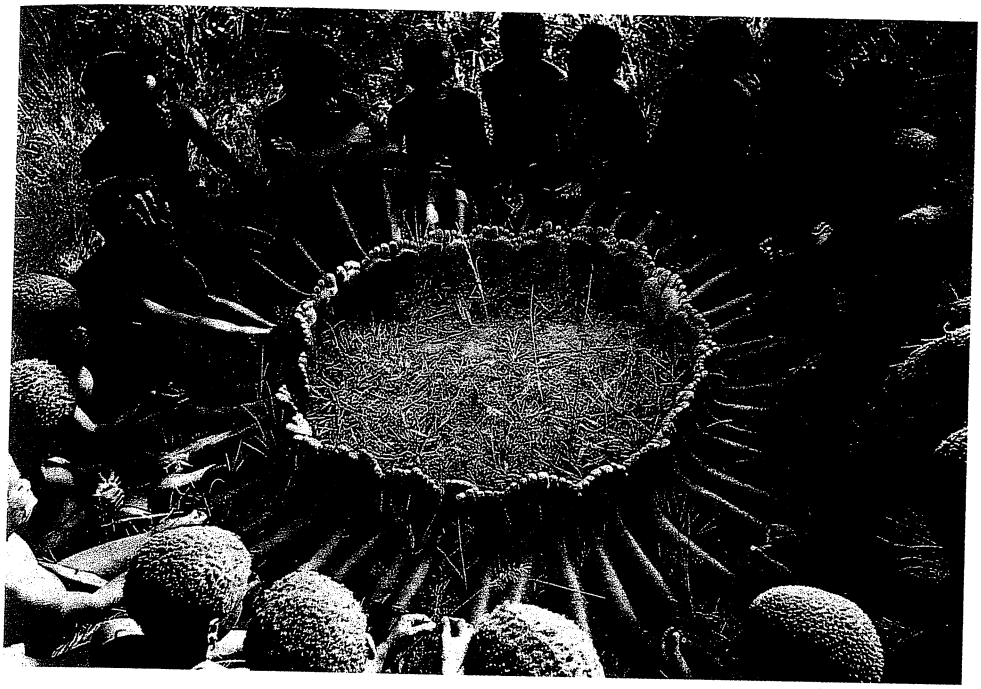
While interaction with larger state societies or colonial powers has been extremely detrimental to indigenous peoples around the world, adaptation of the dominant religions has at times allowed the traditional people to survive. Indigenous people sometimes earnestly try to practice the dominant religion, and in doing so they bring new life into it, as in the lively practice of Christianity in rural Africa. In other places, forced converts may practice the new religion only indifferently. A third outcome is the mixing of traditions to produce a new hybrid.

Despite their different histories and economic patterns, and their geographical separation, indigenous sacred ways do 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 by trade, travel, 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 small-scale cultures.

The circle of right relationships

For many indigenous peoples, everything in the cosmos is intimately interrelated. A symbol of unity among the parts of this sacred reality is a circle. This symbol is not used by all indigenous people; the Navajo, for instance, regard a completed circle as stifling and restrictive. However, many other indigenous people hold the circle sacred because it is infinite—it has no beginning, no end. Time is



Among the gentle Efe Pygmies of the Ituri Forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), children learn to value the circle by playing the "circle game." With feet making a circle, each names a circular object and then an expression of roundness (the family circle, togetherness, "a complete rainbow").

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.

This understanding of life as a complex of circles is thought to be the perfect framework for harmony. As Lame Deer, a Lakota Sioux holy man, explained:

> *Nature wants things to be round. The bodies of human beings and animals have no corners. With us the circle stands for the togetherness of people who sit with one another around the campfire, relatives and friends united in peace while the pipe passes from hand to hand. The camp in which every tipi had its place was also a ring. The tipi was a ring in which people sat in a circle and all the families in the village were in turn circles within a larger circle, part of the larger hoop which was the seven campfires of the Sioux, representing one nation. The nation was only a part of the universe, in itself circular and made of the earth, which is round, of the sun, which is round, of the stars, which are round. The moon, the horizon, the rainbow—circles within circles within circles, with no beginning and no end.*[7]

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

Many indigenous traditions worship a Supreme Being who they believe created the cosmos. This being is known by the Lakota as "Wakan Tanka" or "Great

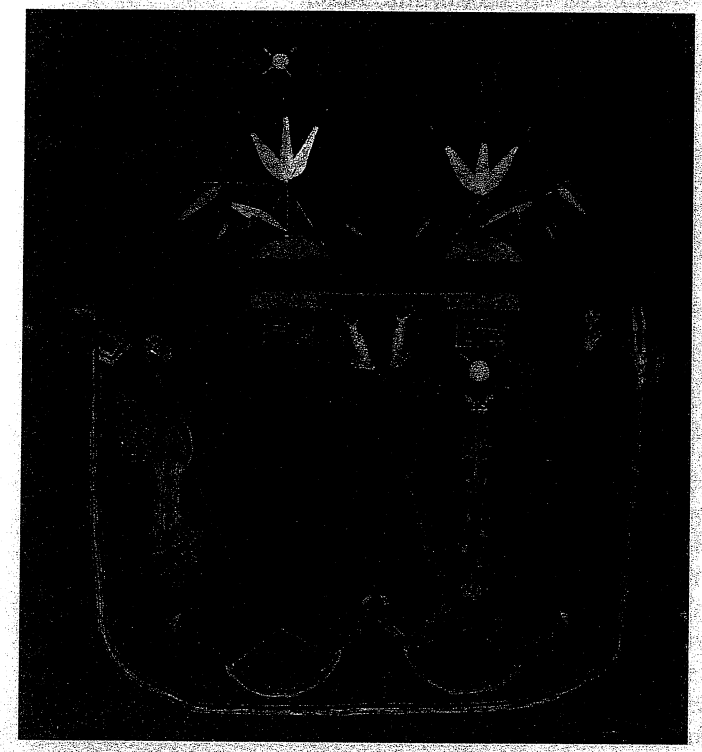
Mysterious" or "Great Spirit." African names for this being are attributes, such as "All-powerful," "Creator," "the one who is met everywhere," "the one who exists by himself," or "the one who began the forest." The Supreme Being is often referred to by male pronouns, but in some groups the Supreme Being 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.

Deity may be conceived as either male or female in indigenous religions. In Navajo belief, divinity is personified as both Father Sky and Mother Earth. In this traditional sand-painting, Father Sky is on the left, with constellations and the Milky Way forming his "body." Mother Earth is on the right, with her body bearing the four sacred plants: squash, beans, tobacco, and corn.

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.*[8]

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 and sacred presences. 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 people of Nepal as invisible serpentine spirits who control the circulation of water in the world and also within our bodies.

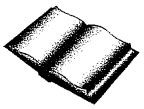
Ancestors may be extremely important. Traditional Africans understand that even the person is not an individual, but a composite of many souls—the spirits of one's parents and ancestors—resonating to their feelings. Rev. William Kingsley Opoku, International Coordinator of the African Council for Spiritual 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. . . . Non-Africans came in and said we should not obey our ancestors, should not call upon them at all, because they are evil people. This has been a mental bondage, a terrible thing.*[9]

Continued communication with the "living dead" (ancestors who have died within living memory) is extremely important to some traditional Africans. Food and drink are set out for 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 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, goddess of death and change, experienced in tornadoes, lightning, winds, and fire; 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 Clyde Ford as "a beingless being, a dimensionless point, an infinite container of everything, including itself."[10] 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, these can also be seen as archetypes of traits existing within the human psyche. The ultimate purpose of the *orisa*—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.



Feminine Leadership, p. 47
JUDITH GLEASON

YORUBA TEACHING STORY

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 *aje*, 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.[11]

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 and the necessity for men to recognize it remain in the culture, teaching an ideal symmetry between female and male roles.

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.*[12]

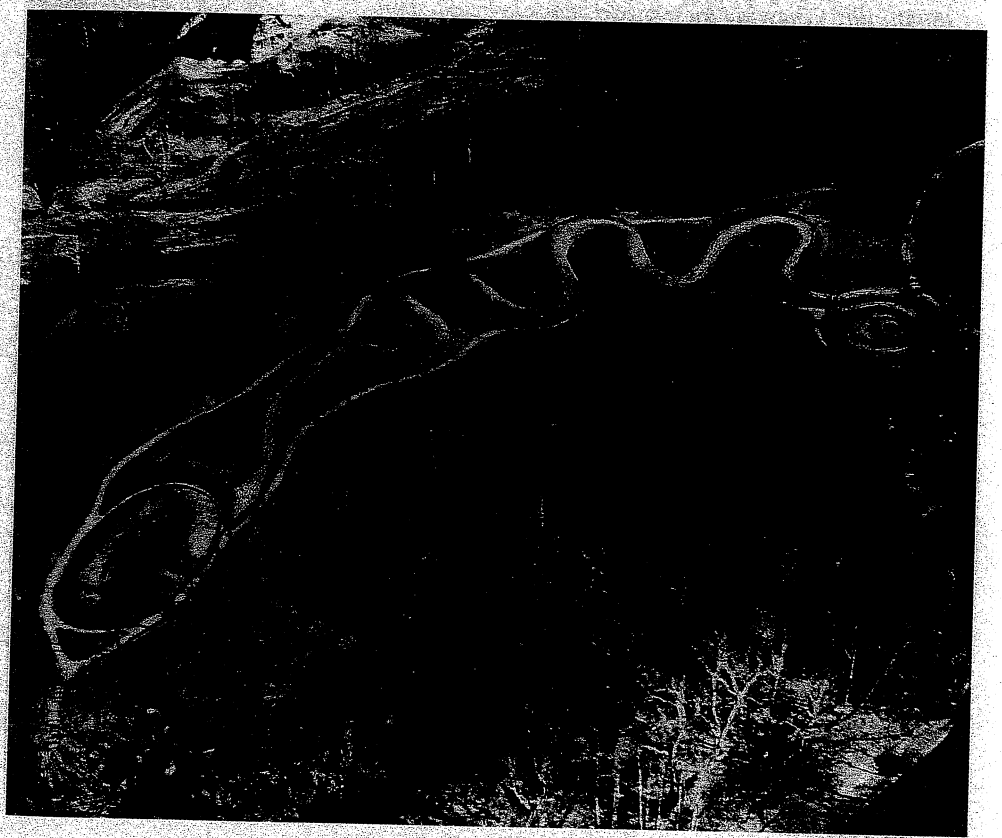
Of Water and Spirit, p. 38
MALIDOMA PATRICE SOMÉ

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"

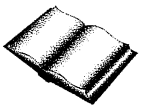
often refers to a large extended family and ancestral village, even for people who have moved to the cities. In indigenous cultures, the community is paramount, and it may extend beyond the living humans in the area. Many traditional peoples know the earth as their mother. The land one lives on is part 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.*[13]

Some striking feature of the natural environment of the 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.



An indigenous earthwork in Ohio, representing a snake and an egg, symbols of fertility and transformation. The spiral in the snake's tail may be an appreciative symbol of the life force and wisdom inherent in the earth.



That Mountain has Spirit, p. 50
SOUTHWEST INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The Western Apache remember vivid symbolic narratives about the exploits of people in specific places in their environment and contemplate them as aids to the spiritual goal of making 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.*[14]

Because of the intimate relationship of indigenous peoples with their particular environment, 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 people 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. The connection we had to the land was a spiritual connection. The loss of the land is a loss to us as guardians and protectors of the land. We are not owners of the land.*[15]

In contrast to the industrial world's attempts to dominate the earth, native people 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 recently 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.[16]

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."[17] Australian aboriginal people see their local landscape in terms of the "everywhen" of the **Dreaming**, the primordial time when the ancestors appeared from beneath

Australian aborigines understand their environment as concentric fields of subtle energies. Snakes and Emus *by Nym Bunduk (1907–74).*

the surface of the earth, investing the environment with their own presence and establishing the law.

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 Kawai'i 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.*[18]

Even the dreams of indigenous peoples are often related to their particular environment and are understood as providing guidelines for proper ways to act.

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.

Many traditional peoples learn a sense of reverence for, and kinship with, the natural world, as suggested in this image from Botswana created by Elisabeth Sunday.

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 people's relationships with non-human 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."[19]

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*[20]

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.

Essence of Cosmic Man, p. 55
TLAKAELEL

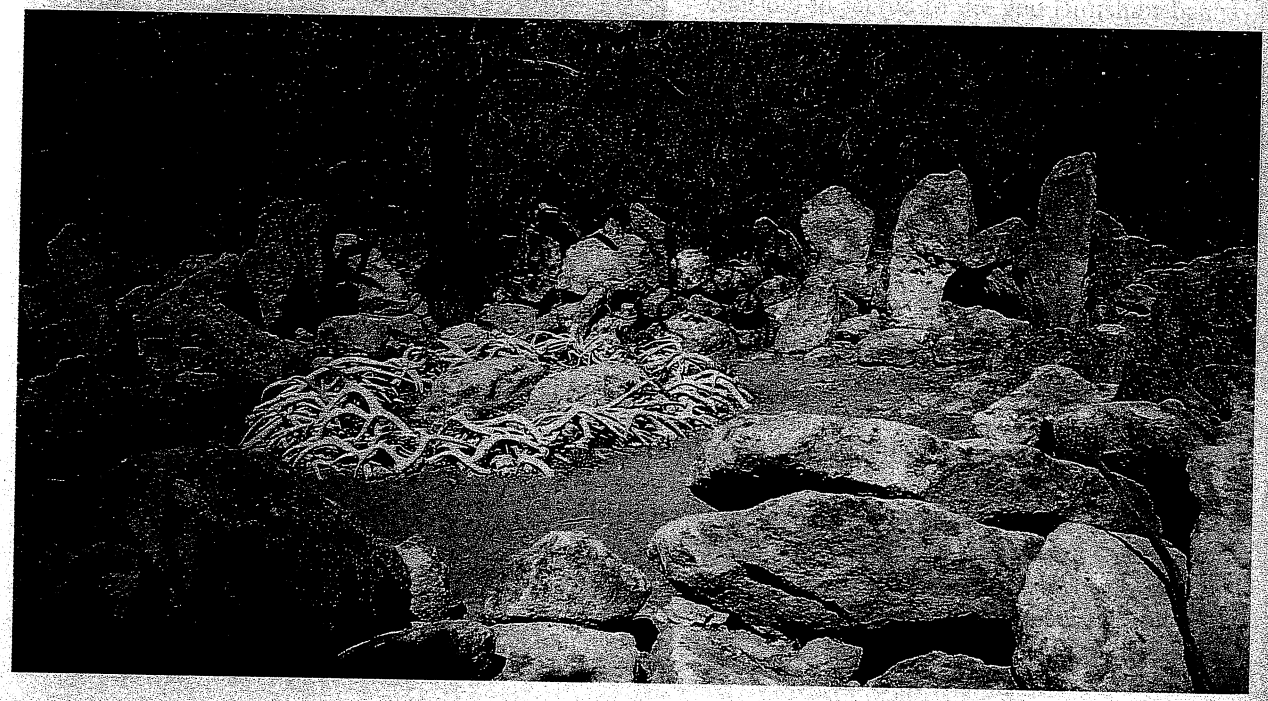
Tlakaelel, a contemporary spiritual leader of the descendants of the Toltecs of Mexico, describes how a person might experience this power when looking into an obsidian mirror traditionally made to concentrate power:

> *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.*[21]

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



At a remote shrine used by indigenous people in New Mexico, a ring of stones protects the sacred area where sun-bleached antlers and offerings have been placed around two stones naturally shaped like mountain lions.

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 people 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. They sacrifice themselves through ritual purification, struggle, hardship, and protocol in order to remain in proper relationship with the spirits.

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.