

INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

✧ Overview

Across all the earth's inhabited continents today are thousands of different *indigenous peoples*, ethnic groups whose ties to their lands go back a millennium or much longer. Some have migrated to new homelands and changed their ways of life in recent centuries; others have been relocated in recent generations to "reservations" within modern states; still others (in growing numbers) live in two worlds, moving between life in their modern countries and their native group. Indigenous peoples today defy easy characterization: In remote Highland New Guinea, the village headman wears only a penis sheath as he performs a ritual to protect his home. More typical is a Kayapo chief in the Amazon rain forest who one day dresses in little more than body paint and on another wears western clothes. A visitor to a Lakota ceremonial leader in the North American Plains would find him in blue jeans, western-style shirt, and a Stetson hat.

All surviving indigenous peoples (or *first peoples*) have been affected by the modern world and its trade, technologies, or communications. The cultural traditions and religious lives of all these peoples have been altered, often dramatically, by outsiders encroaching on their lands, exposing them to new diseases, and imposing laws to take their lands and assimilate them into the majority citizenry. Around the world and over recent centuries, hundreds of indigenous groups have succumbed or been assimilated, their religions like their languages forever extinguished.

The religious traditions discussed in this chapter are different from those of the great world religions covered in the other chapters of this book. Yet these indigenous peoples and their religions remain a noteworthy part of the world's religious landscape today, despite their small populations. Few possess literary texts or great temples. Yet these independent, ethnic, and land-bounded religions are themselves worthy of study; they also help us understand the general phenomenon of humanity as a religious species. The treatment of indigenous peoples by the great world religions gives us important insights about the latter's role in the historical expansion of early states and modern nations; and we can see beliefs and practices of the world's indigenous religions being assimilated into the new religions forming across the globe today.

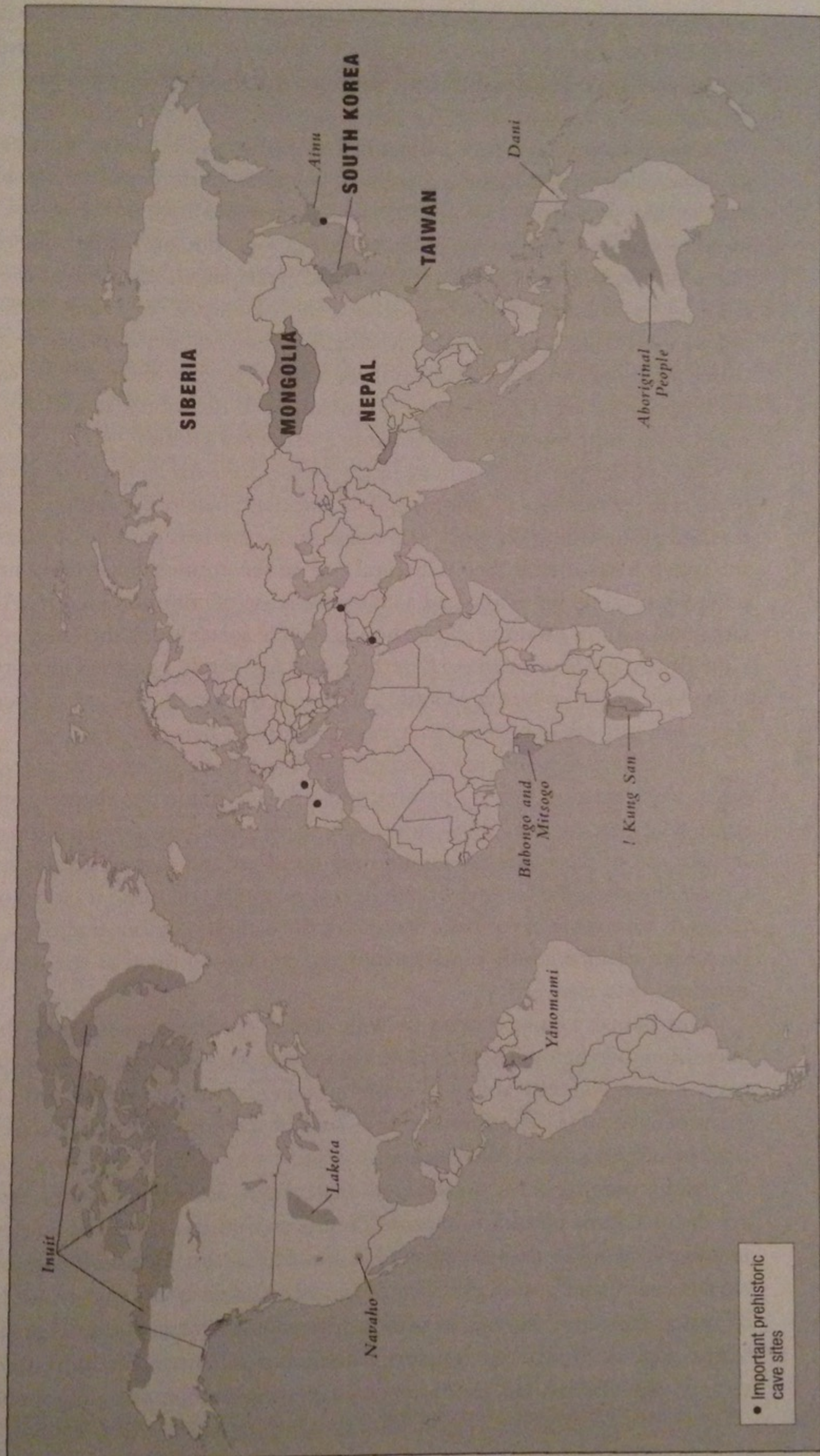
This chapter will begin by looking back to prehistory to understand the long history of some of the common worldviews, religious roles, and ritual practices evident among early *Homo sapiens*. We will then examine case studies of the world's last living hunter-gatherers and simple agriculturalists to sample indigenous religions across the globe today. The world's surviving indigenous religions would best be represented, due to their richness and diversity, by a series of chapters devoted to each one. The scope of this textbook precludes this; however, the short, introductory treatment here inevitably requires making generalizations and relies on somewhat arbitrary but representative case studies. Beyond conveying an awareness of the spiritual vitality and the neglected histories of these extraordinary indigenous traditions, we want to show that understanding religions today is enriched by seeing how all humanity, even in isolated nonliterate groups, has always been "religious."

Origins of *Homo religiosus*: Prehistory

At some point around a hundred thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens* emerged from a 4-million-year process of hominid evolution to become the animal who speaks, makes tools, buries its dead, and thinks symbolically. Long before agriculture and urbanization, the first *Homo sapiens* lived in hunter-gatherer societies. By studying their artifacts as well as the small-scale societies that still subsist in this mode of life, we can imagine what their existence was like. We know our ancestors lived and ate well, yet without the material possessions and conveniences we now consider to be essential. We know they made efforts to communicate with the spirits of their ancestors and with animals. Most likely, they regularly sought assistance from these spirits through trance and altered states of consciousness, which may have been the origins of religion.

Just as the core meanings of modern English words can be discovered by looking up their origins in Latin or Greek history, our appreciation of world religions can be enriched by understanding the origin of religion itself, an origin which can be glimpsed most clearly in the characteristics of indigenous religions today.

Although the earliest humans used language, writing had not yet been invented. Consequently, these societies had oral cultures in which everything that was known



Map 2.1 Locations of some of the prehistoric and ethnographic cultural groups discussed in this book.

was known only because someone remembered it. And memories were made readily accessible because they were expressed in stories—stories of sacred ancestors, spirit beings, and heroes. Not recorded in written texts, these stories were kept alive in song and dance.

Moreover, time and space were not cold abstractions but were reckoned according to ancestral myths and sacred experiences. Religion likely began at sites where people believed the powers that govern the universe first manifested themselves. Whether in sacred groves, on riverbanks, or on mountaintops, human beings experienced such places of revelation as “centers of the world” (*axes mundi*). Indeed, in the indigenous religions, most everything is spiritually alive, a collective of living entities to which people must relate. The trees, the mountains, the rivers, special stones, animals, and, of course, humans are said to have souls or spirits that give them life, or *animate* them. Anthropologists once used the term **animism** to describe a worldview in which a measure of conscious life is attributed to a variety of entities.

Each of the thousands of indigenous peoples have (or had) a unique **cosmogony**, or account of the world’s origins and its essential powers. Because in most cosmogonies the group telling the story was a part of the everlasting cycle of nature’s rhythms, the group is assumed to be an integral part of the cosmos. Everything in premodern indigenous group life reinforced a collective sense of common identity: All shared the same occupations (hunting and gathering, simple agriculture), the same myths, and the same rituals; and all were integral to the group. As a result, a person’s identity was deeply embedded in the collective identity and fate of the group. The group lives on and the individual can stay connected to it, even after his or her own death.

This collective worldview is radically different from the extreme individualism and social fragmentation that is common today. In the following chapters on the world’s great religions, we will show how each in its own way pushed humanity, at least in part, out of the collective community mind-set and toward greater individualism. Comprehending the features of indigenous religions will make it clear how the world religions have some of the basic features of the earliest religious traditions, yet also how they have simultaneously reinterpreted and transposed them as the details of human existence have changed.

Our human nature endows us with certain qualities that underlie the most basic expressions of religion. These include a propensity for repetitive behaviors (**ritual**), a virtually unique cognitive ability to create meaning (**symbols, ritual acts**), the enhancement of survival by identification with land or territory (**sacred space**), and a strong mother-offspring bond (**devotion**).

Archaeologists have ascertained that about 30,000 years ago humans—who are distinct from hominids because they possessed the same physiology and cognitive capacity as we do—established themselves across Eurasia. They wove cloth for clothes, used finely wrought fishhooks, constructed boats that crossed large bodies of water, and were experts in subsistence wherever they lived, from the tropics up to the edge of the Ice Age glaciers. The record of human life indicates that in every society over the last 100,000 years, a progressive complexity in the mastery of tools

The Limitations of the Term *Animism*

The term *animism*, though still in widespread use, is rooted in a problematic distinction in earlier scholarship. An *animist* was said to see the world as inhabited by a host of souls (*anima*) that are embodied in a variety of life-forms. By applying the term only to indigenous peoples, who usually worship a polytheistic pantheon, early scholars tried to create the basis for a distinction between them and peoples adhering to the major monotheistic religions. (Tylor and others saw monotheism as a superior form of religion that emerged among animist peoples, in conformity to the accounts of the Jews in the Hebrew Bible.) But does belief in souls truly separate humanity's reli-

gious belief systems and its thousands of believers? All three Abrahamic faiths hold that human beings possess souls (*anima*), as do traditional Indian and Chinese religions. In that sense, most world religions are animist. Furthermore, even the monotheistic religions hold that a multitude of nonhuman "souls" inhabit the world alongside human beings: angels, ghosts, *jinn*, demons, and so on. A second limitation with the term *animism* as a blanket term is that it also masks the large array of very different conceptions of "soul" recorded in human religious history, including peoples (e.g., the early Chinese) who believe that human bodies are inhabited by two or more souls.

was accompanied by the development of language ability and the unmistakable presence of religion.

The universality of religion in human societies even led Mircea Eliade, a pioneering scholar of comparative religions, to call our species *Homo religiosus*, or "religious humanity." In fact, now as well as from the earliest days of the modern species, religion has been at the center of human culture, reshaping social life. Thus, we can say that religion has always been an integral, at times even essential part of humanity's evolutionary path. It supported the success of small hunter-gatherer groups, the domestication of plants and animals, and then reinforced humanity's prodigious efforts to create cities, empires, and superpowers. We now turn to the very beginning of this extraordinary story.

Religion's Origins Among Hunter-Gatherers

For 99 percent of our species's history, all human ancestors lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers. However, our world has been transformed in so thoroughgoing a manner that few if any people anywhere on the planet still live in this mode of life.

The earliest *Homo sapiens* were much like the people we refer to today as belonging to indigenous or *simple subsistence* societies. Small groups of related individuals (usually fewer than fifty) "lived off the land and ocean," moving with the seasons to find wild fruits and vegetables and to be close to the animals or fish they hunted for food. Close-knit bonds within these living groups were essential to everyone's survival, with individuals sharing

TIMELINE

2 MILLION	Early hominids use the first stone tools
1/2 MILL	Fire domesticated
100,000	<i>Homo sapiens</i> : Neanderthals and another line present evidence of ritual burial
40,000 BCE	Modern man biologically; hunting-gathering societies found across Africa and Eurasia
	Humans just "another animal" on earth
30,000	Human language and symbolic thought reach new level of advancement
15,000	Human burials across Africa and Eurasia with offerings, reflecting afterlife belief
10,000	<i>Homo sapiens</i> from Siberia disperse across North and South America via Bering Strait
9,000	Domestication of sheep/goats
7,000	Beginnings of settled agriculture, first cities
5,000	Earliest archaeological evidence of Australian aboriginal belief connected with the Rainbow Serpent, perhaps the oldest continuing belief in the world
2,000	Major states arise on the Yellow River, China; Indus River, India; Babylon on Tigris-Euphrates; Nile in Egypt
800 BCE–200 CE	Axial Age, era of lasting formulations of social-spiritual teachings defining ethical modes of human existence in cities
100 BCE	States expanding into wilderness frontiers; Axial Age traditions legitimate expansion, assimilation of indigenous peoples
1400	Growing populations in Americas live in hierarchically organized chiefdoms or small kingdoms
1492 CE	Columbus reaches America. He writes that the native peoples encountered "are the best people in the world and above all the gentlest." His record is nonetheless filled with accounts of enslavement, murder, and rape.
1492–1600	Europeans make first contact with native peoples of Western Hemisphere continents Introduction of the horse alters human ecology across the "New World" Peoples having no natural immunological defenses to Eurasian microbes succumb to diseases in great numbers; 90 percent mortality in many settlements Christian missionaries travel on the networks of exploration and empire, making Christianity the world's first global religion
1546	The "New Laws" barring enslavement of indigenous peoples were repealed; "New World" colonists form societies and economies dependent on slave labor
1606	Earliest recorded contact between Europeans and Australian Aborigines
1616	Smallpox epidemic decimates native tribes in New England region
1709	A slave market erected on Wall Street in New York; African Americans and Native Americans men, women, and children are daily declared the property of the highest cash bidder
1716	Alamo Mission in San Antonio is authorized by the viceroy of Mexico. The mission becomes an educational center for Native Americans who converted to Christianity.
1808–1811	Tecumseh, chief of the Shawnees, organizes a defensive confederacy of Northwest frontier tribes, attempting to make the Ohio River a permanent boundary between the United States and indigenous peoples' land
1811	William Henry Harrison, governor of Ohio, leads the ferocious Battle of Tippecanoe, which destroys Tecumseh's town as well as the remnants of Tecumseh's indigenous confederacy

- 1830** Indian Removal Act passed; over next ten years U.S. government forcibly removes thousands of indigenous peoples west of the Mississippi
- 1838** "Trail of Tears": Native Americans force-marched by U.S. military to settle in Oklahoma
- 1850-1875** Hunting by American colonists leads to near extermination of buffalo herds, undermining Plains Indians' survival
- 1871** 1871 Indian Appropriation Act specifies that no tribe thereafter would be recognized as an independent nation
- 1876** Colonel George Custer leads army attack on assembled native tribes and all 250 soldiers are killed. Afterward, U.S. Army orders troops "to attack and kill every male Indian over twelve years of age."
- 1888** The White Australia Policy articulated
- 1889-1890** Wovoka, the Paiute spiritual leader, has vision and spreads message of the Ghost Dance
- 1890** Massacre of Sioux at Wounded Knee, South Dakota
- 1910** Bwiti, a West Central African religion, is founded among the forest-dwelling Babongo and Mitsogo people of Gabon and the Fang people of Gabon and Cameroon
- 1918** Native American Church founded in Oklahoma, combining use of peyote with Christian beliefs of morality and self-respect. Church prohibits alcohol, requires monogamy and family responsibility, and promotes hard work.
- 1920** Santo Daime, a syncretistic religion based on ceremonial ayahuasca (called *daime*) ingestion, is begun in western Brazil by Raimundo Irineu Serra
- 1930** Stalin begins Soviet repression of shamans in Siberia and in their satellite, Outer Mongolia, that lasts until 1989
- 1950** People's Republic of China labels shamanism a "superstition" and represses spirit mediums across China
- 1951** Australian government formally adopts assimilation policy toward aboriginal peoples
- 1961** União do Vegetal, a syncretistic religion based on the use of ayahuasca and elements of folk Christianity, shamanism, and ancient Incan soul traditions, is founded by Jose Porto Veijo
- 1975** The Australian Senate acknowledges prior ownership of country by aboriginal people and seeks compensation for their dispossession.
The World Council of Indigenous People is founded.
- 1978** Religious Freedom Act promises to "protect and preserve" for Native Americans "freedom to believe, express, and exercise" traditional religions, "including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonial and traditional rites"
- 1989** Kayapo people joined by international indigenous group rights advocates to protest dam project at Altamira
- 1992** Australian High Court rules that native title to land has not been extinguished, rejecting 200-year-old settler claims that aboriginal lands were *terra nullius*, "no one's land"
- 2004** Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian opens in Washington, DC
- 2008** Australian and Canadian governments issue formal apologies to aboriginal peoples for policies detrimental to integrity of lives, including forcibly sending children to Christian boarding schools

the food and relying on each other for protection. Also typical was a division of labor, with men predominantly the hunters and women the gatherers. Compared to the permanently settled societies that began in recorded human history, most of these societies were (and are) highly egalitarian, with food and wealth shared equally. Scholars have used data from anthropological studies of modern hunter-gatherer groups to reconstruct the usually good lives of early *Homo sapiens* as follows:

Life lived by our prehistoric ancestors was not characterized by constant deprivation . . . with both men and women contributing substantially to the family, the economy, and the social world. . . . Life was rich in human warmth and aesthetic experience and offered an enviable balance of work and love, ritual and play.¹

The **Kung San** of southern Africa, one of the most studied, late-surviving hunter-gatherer groups, are typical. A nomadic people, the Kung utilize simple tools and build temporary houses. An intricate knowledge of their environment is expressed in a language that recognizes 500 species of plants and animals, yielding a diet that consists of 105 different foods. Utter mastery of an environment shared with large predators is typical of such groups. Once scholars gained firsthand knowledge of hunter-gatherers like the Kung, they began to appreciate the highly skilled nature of this mode of life, the clear rationality of the people, and the very sophisticated languages and cultures that had evolved among them. This new and empirical understanding disproved the theories of nineteenth-century social scientists, who had speculated that religion had its origins in the fear and ignorance of humans facing a threatening and incomprehensible world.

The human capacity for language to create and build culture was almost certainly present by 100,000 BCE among the Neanderthals and those who succeeded them, the *Homo sapiens*. By 30,000 BCE, humans were performing ceremonial burials, painting and carving art, keeping rudimentary records on bone and stone plaques, and crafting elaborate personal adornments.

From this time onward, the human record shows our species constantly adapting and refining their material world, and it was by this time that humans acquired the capacity to think symbolically, almost certainly as a result of their development of more complex languages. We who cannot conceive of complex thought without the medium of language can easily imagine the advantages (in hunting, warfare, etc.) that a leap ahead in linguistic capacity must have given to those early humans.

As we saw in the first chapter, religion is centered on humans establishing and expressing life's ultimate truths. Scientists, therefore, have posited a breakthrough in cognitive ability that changed the destiny of our species forever: "categorizing and naming objects and sensations in the outer and inner worlds, and making associations between resulting mental symbols . . . for only once we create such symbols can we recombine them and ask such questions as 'What if . . . ?'"² The simultaneous emergence of modern humans and religion indicates that many "what if" questions were



Prehistoric cave art: the first shaman. Over fifty examples of animal-human figures like this one suggest that shamanism had its origins in the prehistoric era.

Issues of Terminology and Imagination: Primitive, Indigenous

Writers who wish to refer to the peoples living in simple subsistence societies, both modern and prehistoric, face a problem of nomenclature. The term *primitive* was once popular, but it falsely suggests a lack of cultural development or factual understanding, since in fact many native peoples have complex languages and mythologies. In choosing the term *indigenous religions*, we are implying that the social and religious lives of a given people are rooted deeply in a given place. This first mode of religious life known in the record of human history is inextricably bound to the life of small groups. The reader should note that we are not equating modern hunter-gatherers with

humans living in this mode of life 30,000 years ago or suggesting that these contemporary groups are "living fossils," since none today live isolated from the developed world and all have distinct histories. The term *indigenous* until recent times referred to peoples living in premodern modes of subsistence, either as hunter-gatherers or utilizing nonmechanical agricultural methods. In growing numbers, indigenous peoples today are quickly learning about the legal systems of modern states and selectively adopting modern technologies in an attempt to preserve their lands, ease the burdens of subsistence, and ensure their culture's adaptation and survival.

aimed at explaining the unseen powers of life, the inner world of personhood, and the ultimate mystery, that of death. Many artifacts of prehistoric religion have been found that reflect human engagement with each of these realms.

FERTILITY, CHILDBIRTH, AND SURVIVAL

One striking kind of object found across Eurasia in late prehistory is what scientists have called "**Venus**" **figurines**, small stone sculptures of females with large breasts and hips, often with their genitalia emphasized. To understand these objects, we must enter into the reality of prehistoric human life. Small tribes were doubtless greatly concerned with ensuring the regular birth of healthy children to keep their own group numerous enough for success in subsistence, hunting, and warfare. Further, since at that time all pregnancies and all childbirths were high-risk events and since it was realized that mothers' bountiful lactation helped ensure the survival of newborn children, it is likely that the figurines are related to concerns about birth and the survival of children in small groups. Some scholars therefore interpret the Venus figurines as icons representing a protecting, nurturing "mother goddess." They have speculated that the makers of these objects recognized and revered a special female power that lay behind the mystery of conception and birth; they focused on the miracle of females producing beings from their own bodies and celebrated the ability of women to perpetuate human life.

Added to this evidence of veneration of a mother goddess is another important archaeological find: After 15,000 BCE the dead were uniformly buried in mounds or graves in the fetal position, suggesting that people perceived the earth as a womb from

which some sort of new birth was expected. Some have gone further, to conclude that the so-called Venus icons indicate the predominance of hunter-gatherer groups that were dominated by women, who alone could bring new life and hence were expected to lead their group in harmony with nature. This presumed matriarchal period, in which women had superior status, is said to have ended with the expansion of groups dominated by aggressive warrior males (such as the Indo-Europeans), who adopted settled agriculture and came to rule the new, patriarchal, societies. With little more than figurines and burial practices as evidence, it is difficult to prove or confirm these speculations or to declare their universality.

RELIGION IN PREHISTORY: THE SECRET OF EARLY CAVE RITUALS

Scholars believe that prehistoric hunting group initiation ceremonies were held in underground sanctuaries decorated with carefully rendered images of animals like this early masterpiece of cave art.

In the famous cave paintings of Eurasia, hunted animals such as bison, bear, and deer are rendered with grace and subtlety in a variety of styles. Humans are also shown, some in poses that are still puzzling, challenging us to understand who created the images and the meaning of their context.

Again, we must use our imagination to understand the context and to surmise the place of religion. Caves could be dangerous places, and groups of individuals taking the



trouble to go several hundred yards under the earth, traversing narrow, damp, and dark passageways, seem to engage in no ordinary task. Archaeologists surmise that these sites were related to the hunts undertaken by bands of able-bodied men. Hunter-gatherers needed animals for their survival. They hunted to secure the meat essential for their diet, the skins for clothing, and the bones and sinew used for tools and adornment. Some painted cave scenes also indicate that the prehistoric hunt was often dangerous: Wild bison, cave bears, and large cats are shown inflicting lethal injuries on humans.

The hunt required group coordination for success, since tracking, stalking, encircling, and using spears or stones to make kills at close range could not be achieved without coordinated action, individual bravery, and strong group loyalty. A hunting expedition could fail if a single member broke ranks and failed at his station, endangering not only himself and others in the group, but the entire tribe, which was depending on the hunters. Having documented similar rites among modern hunting tribes, scholars view some of the prehistoric caves as ritual theaters for initiating adolescent boys into the ranks of hunters, sites of instruction in hunting lore, killing practices, and ritual. Perhaps it was to these remote sites that elders brought frightened initiates and dramatically staged rituals that revealed the prey the men pursued and established the youths' new identity as adult hunters. Through this initiation ritual, young men bonded with the other adult males with whom they would risk their lives.

Such practices in the service of human survival formed the basis of the first religions according to the definitions we discussed in Chapter 1: They helped *bind* a group critical to the society's success, and they reinforced the human need to *be careful* with regard to the unseen powers surrounding them. The second point is especially important if we assume that the elders taught that each animal, like every human being, has an inner spirit or soul, one that must be respected in death and returned to the world or sent on its way back to the animal spirit world or afterlife. We now turn to this topic and trace its frequent presence in a variety of modern indigenous groups.

Teachings of Religious Wisdom

Aboriginal Dreamtime

Death is not to be feared, for there is no heaven or hell. At death, people return to where they came from. Life is thus a transition from coming into being from *kamannunngge*, or Dreamtime, to going out of being, back to Dreamtime. This living world is only a shadow of the reality of Dreamtime. In the Dreamtime, the humans and animals were one . . . but because of a split in time, the world we live in became

partially separated from the Dreamworld and as a result human beings became separated from other animals. Humans learned to make fire, speak language, follow the incest taboo, and to have kin. Although this differentiates humans from animals in this world, it does not make humans better than animals.

Adapted from: David McKnight, *Lardil: Keepers of the Dreamtime* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995).

Indigenous Religious Traditions: Soul Belief and Afterlife

Today thousands of separate native peoples still exist, testimony to the resilience of the human spirit and the power of strong social and cultural bonds. Their religions have been an integral part of their survival, in each case somehow reflecting the group's connection with its lands, identity, modes of subsistence, and historical memory. There are indigenous peoples today who subsist primarily as hunter-gatherers, shifting slash-and-burn agriculturalists, or settled agricultural cultivators, as well as those who have assimilated in various ways into the world's modern states and economies. The traditions of these indigenous groups relating to the sacred, though uniquely grounded in each people's separate historical existence, remain an important part of the story of the world's religions today.

Studies of indigenous peoples reveal extraordinary human diversity, imagination, and religious wisdom. Their myths recount what is sacred to the group: the origins of life, its relations with animals, its connections to landforms, and the origination of the norms governing the members of the group. Indigenous religions convey the breadth of human spiritual experience across earth's diverse natural settings and reveal humanity's seemingly universal inclination for reverence. The religious experiences cultivated among these groups also show the great extent of humanity's experimentation with altered states of consciousness and extremes of bodily endurance. The rituals performed to heal, revere, and express group solidarity reveal the ways our species has conceptualized and faced the dual mysteries of birth and death.

The presence of a human belief in some sort of afterlife emerges from the earliest archaeological records of ceremonial burials. In hundreds of excavations, burial clearly was done to preserve the body and provide it with decoration (colors, jewelry, flowers, animal skulls, or antlers), foods (meat, grain), and tools (spears, sticks). These arrangements suggest that early humans felt that there was a nonmaterial component of the self, an essence that "lived on" after the physical body had perished and decayed. Thus the disposal of human corpses is clearly more than merely functional: Death seems to be likened to sleep, not mere dissolution, and the function of burial seems to be to open a gateway to an afterlife.

We noted at the start of this chapter the common belief that living beings and some inanimate objects possess a special life force was first labeled by scholars as *animism*. An early and still widely popular articulation of **soul belief** was made in 1871 by **E. B. Tylor** (1831–1917), who argued that religion originated in the universal human perception that there is an invisible soul or intangible spirit inside our visible, tangible bodies. He argued that in all "primitive societies," recognition of a soul shaped similar belief systems across the world.

More recent studies of surviving indigenous religions focus less on belief in vaguely defined souls or spirits and more on the phenomenon of how indigenous peoples

"The first thing when we wake up in the morning is to be thankful to the Great Spirit for the Mother Earth: how we live, what it produces, what keeps everything alive."

—Joshua Wetsit, an Assiniboiné from Montana

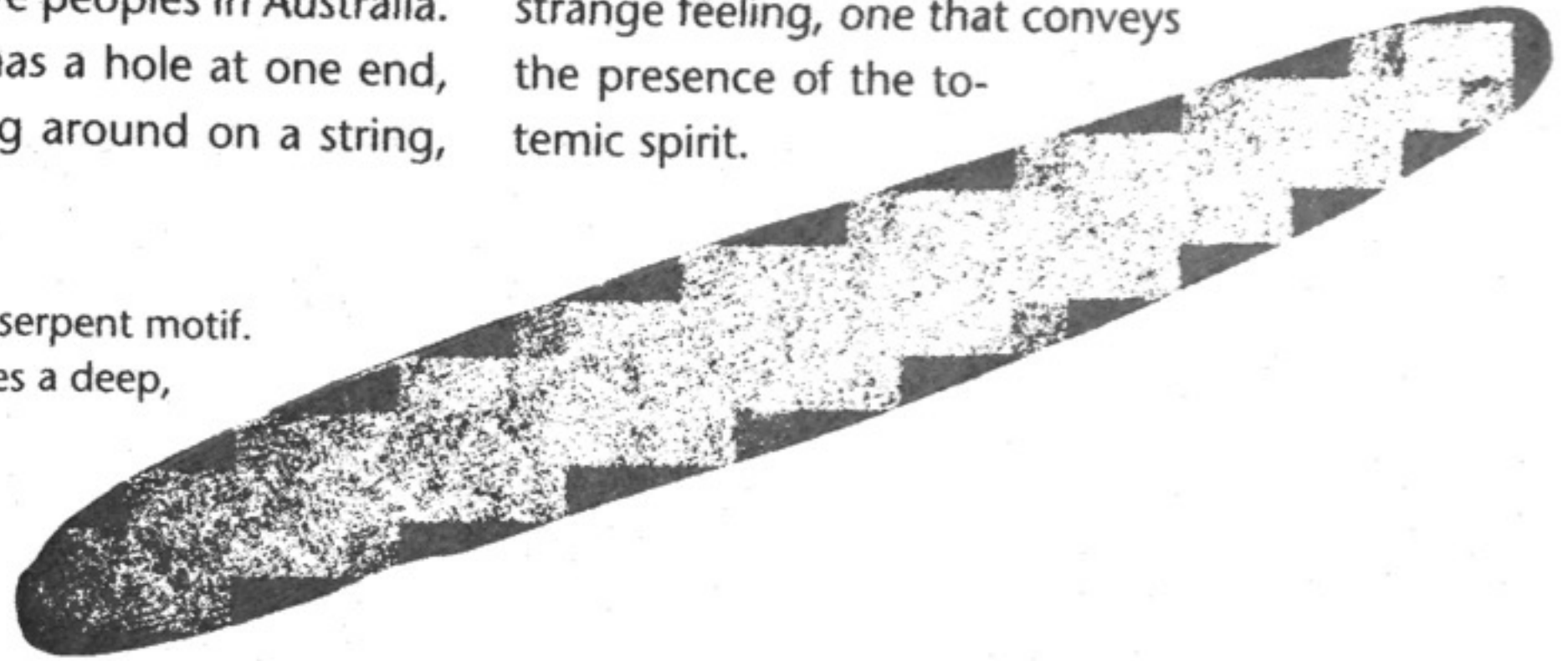
SOURCE: *The Sacred Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life.*

Awakening the Spirits: A Bullroarer

Bullroarers are powerful ritual tools that convey the bond between living and dead members of scattered aboriginal groups, from those in prehistory up to those still used among native peoples in Australia. A bullroarer is a sphere that has a hole at one end, and when the device is swung around on a string,

air passes through, resulting in a booming-whirring sound. The sound waves vibrate at a frequency that affects the human viscera, evoking a strange feeling, one that conveys the presence of the totemic spirit.

A bullroarer painted with a serpent motif. Swinging the roarer produces a deep, piercing sound that elicits a feeling of numinosity in ritual participants.



actually perceive and establish relations with a range of others, human and nonhuman, through their sensory experience. For them, being religious is not about creeds or texts that need interpreting; instead, people experience an embodied engagement with the environment around them, one in which certain stones, animals, trees, and the dead may “speak” to the living. Here emotions, memory, direct experiences, and altered states of consciousness play a part. Most indigenous people sustain a very close relationship with the natural world, one in which the ecosystem is deeply sensed as alive, as fertile, and in the flow of a larger, ordered cosmos.

In hunter-gatherer societies today, human life is more bound up with the recurring rhythms of nature and group interconnections than is the case today in urban industrial societies. The people live by the rising and the setting of the sun, the phases of the moon, and the seasons of the year. Time is circular. This **circular time** follows the pattern of the celestial and natural world. Human lives, too, revolve like the seasons: from life to death, as from spring to summer, fall to winter and then spring and the returning of new life, ever and again in a circle. In myth and ritual and in contact with their sacred centers of revelation, indigenous peoples feel themselves to be part of the largest rhythms of life. There is flow and a quest for equilibrium with the environment; finding the good life has always meant learning to live with the plants, animals, and spirits that share the indigenous peoples’ own world, discerning their motivations and intentions, their love and anger.

This practical and integral relatedness with the natural home world—of hunted animals, essential plants, and surrounding landforms—is realized through the engagement of all their five senses and is guided by myth, mind, and emotions. Resident spirit

beings that have souls also have personalities and the faculty of hearing, and many command the ability to speak; indigenous traditions vary, in fact, by ways these spirit beings speak, their personalities, and the landscapes they occupy through the seasons. The human community's attuning of its senses to this reality through ritual ensures their finding food, avoiding illness, sustaining group harmony, creating healthy children.

All known indigenous peoples have imagined their universe populated by a multitude of supernatural beings that interact with them in life. Many groups believe these ties extend into an afterlife; some assume that souls of the dead reincarnate as humans or other life forms. Relating with spirit beings (or souls) entails making ongoing, reliable connections with them; accordingly, indigenous religions tend to be very careful in performing their communal rituals.

Among most indigenous peoples today, ancestors are in some way still connected with the living; their dreams or visions support the idea that the dead can "return" in nonmaterial form. As we will see, this belief is supported by spirit mediums who serve as dramatic communicators with the dead, who enable a departed soul to speak to the living "from the other side." Although many in the contemporary Euro-American world do not take the content of dreams as seriously as facts derived from "normal waking reality," indigenous peoples today, like most humans before the modern era, regard dreams and visions as very significant sources for understanding the ultimate meanings and purposes of life.

Death is not an ultimate, irrevocable end; in most indigenous societies, it does not imply a final disconnection between the living and the dead. On the contrary, death is an elevation of one's status to that of sacred ancestor. Ancestors, in turn, are venerated as spirits who can help the living by guiding them to the hunting grounds and bringing prey animals their way or by invigorating the wild foods or cultivated crops. By the same token, misfortune in a community may be the fault of the living, who have incited the ancestors' anger and punishment by breaking a moral law or neglecting a ritual. In such situations, harmony between the living, the dead, and all of nature needs to be restored.

Ancestral spirits are seen as custodians of the traditions. They may harm those who flout custom and bless those who are faithful to it. Some scholars, following Tylor, believe that later religions evolved from early animist views of the world and efforts to manage the activities of supernatural spirit-beings. Recent archaeological evidence suggests that the most elaborate burials in late prehistory were conducted to protect the living from the power of malevolent souls. Perhaps powerful ancestral spirits (both the kind and the dangerous) became the world's first gods.

Among the **Dani**, a simple agricultural group in highland New Guinea, belief that the soul survives into an afterlife profoundly shapes the ways of the living. In their death rituals, the Dani try to direct the soul of a person who has just died to a distant ghost land. Yet many ghosts are thought to return to cause problems, especially if their last rites were not done properly or their death is not avenged in timely fashion. Thus Dani elders take great care when performing funerals, and they maintain small guest houses to accommodate, and pacify, the occasional ghost visitors.

Further, rival Dani villages engage continually in lethal warfare, whose main purpose is for the men to satisfy a newly departed kinsman's spirit by killing someone on the enemy's side. The Dani moral code includes the precept of "a life for a life." Moreover, since losing a kinsman inevitably weakens the collective community and each individual's soul, avenging the loss of the deceased by killing an enemy tribesman is the only means to restore the vitality of the survivors' souls. In fact, Dani kinship and food production is organized around the central need for supplying the feasts that must be held to mark deaths and celebrate revenge killings. Appeasing ancestral ghosts is always in mind.

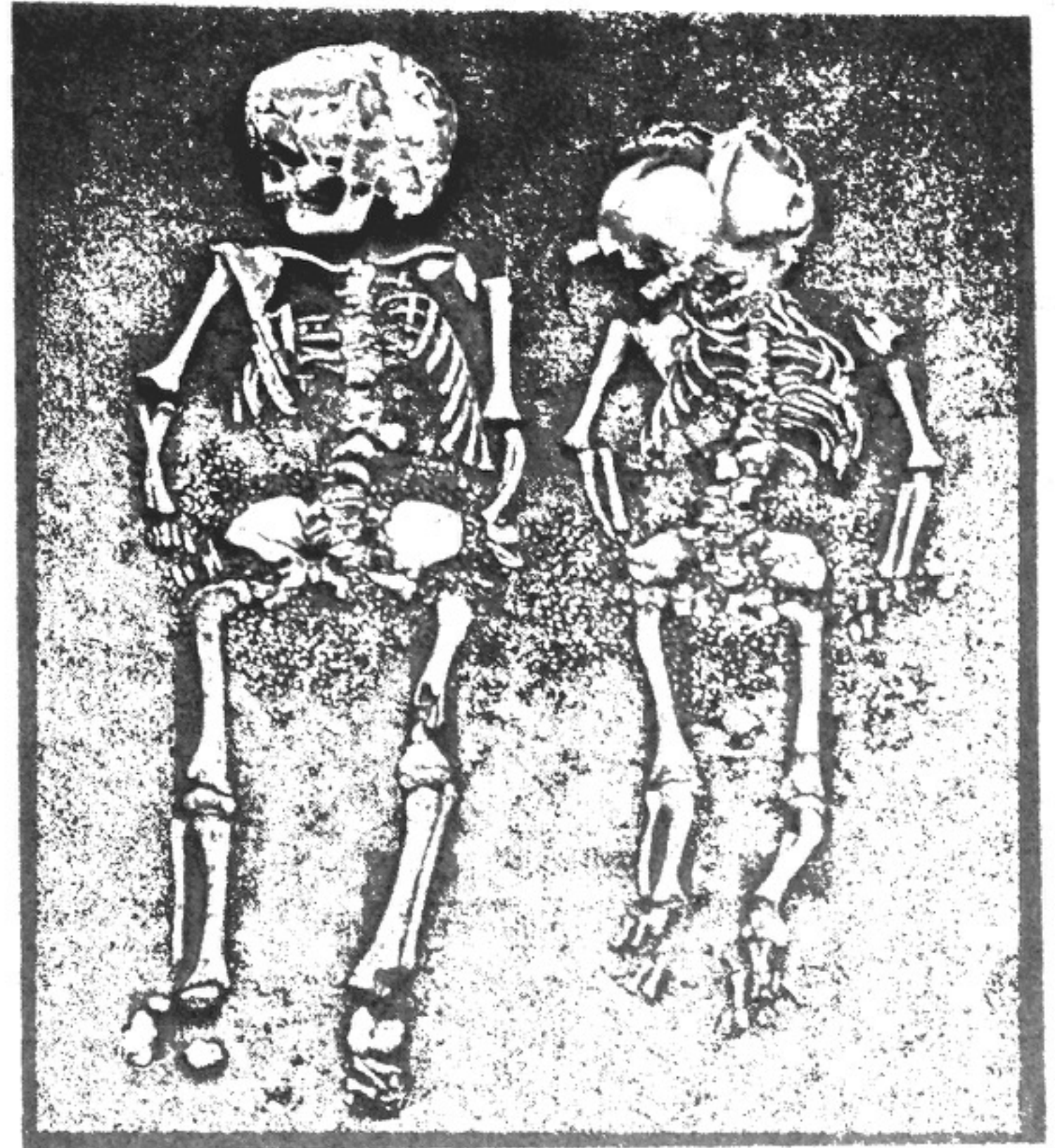
The Dani, like the Blackfoot tribe of the Northern Plains of North America, are representative of the many indigenous groups in which shamans are absent or marginal. Lacking a class of priests, every adult learns to perform the most common rituals. But there are in both societies wise religious leaders who are looked to for leading major communal festivals based on their ready knowledge of the intricate rites. Dani religious leaders are thoughtful in hosting the regular visits of ancestral ghosts; the Blackfoot wise men and women religious leaders show care in treating spirits as honored guests, feeding them, making lovely home altars, and assembling the finest medicine bundles for offerings.

Religious tradition pervades the lives of indigenous peoples. If they live in the prescribed ways, which always requires them to show respect for the beings around them (human and nonhuman), members of the group will lead successful lives.

TOTEMISM: AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL RELIGION

Across the world, anthropologists have noted that many indigenous groups use a symbol, or totem, to establish their fundamental identity, identify proper marriage partners, promote collective solidarity, and regulate relations with outsiders. A **totem** is an animal, reptile, insect, or plant that is emblematic of the community and is treated as sacred. The relationship between totems and groups reveals a special circle of kinship and a primal connection between humans and the rest of nature.

Totemism is still found among some Native Americans and is common among the various **aboriginal peoples of Australia**. To understand this belief system, we can take an example from the latter: Members of the aboriginal kangaroo clan believe that their origins occurred in the **Dreamtime**, when the world as we know it was



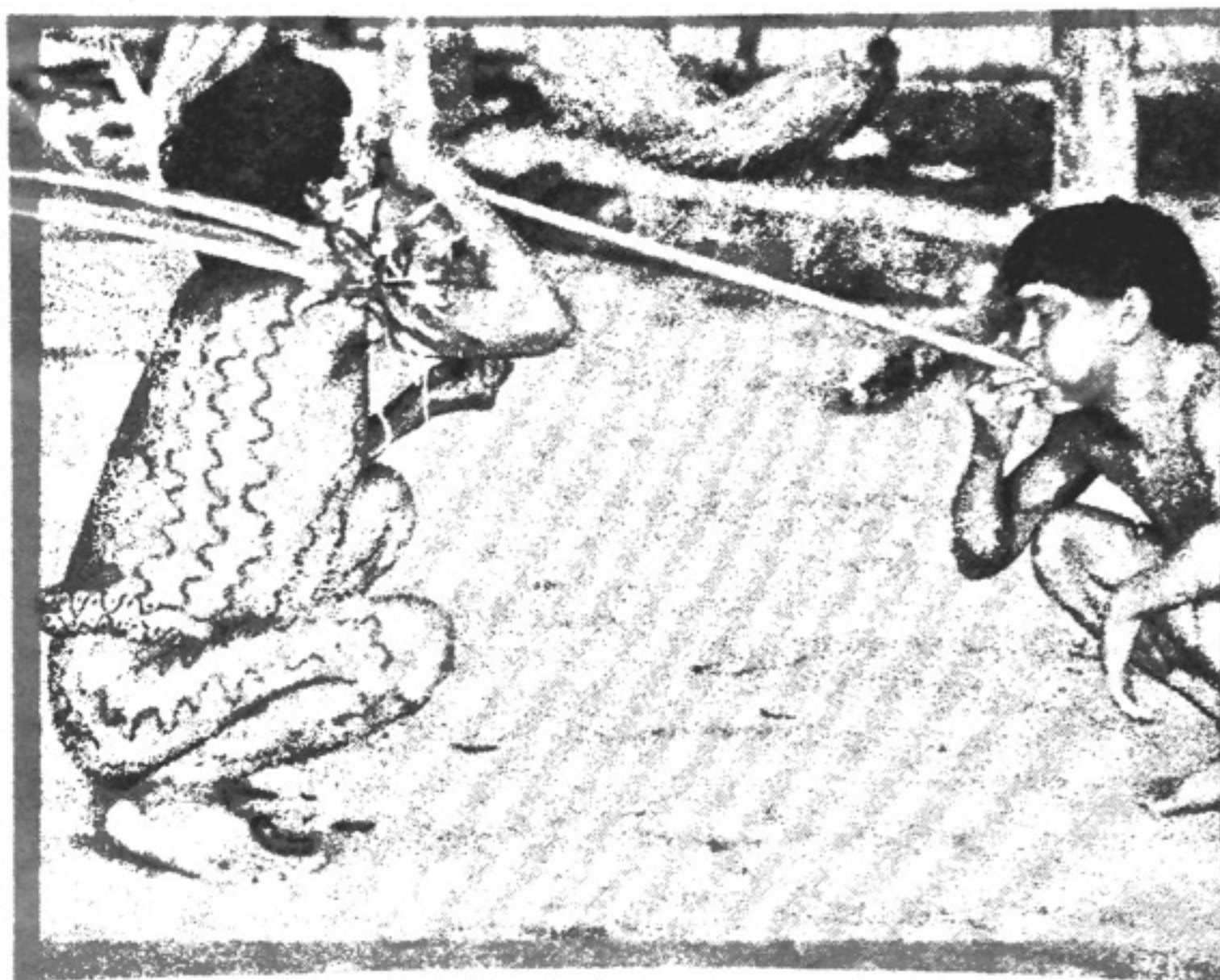
Burial of children from 20,000 BCE: With the remains are perforated shells and remnants of decorated clothing.

Rituals and Rites

Shamans Across the World

The shaman remains the key religious specialist in many societies today. The term *shaman* (alternatively pronounced "SHAY-man" or "shah-MAN") comes from the Evenk, a group of hunters and reindeer herders in Siberia. The term was adopted for all similar practitioners, however, because early scholars thought that the Siberian shaman tradition had spread across Eurasia and into the Americas, a theory that is doubted today. Four religious figures are central to an understanding of the world's religions: the shaman, the prophet, the sage, and the priest. The first is our concern in this chapter, for the shaman

is still found among peoples on every inhabited continent and in the earliest records of our direct forebears.



Though differing in details of clothing and techniques, shamans are found across the world today: left, a Yanomami shaman in the Amazon; right, a Korean shaman in Seoul.

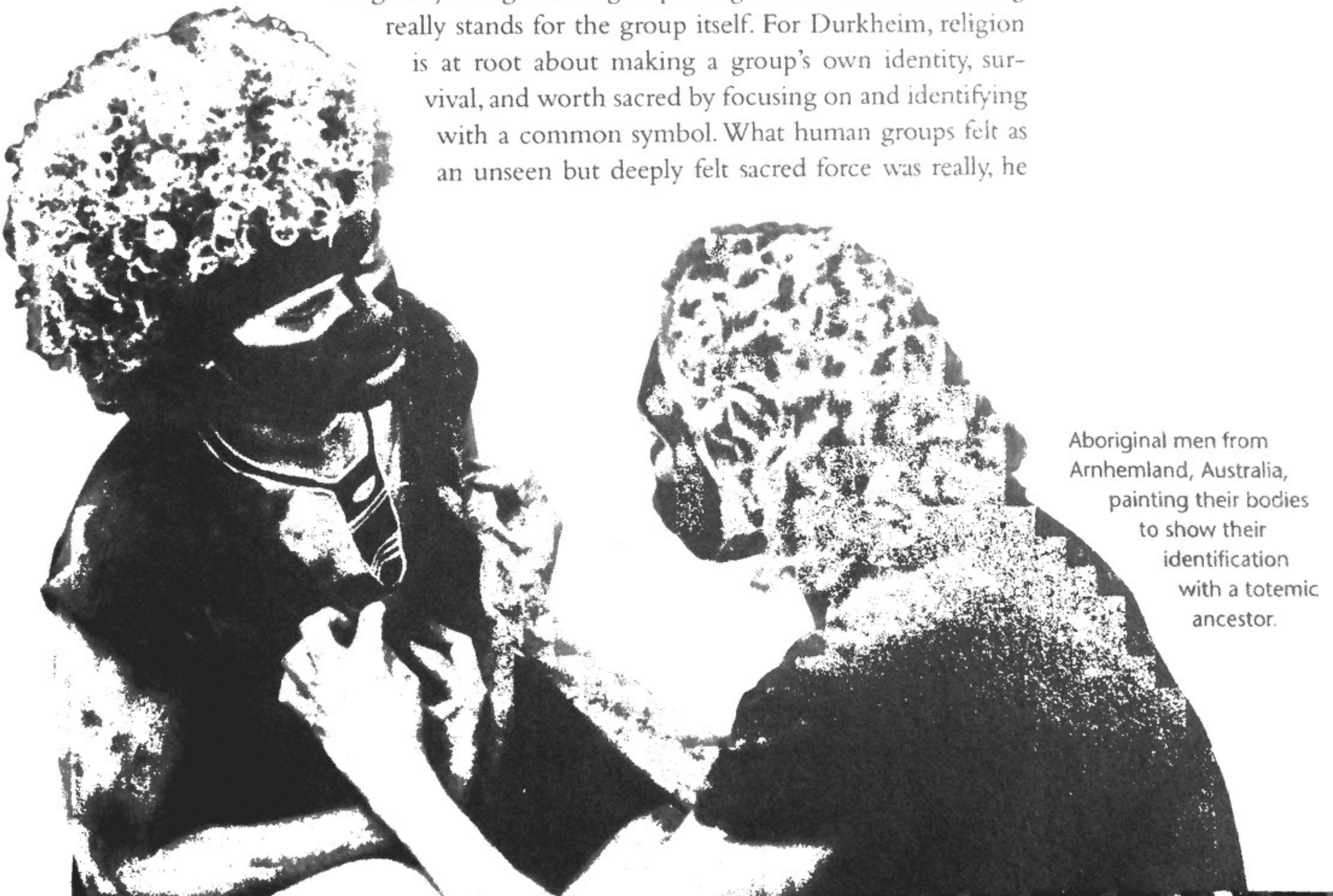
being created. Their myths inform them that their clan consists of the descendants of their totemic progenitor, the first kangaroo, who created them from her own body and essence, established their existence as humans, and then led them to their current home territory, making landforms, including rivers and mountains, and other creatures. Accordingly, the group members ritually decorate their bodies with kangaroo drawings; and before children are considered to be adults, they must learn the distinctive dances and songs recounting the group's totemic kangaroo story. Elder men pass down these secrets to the young men through initiation; they are most protective of

the sacred symbols, the polished wood or stone *churinga* that symbolize the totem and are inscribed with the most sacred maps or tales of the founder and other heroes. The group is also protective of its own “songlines,” the myths that are sung to trace in detail the progenitor’s trail of creation over the land, an oral record giving the group claims to a shared identity and territory.

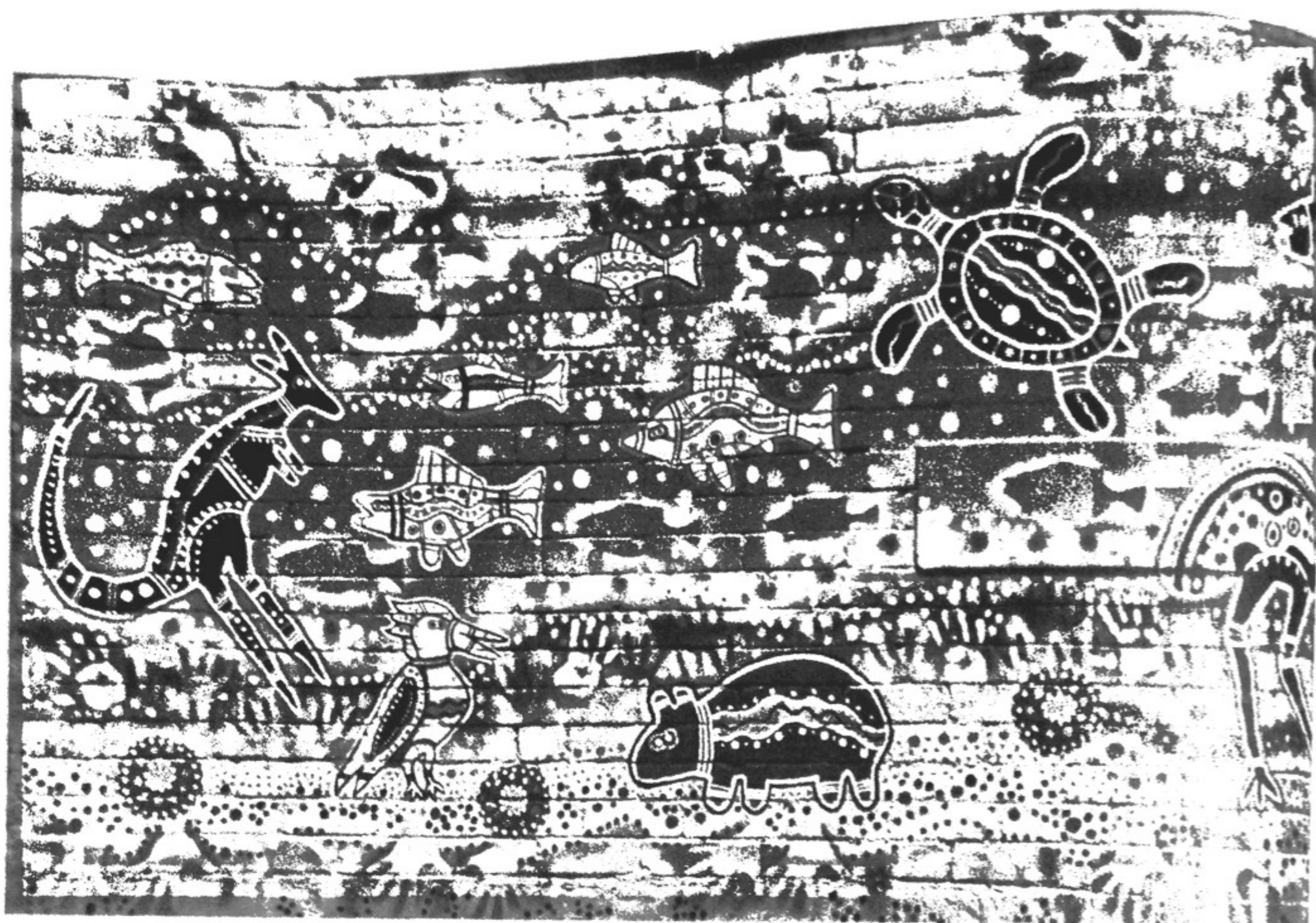
Harming or eating a kangaroo is almost always forbidden, or **taboo**, to members of the kangaroo clan. The totemic kangaroo spirit that dwells in the home territory is thought to be alive and protective of the group. Elders pray to and invoke it for healing and guidance. Women of the kangaroo clan who want to become pregnant visit the places where the totemic spirits reside, for they believe that conception—via spirit/soul acquisition—cannot occur without exposure to the totem’s life force.

There is also a unique and regularly performed ritual that unifies the totemic group. In addition to singing and acting out their myth of origins, all the “kangaroos” in the group, on this one annual occasion, gather to renew their primordial identity and “become one flesh” again. How? By hunting down a kangaroo and ingesting its flesh. These rites are performed to increase the totemic species and give spiritual strength to individuals in the group. Here, again, in the totemic belief system, humans and nature form a spiritual totality: Although the design of the world was fixed once and for all in the Dreamtime, it is the task of humans, through their totemic rites, to maintain and renew this creation.

The French sociologist **Émile Durkheim** (1858–1917) argued that totemism points to a key feature in all religious life. It is the sacred totem (in our example, the kangaroo) that gives the group a singular focus and in so doing really stands for the group itself. For Durkheim, religion is at root about making a group’s own identity, survival, and worth sacred by focusing on and identifying with a common symbol. What human groups felt as an unseen but deeply felt sacred force was really, he



Aboriginal men from Arnhemland, Australia, painting their bodies to show their identification with a totemic ancestor.



The art of contemporary Australian Aborigines depicts totemic beings and their role in creation during the "Dreamtime."

argued, the cohesive power of group unity. For Durkheim the central purpose of religious myth is to frame society's customs with a long and noble history such that they can be respected as sacred and bring social stability to human life.

Durkheim's influential theory is that whatever else has come to define religious beliefs across the world's human groups, religion's power to bind us together is what established it and keeps it central to human life.

Shamans: "Technicians of the Sacred"

What happens if the group's band of skilled hunters come home empty-handed after a month? How to respond when debilitating illness marked by fever, chills, and physical weakness afflicts a growing number of villagers? Who can halt or reverse the series of misfortunes befalling a family that has let its ancestral shrine fall into ruins? Only a **spirit medium**, or **shaman**, referred to variously as *medicine man*, *folk healer*, *witch doctor*, and so on, can intervene with the unseen powers. These terms taken together designate some of the usual traits attributed to shamans.

Among the many fascinating scenes shown in prehistoric cave art are over fifty images of humans that suggest the depiction of no ordinary person. Two are famous: a bison hovering over a man, with a pole surmounted by a bird, and a human seeming to morph into a composite animal who walks hidden among a large herd of deer. These two ancient paintings may be the first recorded depictions of the shaman, an individual with special powers, whose roles, even 30,000 years ago, may have included healing the souls and bodies of others, dealing with death, and venturing into the realm of the dead. The Kung healers in recent decades have embellished rock walls with shamanic paintings, and records of similar practices have been found in ancient caves in Europe and Asia. Scholars have posited that the prehistoric shamans are shown discerning the movements of animal herds, guiding the hunters to success, and perhaps recalling the errant souls of the living.

The term *shaman* identifies a religious specialist who mediates between the human community and the usually unseen supernatural beings also populating our world. The role varies across the world: In some indigenous societies they dominate in the group's religious life; in others, the medium remains a marginal, often-distrusted figure resorted to only in dire circumstances, where chiefs, priests, or healers perform the group's ritual and healing functions. And some indigenous societies have no tradition of spirit mediums at all. The most common shaman's role worldwide is the ability to heal (both literally and metaphorically) through **spirit flight** achieved in trance or an altered state of consciousness; in some indigenous groups, shamans utilize psychotropic drugs found in nature to achieve or aid their otherworldly journey. Shaman healers usually cooperate with spiritual beings and in some places are distinct from **sorcerers**, mediums who manipulate the spirit world and coerce the supernaturals without their consent, often for their own benefit and against community values.

Where found, shamans are ritual specialists, intermediaries who attempt to connect this world to another realm of being that impinges on humanity. By these acts, they knit together the community in the face of the chaos of disease, death, and discord. Many shamans through their spirit flights return to teach their communities, and through trance rituals they demonstrate that the daily, ordinary world is not all there is. A deeper spiritual order enfolds the known, everyday experience of life. In most indigenous societies, the living and the dead, the community and its sacred ancestors, form one great community. Binding it all together, the shaman uses his or her body as a bridge to connect these two worlds. If harmony in an indigenous group has been shattered by troubling ancestral ghosts, only the shaman, who is able to visit both worlds and communicate the needs of one to the other, can restore balance.

Shamans have been found in over a thousand indigenous societies, though their practices vary. A commonly held conception in the indigenous religions is that sickness can be due to the loss of an individual's soul, by accident or by theft. In some indigenous societies, people believe that illness can be induced by an enemy's inserting a foreign object such as a piece of bone or an insect into a victim's body. The common characteristic of the shaman's intervention is to discover this, locate the object, and remove it to cure the afflicted party.

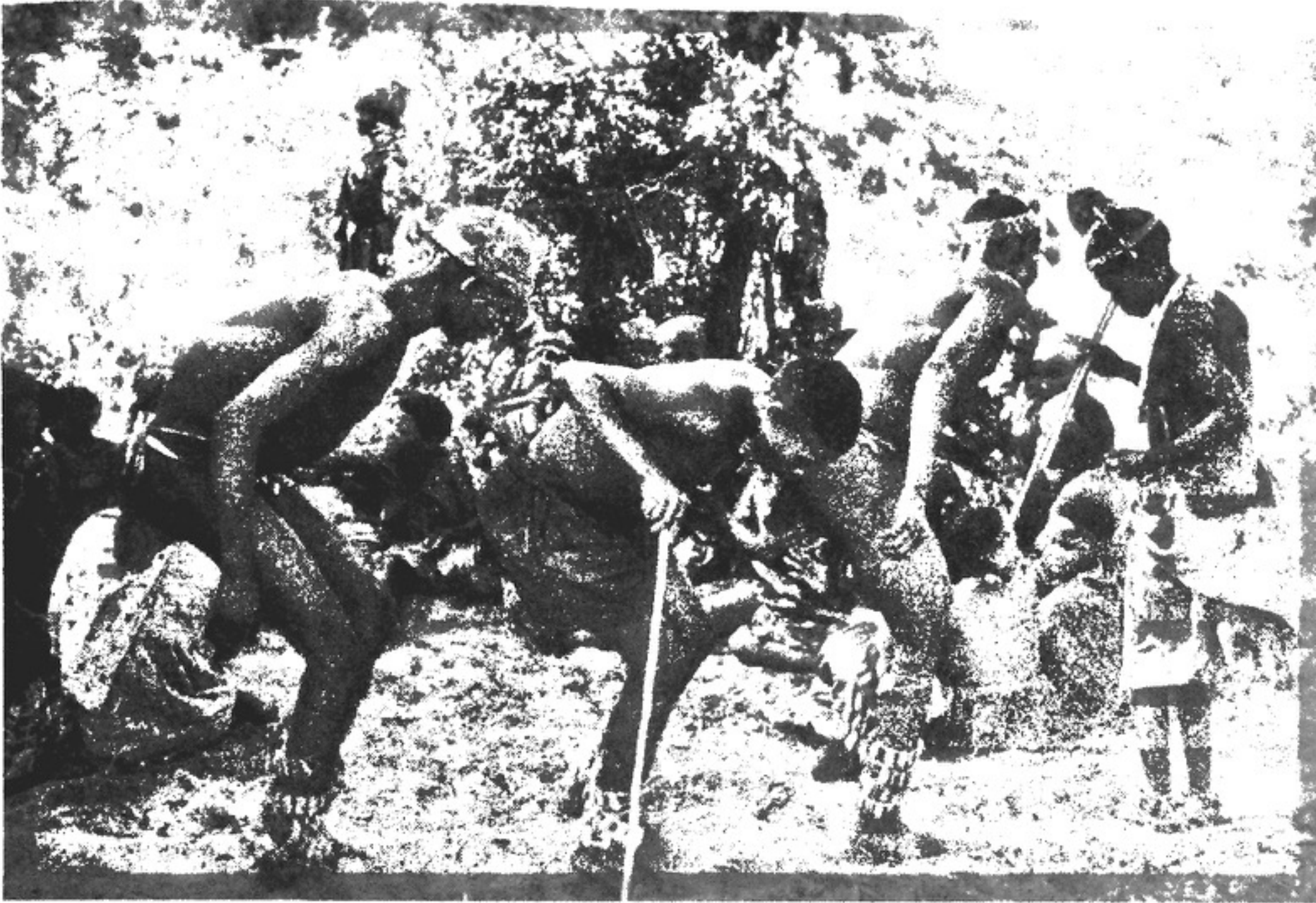
The trance state can be reached by drumming and singing alone, but in global perspective shamans have also discovered a long list of psychotropic agents for altering consciousness to their purposes. Fasting is common, but practices may also involve the inhaling of incense, snuffs, or smoke from psychoactive herbs or the ingesting of mushrooms or potent plant concoctions. The shaman's trance may be marked by loud breathing, protruding eyes, insensitivity to temperature or pain, convulsions, or trembling. In many traditions, the shaman's soul is thought to leave the physical body, free to fly to the heavens, beneath the earth, or under the sea. On these *spirit flights*, or *soul journeys*, shamans attempt to locate another person's lost soul, perhaps because it has wandered off in this world or passed on to the afterlife. A common belief is that the dead person's soul needs a shaman's assistance to reach the afterlife dwelling place of the clan's ancestors.

Shamans through initiation find connection with a protective spirit, or **tutelary spirit**. This is a supernatural agent, often an ancestral spirit, whose help is required to perform the difficult soul journeys, negotiate with evil spirits, compel a soul to return, or increase the shaman's healing powers. In many tribes, shamans have human helpers who watch over their unconscious bodies during trance states, for they, too, can remain stuck as spirits if their souls cannot return to their bodies.

The shamanic world is one in which spirits coexist with humans in a layered cosmos, with humans occupying the earth between an upper and a lower world. The spirits are particularly accessible to humans around sacred physical objects or unusual places. As we saw in Chapter 1, each culture regards these locations as being connected to the "center of the world" (*axis mundi*). Most commonly, such sites are actual or symbolic sacred mountains or sacred trees, revered as places of original revelations, intensely alive with spiritual power, or **numinous** presence. Several examples show how shamanic traditions from around the world today share common traits.

* Case Study in Healing Trance: Kung San Healers

The Kung San of southern Africa believe that the dead go to an afterlife, a "next world," populated by ancestors, one that is similar to this world and is linked closely to the living. Souls that miss the living return to earth as ghosts and try to sicken friends and family members in an effort to hasten their arrival in the next world. The most accomplished Kung shamans (*n/um kausi*) have the ability to enter into a trance during night-long dances, in which everyone joins in ceremonies of rhythmic drumming and singing around a fire. With this group support and social purpose, anthropologists suggest, the Kung shamans activate a natural force within their bodies, the *n/um*, a power that "boils" in and moves up the spine. The body shakes and sweats, and inhalations grow forced and deeper as the shaman slips into a trance state. Thus empowered, the shaman begins to touch the bodies of others to transfer the healing force of the boiling *n/um* into them. Expert healers can also identify and suck out poisons from the bodies of the sick; some may massage the patient with a mixture of the shaman's own sweat and blood. Healers who perceive the ghosts of troublesome ancestors watching the dance outside the community circle may hurl stones at the uninvited spectators or at deities in



A Kung healing ceremony. The trancing and healing performed by Kung shamans depends on the community's participating in drumming, singing, and dancing.

the shadows who are identified as causing difficulties. The most effective Kung shamans are honored, but they are otherwise typical members of the tribe; most are men.

The most skilled Kung shamans enter into a deep trance state (*kia*) so that their souls can leave the body and journey to the "next world." There they confirm the fate of the dead, investigate causes of sickness, or convey messages between the dead and the living. The spirit flight is a practice attributed to shamans in nearly all indigenous societies, past and present.

The shaman's role is universally regarded as mortally dangerous. The Kung call entering trance "being half-dead" and with great care guard a shaman's physical body while the healer's soul journeys to "the other world." Like many indigenous peoples, the Kung are also careful not to startle sleeping individuals, for fear that souls wandering during sleep will not have time to return to a person who has been awakened suddenly.

Men and women who become shamans in the Kung or other cultures must train through long apprenticeships. But in most groups it is common for shamans to feel that they were chosen for the role by a tutelary spirit, often in spite of their own resistance. Novice shamans must prove their ability by surviving an initiation ordeal that may require fasting and acts of extraordinary physical endurance. Each must demonstrate the capacity for trance, the grace of a tutelary spirit, and evidence of supernormal powers. Many shamans feel that they wear out their bodies by repeatedly undergoing near-death experiences in the course of soul journeys or the ingestion of spirit-infused herbs.

* Case Study: Sioux Vision Quest for a Spirit Ally

Among the **Lakota Sioux** of North America, young men go to a sacred wilderness region on a *vision quest* in search of a personal protector spirit. After preparatory

"You dance, dance, dance, dance. Then *n/um* lifts you up in your belly and lifts up in your back, and you start to shiver. In trance, you see everything, because you see what's troubling everybody. . . . Then *n/um* enters every part of your body, right to your feet and even your hair. . . . Then *n/um* makes your thoughts nothing in your head."

—Kinachau, a Kung San healer

SOURCE: Richard Katz, *Boiling Energy: Community Healing Among the Kalahari Kung* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

Modern Native American art depicting the flight of the shaman.



training, the apprentices fast and purify themselves in a sweat lodge. Then each one ventures out alone into the wilderness. The Lakota believe, as do the Kiowa, that every human being has the potential for supernatural connection and that all should be encouraged to develop this ability.

Those contacted by strong spirit allies and who have vivid visions of the ancestors may go on to become shamans after further training with an elder practitioner. As the Lakota shaman Lame Deer recalled his experience, "All of a sudden I heard the cry of an eagle, loud and above the voices of many other birds. It seemed to say, 'We have been waiting for you. We knew you would come.'"¹ Apprentices learn the techniques of trance, the myths of the tribe, the location of "power places" in the landscape, and other healing arts that involve the use of medicines. Shamans are never the same after initiation; many receive a new name, a new identity, and in the myths they even obtain a new body. Shamans encounter evil spirits that must be tricked, seduced, or killed to complete the healing task. Given these arduous demands, becoming a shaman is often described as a death-and-rebirth experience.

BEAR SACRIFICE: A WIDESPREAD ARCTIC AND PACIFIC RIM TRADITION

We have noted how shamans can serve as mediums who bring the spirits down to earth for "ritual negotiations." An example of this practice is the bear sacrifice, once one of the most widespread rituals in the world and common across the upper Pacific Rim and the vast circumpolar region from northern Japan to North America. As observed

"The greatest peril in life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls. All these creatures that we have to kill and eat, all we have to strike down to make clothes for ourselves, have souls, souls that do not perish and which must be pacified lest they revenge themselves on us for taking away their bodies."

—Ivaluardjuk, an Inuit healer

SOURCE: *The Sacred Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life.*



A bear raised from infancy is exercised in preparation for a community sacrifice by AINU tribesmen in northern Japan.

in modern times, shamans carefully manage the sacrificial rituals, offering gifts from humans in exchange for an animal's life. A common belief in hunter-gatherer societies is that animals are actually spirits in disguise who assume animal bodies to interact with humans. This may have been the earliest example of humanity conceptualizing divine incarnation, the embodiment in earthly form of a supernatural being.

Among the **Ainu** people on Hokkaido Island in northern Japan, spirits that incarnate themselves as animals are called *kamui*. They mostly dwell in an "other world" but can have contact with humans by coming to earth and assuming life in a bear's body. The Ainu conception is that humans and *kamui* are of equal status. Although the latter (when unencumbered by a body) can fly and have magical powers, only humans can give them what they really need and want: precious wine and *inau*, the earth's fragrant willow sticks. In the Ainu understanding, the spirits don animal bodies to acquire their fur as "clothes" to trade, for they can get *inau* and wine in exchange. This transaction requires that they be ritually hunted and have their bodies killed to complete the exchange that benefits both parties.

The Ainu shaman performs special rituals to attract a spirit in its bear incarnation. Knowing that an exchange has been requested and consenting to it if humans have kept up their part in earlier exchanges, a bear cub leaves trail signs that allow hunters to track and capture it. Villages then raise the specially chosen animal until it becomes fully grown. Afterward, the shaman addresses the bear respectfully, makes the proper offerings, performs a ritual execution, and releases the *kamui* spirit to return to the other world, happy with its gifts. The Ainu believe that if the sacred conventions of the exchange are duly observed, the *kamui* just released and other spirits will continue to

assume animal form. Thus the shaman ensures that the people will have a continuous supply of meat and shelter.

SHAMANS WHO "REPAIR THE WORLD"

A shaman's expertise can also be effective when a human group acts improperly. The practices of the Inuit (who dwell around the Arctic region) illustrate the shaman's role in "repairing the world." The Inuit believe that the great goddess Takanakapsaluk, Mistress of Sea Animals, lives on the ocean floor and releases whales, seals, fish, and other marine creatures so that they may be killed for human use. But the Inuit believe that when their community performs the ritual improperly or someone breaks a moral taboo, the goddess's hair "becomes soiled" and she burns in anger, holding back all creatures in her domain. The Inuit shaman must then be called for a séance. To follow one account:

He sits behind a curtain and says again and again, "The way is made ready for me!" after which the audience responds, "Let it be so." Finally from behind the curtain, the shaman cries, "Halala-he-he-he halala-he-he!" Then he drops down a tube, which is believed to lead straight to the bottom of the sea. The shaman's voice can be heard receding further in the depths, and finally it disappears. During the shaman's absence, the audience sits in the darkened house, listening to faint sighing and groaning, while singing songs of past journeys: the shaman's dodging three deadly guard stones, averting the father of the goddess, and getting past a fierce guard dog. Approaching the goddess, the shaman finds her angry, with hair uncombed, filthy, and hanging over her eyes. The creatures of the ocean sit in a pool beside her. The shaman gently turns the goddess toward the animals and a nearby lamp, combing and washing her hair. He then asks why the animals are not coming, and she replies that they are being withheld because the people have eaten forbidden boiled meat and because the women have kept their miscarriages secret, failing to purify their homes afterward. Mollified by praises and promises to make amends, goddess Takanakapsaluk releases the animals and they are swept back into the ocean. The shaman's return is marked by a distant, then louder call of "Plu-a-he-he!" as he finally shakes in his place, gasping for breath. After a silence, he demands, "Your words must rise up," and then the audience members begin to confess their misdeeds. By the end of the séance, there is a mood of optimism.⁴

The Yanomami shamans of the Amazon rain forest also illustrate how mediums repair community life by bringing spirits down to earth. Village leader, curer, and defender against evil spirits, the village shaman (always male) locates and returns the

disoriented souls of sick or dying villagers. If others have acted to weaken or steal someone's soul, it is the shaman who must identify both the misdeed and the perpetrators. To be initiated as shaman and to achieve such abilities, an individual must memorize chants, drumming, and struts to attract the support of his special ancestral spirits. The shaman must also master the use of the hallucinogenic snuff called *ebene*, made from psychoactive plants that the shaman's own teacher repeatedly blew into the student's nostrils as part of his training. This powerful substance is thought to be a spirit ally that is essential for opening the Yanomami shaman's body to perceive, feel, and contact his tribe's spirit allies.

The Yanomami shaman has the power to conduct the spirits into the human world. The spirits can then be induced to enter the shaman's body and respond to questions about matters of concern, small or great. At times and without invitation, the shaman's mouth may speak the spirit's messages about group origins, life's meaning, or any hidden facts relevant to recent events.

The reliance on psychoactive substances to assist the shaman to achieve altered states of consciousness, as found among the Yanomami, is not universal. Drug-induced trances are limited mostly to groups in the Americas, where the use of the cactus peyote, the vine extract ayahuasca, and plants such as jimson and datura have long been in the shaman's medicine bag. What is universal for shamans across the world, even among shamans utilizing psychoactive drugs, is reliance on the impact of fast, rhythmic drumming, dancing, chanting, and fasting to induce trance experiences. Thus, the drum or the rattle is a universal symbol of the shaman's extraordinary religious practice.

Tales of Spiritual Transformation

The Peyote Ceremony: Divine Communion

From that time, whenever they held peyote meetings, we all attended and . . . one time something happened to me. . . . I was sitting with bowed head, . . . we prayed, . . . then I saw Jesus standing there. . . . I will pray to him, I thought. I stood up and raised my arm. I prayed. I asked for a good life—thanking God who gave me my life. And as the drum was beating, my body shook to the beat. I was unaware of it. I was just very contented. I never knew such pleasure as this. There was a sensation of great joyousness. Now I was an angel.

That is how I saw myself. Because I had wings I was supposed to fly but I could not quite get my feet off the ground. . . . I knew when I ate peyote that they were using something holy. That way is directed toward God. Nothing else on earth is holy, . . . and if someone sees something holy at a peyote meeting, that is really true. I understood that this religion is holy.

—Shirley Etsitty, Native American Church

Source: *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life* (Tsaile, AZ: Navajo Community College Press, 1996).

Indigenous Religions Today

THE CATAclysms OF COLONIALISM

A theme that runs throughout this book is the disruptions to life and religious traditions caused by modern European colonialism. For indigenous societies across the planet, this global expansion of invading outsiders and the political dominance they imposed has been utterly disastrous.

This cataclysm has had many facets. Native peoples of the New World and other remote regions were decimated by the diseases of Eurasia, to which they had no natural resistance. Often simultaneously, the disease-bearing outsiders plundered the native people's riches, utilizing horses and superior weapons technology to achieve their aims. In the early colonial era, millions of people in small-scale subsistence societies were killed or enslaved. In countless instances, the outsiders appropriated and transformed the native lands when natural resources were discovered there. Whole peoples were ruthlessly swept aside, and ways of life that had evolved over centuries were violently ended. Since religion is closely related to a community's way of life, the epidemics and genocide suffered by the world's indigenous peoples inevitably included the destruction and deformation of ancient religious traditions.

Over time, as the worst cruelties of colonial rule eased, the survivors and their descendants faced stark choices. Would they risk the chaos of migration by retreating into the receding natural frontiers of forests and mountains? Would they acquiesce to a nineteenth-century government's program of forced resettlement on reservations? Or would the best choice be for individuals to go their separate ways, to assimilate with the dominant society and submit to the national laws of others? Whatever the choice, the solidarity and cultural integrity of most of these displaced groups worldwide has weakened over every generation. It has inevitably been the young who have seen the limits of their minority status, rejected the old dialects and religious customs, and responded to the allure of the dominant culture by embracing assimilation.

Exposure to missionary religions and their alien exponents often contributed to the downfall of the indigenous religions. Beliefs and practices of many native peoples elicited much hostility and criticism. Governments in the Americas and Australia forced indigenous children to attend missionary schools, where Christianity was aggressively taught and in which traditional practices were ruthlessly banned. Students who spoke their native languages were subject to punishment. Missionaries viewed shamans as obstacles to the advance of the colonizing powers. Outsiders often accused the native healers of combining evil with fakery: acting as "servants of the devil" while also being imposters or religious charlatans who exploited a naive, credulous people. For the Euro-American Christian immigrants, for example, shamanism represented the chaotic wilderness, the shaman a shady character and source of disruptive chaos that threatened the colonial order. Under these circumstances, native peoples in many

cases had to hide their drums, medicines, and sacred images. They believed that the only way to preserve their culture was to take it underground.

Other native peoples, however, organized in attempts to restore their place in the world and give new life to their traditions. In North America, shamans rallied to attempt to revitalize native peoples in the nineteenth century through a movement called the **Ghost Dance**. After the decimation of the buffalo by white hunters, which greatly contributed to the destruction of the indigenous way of life on the Great Plains, several elders had the same visionary revelation: Their tutelary spirits announced a way to restore the lost world by bringing back the ancestors and causing the whites to disappear. Native American religious leaders then preached that this could be accomplished if all the people performed a new dance ritual as prescribed by the spirits. Soon this Ghost Dance was practiced with fervor across the Great Plains by those whose kin had died, with the dancers falling unconscious in hopes of experiencing reunion with their deceased relatives. One leader in this movement had this vision of the Ghost Dance recorded:

All Indians must dance, everywhere, and keep on dancing. Pretty soon in the next spring, the Great Spirit come. . . . The game be thick everywhere. All dead Indians come back and live again. . . . White can't hurt Indian then. Then big flood come like water and all white people die, get drowned. After that, water go away and then nobody but Indians everywhere and game of all kinds thick.⁵

The pain of engagement with outsiders is unmistakable in this new religious movement, one that sought to bind a vision of ecological renewal with the restoration of traditional religious consciousness. The U.S. Cavalry was ordered to end this nationwide movement in 1890 by massacring the men, women, and children gathered for a Ghost Dance at Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

By 2010, no indigenous societies remain that have not been exposed to the world of outsiders, with their missionaries, armies, nation-states, and corporations. Some have even been the targets of genocidal persecution. Most of the Kung people have been relocated onto reservations, forced to give up hunting, and directed to adopt agriculture or simple craft production. The Ainu of northern Japan have suffered land seizures and legal discrimination and are so stigmatized today that few are willing to profess knowledge of the old traditions and shamanic practices. Native peoples of the Amazon rain forest have been displaced by land-clearing settlers and threatened by multinational mining and oil drilling projects. The history of Native Americans since 1500 is a shameful story of genocide and land taking, made worse by legal discrimination against Native American religious practices. In every decade of the twenty-first century, hundreds of indigenous languages and religious traditions will decline in use and disappear forever. It is hard for those centered in the dominant world civilization to absorb vicariously the shattering impact of the past centuries on the earth's "first peoples." Many groups today are involved with land ownership disputes with their federal governments, and they call for the return of human remains and the sacred items of their ancestors that were collected by museum curators in the past.

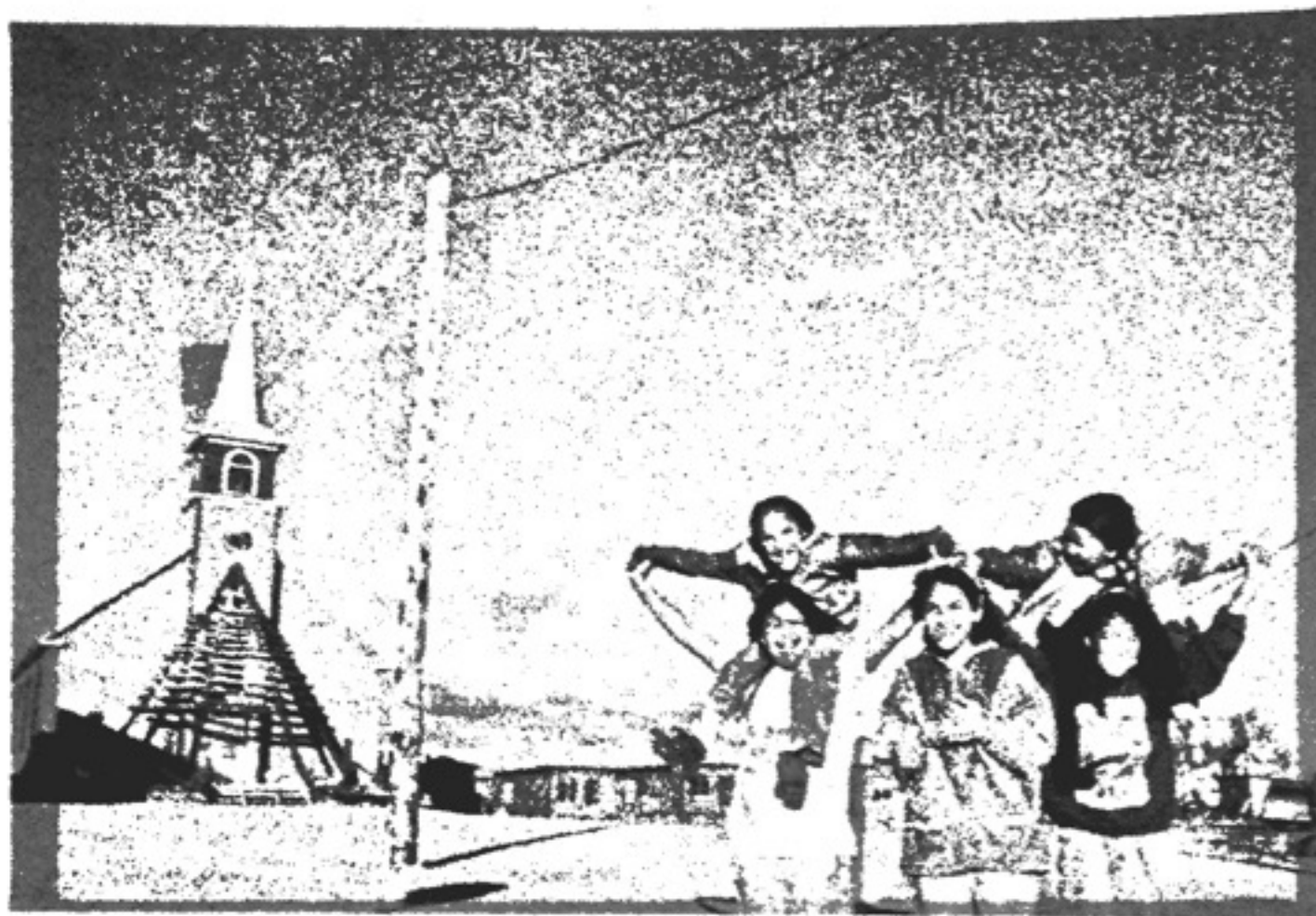
"Our church is
the world."

—John Emhoolah,
Kiowa leader of
North America

SOURCE: *The Sacred Ways of
Knowledge, Sources of Life.*

The Native American Church

In the United States today, over 550 Indian nations are recognized by the U.S. federal government, each with its own history and tribal land and each practicing its own distinct traditional religion. In the last century, there have been successful efforts to draw Native Americans into new religious groups in what scholars have identified as the "pan-Americanization" of in-



igenous peoples. The **Native American Church** is a major example of this phenomenon, one that has had one faction drawn into the orbit of Christianity and another that remains independent. But the two are united in their ceremonial use of the cactus peyote as a communal sacrament. This "melting pot" movement remains controversial among some Native Americans, who criticize how the Native American Church draws tribal members away from their own group's traditions. An additional problem this group encounters is the drug enforcement laws of the U.S. government. Similar indigenous peoples' new religions have started in South America. Two examples are Santo Daime and União do Vegetal; both are syncretistic, influenced by Christian morality and folk religion, and centered on a traditional psychotropic herb, in this case, ayahuasca. Both also have now spread across the globe, attracting nonindigenous devotees from Japan to Europe.

Source: http://www.nativeamericanchurch.net/Native_American_Church/NATIVE_AMERICAN_CHURCH.html

Some indigenous groups that have survived with their cultures most intact live far from resources the modernizing world has sought: in the trans-Arctic zone, deep in the rain forests, high in the remotest mountains, or on isolated islands far from the continental landmasses. Others have found successful means of assimilating, with members gaining education and employment outside the group and integrating modern economic life with indigenous tradition. Those groups that have retained autonomy, resisted assimilation, and worked to revitalize their identity show both the near-boundless adaptability of human culture and the deep resilience of the human spirit. An example of this indigenous vitality is in groups like the Kayapo in Brazil, who now use the Internet to share their anti-expropriation strategies and principles of cultural revitalization with other groups across the globe; their experience emphasizes the role of the young as bicultural actors who negotiate with the world outside the indigenous group. They have also harnessed the power of modern video to document infringements on their lands by outsiders and as an effective medium to communicate about group issues and share cultural teachings between Kayapo in separate regions. Shamans in some indigenous groups were pivotal figures who led groups in facing the crises of modernity. Because traditionally they were entrusted with mediating

between spirits and humans, shamans have been the natural choices to act on behalf of the group when the outside world intruded. In the face of repression, many shamans saw confrontation as the only hope for their group, led rebellions, and died in vain defense. Siberian and Mongolian shamans under Soviet rule, for example, retreated to the deep wilderness and continued to practice there.

Religious leaders found other creative responses. Some advocated **syncretism**, in which indigenous religious beliefs and practices were woven together with those of outsiders. In present-day Mexico, for example, shamans have integrated Catholic saints and sacramental theology into healing rites that utilize peyote. Another example of combining elements from different traditions to create a new religion is **Bwiti**, a West Central African religion. Organized in the early twentieth century among the forest-dwelling Babongo and Mitsogo people of Gabon and the Fang people of Gabon and Cameroon, Bwiti incorporates animism, ancestor worship, and Christianity into its belief system. As with the Native American Church, a mild hallucinogen plays a role, in this case the root bark of the *Tabernanthe iboga* plant, which is now specially cultivated for its religious purpose. Individuals joining the Bwiti community are taught that iboga induces a rich spiritual experience, one that allows the disciple to be healed and solve problems.

Many indigenous peoples, especially those decimated by disease, forced immigration, or land loss, have been attracted to missionaries of the major world religions seeking to convert them. Governments often cooperated with this goal. In many colonized lands, rituals of the indigenous religions were banned outright. It was also common that marriage was only recognized under national laws if conducted by a Christian priest. Possessing neither wealth, institutional power, nor prestige among the colonial

"The Catholic church is a beautiful theory for Sunday, the iboga on the contrary is the practice of everyday living. In church, they speak of God, with iboga, you live God."

—Nengue Me Ndjoung Isidore, Bwiti religious leader in Africa

SOURCE: S. Swiderski, *La religion Bouiti*, vol. 1 (1990–1991).

Religious leaders in the Bwiti movement creatively combine regional and Christian traditions.



The Kayapo of Brazil: Selective Modernity and the Survival of Tradition



Kayapo chiefs act as religious and political leaders, trying to retain control of the land that is essential to the continuation of tradition.

The Kayapo until recent decades killed all intruders on their lands, whether lumberjacks, gold miners, or rubber-tree tappers, and were regarded as the most dangerous natives of the Amazon rain forest. Outsiders made every effort to exterminate the Kayapo, going so far as to fly over them to drop blankets infected with smallpox onto their villages. But in the middle of the twentieth century, Kayapo chiefs changed

their relationship with outsiders, and in 1982 they regained ownership and control of most of their indigenous lands, the largest tract held by native peoples in South America. On a limited scale, their leaders have sold rights to cut timber and to allow outsiders to mine for gold, using the substantial rents and taxes collected to sustain and protect their culture.

The Kayapo consider themselves an integral part of the universe, bound to the cycles of the natural year and nature's ongoing rebirth. Returning from their hunts, men sing to the spirits of the game they killed in order for the animal or reptile spirits to remain in the forest. Each species is connected to a distinctive song that begins with the cry of the dead animal. A "center of the world" is located in each village's central plaza, where rituals and public life take place. To go back to the time of mythical origins and stimulate the energy required for life's prosperity and continuance, the Kayapo dance the myths recounting their origins and subsequent incidents, recalling their past to reaffirm their identity and innate vitality.

Kayapo shamans specialize in ritual healing. Their supernatural visions and capacity to contact tribal spirits enable them to perform rites that recall and restore the integrity of the *mekaron*, the soul double in each person's image; at death they ensure that this soul makes a successful journey to their "village of the dead," located on tribal land, near a mountain range, where it lives an afterlife similar to that in the village of the living.

Now that some of their young men have gained an education and attracted the support of international organizations upholding the rights of native peoples, the Kayapo have secured a firm legal existence in modern Brazil. Their chiefs have acted decisively and creatively to selectively modernize yet preserve their religious traditions. From their taxes on tenant miners, they brought the group into the national cash economy, even going so far as buying airplanes and hiring Brazilian pilots to police their territory. They invested in radios and video equipment for recording group rituals and communicating with other Kayapo across their large territory, all to cultivate their identity, ritual celebrations, and cultural survival. Traditional lip plugs and body painting remain common in village life, and group hunts keep male and female jungle survival skills honed; yet these have been integrated alongside the adoption of Western medicine, canned foods, and business connections in the global economy (such as supplying Brazilian nut oil to the corporation The Body Shoppe). As material wealth has increased, Kayapo chiefs, by adapting to the possibilities of modern life, have been outspoken in having their group maintain their jungle traditions and resist compromising their sociocultural integrity.



Protest against modern states is a regular fact of life among indigenous peoples in the world today. Struggles to retain control of the land, secure their legal rights, and ensure the education of the young are central to the survival of indigenous religious traditions today.

rulers, indigenous peoples in the early contact periods who persisted in their practices were subjected to discrimination, and some states, such as the Soviet Union, imprisoned shamans in psychiatric hospitals. Many studies have found that even after an indigenous people's successful accommodation to a dominant colonial culture, what often survives as its "shamanic tradition" is only fragmentary, reduced to practical applications such as healing services.

In a world turned upside down, one in which the ancestral spirits clearly failed to protect the group or safeguard its territory, radical change was inevitable. Over generations, many shamanic traditions themselves have been diminished or reformulated to match the new life circumstances. Under colonial conditions and until today, cultures that were thriving only a few centuries ago exist only in dimming memory. What has proven the most enduring of these indigenous traditions, even in regions that came to be dominated by one or more world religion, is shamanism.

SHAMANISM IN MODERN ASIA: DIVISION OF LABOR WITHIN THE WORLD RELIGIONS

Shamanism continues to exist as an integral part of the pluralistic religious cultures of Asia. In most settlements across the region, there is a shaman who can enter into the trance state, if called on to heal or to solve practical problems. Such shamanic practice today has been harmonized with the doctrines of the dominant religions

"Look around. . . . So much of nature has been ruined. Spirits of trees and rocks are displaced and haunt humans because they have nowhere else to go. No wonder the country is a mess."

—Kim Myung, a Korean shaman

SOURCE: New York Times, July 7, 2007.

and is tolerated by the Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic religious establishments that are also by now deeply rooted in these areas.

This pattern of coexistence also includes East Asia, where shamans augment popular Confucian beliefs and ancestral rituals, a tradition of pluralistic accommodation there going back to the beginnings of recorded history. Here we can say that given the widespread belief in deities inhabiting this earth and in the soul's afterlife destiny, it is not surprising that East Asians still recognize the utility of spirit mediums who attempt to communicate with the dead. Divination has provided answers to such problems as where grandmother's soul might be residing, whether the ghost of a dead child is causing family troubles, or what might be done to gain the favor of a god who could help end a drought. Unhappy spirits (*kwei*) are also thought to cause distress to the living, so here, too, shamans have had an important role in healing the sick.

Typically, a client approaches a spirit medium today because of the suspicion that an illness is due to ghost possession. The medium goes into trance in the sick one's presence and speaks or acts (sometimes writing on a slate or sand-covered board) after having made contact with one or more spirits. The medium's communications are usually interpreted by an assistant, who acts as the intermediary for the family and community members present. For example, contemporary mediums in Taiwan, called *dangki*, become possessed and rapidly write divinely inspired characters in red ink on yellow papers. Sometimes the objects become amulets for their patients; alternatively, they may be burned, whereupon their ashes are mixed with water that is then drunk as medicine. The role of these spirit mediums has, if anything, increased with the modernization and rising prosperity of Taiwan. The same phenomenon has been reported in modern Korea as well.

GLOBAL NEO-SHAMANISM: EXPROPRIATION BY "WHITE SHAMANS"

Traditional shamanistic practices now appeal to those in the dominant societies who are drawn to the mysteries of life and want to discover them outside the practices and normative worldviews of the major world religions. With their esoteric and primordial qualities, shamanic practices are seen by some in the West as "uncontaminated," the last remaining spiritual frontier on earth. Now growing numbers of adventurers, romantics, and spiritual explorers from urban civilizations across the world seek out shamanic experience as the representative of nearly lost worlds, hoping to recover something of value. Thousands of Euro-Americans each year sign up for tours to Siberia, the Amazon, or the Himalayas to observe and even be initiated by local shamans. A number of Westerners (hence "**white shamans**") have created global organizations propagating a purported "universal" shamanic tradition, charging high fees for tours, courses, initiations, and healing services, some pledging to use some of the proceeds to assist indigenous shamans. In indigenous societies, the shaman has a social rather than a personal reason for entering into trance and contacting the spirits, with a primary concern for the con-

Gender Focus

Women Healers and Shamans Today

In most hunter-gatherer societies, where there was minimal social hierarchy and only the gendered division of subsistence labor existed, both women and men worked as healers. As indigenous societies became more complex and settled, and adopted forms of pastoralism and simple agriculture, women were subject to greater restrictions, but in some societies they still serve as healers and noted spirit mediums. In most urban communities of China and Japan, shamans are typically regarded as marginal figures of low status, but in South Korea their practices are uniquely honored and sought by people of all faiths. Korean shamans called *mudang* tend to be predominantly women, drawn into the role from one of two backgrounds: troubling personal experiences

that led them to initiation; or inheritance of the role through kinship lines. An estimated 100,000 Korean shamans practice their healing arts today, dealing with life's pragmatic problems. Their séances, called *kut*, are usually held to contact a deity to request economic blessings, healing, restoration of good marital relations, or help in becoming pregnant. The *mudang* enters a trance and then begins to speak with voices attributed to deities. Typically the first statements are complaints of deficiencies in the offerings laid out or about impurity, which Korean supernaturals particularly dislike. When sponsors apologize and promise to do better next time, the divinities usually entertain the sponsor's request(s). A second type of ritual has the most proficient *mudangs* go to the next world with the soul of someone who has recently died or to check the status of a newly departed soul.

munity and its well-being. This is an orientation that contrasts sharply with that of the neo-shamans, whose primary interest is in personal development and a self-healing disconnected from any wider community.

Some native peoples regard this development as an attempt by the conquerors to take the last of their possessions, their culture. Well aware of how much their peoples have lost and ever zealous to guard their traditional secrets, many shamans today distrust the outsiders and doubt their sincerity. Responding to these postmodern possibilities, the indigenous shaman is again mediating between worlds in creative ways. As David Chidester has noted:

Acting on behalf of a community, even when that community was displaced and dispossessed, shamans developed new religious strategies, not only for preserving archaic techniques of ecstasy, but also for exercising new capacities for memory, concealment, performance, translation, and transformation in negotiating indigenous religious survival under difficult . . . conditions.⁶

Assimilating indigenous animistic and shamanistic traditions into urban-based civilizations goes back to the very beginnings of recorded human history, as we saw in Chapter 1. We will see in subsequent chapters how world religions from antiquity

onward performed a central role in the absorption of tribal peoples into states by "converting them" away from their indigenous religions. It will also be seen in the final chapter that the "civil religions" of modern nations have been focused on legitimating the violent and often-genocidal work of assimilating indigenous peoples.

In the next chapters, we can find repeatedly the imprint of indigenous religions, especially soul belief and trance. Soul beliefs remain nearly universal in the great religions, with East Asia's widespread ancestor veneration an important example of archaic practices that still remain compelling and satisfying. Death rites continue to be powerful expressions of religious tradition, and states of altered consciousness are still central to spiritual growth. The metaphor of human life existing on a plane between heaven above and a netherworld below is found in all major world religions. Finally, sacred places that are believed to be at the center of the world (the *axis mundi*) in the early indigenous traditions continue to be revered in the great world religions: Divine revelations occur on mountains (as to Abraham, Moses, Muhammad, and the Daoist sages), and trees connect humans to life's sacred cosmic mysteries (Buddha was enlightened under a tree; Jesus was crucified on a wooden cross). As for the connection with shamans, when examining the lives of the founders of the world religions, prophets as well as sages, we can notice the performance of miracles such as healing the sick and ascending to the heavens on magical flights, in both cases demonstrating the mastery of what began as the chief shamanic arts.

In the last chapter of this book, we will trace further this now-global arc of interaction between indigenous religions, their leaders, shamanism, and "white shamans." We will also see how the shamanic experience of trance, communication with other worlds, and spirit flight have again found their way into the syncretistic practices of many of the "new religions" that have arisen across the world.

Conclusion

For at least the last 30,000 years, humans have evolved primarily through their cultures, not anatomy. Art, religious practices, and complex symbols were all present among modern *Homo sapiens* from the beginning. And all three emerged simultaneously. What should we understand from this circumstance? Religion is an essential element in our species's evolution: It has helped humanity bond more tightly, face the unknown, hunt more effectively, and reconcile with death. Cultural historians see all these factors helping human groups maximize the quality of their diet, which in turn enabled them to better organize, understand, and adapt to their environment as well as to each other. With more free time, there were greater possibilities for individuals to specialize and so introduce cultural innovations.

Evidence of religion in prehistory reflects the major concerns of our species as hunter-gatherers. Fertility was important for group survival, the need to hunt for prey was a constant and central fact, and there was ongoing concern to maintain group and

gender boundaries. Indigenous religions among early and later hunter-gatherers and early settled cultivators aided group survival.

To the extent a group adopted religious beliefs and practices that abetted its survival, that group obtained advantages vis-à-vis other groups. As a force binding communities, as a means of "being careful" about the unseen, and as a decisive factor in helping human groups adapt to their environment, the world's indigenous religions point out the central issues we face in understanding the continuing role of religion in later human life.

Finally, we can also discern the emergence of the first religious specialist, the shaman, who cultivates the universal human capacity for entering altered states of consciousness. Both serving and leading the people, the shaman has given peoples confidence and direction in dealing with the world's unseen forces. Shamanism is still widespread in the world today. Even where one or more of the great world religions has been adopted by a population, shamanic traditions continue to find patrons. In some cases, shamans express concepts associated with one of the now-dominant world religions (e.g., the soul, hell, the force of karma). In other instances, a shamanic cosmos exists side by side with that of a world religion. Today, shamanism is practiced "underground" if there is reason to fear persecution. In most places, however, it is integrated with the dominant world religions.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the problems in knowing and understanding the religions that existed before the development of written language?
2. How might the history of religions be written by a member of an indigenous people?
3. In many hunter-gatherer groups, the people often refer to themselves as "the true people." How might sudden awareness of the existence of other people in itself undermine the cosmos posited in such indigenous religious traditions?
4. Do you think it is valid to generalize from modern hunter-gatherers back into the past to reconstruct the origins of religion? Why or why not?
5. How might a modern shaman explain the endurance of her tradition and the attraction of shamanic practices by those living in modern industrial societies?
6. Some scholars have noted that the practices of modern sports fans in the West often resemble the totemic practices of indigenous peoples. Describe these commonalities in the case of your college or for a professional team such as the Chicago Bears. How do mascots and symbolic practices function to achieve group unity and individual identity?
7. Scholars who have studied tribal peoples now counsel sympathetically imagining indigenous religions as "lived through the body" and involving the entire spectrum of human perception. Explain why this approach has value, given the practices of Kung shamanism.