


Traditional and Tribal Religions

An important note: This chapter is different from the others. It does not focus on any one religion. Instead it presents a number of concepts that cut across the boundaries of various religions and are often most at home in traditional cultures. Use this chapter to look up helpful information on


- *spirits*
- *ancestor worship*
- *ritual*
- *magic and witchcraft*
- *fortunetelling*
- *sacrifice*
- *rites of passage*

T NAME. Many people around the world follow religious practices and beliefs that do not have a name or even a clear identity. We call what they are doing a “religion,” but for them it is just the way in which one does things. These are the ritual and spiritual practices of traditional and tribal cultures, and they vary greatly, depending on which people one encounters. Ultimately, the only meaningful designation for any of them is in terms of a specific culture. Sometimes it makes sense to talk generally of African traditional religion or Native American religion, but when you come right down to it, you have to be a lot more specific and refer to, say, “the religion of the Navajo tribe” or “the religion of the Maasai.”


These religions do, however, embody patterns that are deeply ingrained in the human psyche, and even though the cultures may be far away from modern industrialized life, the same patterns manifest themselves wherever religion is being practiced—and often even where it is not.

 **NUMBERS AND DISTRIBUTION.** According to some estimates, 150 million people around the world are practicing some form of traditional religion in a relatively pure form. Even if this number is accurate, it is rapidly dwindling due to the missionary efforts of other religions as well as the fact that the modern world seems to be simply swallowing up these cultures, religion and all. Still, if we were to expand our criteria to include everyone who has ties to the patterns of traditional religious practice, we would have to include virtually all of humanity.



 **SYMBOLS.** On the level of a traditional culture, symbols are crucial. Symbols are signs that stand for some deeper reality, but often the symbol itself becomes the reality. For example, Native Americans have long admired the morning star and thought of it as representing courage and purity. It is often drawn as a simple four-pointed star. Some American Indian tribes believe that the star itself is a spirit, and others expect that a deserving person who decorates himself with the star will gain courage and purity from it. If you put yourself in the shoes of someone who holds such a view, you may realize how painful it can be to them when other people use their cherished symbols as frivolous decorations.

Nevertheless, symbols are an important part of all our lives. Even thoroughly nonreligious people wear wedding bands, set up Christmas trees, fly flags at half mast or tie yellow ribbons on trees.

 **HISTORY.** To speak of history in this context is to raise the all-important question of the origin of religion, and theories on that subject go far beyond the bounds of a pocket guide such as this. It seems clear, however, that to answer this question one has to look at both the remote past—when human beings first started to interact with the spiritual world—and into the human soul to see what it is that drives people to find a realm of existence outside their material world.

■ ■ **SCRIPTURES.** Traditional religions do not have scriptures in the way that the larger world religions do. However, that does not mean traditional cultures do not have any writing, nor that special pieces of writing never play a role in a traditional religion. Often, when something has been expressed as a picture or a symbol, it takes on greater power, just as today in Western society a person may be held more accountable for what she has written down with her signature than for what she merely said. Nevertheless, it is a hallmark of a traditional culture that all important information is conveyed orally, often through laborious memorization, rather than in writing.

💡 **MAJOR BELIEFS.** We usually associate traditional religions with the worship of various spirits, and this is accurate. The number and type of the spirits, however, vary greatly from culture to culture. Many people believe that there are numerous spirits in aspects of nature, such as animals, trees, plants, rocks or rivers. These spirits want to be treated with respect and not be wantonly destroyed.

Furthermore, many traditional cultures practice ancestor veneration. Here, though, the word *ancestor* is something of a misnomer since a person need not have left progeny in order to qualify for this status. What is usually more important is that, when the person has died, the proper rituals were performed so that the deceased will not come back to haunt the living community.

The important thing to remember about spirits as they are recognized in traditional religions is that they are limited in their powers. They do not know everything, and so they need to be kept informed. They have limited strength. And they need to receive regular offerings in order to be kept disposed favorably toward the living.

Almost all traditional cultures also believe in a Creator. In contrast to the spirits, he (or she) is usually thought of as all powerful and all knowing. The Creator does not, however, usually receive regular attention from the people. In most cases, the people think he is remote and uninvolved, and they usually only pray to him in times of distress.

Whatever the conception of God and spirits, the way in which people deal with the supernatural in traditional religions is on the basis of ritual. This means that they perform the same actions again and again in order to bring about a desired end. Think of the way in which an airline pilot prepares for takeoff. Even though he has gone through

the same actions thousands of times before, he follows the identical protocol each time, in order to make sure that all equipment is working safely. If he leaves out a step, there could be serious negative consequences. In the same way, when a culture uses a certain ritual, this ritual must be performed with precision and accuracy lest something untoward happen.


Often a traditional culture will recognize the value of magic. Think of magic as accelerated ritual. A person will have such a strong command of the correct actions that he will inevitably influence the spiritual world to carry out his wishes. Sometimes it is just a matter of a person being extremely proficient at spiritual techniques, but sometimes the person will actually allow himself or herself to be possessed by the spirits, who will then speak and act through the human being. In that case, the person is considered to be a *shaman*.

Magic can also be a negative thing. More often than not, negative magic is referred to as *witchcraft*. (There is, however, no standard terminology, and it's important to note that some contemporary practitioners of witchcraft claim that they promote good, not evil.) In many African cultures, the people believe that whenever someone dies it is because a witch has placed a curse on him or her. Sure, a man may die because he fell out of a tree, or a woman may die because of a disease, but they wouldn't have had that misfortune to begin with if it hadn't been for the witch's curse.

Finally, being in tune with the spirit world may help a person discover hidden connections, which may even disclose truths about the future. Fortunetelling (*divination*) is an important aspect of many traditional religions. Basically, the intent is to establish a technique by which the spirits can manifest themselves with a minimum of human interference. For example, among the Yoruba of West Africa, predictions of the future are made when the diviner passes palm nuts from hand to hand and makes marks in the sand on a tray, depending on how many nuts are left in his hand each time. In the process, he creates a pattern on the tray, which he then interprets with analogies from ancient fables. Yoruba people may make important life decisions based on the outcome.


Once again, even though not many contemporary Western people would subscribe to these practices explicitly, we can see how they show up in less formal ways again and

again. We may not believe that the world is inhabited by a host of spirits, but many people do think that their departed loved ones are still with them and watching over them. We may scoff at rituals and hope that we never fall into silly superstitions—knock on wood! We wouldn't dream of having our tea leaves read by Madam Pakvora, licensed palm reader, but we can't help but anticipate how certain things may turn out by looking for little signs. Finally, we might think the idea of someone dying from a curse is ridiculous, but we make sure that we express our wishes for a quick recovery to someone who is seriously ill, and we would be offended if others did not do the same for us.


 **SUBGROUPS.** Obviously, given the fact that traditional religions are completely bound to local situations, it is impossible to think of their having subgroups. However, speaking of subgroups, this section gives a chance to talk about *totems*, a concept that is as well known as it is often misunderstood.


We all know the colorful totem poles that we associate with Native Americans. Not every American Indian tribe uses totem poles; they are most popular among the northwestern tribes, such as the Tlingit. Totem poles usually tell stories, and the most common story they tell is how a person is descended from mythical ancestors, usually in the animal realm. Being “low man on the totem pole” is actually not a bad thing to be; this spot is frequently reserved for an exalted person or a mythical being.


All over the world, however, totems also carry the crucial function of dividing tribal groups. If a tribe were to consist of two totemic groups, say, the “wolves” and the “bears,” there would usually be some particular food that is taboo for each of the groups, thereby ensuring that in case of a shortage there might still be enough around to feed at least half the tribe. Also, as a rule, people are required to marry someone outside their own totem group, thus avoiding inbreeding.

 **WORSHIP PRACTICES.** Uncountable religious rituals and practices are associated with the many traditional religions. Think of the great variety in how people engage the spiritual dimension, from the North American Indians' sun dance to an African divination ceremony. Many people, including many of the traditional cultures, find it helpful to distinguish between worship, which is an act of submission to the Creator God,

and veneration, which encompasses rituals directed toward spirits. (This distinction is much like that found in Roman Catholic Christianity, in which God alone is worshiped but saints are venerated.)


 **RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS.** Given the nature of traditional cultures, one should not expect elaborate religious buildings on a par with churches, mosques or temples. Nevertheless, traditional religions will frequently have a building set aside for ceremonial purposes. A large number of Native American tribes maintain sweat lodges, in which members purify their bodies and their spirits. Among traditional Africans, the healer may have a special hut, and often the dwelling of the chief is the spiritual center of the kraal (village of huts) as well.

 **HOME PRACTICES.** Traditional cultures do not usually have a distinct dividing line between what is public and what is private, and even though there usually is personal space and personal property, any individualistic attitude that might seek to make religion a purely private matter is unheard of. Depending on the culture, there are specific roles and obligations carried out in each household and family grouping. There is, however, no getting around the fact that what happens in the home will affect the community as a whole and vice versa. Thus a family's not being diligent in their prayers might bring calamity on an entire village. Or, on a more positive note, if every household keeps the ways of the spirits properly, the community will prosper.

 **CLOTHING.** Because of the great variety represented among traditional cultures, it is impossible to discuss clothing in general. However, this may be a good point at which to address the ticklish issue of ornamentation.


The important thing to remember is that what may look to us like nothing more than a pretty piece of jewelry or body art may be of great significance to the wearer. Decorations may indicate a person's standing in his or her community or carry spiritual power. For example, in many cultures people wear bracelets to ward off evil spirits, but if the bracelets are not put on properly or not worn in the right way, they might backfire and attract evil spirits. An outsider cavalierly sporting the "neat-looking" beads may cause consternation among people of the culture. And remember, just because somebody is

selling something does not mean it is legitimate or appropriate in the eyes of the culture for you to wear it.

 **DIET.** Again, the great diversity of traditional cultures keeps us from being able to make useful general remarks. But once again, we can call attention to certain interesting features that appear in many traditional religions. For one thing, there is the notion of *taboo*, which is often associated with eating certain foods. There is an important difference between a certain food's just being forbidden and its actually being taboo.

To make up a silly example, if my neighbor has a chicken and I steal it, cook it and eat it, I have done something wrong, but it's my fault, not the chicken's. But let us say that eating chicken is considered taboo in my culture. Then it doesn't matter whether the chicken belonged to me, whether I meant to eat it or whether I even knew I was eating chicken—just the ingestion of chicken would be the violation of a taboo, and I would be ritually defiled and liable to suffer serious negative consequences.

On the other hand, it is also important to remember that in many cultures food is considered a sacred gift from the Creator or the spirits. The Algonquin tribes of North America go to an extreme with this notion. Anytime someone kills a living being, perhaps accidentally stepping on a worm, the person must give thanks for it to the Great Spirit (Manitou) and eat it.

 **CALENDAR.** Once more looking for a general principle behind all the possible diversity, we can make this observation: traditional cultures are usually tied closely to the one-year cycle on which their economy is based, and time does not stretch either backward or forward beyond that cycle.

Let me try to explain by making a contrast. Each December 25 Western Christians celebrate the birth of Christ. They commemorate the event by rehearsing and may even reenact it with Nativity plays, but they know the birth of Christ was a unique occurrence that happened roughly two thousand years ago. In many traditional cultures, the important event is thought to recur every year at the time of its celebration. For example, the Hopi of the American Southwest celebrate the coming of the Kachina spirits from the mountains to their bean fields each year at planting time. They stay until harvest and

then withdraw again, only to return next year. This cycle plays itself out over and over again on an annual basis.

There is no beginning or end to time, nor are there truly unique historical events. Rather, when the cycle has been completed, it just starts over. And of course we realize that, even though in our modern world we think of time as always moving on, with the past behind us and an unknown future before us, we still find great comfort in the rhythm of the events that return every year.

Fewer and fewer people practice traditional religions, but their many components continue to be a part of our lives.