Chapter 6

6

Indigenous Religions

Indigenous

Traditions

Chapter Overview

What are “Indigenous religions” and how can we talk about them? As Ken Derry notes, these terms are themselves deeply problematic, as they (and the various assumptions and stereotypes that go along with them) have coloured Western academic approaches to Indigenous culture since the first colonial contacts between the two groups’ respective forebears. Given these challenges, Derry structures this chapter somewhat differently than the others in this textbook, using the first section of the chapter to explore issues that can arise when we attempt to address these traditions in a fair and unbiased fashion. Likewise, in each of the later sections, Derry begins by carefully explaining ways that assumptions, stereotypes, and generalizations have traditionally led to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Indigenous practices, often presented out of their intended context.

In this chapter Derry highlights important themes evinced across different Indigenous spiritual traditions (such as context, the role of ancestors, a rhythmic sense of time, relationships between humans and spirits, the importance of elders, connections with specific places, and a worldview characterized by complementary dualism), and weaves these themes through specific examples. He discusses the importance of oral traditions in Indigenous societies and provides an introduction to Indigenous story telling (in general), which leads into an exploration of origin stories and trickster tales.

Next, the author outlines the role of ritual in Indigenous societies, attending to the importance of sacrifice and rites of passage, which are central features of ritual life across various different Indigenous cultures. He examines several cultural art practices (such as weaving, carving, and building), paying particular attention to the ritual and spiritual contexts in which such art forms were (and are) practised.

The chapter concludes with an overview of historical realities that have impacted Indigenous peoples worldwide (such as colonialism) and the various ways that these cultures have responded (including adaptation, syncretism, revival movements, and quests for autonomy/equality). Derry surveys how gender has been constructed in different Indigenous societies and how contemporary changes to traditional gender roles within Indigenous cultures are changing certain social dynamics.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

* comprehend the difference between Indigenous knowledge and outside analysis of Indigenous culture;
* recognize that the majority of what most non-Indigenous people know, or think they know, about Indigenous cultures has come from non-Indigenous sources;
* overcome notions of Indigenous cultures as static, ahistorical, and/or primordial;
* understand that context is crucial for interpretation—exemplified by the shift in storytelling from community performance to solitary reading, which has the potential to transform the meaning of the stories;
* examine the figure of the trickster, who often plays a central role in communities’ stories, teaching valuable lessons about history, ethics, and relationships;
* explore how rites of passage constitute a widespread form of Indigenous ritual practice, wherein a person’s transition from one state to another within the society is formally acknowledged;
* understand how Indigenous art expresses a variety of concerns having to do with religion, relationships, and aesthetics;
* examine the ways in which colonialism and its religious missionary component devastated the physical, psychological, and cultural life of Indigenous communities across the globe;
* recognize that Indigenous peoples around the world have been, and continue to be, engaged in the active resistance to both the colonial legacy and contemporary appropriation of their cultural symbols and practices;
* observe how gender and sexuality is constructed in different Indigenous cultures.

Key Terms

Aborigine An Indigenous person. Often, the term specifically indicates an Indigenous person of Australia. (p. 377)

cargo cults Religious movements, mainly in Melanesia, inspired by the shipments of goods that local Indigenous people saw arriving for foreigners; founded on the belief that one day the spirits would send similar shipments to them, initiating a new age of peace and social harmony. (pp. 363-364)

colonialism The process of establishing and maintaining colonies in one place by people who are from another, and the effects of this process on the people who were already there. Historically, these effects have often included the destruction of Indigenous cultures and people. (pp. 348-357)

complementary dualism A worldview in which the universe necessarily comprises both creative and destructive forces, and that the two can work together; a feature of many Indigenous religions. (p. 362)

conflict dualism A worldview in which the universe is divided between good and evil forces that are in constant battle with one another; a feature of many Western religions. (p. 362)

diviner A religious specialist who uses various ritual tools and practices to gain insight into the hidden or spiritual aspects of particular circumstances, events, problems, etc. (p. 378)

elder A man or woman whose wisdom and authority in cultural matters are recognized by their community. Elders are not necessarily elderly per se, but are understood to possess greater knowledge of tradition than others, and often to be more closely in touch with spiritual forces. (p. 378)

Indian Act Canadian federal legislation created in 1876 that defines and regulates Native people and their lands and outlines the federal government’s responsibilities towards them. The act is administered by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and has undergone several amendments and revisions. (p. 378)

potlatch A ritual practiced by many Indigenous groups of the Pacific Northwest Coast (e.g., Haida, Salish, Tlingit, Tsimshian), in which a family hosts a feast and offers guests a variety of gifts. The ritual typically marks important moments such as marriage, childbirth, or death, and may include music, theatre, and ceremonial dancing. (p. 355)

residential schools Church-run schools, funded by the Canadian federal government, designed to facilitate the assimilation and Christian conversion of Indigenous people. Families were forced to send their children to the schools, where they remained for months or even years at a time, forbidden to speak their own languages and often subjected to neglect or abuse. The system was established in the 1840s and the last school did not close until 1996. (p. 354)

syncretism The combination of elements from two or more different religious traditions. Too often the term is used negatively to suggest that the “purity” of a particular religion has been compromised or contaminated. (p. 318)

*terra nullius* Latin for “no one’s land,” referring to territory over which no person or state has ownership or sovereignty; a concept invoked in several instances by European colonists to claim land occupied by Indigenous people. In Australia, the High Court invalidated this justification in a 1992 ruling. (p. 351)

trickster Term coined by scholars to classify a variety of usually superhuman figures who appear in the stories of cultures around the world; tricksters disrupt the norms of society and/or nature and often serve to teach important lessons about what kinds of behaviour a particular community considers appropriate. (pp. 331-335)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. How has contact with non-Indigenous people affected Indigenous cultures and societies?
2. How has the study of Indigenous cultures by non-Indigenous scholars shaped the body of academic materials regarding gender roles, and participation within Indigenous religious activities?
3. Why might the category of “trickster” figures be problematic for developing an understanding of Indigenous traditions?
4. What are some of the central legacies of the religious missionary movements that proliferated during the colonial era?
5. In which ways is the term “totem pole” representative of the non-Indigenous scholarly misinterpretation and de-contextualization of Indigenous practices?

 Reflection Questions

1. How has the presentation of the subject matter in this chapter differed from that of the previous chapters? Did you find this to be a helpful style of presentation?
2. Can you think of any oral traditions that exist within your own culture? If so, what types of themes are communicated and explored in this tradition?
3. Have you ever viewed Indigenous art? What context was it in? If it was in a museum, did you understand the meaning and intended purpose behind the artwork?
4. Do you own any Indigenous-themed objects that might be considered examples of appropriation? How do you feel about the idea of cultural appropriation?
5. Have you seen any contemporary Indigenous filmmakers’ work? Have you read any contemporary literature written by an Indigenous author? Or listened to any new music produced by Indigenous artists? If so, what was your impression of the themes expressed in the work? Were they strictly Indigenous, or did they resonate with non-Indigenous concerns as well? If not, why do you think you haven’t encountered any contemporary Indigenous culture?

Research Paper Topics

1. What historical and cultural expectations are intuited by the use of the term “primitive” in regard to Indigenous cultures? How as the term been used in non-Indigenous societies to both vilify and romanticize Indigenous peoples?
2. In what ways might “origin stories” help to orient people within both their culture and their physical environment? What might be some of the social ramifications tied to the loss of these origin stories within Indigenous communities?
3. What are the implications and insinuations associated with non-Indigenous scholars’ use by the term “magic” to describe elements of Indigenous religious practice? Provide specific examples and analysis.
4. Select two examples of rituals from Indigenous cultures which fit the description of “rituals of passage.” Present a descriptive, comparative analysis highlighting similarities and differences, and present an argument either for or against the helpfulness of the category “rituals of passage” as it applies to the study of Indigenous religious traditions.
5. Identify a contemporary Indigenous revivalist movement. Provide a detailed description of the movement’s roots, its mission, and its level of success in achieving its goals. Pay special attention to any features of the movement that might be described as “religious” in character, and relate the degree of importance that this religious feature constitutes for the overall movement’s success.
6. What is the significance of the use of naturally decaying substances in Indigenous art and architecture? Cite three different examples from one or more Indigenous traditions, and offer a consideration of how this practice compares to modern non-Indigenous practices. Pay special attention to the theme of human interaction with the natural environment.
7. Describe and analyze the ways in which gender and sexuality in certain Indigenous cultures were constructed in contrast to how gender was understood in non-Indigenous cultures. Offer a consideration of how contemporary gender theory in the modern academy may or may not resonate with the understanding of gender which existed in many “pre-contact” Indigenous societies.
8. Provide an analysis of the various historical and technological elements which influenced the emergence of “cargo cults” within certain Indigenous cultures. What commentary, and or critique, of modern non-Indigenous culture might be derived from the objects and practices which the ritual practices of the “cargo cults” focused upon?
9. Select a modern syncretic religious tradition such as Voudou or Santeria and describe the historical circumstances that led to its development. Focus on how the different components of the religion are approached by its practitioners and whether they themselves recognize their practice as syncretic or new.
10. What counts as cultural appropriation? Advance a clear argument, supported by detailed analysis, asserting what sorts of Indigenous symbols, practices, and ideas ought to be considered “sacred,” and what such a prohibition means. Consider whether branding and merchandising are the only contexts in which appropriation should be challenged, or whether the use of Indigenous materials in art, music, and personal expression also constitute a problem area.

Additional Resources

*Afrika World*: An examination of African traditional religions with excellent links and commentary: <http://www.afrikaworld.net>

*Creative Spirits* presents Aboriginal culture in Australia by including Aboriginal authors and Aboriginal resources: <http://www.creativespirits.info/index.html>

Warnes, H.B. 2000. *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Native Art: Worldview, Symbolism and Culture in Africa, Oceania and Native North America*. New York: Continuum.

Idle No More, a website associated with the contemporary Indigenous rights movement based in Canada. <http://www.idlenomore.ca/>

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. Although change is a constant among all cultures, the changes that resulted from Indigenous peoples’ contact with non-Indigenous peoples was of a different order than the normal changes effected by time, social mores, and the natural environment. Along with the imposition of new and exploitative systems of exchange, and the introduction of disease to which Indigenous people had no immunity, there was an influx of conceptual ideas that radically altered the frameworks of meaning within which Indigenous societies lived. The result of this conceptual shift is expressed in the development of new syncretic religious practices that merged Indigenous traditions with Christian or Muslim elements. Although syncretic practices do not, in and of themselves, lack legitimacy, it is clear that the often coercive means that were employed to force Indigenous people to adopt different beliefs casts these changes in a very problematic light. ( pp. 318, 350-357)
2. The majority of the information documenting the practices and beliefs of Indigenous societies in the early period of contact with non-Indigenous people is derived from the observations and studies of white European males. Indeed, it wasn’t until the mid-twentieth century that women (other than religious missionaries) began to report regularly on Indigenous cultures. The consequence of this exclusively male lens on Indigenous life is that the experiences of Indigenous women tended to be ignored. In some cases non-Indigenous men were not allowed to interact with women, thus creating a massive gap in our knowledge of what roles Indigenous women played in ritual life. However, in most cases the ingrained sexist attitudes that non-Indigenous male scholars held regarding the place of women in their own society led them to assume that any significant cultural activity would be the domain of the Indigenous men, and thus focused solely on male practices. (p. 324)
3. Although the term “trickster” is widely used by non-Indigenous scholars of religion to describe a category of figures perceived as performing similar roles across various Indigenous cultures, the Indigenous people who told the stories about these figures did not conceive of these characters as “tricksters” in same sense that the category has come to represent. Each of these figures is particular to the culture within which its stories are told. The corralling of all of these different figures from different traditions into the category of the “trickster,” while facilitating scholarly work, effectively homogenizes them and obscures the specific cultural purposes they serve. (pp. 331-335)
4. Two of the most salient legacies associated with the impact of colonial religious missionary movements are, first, the forcible conversion of Indigenous peoples to a foreign religion (Christianity for the most part), and second, the loss of Indigenous languages through the forced assimilation of Indigenous children to colonial language and culture, such as in the case of Church run, residential schooling in Canada. (p. 351-354)
5. The term “totem pole,” which is popularly used to describe the elaborately carved poles produced by several North American Aboriginal cultures in the Pacific Northwest, is actually derived from the Anishinaubae term *dodaem*. It should also be noted that the Anishinaubae do not produce carved poles. Hence, not only is the term “totem” foreign to the cultures within which these poles are produced and have significance, but it leads to the assumption that ideas and terms are interchangeable for describing what are in fact highly particular cultural traditions. (p. 344)