Chapter 2: Indigenous Traditions

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, Ken Derry investigates key issues in the study of Indigenous traditions. He begins by analyzing the terms “religion” and “Indigenous” to illuminate problems that scholars of Indigenous traditions seek to overcome. Derry notes that one of the main issues is the insider-versus-outsider dichotomy, which produces this “us” versus “them” worldview. According to Derry, the insider-versus-outsider problem is especially harmful when studying Indigenous traditions because early scholars were outsiders who conventionally described the Indigenous people and their traditions as “primitive,” “uncivilized,” and “non-literate.” Later in this chapter, Derry connects these prejudicial interpretations to Colonialism, which led to the loss of land, language, stories, religion and identity for Indigenous communities. At the same time, Derry recounts how Indigenous people created resistance movements to counter colonialism through various strategies of adaptation and change.

This chapter focuses on the common elements or patterns shared across most, if not all, of the Indigenous traditions. Derry identifies the following recurrent elements across Indigenous traditions: orality; connection to specific place; emphasis on community and relationship; sense of time as rhythmic; greater emphasis on what happens here in the present life rather than after death; behavior is viewed as more important than belie; authority of elders; complementary dualism; a view of the sacred as this ongoing process rather than as once and for all static revelation; and patterns to gender roles. Derry examines several aspects of Indigenous traditions such as origin and trickster stories, rituals of sacrifice, rites of passage, art therein including weaving, carving, literature, and painting, and the importance of sacred spaces. Included in his discussions are a broad range of geographic locations spanning from the North American traditions, Australian traditions, Asian traditions, and the African traditions. Derry concludes by analyzing the effects of various interactions and adaptions as well recent developments that have led to the resurgence of Indigenous cultural and religious practices.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Comprehends and explains the difficulties involved in defining the term “Indigenous” including the immense diversity within and across these traditions.
2. Identifies and summarizes the importance of stories, rituals and art in Indigenous communities, including the transmission of traditions and fostering values.
3. Explains why religious location and practice more important than belief for Indigenous people.
4. Outlines and analyzes the impact of colonization upon Indigenous religious traditions including how colonial attitudes, laws and practices altered or obliterated Indigenous customs.
5. Summarizes and delineates the various paths of resistance by which indigenous people have and continue to reclaim, rebuild, and revise their religious traditions.

Study Questions

1. What have been some of the recurrent issues within past scholarly assessment of Indigenous people? What are some of the historical explanations behind the previous shortcomings of scholarly assessments of Indigenous communities?
2. What are some of the common practices and teachings to many, if not all, Indigenous traditions?
3. Three elements of the Potlatch, which is practised by many Indigenous people in the Pacific Northwest, are elucidated in this chapter. First, according to Derry, what does the potlatch demonstrate? Second, what are some of the occasions for a potlatch. Third, what else does the potlatch indicate?
4. What are the various physical and ritualistic components of the Sioux Sun Dance? How does this ritual represent the ideas concerning the creation of the world for this Indigenous group?
5. What are examples that demonstrate gender classification could be somewhat fluid across Indigenous communities?

Study Questions: Answers

1. One overarching issue has been scholars carried with them unchecked assumptions about the Indigenous people, which colored their approach and interpretation of these groups. They assumed that the Indigenous cultures had remained unchanged prior to their interactions with the “modern” Europeans, and thus, they labelled them primitive. The European scholars, who were largely Christians, wrongly assumed that the Indigenous people had no real religion of their own as they supposedly collapsed the religious and non-religious in their lives. Lastly, it was wrongly assumed that Indigenous people were non-literate (pp. 30–31)
2. Common practices and teachings in Indigenous traditions are orality, connection to specific places, emphasis of community and relationship, sense of time as rhythmic, greater emphasis on what happens in life rather than after death, behavior more important than belief, authority of elders, complementary dualism, view sacred as ongoing process rather than as this static revelation, and gendered roles. (p. 34)
3. Potlatch is that it demonstrates hospitality and the redistribution of wealth through both a feast and the giving of gifts. The second element is that the Potlatch is often held to mark or celebrate important moments in life, from birth to death. The third element is that it may also indicate a family’s social and economic status by demonstrating the family’s ability to provide resources for others. (p. 54)
4. The Sun Dance is an annual ritual lasting several days. Inside this specially created lodge, the participants dance to the point of exhaustion while the community provides support. The Sioux Sun Dance includes a kind of sacrifice wherein the male dancers fast, pierce their chests and backs, and attach themselves to a central pole with ropes tied to sticks that are inserted through piercings. The male dancer may be entirely or partially suspended from the ground and dance until they pass out or the fastenings tear loose. The special lodge replicates the creation of the world, and in its construction is accompanied by songs about creation. Second, the pole that is used represents the state, or connection, between life and death, and the connection of the material and spiritual worlds, thereby representing the elements of the created world. Third, the dancers are connected to the pole and thus they are connected to the spiritual world as well as to the earliest times. (p. 42)
5. Derry notes that the heads of most Indigenous societies have typically been male, yet women have often been involved with decisions affecting the entire community. And in some cases decisions were normally made by women then carried out by men. Gender classification could be somewhat fluid as women might participate in men’s work, and vice versa. Sexual roles and orientations could also be fluid. Accounts of men identifying as women, wearing female clothes, and taking on women’s roles are not unusual. There are also accounts of Indigenous women identifying as men and becoming hunters or warriors. With respect to kinship, some Indigenous societies are matrilineal, tracing ancestry through the mother, while others are patrilineal, focusing on the father. Important spirits and gods—including the supreme being—may be either male or female. It was also not uncommon for Indigenous societies to separate the religious activities of women and men. Yet most studies have looked only at male practices—whether because male scholars were unaware that women had their own practices, or because they were not permitted to study the women, or because they assumed that the men were the most important members of their communities and hence that their practices were the only ones worth investigating. It is only relatively recently that scholars have begun to examine what Indigenous women think and do in the context of religion. (pp. 39–40)

Research Questions

1. Current scholars of Indigenous traditions often strive to correct the biased or prejudiced views of past scholars of Indigenous traditions. What are the methods employed by current scholars that allow them to counter these biased or prejudicial views?
2. Mabel McKay is a Pomo healer who practised healing and community building through the art of basket-making. Her biography, *Weaving the Dream*, written by Greg Sarris, describes how she wove together her art, her spiritual visions, and her healing. Explain how her practices were interwoven and how she was able to build community through her weaving.
3. The imagery used in the carving of totem poles often tells stories that are central to the individual or community for which the totem is made. Analyze the creation and imagery of one totem pole, and explain how the totem pole represents the individual or the community for which the totem pole was created.
4. How have the ideas of “primitive” society, culture, and religion affected the Indigenous population of Canada, Australia, or Africa?
5. Derry asserts that there was some fluidity of gender roles in political and religious life, however, this area has been understudied, in part, because of underlying assumptions that men are more important and deserving of scholarly attention. Conduct research that advances our understanding of the fluidity of gender roles and the important roles of women within the religious life of Indigenous communities.
6. The view that the sacred is an ongoing process rather than static revelation can be connected to the oral traditions of Indigenous traditions. What is an example of a story that represents this connection? How does this story help us understand this connection?
7. Trickster characters often illustrate the notion that behaviour is more important than belief. Why is this so? Which character is an example of this notion?
8. One version of the “Earth Diver” tale is the story of the Sky Woman. Compare this story to other origin tales, and explain how the story of the Sky Woman helps us to distinguish what is significant in the community for which the Sky Woman is central.
9. Provide an overview of *terra nullius* (“no one’s land”) then research and analyze how this concept relates to the protest by Indigenous communities and their allies at Standing Rock against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL).
10. Rites of passage are significant in the lives of people for several reasons. How is the rite of passage significant for the Wiradjuri males of eastern Australia? How does this rite of passage help us understand the significance of rituals for communities?

Reflection Questions

1. In the first sections of this chapter, Ken Derry points to the inherent problems of looking at traditions through the lenses of one’s own tradition(s). How should we approach studying traditions that are not our own?
2. Rituals can both indicate the human need for meaning and structure as well as the human capacity for creating meaning and structure. Why do you think humans find it important to create meaning and structure for their world?
3. Stories are often understood as vehicles that transmit a group’s beliefs and values. Do you think that the stories that a scholar describes and/or analyzes also transmit beliefs and values?
4. It has been argued that Indigenous people have lost control of their own identities through the processes known as cultural appropriation. Discuss why the “trade-marking” of Indigenous images and names by sports teams contributes to the loss of identity for Indigenous people.
5. The role of women within religious traditions is often dictated and limited to one extent or another. Citing specific examples, how would you describe the place of women across the Indigenous religious traditions?

Additional Resources

1. World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (WCIP). <http://wcip2014.org/>

The WCIP is a meeting of Indigenous people from around the world, who gather to discuss the realization of the rights of Indigenous peoples, including to pursuit of the objectives of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The WCIP website provides a number of resources including news, multimedia, and ways to support and connect with regions and caucuses.

1. “Yoruba Religion of Southwestern Nigeria,” <https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/sj14-soc-yorubarel/yoruba-religion-of-southwestern-nigeria/> 1:25 min.

“Initiation of a Yoruban Priestess,” <https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/sj14-soc-yorubarel/yoruba-religion-of-southwestern-nigeria/> 5:27 min. The first of these two brief documentary clips provides a very brief history of Yorubuland, which is home to one of the greatest civilizations in sub-Sahara Africa prior to the devastating effects of the American slave trade. The second segment follows to American women who travel to Nigeria where they are initiated into the Yoruba religion as priestess.

1. IdleNoMore (INM). <http://www.idlenomore.ca>

Idle No More (INM) calls on all people to join in a peaceful revolution, to honor “Indigenous sovereignty, and to protect the land and water.” INM will continue to: help build sovereignty & resurgence of nationhood; to pressure government and industry to protect the environment; to build allies in order to reframe the nation to nation relationship, this will be done by including grassroots perspectives, issues, and concern.

1. Indigenous Peoples of Africa Co-ordinating Committee (IPACC). <http://www.ipacc.org.za/en/>

The Indigenous Peoples of Africa Co-ordinating Committee (IPACC) is a network of 150 Indigenous peoples’ organizations in 20 African countries. Any legitimate organization composed of African indigenous peoples may apply for membership. Other associations working in development, human or Indigenous rights may apply to be associate non-voting members.

1. World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (WCIP). <http://wcip2014.org/>

The WCIP is a meeting of Indigenous people from around the world, who gather to discuss the realization of the rights of Indigenous peoples, including to pursuit of the objectives of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The WCIP website provides a number of resources including news, multimedia, and ways to support and connect with regions and caucuses.

1. Australian Human Rights Commission. <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice>

The statements set forth by Australian Human Rights Commission for the quest for social justice for Australian Aborigines. The website also includes news, publications, guides, past and present projects.

1. ***Spirit of the Trees***. 2008. National Film Board.

<http://www.treesforever.org/Spirit>

Each of these six segments are made available for free (via YouTube) at the link provided above. Alternatively, each of the six segments is available to CAMPUS subscribers by searching them within the website of National Film Board of Canada at the following link: <https://www.nfb.ca/search/>. **This** is a six-part documentary series that weaves together Native voices, art, and music from forty Indigenous tribes and nations. The series discusses the spiritual practices, foods and medicines, art and music, shelter and land management of First Nations Peoples that are inseparably connected to trees, forests, and rivers of Earth.

1. Indigenous Art & Stories. <http://www.our-story.ca/>

This website is by Indigenous Arts & Stories, which is known for their well-recognized “art & creative writing competition in Canada for Indigenous youth.” The website includes portfolios of young artists work and other point of interest to explore.

1. Greg Sarris. 1997. *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream*. Berkley: University of California Press.
2. Danny Beaton. <http://www.dannybeaton.ca/Home_Page.html>

Turtle Clan Mohawk environmental activist and film maker, Danny Beaton has produced several documentary films that, amongst other concerns, advocate for a more responsible engagement with the environment coming out of his own traditions.

* *The Second Thanksgiving.* 2008. 60 min. This film is about “the Sacredness of Life, the duty for Human Beings to respect and give thanks to all of Creation, to honour the life giving forces, the air, the water, fire and Mother Earth.”
* *The Iroquois Speak Out for Mother Earth.* 2009. 50 min. Beaton encourages a serious engagement with the current environmental crisis by reminding us to embrace and care for the earth as our Mother.
* *Mohawk Wisdom Keepers.* 2009. 43 min. This documentary narrates the traditional teachings of five Mohawk Elders, both men and women, including an emphasis on respecting earth as Mother, medicine, and the practice of peace.
* *Indigenous Restoration*. 1992, DVD 2010. 55 min. This documentary is on the performance event “Concert for Indigenous Restoration,” where the performers explain the significance of their ceremonial performances, dance and songs (both traditional and contemporary) in relation to their native culture.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For Indigenous sacred sites and rituals, these rules usually mean that legs and shoulders should be covered for both men and women. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.
5. Due to notions about the power of life and the need for certain ceremonies, menstruating women may be asked to refrain from participating in some ceremonies as they do not need to participate during this powerful time. Please be respectful of these ideas and needs.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.