Since prehistoric times, small groups of people throughout the world have practiced their own unique forms of religion. Some of those religions continue to be practiced, especially among the native inhabitants of Australia, Africa, and the Americas. We refer to those religions as primal because they tended to come before the religious traditions we will study in the remaining chapters of this book.
Beginning our study with these first religions is a good idea for two reasons. One is that primal religions provide special insight into the mythic and ritual dimensions of religion. Primal peoples have tended to preserve a mythic orientation toward life. Their myths, and the rituals that re-enact them, remain essential sources of knowledge and power for all aspects of their lives.

The other reason for studying primal religions first is that all religions stem, more or less directly, from primal beginnings. For example, the ancestor of Judaism, the religion of the ancient Israelites, was in its early stages a tribal religion, exhibiting features similar to those discussed in this chapter. Other religions, such as Hinduism in India and Shinto in Japan, are also rooted in the primal traditions of early peoples.

Along with having originated first, primal religions are generally the traditions of nonliterate people, which means that they do not depend on scriptures or written teachings, as do most other religions. What they lack in written texts, however, they often make up for in oral material—myths or stories that are passed down from generation to generation. Primal religions tend to be the traditions of tribal peoples, organized in small groups that dwell in villages as opposed to large cities. There are exceptions, however, including the Yoruba of Africa and the Aztecs of Mesoamerica. In this and other ways, primal traditions are diverse. It is therefore crucial that we avoid making sweeping generalizations about them.

In the light of this vast diversity, this chapter does not attempt to describe all primal religions. Instead it focuses on five rather specific examples: the Aborigines of Australia, the Yoruba, the Plains Indians of North America, and the Aztecs. Once we have considered some particular features of each of these traditions, we will reflect on general themes that tend to be common to primal religions.

Religion of the Australian Aborigines

The Aborigines, the native people of Australia, were largely unaffected by outsiders until the arrival of Europeans some two hundred years ago. The Aborigines maintained traditions extending many thousands of years into the past. In some areas, notably in the northern and central regions of Australia, those traditions remain largely intact today.

Australia is a continent of great diversity. Its geography ranges from lush forested mountains to harsh deserts, and those differences have produced a variety of social groups that speak about forty separate languages and have differing customs. Australia’s primal religious life is diverse as well, but it possesses enough common elements that we can speak of one Aboriginal religion while acknowledging its varying manifestations.

The Dreaming: The Eternal Time of the Ancestors

The foundation of Aboriginal religion is the concept of the Dreaming. According to Aboriginal belief, the world was originally formless. Then at a certain point in the mythic past, supernatural beings called Ancestors emerged and roamed about the earth. The Ancestors gave shape to the landscape and created the various forms of life, including the first human beings. They organized humans into tribes, specified the territory each tribe was to occupy, and determined each tribe’s language, social rules, and customs. When the Ancestors had finished and departed from the earth, they left behind symbols of their presence, in the form of natural landmarks, rock paintings, and so on.

This mythic period of the Ancestors is called the Dreaming. As a very real sense, this period lives on, for the Aborigines believe that the spiritual essence of the Ancestors remains in the various symbols they left behind. The sites at which these symbols are found are thought to be charged with sacred power. Only certain individuals are allowed to visit them, and they must be approached in a special way. Rather than traveling the shortest routes to the sites, visitors follow the paths that were originally taken by the Ancestors in the Dreaming. Their ritual approach re-enacts the mythic events of the Dreaming, and through it the Aborigines re-create their world as it existed in the beginning. This re-creation gives them access to the endless sources of sacred power of these sites. The Aborigines inhabit a mythic geography—a world in which every notable landmark, whether it be a rock outcropping, a watering hole, or a cave, is believed to have great religious significance. Aboriginal cosmology—or understanding of the nature of the universe—thus plays a constant role in Aboriginal religion.

The spiritual essence of the Ancestors is also believed to reside within each individual. An unborn child becomes animated by a particular Ancestor when the mother or another relative makes some form of contact with a sacred site. Usually this animation involves a ritual that draws the Ancestor’s spiritual essence into the unborn child.
What experiences have served as rituals of initiation for you, marking your passage from childhood to adulthood?

An African Tradition: The Religion of the Yoruba

Africa, the second largest continent in terms of landmass, is home to some four hundred million people and several hundred religions, including the religion of the Yoruba. While hardly representative of all African religions, the Yoruba religion is similar enough to some others to serve as a good example. Yoruba society, today consisting of about ten million people, has endured for more than one thousand years. Its ancient religion has produced artwork that is famous and much admired.

Gods and Ancestors: The Inhabitants of Heaven

Orishas

The orishas are lesser deities, compared with the supreme Olorun, but are nonetheless truly significant. All are sources of sacred power and can help or harm human beings, depending on how well the rituals designed to appease them are carried out.

Hundreds of orishas exist. Some are worshiped by all Yoruba, others by only one family group. An especially significant orisha is Orisha-ela, whom most Yoruba believe created the earth. Ogun, the god of iron and of war, has a special status. Originally he was a human being, the first king of the city of Ife. After he died he became a god, and now he inhabits the border area between the ancestors and the rest of the orishas. The most complex orisha is Esu, who contains both good and evil properties. Precisely because of this, Esu mediates between heaven and earth. Worship of Esu is included in the worship of any other orisha, and Esu has a place in every shrine.
The Seven Dimensions of Religion: Primal Religious Traditions

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Common Themes, Diverse Traditions

While primal religious exhibit great diversity, including totemism, taboo, and the trickster figure, the vision quest, and the axis mundi.

The four examples of primal religions presented in this chapter also share certain general themes. For these religions, the boundaries between the supernatural and the human worlds are very thin, and easily crossed. Among the Australian Aborigines, for example, the sacred power of an Ancestor of the Dreaming is believed to enter an individual at the time of conception. The Yoruba commonly turn to divination to acquire knowledge of their destinies from the orishas. In both traditions communication between the ancestors and the living is thought to take place regularly.

A related theme is the all-encompassing nature of religion. In primal societies the secular and the sacred are not separate. Rather, the universe is full of religious significance, and...