



## Chapter 2

---

# **Expressive Traditions of Oceania, America and Africa**

## Timeline

	CE	
	ca. 1240-1500	Mali Empire in West Africa
La Malinche (Doña Marina)	ca. 1496 - ca.1529	
	1580s	Portuguese establish slave trade in Dahomey (Benin)
	1519	Hernán Cortés in Mexico
Moctezuma	d. 1520	
Cuauhtémoc	1502-1525	
Martín Cortés	1523-1568	
	1530s	First Africans in Brazil
	1531	Indian Juan Diego's vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe
	1600	25,000 Portuguese settlers in Brazil
	1606	Nine Dutch crew members eaten by cannibals in New Guinea
	October 8, 1769	First Maori with <i>moko</i> shot by British crew member
	1770s	British claim New Guinea, New Zealand and Australia
	1800s	Migrant workers carry Candomblé to urban centers in Brazil
	1821	Mexico's independence from Spain
	1846	US military moves into Navajo territory
Black Elk (Hehaka Sapa)	1863-1950	
	1865-1900	Moko virtually disappears among New Zealand Maori
	1888	Slavery abolished in Brazil
	December 29, 1890	Massacre of Sioux at Wounded Knee Creek, SD, USA

	1890s (late)	French control of Dahomey, Mali, Burkina Faso, etc.
	1904-1934	Sun Dance banned in USA
	1946	Candomblé legalized
Malidoma Somé	b. 1956	
	1986	Wole Soyinka wins Nobel Prize in Literature
	1990	Octavio Paz wins Nobel Prize in Literature
	1994	Disney's "Lion King"

This chapter highlights ten traditions from the indigenous peoples of Oceania, America, and Africa. One chapter of a book such as this can provide only a glimpse into the religious lives of the many distinctive peoples who live in these three vast areas. Yet despite their variety, the indigenous peoples of these regions are alike in two culturally significant ways: (1) They created expressive traditions that center on the performative aspects of religious life rather than on a corpus of sacred literature. (2) They became vulnerable to the powerful economic ambitions of European colonizers -- many of whom worked hard to convert aboriginals to the Christian faith. Because the indigenous peoples of Oceania, America and Africa emphasize the expressive (non-literate) aspects of religion, they are treated here in terms of the ten elements of performance. Three Oceanic traditions are explored in terms of the three expressive aspects (lived place, lived time and lived objects), while four American and three African traditions illustrate the DRESTAT functions: donation, restoration, enactment, symbolization, transformation, accession and transmission.

Each element of performance is illustrated by one religious practice that represents a key value from its religious culture. To aid in thinking about these indigenous traditions in comparative terms, the examples were chosen to highlight aspects of religious life in five complementary sets: (1) Ceremonial gardening and Fon divination deal with *cosmic patterns* they find in the world that relate to the human situation. (2) Aboriginal Dreaming and The Lion King story both deal with *key myths* that shape their religious identities. (3) Candomblé dance and Navajo sandpainting treat aspects of *healing* that use the expressive arts of dance and painting. (4) Maori tattoos and Sioux Sun Dance involve use of the *human body* as the focal point of religious expression. (5) Mexican identity and Dagara initiation present two *personal accounts* about experiences and values of the Mexican and West African cultures.

Table 2.1 Overview of chapter contents

Category	Focus	Illustration	Location
Lived time	cosmic patterns	Trobriand gardening	Papua New Guinea - Oceania
Lived place	key myths	Aboriginal Dreaming	Australia - Oceania
Lived object	human body	Maori tattoos	New Zealand - Oceania
Donation	human body	Sioux Sun Dance	U.S.A. - North America
Restoration	healing	Navajo sandpainting	U.S.A. - North America
Enactment	personal view	Mexican identity	Mexico - Central America
Symbolization	healing	Candomblé dance	Brazil - South America
Transformation	personal view	Dagara initiation	Burkina Faso - West Africa
Accession	cosmic patterns	Fon divination	Benin - West Africa
Transmission	key myths	The Lion King story	Mali - West Africa

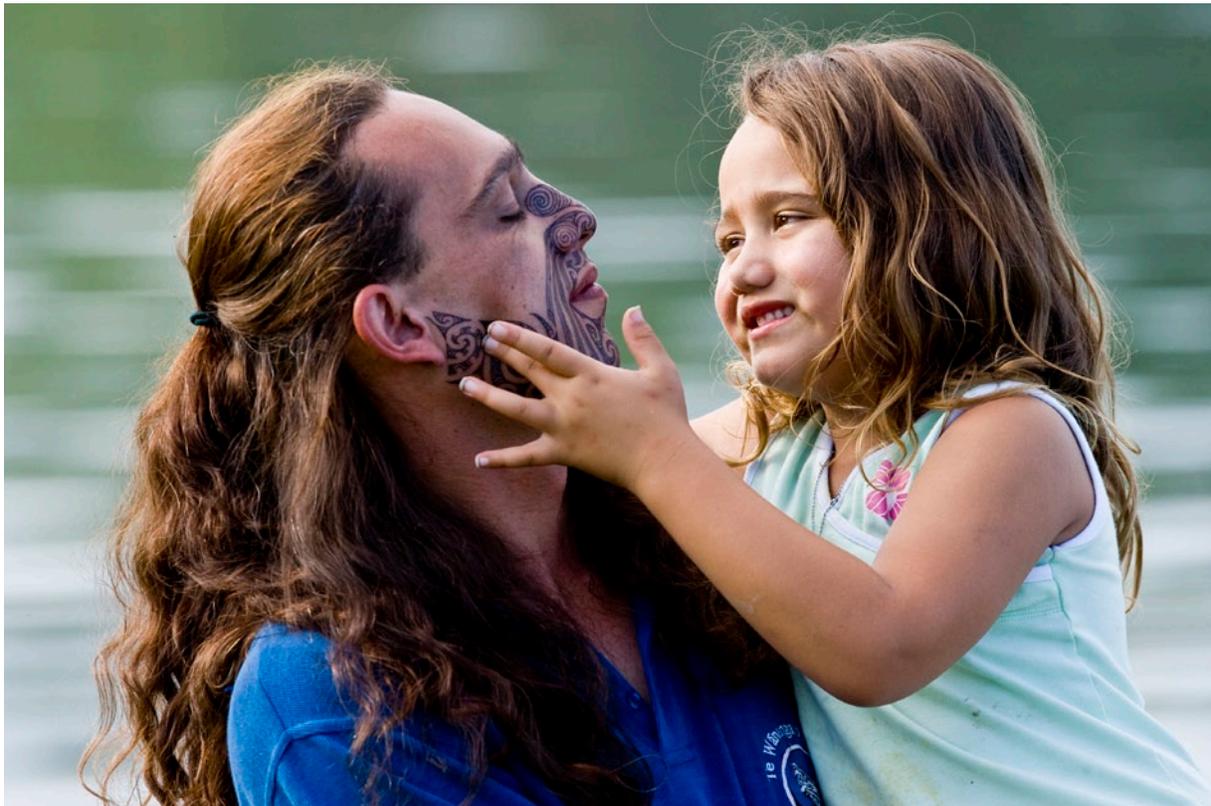


Plate 2.1 “Muriwai Hei inspects her father Hohepa’s new moko, or facial tattoo. (Ta Moko wananga with [Mark Kopua](#), Tolaga Bay, New Zealand in January 2007.)” The Maori art of ta moko is coming back to life. ©Aaron Smale/[IKON](#)

Although the indigenous traditions of Oceania, America and Africa are presented thematically in this chapter, it is critical to remember that they all were subject to the [European colonial experience](#). The ten religious ideas and practices explored here are inseparable from the trauma of early modern world history. Needless to say, world history shows that many brutal regimes and “civilized societies” have committed unspeakable atrocities. Here some negative acts of the Europeans come to the fore because at this cultural moment many indigenous peoples seek to define themselves in response to their experience of European colonialism. Colonialism is very much on the minds of native peoples who wish to prevent the erasure of their traditional collective memories.

## LIVED TIME: CEREMONIAL GARDENING

Ceremonial gardening done by Melanesian people who live on the [Trobriand Islands](#) of Papua New Guinea illustrates the expressive function of lived time. Ceremonial gardening creates a lived time whose cyclic rhythm of two seasons brings meaning to all aspects of life. Trobrianders do two types of gardening: (1) ceremonial *taytu* (yam) gardening and (2) secondary gardening to produce sweet potatoes, bananas, squash, beans, greens, taro and other crops. *Taytu* gardening is accompanied by extensive ritual that is divided into ten lunar months -- five sunny unripe moons and five rainy ripe moons. This is because yams (*dioscorea*) grow only where dry and wet seasons are distinct.

- *The unripe moons*. This is the sunny time (starting around July) when a space for the year’s garden is cleared and the *taytus* are planted. This is men’s work. The planting of a *taytu* requires clearing holes. Thus each man squats and digs with a stick (*dayma*) that could be anywhere from about two meters in length (for a strong man) to a short stick (for a child). A whole *taytu* is placed in the hole.
- *The ripe moons*. This is the rainy time during which the *taytu* gestates in the ground. Men may not approach women during this phase. Women’s work is taking care of the growing tubers by weeding. The *towosi* (ritual garden specialist, sometimes called the garden magician) utters verses of fertility to promote growth of the *taytus*. During this time villagers tell stories (some of ribald nature) to encourage the growth of the tubers. This is a time when careful nurturing is needed.

The two phases of the ceremonial gardening cycle parallel the process of impregnation and gestation. Thus Trobrianders view the production of food and the production of life itself according to the same cycle. The symbolism of the sunny phase of yam gardening done by the men is of opening the way and planting the embryos. After men have planted the embryo of the *taytu* the women see to its gestation. And just as men do not approach women during the rainy moons, so a pregnant woman separates from her husband and male company after her fifth month of pregnancy.

The *towosi* chants sacred verses said to have been passed down from the legendary ancestor who brought ceremonial gardening to the Trobriand Islands. Knowledge of these verses carries political as well as religious power. Although people always hear the songs, their use is restricted to specialists. Verses sometimes are purchased or recited for special favors. The *taytus* are supposed to imbibe the vibrational energy of the words and respond by moving in the soil without being blocked by stones. The key song used in ceremonial gardening is the *vatuvi* (show the way). Similar incantations are sung during the time of a woman's gestation. A portion of the *vatuvi* goes like this (Malinowski 1935, 1966: 97).

The belly of my garden leavens,  
 The belly of my garden rises,  
 The belly of my garden reclines,  
 The belly of my garden grows to the size of a bush-hen's nest,  
 The belly of my garden grows like an anthill; ...  
 The belly of my garden lies down,  
 The belly of my garden swells,  
 The belly of my garden swells as with a child,  
 I sweep away.

The parallel between gestation and *taytu* cultivation is just one among many symbolic patterns found in ceremonial gardening among Trobrianders. For example, a man will bring his axe to the ritual garden specialist to empower it. So the tool will become more effective in cutting roots to prepare garden soil the *towosi* spreads an herbal mixture on the axe and wraps it in banana leaf. After he has sensed the arrival of the ancestral spirits the *towosi* sings a song whose words are supposed to penetrate the blade and herbs. The herbal mixture is composed of various items that function as symbols. Each contributes something to the production of an ideal *taytu* crop: (1) Coconut leaves and the areca nut have a dark green color like a healthy *taytu* plant. (2) Three items are gathered because they have a good round shape like a bulging *taytu*, namely earth from a mound created by a bush-hen, chalk scraped from a large coral boulder with a mussel-shell, and a part of a large hornet's nest that was made in the ground. (3) Leaves from several creepers are crushed up and mixed in because their foliage is luxurious like healthy *taytu* foliage. (4) A small white tuber with fragrant white petals is used to obtain pleasant-smelling beautiful white *taytus*, and so forth (Malinowski 1935, 1966:105-106). These symbols illustrate the principle of homology in the practice of religion. Each symbolic item is *like* the object it is meant to affect. They have the same *structure* and therefore a change in one effects a change in the other. (In religious studies this type of operation is sometimes called sympathetic magic.)

## BOX 2.1: CULTURE CONTRAST

### The world stage in 1500 CE

[The year 1500](#) is chosen often to mark the start of the modern period of world history. At that moment in world history “it was by no means obvious to the inhabitants of Europe that their continent was poised to dominate much of the rest of the earth.” (Kennedy 1987: 3) According to historian [Paul Kennedy’s](#) analysis, these “power centers” were at play with the following strengths and weaknesses:

**Ming China.** [Ming China](#) was heir to a long-standing civilization -- one of the oldest and most cultured in the world. It was fertile, well populated and efficiently run by its organized Confucian bureaucracy. In 1500 China’s cities already had grown large due to vibrant industry and trade, and they far overshadowed European urban centers. Plus the Chinese were technologically advanced in arms with gunpowder (which they invented), cannons, a huge standing army, and a sophisticated navy in possession of the magnetic compass (which they invented). But China seemed to retreat from the world stage.

**Muslim cultures.** In the 1500s Muslim cultures were immensely successful in several arenas of the world stage. The [Ottoman Empire](#) (1301-1922) bumped up against Europe, the [Safavids](#) in Persia (1502-1736) prospered, and Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) ruled the [Mughal Empire](#) in India. Besides those great Islamic empires, a significant Muslim presence was felt along the Silk Road, and in West Africa. But overextension of the Ottomans and overindulgence of the Mughals proved to be crippling.

**Tokugawa Japan.** After a hundred years of clan feuding, the Japanese became unified under the [Tokugawa](#) clan. The great potential they had begun to develop in terms of international trade came to an abrupt halt with a new policy of isolationism. No Japanese was allowed to sail, and foreign trade was all but cut. Internal economic conditions were not bad, but there was a radical break in economic and cultural contact with the outside.

**Muscovy.** The Russian czars would someday grow to become rulers of a world power. In the 1500s the Kingdom of [Muscovy](#) possessed the arms (muskets and cannons) that put them in the running (along with the other “gunpowder empires” named above) for extended economic and political influence. Besides their relative military might, however, the Russians were economically underdeveloped. As they expanded, internal disputes had a stifling impact on economic success.

**Europe.** Europe paled in comparison to India and China in population; it was not the most fertile of lands; its borders were vulnerable to attack by both land and sea; and it was disunited. But what allowed the cluster of independent territories to succeed seems to have been an entrepreneurial spirit, a drive for innovation, and the absence of a single authority whose policies could control, homogenize, and regulate commercial activity.

Among all the world powers in 1500 the Europeans found a combination of social and economic factors that brought them to the forefront. The fantastical success of Europe in trade led to colonization, and colonization led to cultural domination.

## LIVED PLACE: ABORIGINAL DREAMING

The Dreaming (*Altjeringa*) is key tradition among Australia's Aboriginal people. It gives religious meaning to the land on which they live -- and by extension to everything associated with that lived place. The Dreaming connects people to each other through associations with family territory. Aboriginal genealogy is not passed down as a memory because saying the name of ancestors is forbidden. Thus relationships are based upon shared Dreaming. A connection to a grandfather or grandmother is made on the basis of the particular area in which those relatives lived. The living and deceased members of families are related through their common affiliation with the Eternal Beings of the Dreaming (*Altjeringa Mitjina*) who awakened at the beginning of time.

[Aboriginal tradition](#) says that the Eternal Beings of the Dreaming dreamed land, rivers, mountains and living creatures into existence. They did this by walking across the land that had no features and doing things for the first time. The Dreaming beings used tools and did things that Aborigines do today. They camped, made fire, engaged in combat and performed rituals. Their Dreaming started the culture of human beings. At some point the Dreaming ended, but stories about it survived through retellings and ritual enactments. Aboriginal elders pass on the sacred body of Dreaming myths, songs and rites. Based on the memories passed down about the Dream-



Plate 2.2 “Australian Aboriginal people with Thomas Baines.” Thomas Baines (1820-1875) was the official artist for the Royal Geographical Society sponsored by the British crown. His job was to record life in Australia. What is your impression of this painting?

ing, Aboriginal people discuss details of what the Eternal Ones did at every place. They also base tribal laws on examples of social relationships shown in the Dreaming, and keep the laws alive through the performance of rituals. As ritual articles are prepared the Dreaming stories about them always are recited.

The Aborigines tell stories about the origins of many things and customs, such as the first kangaroo, death, fire, children and so forth. Here is a story about the travels of Yam Dreaming as told by Paddy Japaljarri Sims (Warlukurlangu Artists 1987: 47):

He moved with his feet dragging along the ground at Yumurrpa. He was walking along and he noticed, at a distance from Yumurrpa, the flower of a yam plant standing all alone. He kept going ... [and] dug into the earth there [at Jupurrurla and Jakamarra] and followed the roots deep down into the earth. He dug and found yams and made them into a pile. Having dug deep down and dug out the yams and made them into a pile, he left them and went on his way. Yamaparnta is near the road to the east of Pikilyi. It too belongs to Jupurrurla-Jakamarra. He moved off, dragging his feet along the surface of the earth. He went south, and kept walking a long way. ... As the yam roots spread out to the east the Dreaming travelled in the same direction and he came to be in the eastern country. Keeping to the south he travelled through Warnipiyi to Kuurrpa, which is a hill. From there the Dreaming, who was originally a person, spread out like yam roots and became them. Thus the yams which the Dreaming carried with him spread out into the country.... Then a fire burnt the country and burnt the yam roots into many pieces. White ants ate them bit by bit. The Dreaming travelled and was burnt at that place. The Dreaming finished at that place and entered into the earth, going no further.

Aborigines must have Dreaming knowledge of the land and their connection with it. For example, people might be associated with particular places if their mothers first felt them move in the belly at that spot, or if they were born at that spot, or if their grandparents lived there. They use land and objects only when they can tell Dreaming stories pertaining to them. Circumstances have changed with the European colonization of Australia. The Aboriginal people no longer live by hunting and gathering in small bands. Rather they live in large settlements, towns and cities. But no matter where they live, traditional Aborigines always have Dreaming myths associated with their place of residence as well as people, creatures and objects involved in their lives at that place. Elders find evidence of the Dreaming if the group moves to new area, and new objects obtained at stores are brought into use through recitation of Dreamings.

## LIVED OBJECT: MAORI TATOOS

Among Maori people of New Zealand the [tattooed body](#) is a sacred object. It is a religious symbol that bridges two realms of reality: (1) the world of light in which humans dwell, and (2) the world of *atuas* (spirits) who dwell in twelve heavens and an underworld. The Maori feel the presence of *atuas* in powerful manifestations of the weather (thunder, lightning) or in uncharacteristic mental states such as fear in the case of a brave warrior or mental illness. *Atu- uas* also manifest in the growth energy of plant life and can work through human beings who skillfully carve wood or etch a tattoo. The Maori consider anything under stimulation from the non-human realm as tapu. This means that every circumstance of encounter with *atuas* requires ritual care. The process of *ta moko* (applying a tattoo) is tapu, and thus both artist and subject need protection. Maori have the sense that while something is being ornamented with a pattern under tapu conditions it becomes invested with power (*ihi*), awe (*wehi*) and authority (*wana*). A word, message or living iconography (*kupu*) is built into the sacred object as well. The sacred object created through this artistry gives access to the spiritual realm.

Traditional Maori full moko designs are created as follows: (1) six lines on each side of the chin, (2) lines on the chin, (3) six lines below nostrils, (4) a curved line on cheekbone, (5) lines between cheekbone and ear, (6) lines below cheekbone and ear and (7) lines on each side of lower part of nose (Robley 1896, 2003: 68).

The patterns are etched as negatives with the design on the uncolored skin. An untattooed vertical line runs from forehead to chin that divides a symmetrical pattern. Spirals are etched on the nose and cheeks, while arched bands are carved into the forehead. The eyelids are also tattooed and lips are black. Each buttock has a large spiral and the thighs are covered with tattoos resembling foliage down to the knees. A Maori woman traditionally had *ta moko* on her upper lip and chin with deep lip coloring. A Maori myth tells how *ta moko* originated in the underworld (Robely 1896, 2003: 116):

Tama-nui-a-raki visited his ancestors. When they asked what brought him there he said, “To obtain your services to make on my face the lines I now see marked on yours.” He wanted markings that would not wash off when he bathed. The ancestors re-



Plate 2.3 “A classic moko design.”

ferred him to another group of ancestors to undergo the procedure but warned that it was painful. Tama-nui-a-raki said, “It cannot be death, as you have borne it and live.” Coming to the right place Tama shut his eyes as an ancestor cut lines into his face. Tama fainted three times during the operation. On recovering the first time he cried out thinking he would die, but the ancestors sang words of comfort. After a second faint, Tama bathed and rested facedown on the earth, whereupon an ancestor knelt on him to press blood from the wounds. When Tama fainted a third time the ancestors laid him near a fire. In three days he could see again, rising from the “black darkness” that had covered him. When he could again walk and bathe Tama bid his ancestors farewell: “I will now return home to my children.”

The method of applying the Maori tattoo involves piercing the skin with a bone chisel. The bone has a serrated edge that holds the pigment. These are finely made implements with decorations that make them look like miniature adzes. While applying the pigment, the bone is tapped rhythmically with a small mallet made of wood. The pigment is made from a mixture of soot with a liquid substance to make it smooth. Artists kept the sticky indigo blue-black or greenish black substance in specially decorated inkpots that traditionally were passed down from one generation to the next. Pigment was continually added to the pot and over time it made a precious mixture. Between 1865-1900 the tradition of *ta moko* virtually [disappeared](#). But today the Maori are taking an interest in their traditional arts including *ta moko*.

## BOX 2.2: INTERPRETATIONS

### Obstacles to understanding oral cultures

It would be naïve to think that a student of religions could immediately find out all there is to know about the religions of indigenous peoples. Because their traditions have been largely expressive there are several factors that make understanding them difficult.

***Problems with translation.*** Relatively few people have good knowledge of the language of small groups of people. Expressive cultures are largely oral. Their religious specialists do not commit their body of wisdom to writing. Those who first studied the languages of people of Oceania, America and Africa were largely missionaries. Over time the field of anthropology developed, and their accounts provided a look at tribal cultures. Thus some information comes out when reports of the customs of indigenous tribal peoples were written by outsiders.

**Biased reports.** Written accounts of oral traditions have not always been sensitive to cultural nuances and religious values of people who do not use writing to transmit their religious rituals and beliefs. Therefore what is translated and recorded may not have captured an accurate sense of the oral religions.

**Faulty or partial information.** Some missionaries may have tried to be accurate, and within the field of anthropology much thought has been give over time to the most suitable ways of gaining information, and transmitting it. Yet the willingness of indigenous people to convey especially their most sacred lore is variable. Anthropologists have discussed problems of paid informants relating what they think the anthropologist wants to hear, or providing only partial information for religious or other reasons. And there is always the problem of communication -- understanding through language and cultural barriers. An anthropologist may ask questions that pertain to his or her worldview, but miss out on the most important aspects of the informant's worldview. Answers come in response to questions, and questions frame reality in such a way that much of a worldview can be ignored.

**Obscured or devastated traditions.** Often the traditions of small-scale societies become obscured or devastated when the people encounter cultures that are more politically and economically powerful. Sometimes a superior ruling power purposely attempts to wipe out earlier traditions. Other times the indigenous traditions become mixed with the newer traditions. This process of syncretism makes it difficult to learn about traditions that existed prior to the onset of a new ruling power.

## DONATION: SIOUX SUN DANCE

The [Sun Dance](#) illustrates the expressive function of donation because some dancers give their flesh as a sacrifice to Wakan-Tanka for the sake of the people. It is typically (but not always) an annual large-scale ceremonial made by members of about three dozen Native American People. Practices vary according to the tribe, the individual and the time period under consideration. Black Elk (1863-1950) a holy man of the Oglala Sioux said that the Sun Dance first came to his tribe in a vision. The Sioux call it a “dance looking at the sun” (*wiwanyag wachipi*) and for them Wakan-Tanka, the Great Spirit, is associated with the sun, life and light. The man to whom the vision was given explained, “Long ago *Wakan-Tanka* told us how to pray with the sacred pipe, but we have now become lax in our prayers, and our people are losing their strength” (Brown 1953: 68). Thus the vision was interpreted as Wakan-Tanka's gift to the Sioux to help them recover their intensity of prayer.



*Plate 2.4* “Prayer.” The ceremonial cottonwood tree is regarded as a living being that sustains those who sacrifice themselves in the Sun Dance. In the intensive heat the tree transmits the cooling moisture it collected at the stream when it grew. This scene captures the spirit of Native American prayer.

The Sun Dance evolved into an annual gathering where thousands of tribal bands came together to distribute goods and engage in communal prayer. A handful among the thousands of participants came as Sun Dance pledgers. This meant that they had already undertaken a vow to perform the Sun Dance at a higher level of intensity. The most intense prayer involved being attached to a pole by hide thongs that skewered the body above each nipple on the chest. Black Elk said, “when we tear ourselves away from the thongs, it is as if the spirit were liberated from our dark bodies” (Brown 1953: 92). The pole (typically) was a ritually prepared cottonwood tree (*wagachun*), and the dancer pulled back against the pole until the flesh tore so he could be released. (This intensive torture was not done by women. However another option for Sun Dancers, including women, was donation of small pieces of flesh.) Anthropologist Alice C. Fletcher, an eye-witness of a Sun Dance performed by the Oglala Sioux in 1882 described its culminating as follows:

At this time all the dancers are painted according to the visions of their respective priests. Scarifications are next performed. After noon, the leader is led to the pole, when according to

certain ceremonies the flesh is punctured a little above the nipples by a wedge-shaped knife, and a stick having one end embroidered with porcupine quills is inserted. To this skewer the raw hide rope fastened to the pole is secured, and the man is led out toward the east until the rope is taut. A large amount of goods are then given away, and many ceremonies take place to insure him a speedy release. When a certain song is started, he must put his whistle in his mouth and bracing himself pull with all his force, until he shall tear the flesh loose. When one side gives way he raises his hand, palm upward to the sky, as a sign of thanks for the deliverance. With one man the struggle lasted nearly twenty minutes. When these tortures are completed the festival is over.

(Fletcher 1883: 584)

The Sun Dance is held during the hottest part of the summer -- namely late June or early July. The highpoint of the ceremony typically is a span of 3 days during which pledgers abstain from food and drink. During these days the weather should be scorching hot. One can say “should be” because the weather is thought to be a reflection of the intensity and sincerity of the dancers’ sacrifice. Cool weather or a cloudy sky is considered inauspicious because the dancers obtain spiritual power from being dried out and cannot do so in case of rain or clouds. Their lament is deepened through the ordeal of staring at the sun and refraining from water. On the other hand, after the Sun Dance, rain is thought to be an auspicious cosmic response to the sacrifices made.

Although the Sun Dance pledgers do not drink water, it is said that they might get a taste of sacred water under extraordinary circumstances. In some versions of the Sun Dance a buffalo head hangs from the cottonwood pole. From this buffalo comes soothing water that the pledgers may find dripping through their eaglebone whistles. “Dancers say, ‘Just as when the buffalo is thirsty he can dig water out of the dust where no one can see it, *nuc* [Indian] can get water from Buffalo when he is thirsty’” (Jorgensen 1972: 209). Sometimes they are granted moisture from the sacred cottonwood pole itself -- which is one of the “standing peoples” (i.e., trees) chosen to be at the center (Brown 1953: 69).

Stories circulate that during the dance the center pole opens, and water comes out. It is spiritual water that blesses the dancers but only can be seen by some. Dancers may drink it through their whistles.



*Plate 2.5* “Sun Dance pledgers.” The Sun Dance ceremony is lead by someone who has received authority through a vision quest or transmission from an elder medicine person. These two men have prepared themselves to deal with the awesome power of the sacred, which by nature is dangerous. To cope with danger, they should have undergone certain dangerous trials themselves. It is possible that participation in war (in modern times as a member of the United States armed forces) could provide this qualification. Participants in the Sun Dance go without food and water for several days.

(Hultkrantz 1981: 251)

At some point a dancer may be hit with a vision. This becomes evident from the outside as the dancer is literally knocked down by the force of something sacred, such as the buffalo or the pole, and would lie unconscious for three to four hours. During the time of the vision the Sun Dancer gains new knowledge that includes such things as songs, a dance steps, techniques for healing and so forth. The Sun Dancer is instructed during this time as his (or her) spiritual body leaves the physical body. The experience of vision can involve drinking water with holy beings. Thus the dancers may return from such shamanic journeys with moistened throats and dance effortlessly without experiencing hunger or thirst. Later the Sun Dancers share details of their visions with the other Sun Dancers, chiefs and family. Many symbolic objects, words, songs, movements and so forth patterned on events in the visions are incorporated into future Sun Dances. The relatively small number of Sun Dancers who undergo the most intensive practice of ripping their flesh offer themselves as a sacrifice to Wakan-Tanka so that “much strength would be given to the life of the nation” (Brown 1953: 100).

## RESTORATION: NAVAJO SANDPAINTING

The Navajo religion centers on healing, based on the assumption that illness is caused by interference with the life force of a person. Thus healing is a form of restoration. Illness can arise from contact with the dead or things associated with blood, excessive behavior, witches and contact with specific animals, a pre-natal incident or even Holy People (i.e., supernaturals who pose danger due to their power). The Navajo classify their healing into ceremonies called “ways,” such as Enemyway, Beautyway, and Uglyway. Each healing way is associated with one branch of a vast story network. Navajo songs are a form of wealth and no cure is possible without them. Sacred songs link the healer, patient, medicine and ritual objects to the supernatural world. Singers specialize in healing ways and must learn the songs (many hundreds), stories, iconography and medicines associated with them. A Navajo curing chant invokes supernatural beings who set things right. Through the ritual, the healer makes contact with the supernatural counterpart of an earthly cause of trouble. The cure applies a kind of “homeopathic” remedy whereby ritual contact with the source of trouble restores health. Physical diseases and other ailments are linked to problematic associations with the earthly counterparts of characters in the Navajo stories. The supernatural counterpart of the character must be called to undo the effect of the improper act.

In the Navajo system, a sore throat, stomach trouble or skin disease is attributed (sometimes) to an inappropriate act involving snakes. Thus the healer must use a story about snakes in the cure. Navajo [sandpaintings](#) depict various “people” that exist in the sacred stories. The healing power of the paintings

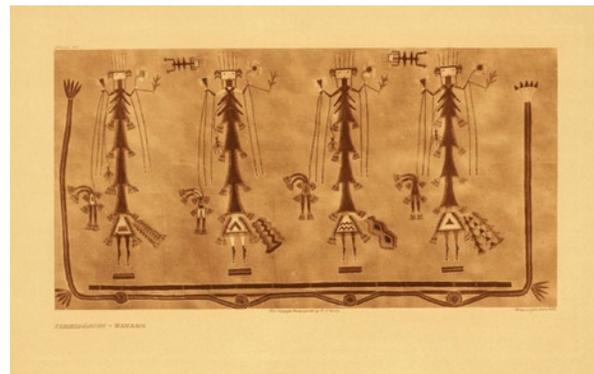


Plate 2.6 “Navajo sandpainting.”

comes from the (hierophanic) fact that supernaturals invest energy into their symbols. The holy people become present after corn pollen is sprinkled on the sandpainting and patient. A painting might be six feet across, made on the floor of a hogan (ceremonial lodge) that is some fifteen to twenty feet across. The sick person sits in the middle of the painting facing east, in line with the hogan entryway. Sand from specific areas of various “people” is picked up with moistened hands and “pressed” onto corresponding parts of the patient’s body. As part of the remedy, the sick person also is fed a ceremonial stew in a prescribed manner:

At dawn, after the stew has been kept boiling all night long the pot is placed before the patient. With his fingers the singer takes a pinch from the east side and inserts this into the patient’s mouth. He repeats this feeding with a pinch from the west, south and north and concludes with a pinch from the center of the dish.

(Haile 1947: 29)

Medicines are also fed to the patient bringing the container to patient’s lips. Usually they drink it four times when the appropriate song words are sung. At dawn following the closing songs the patient goes outside and inhales dawn’s breath four times, facing east toward dawn and drawing hands toward one’s mouth and inhaling.

In the sandpaintings supernatural beings are always portrayed in human form, whereas plants, animals and natural phenomena might look like people or be depicted in their own shape (e.g., curvy snake, straight snake, weasel) or in abstract form (e.g., rainbow lines, zig-zag thunder). Usually the protagonist of a healing story is represented as human. Circular paintings have the place of the episode depicted in the center. Some symbols, represented in multiples of two and four, are put in cardinal directions or in a line with heads pointing east. Symbols in the sandpaintings include: snakes, people, water creatures, thunder, corn and guardians. For example, one painting of a corn myth includes corn rooted in a cloud symbol standing above a mountain symbol (all of the same color). The corn plant has six leaves on each side with a bird perched on each leaf, and two more birds hovering over the corn. In addition, two human figures one above the other are on each side of the corn. The birds have sacred pollen on their bills and feet, and the corn tassels also have pollen (Wyman 1957: 181). Most circular paintings have the four Navajo sacred domesticated plants marking the four quadrants: corn, beans, squash and tobacco. A male or female rainbow guardian in the form of an elongated person encircles most Navajo sandpaintings -- leaving an opening to the east.

**BOX 2.3: A SPIRITUAL PATH****Preserving cultural memories**

Efrain Tomas Bó, an Afro-Brazilian social critic, observed that the “clouding of memory” was a powerful colonialist weapon.

A noun, an apparently simple neologism -- civilization -- coined, curiously, as recently as the middle of the eighteenth century, simultaneously in France and England, derived itself into a verb, to civilize, would become, within a century and a half, a weapon and a tool, a powerful ideology of conquest. From this weapon or tool or ideology would emerge colonialism, the African and Asian colonial wars, entire peoples’ enslavement for their economic and human exploitation. And what form did the instrumental violence of this weapon or ideology take? It sought, first, to cloud the memory, and then to implant the civilizing powers’ own cultural forms among the conquered peoples.

(Efrain Tomas Bó in Nascimento 1995: 133)

Nowadays the restoration of traditional values is a kind of spiritual path for many indigenous peoples. The American Indian Movement (AIM) was formalized about 30 years ago as a reaction to unjust treatment of Native Nations with this vision:

The movement was founded to turn the attention of Indian people toward a renewal of spirituality which would impart the strength of resolve needed to reverse the ruinous policies of the United States, Canada, and other colonialist governments of Central and South America. At the heart of AIM is a deep spirituality and a belief in the connectedness of all Indian people.

(Whittstock and Salinas: 2007)

Yet even in resisting the effects of colonization, some indigenous peoples acknowledge the benefits of colonization and recognize difficulties of governing without the Europeans.



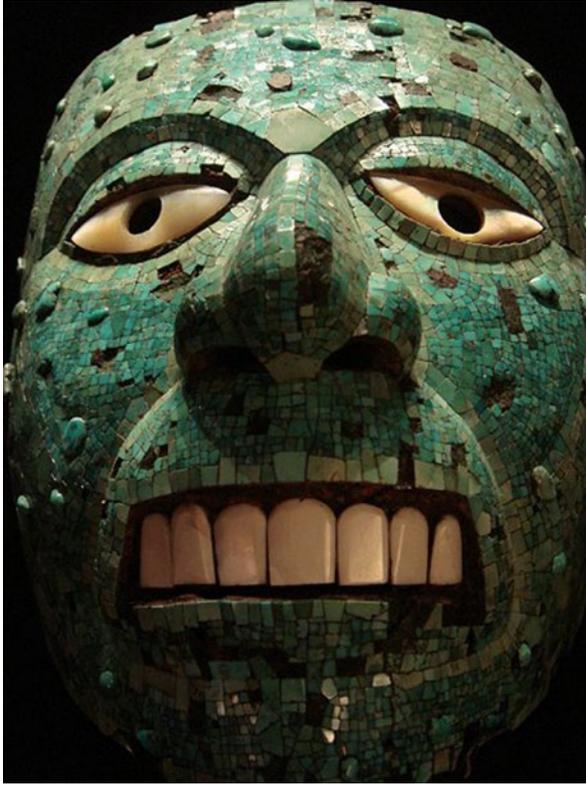
*Plate 2.7* “African-Indian art.” For nearly a century while India was a British colony, many Indians moved to other parts of the British Empire for employment opportunities -- starting in the mid-1800s. Mohandās Gāndhī was among those who moved to Natal, South Africa. An Indo-African cultural mix is reflected in this carving photographed by “Twice 25” at a Natal market.

[Octavio Paz](#), winner of the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature, notes in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* that in spite of the trauma of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, the Spaniards brought a rich cultural heritage of universality -- including “almost all the artistic forms of the Renaissance: poetry, the novel, painting and architecture,” along with well-developed philosophical and political ideas (Paz 1961: 98). Furthermore, the conquistadors brought a living faith in Christ along with a universal openness that made room for indigenous peoples. Notwithstanding “the religious pretensions of colonial society” the Roman Catholic Church provided a place for the disillusioned and defeated Indian -- a place in the cosmos, even though it was at the bottom of the social order (Paz 1961: 101). Paz expresses gratitude that Mexico did not have to endure what the indigenous people in the English colonies endured at the hands of Protestants in the North American colonies. Paz also acknowledges social difficulties faced by Mexico after independence from Spain. In his view no ideal government has been able to replace the colonial rule, noting that the independent governments were beset with corruption and unable to solve many social problems. Paz argues that Mexicans have been unable to transcend their deep-set ambivalence about being “mixed” with the Spanish because they tried to get rid of the past by canceling themselves and adopting the identity of the universal man.

The examples of self-assertion and introspection among indigenous peoples could be multiplied. In today’s creative atmosphere of restoration, two questions run deep in the hearts of many indigenous peoples: (1) How much traditional cultural memory can or should be restored? and (2) How much memory of colonization should be erased?

## ENACTMENT: MEXICAN IDENTITY

In the study of religions it is common to find people ritually “enacting” wondrous hierophanic events in order to relive them. But “enactment” can also occur in response to kratophanies that came as traumatic events of irresistible power. The persistent Mexican enactment of the trauma of the Spanish Conquest is an example of the latter. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz (1918-1998) contemplates his Mexican identity (*mexicanidad*) as it embodied the trauma of long-passed events. Paz says that the history of the Spanish conquest of Mexico should begin with an understanding that Hernán Cortés encountered Moctezuma, leader of the Aztec Empire, who was already defeated by the expectation that Mexico’s gods were dead. According to the Aztec calendar one cycle was ending and a new cosmic age was starting. Many warnings and bad omens had been seen. The Aztecs felt “suicidal” with a kind of death wish because the gods had abandoned Moctezuma who was “so fascinated by the Spaniards that he experienced a vertigo which it is no exaggeration to call sacred -- the lucid vertigo of



*Plate 2.8* “Xiuhtecuhtli, turquoise god of the Aztecs.” This Mother-Father of the Aztec gods lived at the center of the world. He was god of fire, light, and life who protected rulers and warriors. Hernán Cortés and other Spanish conquistadors brought the Christian concept of God to Mexico in the early 1500s. Thereafter, Xiuhtecuhtli and other Aztec gods lost their following.

tion of the poor, the shield of the weak, the help of the oppressed. In sum, she is the mother of orphans (Paz 1961: 85). The deep thirst for a compassionate deity is seen also in the way villagers express their love of Christ, the “victimized Redeemer” in villages. Paz notes, “The village churches have a great many images of Jesus -- on the cross, or covered with thorns and wounds -- in which the insolent realism of the Spaniards is mingled with the tragic symbolism of the Indians” (Paz 1961: 83).

La Malinche (Doña Marina to the Spanish) was Hernán Cortés’s Indian lover-mistress. La Malinche (Náhuatl-Maya) was drawn to Cortés and loved by him -- and then abandoned. She and Hernán had a son Martín, who became known as the first *mestizo* (Spanish-Indian). La Malinche became a Mexican symbol of the woman who sold out, who was violated and discarded. She is called La Chingada. The term Chingada is so powerful a word that it is normally taboo. The Chingada is the violated one. La Chingada embodies the ambivalence of attraction to the stranger -- and the subsequent violation or seduction. Cortés’ violation of La Malinche/La Ch-

the suicide on the brink of abyss” (Paz 1961: 93). Since the trauma of Conquest, Mexicans await the redemption of history -- and the power of a new cycle. Thus they still look for the tomb of Cuauhtémoc, the young hero who went out to meet Cortés alone without his woman, “separated from the curved breast of the Empress,” Moctezuma’s daughter (Paz 1961: 84). Mexicans call Cuauhtémoc the “young grandfather” and await his resurrection.

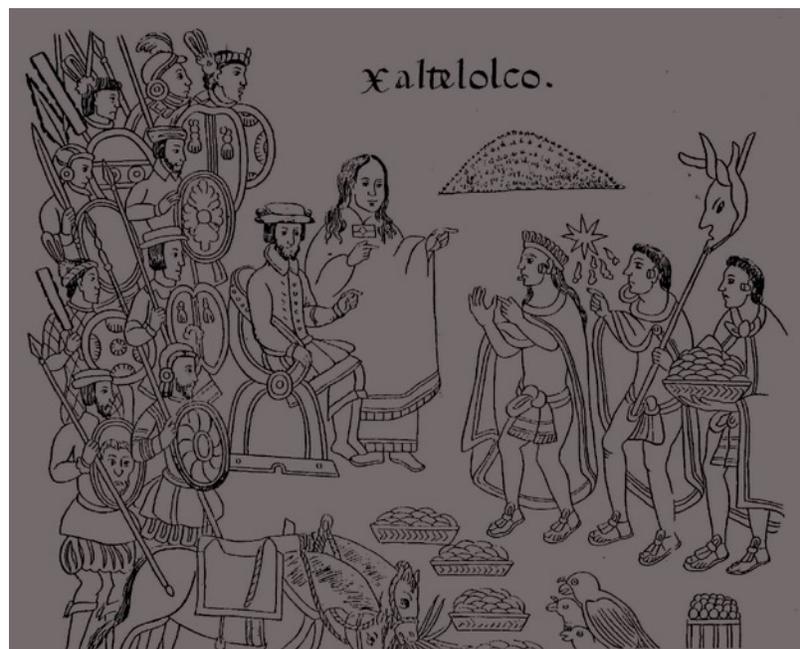
An intense solitude followed the death of the gods and the leaders of Mexico after the Conquest. This defeat of the indigenous gods prompted a turn to the feminine. The Spanish conquistadors introduced a [new empire](#) and a new cosmic cycle with a new vision of the divine wrapped around the goddesses of vegetation and agriculture. Catholicism in Mexico centered on the Virgin of Guadalupe who appeared to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531 on a hill sacred to Tonantzin, the Aztec fertility goddess. But despite the Virgin’s association with fertility, “the worshipers do not try to make sure of their harvests but to find a mother’s lap. The Virgin is the consola-

ingada became the ground of Mexican identity. The trauma of the rape of Mexico is reflected in the words shouted by its people every fifteenth of September on Mexican Independence Day: “¡Viva México, hijos de la Chingada!” (Paz 1961: 74). This cheer (that borders on a curse) is highly colloquial meaning something like “Go Mexico, sons of the tramp!” or “Long live Mexico and the children of the Chingada!” The Chingada is the woman-mother who was violated and passive to the point of nothingness. And Mexicans are drawn to her with deep ambivalence as their mother, from whose womb the illegitimate mestizo people were born.

Paz uses the hated *Chingada* / Malinche to explain the cult of the Virgin in Mexico. He maintains that the specific nature of Mexican Catholicism revolves around the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe. ... She constitutes the very antithesis of *la Chingada* whom Mexicans simply cannot forgive and they, they bastard race, the orphans, turn toward their Virgin mother for comfort and solace.

(Davies: 2000)

Plate 2.9 “La Malinche and Hernán Cortés (ca. 1585).” This image was drawn about sixty-two years after the birth of Martín Cortés. Martín is traditionally known as the first mestizo (person of mixed Mexican-European blood) because his parents were Hernán Cortés, the Spanish conquistador and La Malinche, an indigenous Mexican woman. Octavio Paz argues that La Malinche’s abandonment by Hernán after giving him a son and much help had a traumatic effect on the Mexican psyche.



Paz suggests that Mexican goddesses (and women) are symbols of passivity. The immense passivity of the divine figures in Mexico gave birth to a strange and disturbing social polarity that pits the violator against the violated. The violence of Mexican society is seated in the opposite side of the Chingada. One either inflicts actions “implied by *chingar* on others, or else he suffers them himself at the hands of others” (Paz 1961: 78). Thus Mexican society became divided between strong and weak. In a move of identification with the oppressor, Paz notes that the figure of the Mexican “macho” took up the role of the conquistador. The macho Mexican male knows only the drive for power. The macho becomes the model for those in power in Mexican society -- in relation to the powerless, including women. Paz claims that Mexicans

continually relive the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire. They seem unable to reconcile their self-hatred and ambivalence toward a powerful oppressor who still lives as a figment of the Mexican imagination. In Mexico the term *malinchistas* applies to those who want Mexico to open to the outside world. Thus rather than chance another humiliation, Mexicans retreat into a “labyrinth of solitude.”

## SYMBOLIZATION: CANDOMBLÉ DANCE

The Afro-Brazilian religion [Candomblé](#) centers on the worship of orishas, who are spiritual beings that represent many aspects of life. The deepest influence in Candomblé comes from the Yoruba people of West Africa who were brought as [slaves](#) to the Americas. Yoruba tradition associates some orishas with historical persons while others are connected with features of the land or the cosmos, such as rivers, thunder and so forth (see Box 2.4). The *babalawô*, priests of Ifá, pass along sacred lore about the orishas -- such as these lines about Shangô, the warrior orisha who is associated with iron:

One of the customers of Ogun, the blacksmith, was Shangô,  
 Who liked to dress elegantly,  
 To the point of braiding his hair like that of a woman.  
 Having pierced the lobes of his ears,  
 He always wore earrings.  
 He wore necklaces of beads.  
 He wore bracelets.  
 What elegance!!!  
 This man was equally powerful through the use of his talismans.  
 He was a warrior by trade.  
 He never took prisoners during his battles.  
 (He killed all of his enemies.)  
 For that reason, Shangô is saluted as  
 King of Kosô who acts with independence!”

(Carybé 1993: 251)

Candomblé makes intensive use of symbolism. Specially trained people known as Orisha Children serve as channels through which the orishas manifest to the Candomblé community. The person “mounted” by an orisha *becomes* a living religious symbol. A person who seeks protection from the orishas need not become such a trance medium, however. One must be *called by an orisha* to become an Orisha Child. This calling may be indicated in several ways, including: (1) falling into a trance during a drumming ceremony, (2) having an illness that does not respond to normal treatment, (3) having an unusual dream, (4) discovering a strange object or (5) having a series of life setbacks (Verger 1993: 242). Those called to the spiritual vocation

go through a seventeen-day period of ritual training during which they become a vehicle for the orisha that will be special to them for the rest of their lives.

In the course of initiation, sacred lore is transmitted about the orisha's greeting, gestures, rhythms, favorite foods, colors, clothes, medicinal plants and other matters. An initiate learns to serve the orisha who mounts her or him, showing its personality through distinctive dance moves, expressions, vestments and so forth. The vestments include insignia such as a double-headed axe, a fan, a broom, a bow and arrow or another insignia depending on what item is associated with the orisha. The dance moves are performed along with specific rhythms and are accompanied by gestures that convey the nature of the orisha. For example, a person mounted by the feminine warrior Oya-Yansan would press forward the palms of the hands as though stirring up wind because the orisha is associated with storms and spirits of the dead. After the seventeen-day period the new Orisha Child consciously remembers nothing about the initiation, but continues to serve the orisha and gain deeper knowledge of its ways of helping people.



*Plate 2.10* “Three Candomblé priestesses of Gantios, Salvador da Bahia, Brazil.” Gantios is the popular Portuguese name for the Ile Iya Omin Axe Iyasse house of Candomblé. It was founded in the nineteenth century by Maria Escolastica Conceicao Nazare -- better known as [Mae Meninha](#). It is said that when Meninha sang “the orishas came down like stars from the sky.” Upon her death in 1986 the people of Brazil mourned. These three priestesses carry on Mae Meninha’s work.

Candomblé is a healing religion. During a public ceremony non-members may join worshipers in seeking advice and personal help from the Orisha Children, who prescribe remedies. Each medicinal plant is associated with a particular orisha. Herbal baths serve as medicine for weight loss, menopause and reduction of fever or inflammation. In addition, herbs are used for illnesses such as rheumatism, liver and stomach ailments, anxiety, diabetes, hemorrhage and whooping cough (see Voeks 1997: 170-191). Illness is interpreted as a symptom of being out of harmony with the spiritual realm. Orisha worshipers feel that one source of illness is neglect of one's duty to the ancestors. Thus the orishas are called upon for help in resisting political oppression that prevents people from practicing their traditional rites. Abdias do Nascimento (b. 1914), the Brazilian born African artist and activist, appealed to Eshu for powerful speech to help him resist the violence perpetrated against Afro-Brazilians by death squads.

I implore you Eshu  
to plant in my mouth  
your verbal axé [vital force]  
restoring to me the language  
that was mine  
and was stolen from me  
blow Eshu your breath  
to the bottom of my throat  
down where the voicebud  
sprouts so the  
bud may blossom  
blooming into the flower of  
my ancient speech  
returned to me by your power  
mount me on the axé of words ...

we are murdered  
because they judge us orphans  
scorn our humanity  
not knowing we are  
African men  
African women  
proud sons and daughters of  
Orun's Lord ...  
O Eshu  
one and omnipresent  
in all of us  
take to our Father  
in your shredded flesh ...  
the news of our devotion ...  
overflowing with tears ...

(Nascimento 1995: 15,17)

As Eshu is associated with freedom fighters and communication, so each orisha has a specific function. No matter when or where an orisha mounts a person, the spiritual personality is said to come out looking the same. Orisha Children hone the beauty and power of these manifestations through ever deepening experience in managing the protective energies of the orishas.

## BOX 2.4: SYMBOLS

### A weekly cycle of orishas in Candomblé

The orishas of Yoruba-based religions have many symbolic associations (with variants) -- including characteristic functions and specially colored beads worn by those who seek their protection. Here is a description of several orishas, listed according to the weekday with which they are typically linked (see especially Verger 1993).

**Monday.** Eshu brings order to the world and travels between cosmic zones to facilitate divine-human communication. All Candomblé ceremonies open with an invocation to Eshu to open a channel to the other orishas. He is a **trickster** associated with crossroads (which is the best place to leave him offerings). Eshu is felt to be the most human among the orishas. People wear black and white beads for Eshu.

**Tuesday.** Oshun is the goddess of love. She is associated the Oshun River in West Africa, and devotees (even from Brazil) make pilgrimages there to honor her. Oshun dances voluptuously, looking brightly at herself in a mirror, graciously waving a fan and wearing lots of jewelry. People wear golden yellow glass beads and many bracelets made of brass for Oshun.

**Wednesday.** Shangô was a former African king who manifests as a forceful character and dances to warlike rhythms. His insignia is a two-sided axe. A long dried gourd filled with small seeds is used as an instrument to sound like rain in his honor because lightening is associated with his administration of justice. People wear red and white beads for Shangô.

**Thursday.** Ogun is the god of iron and blacksmiths. Those whose work involves metal seek his protection, such as farmers, hunters, butchers, carpenters, and machinists. He wears a metal helmet and bracelets, carrying a shield and sword or war axe. In Brazil due to the enslaved position of Africans, the original association of Ogun with farming was lost. People wear dark-blue or green beads for Ogun.

**Friday.** Obatala is perhaps the greatest orisha. He descended from the heavens to fulfill the mission of his father, Olorun. Obatala was entrusted with the act of making humans out of clay. Because the clay took on many shapes, people with hunched backs or crippled limbs worship him. Obatala is associated with the crucified Christ of Christian teachings and walks with a dignified presence among the people. Obatala always wears white, as do his followers (including white beads). All Candomblé ceremonies close with reverence to Obatala, who is offered white rice.

## TRANSFORMATION: DAGARA INITIATION

The process of transformation during a rite of passage can be seen in the personal account given by Malidoma Patrice Somé (b. 1956), who was born in village in Burkina Faso, West Africa among Dagara people. [Malidoma](#) was taken against his family's will to a Jesuit mission boarding school where he lived for fifteen years. One day he ran away and returned to his village. There he underwent a traditional Dagara six-week initiation. He went with five elders and some sixty-three boys (13 to 14 years old) from five villages. All the initiates were naked through their many trials, allowed only to cover themselves with leaves while sleeping on the ground.

Nakedness is very common in the tribe. It is not a shameful thing; it is an expression of one's relationship with the spirit of nature. To be naked is to be open-hearted. Normally, kids stay naked until puberty and even beyond. It was only with the introduction of cheap cloth from the West, through Goodwill and other Christian organizations, that nakedness began to be associated with shame.

(Somé 1994: 193)

Malidoma's initiation began with an exercise on vision. The elder had told the initiates the first night, "Tomorrow we will begin working with your sight....When you have learned to see well, you will journey one by one to your respective places in this world and find every piece of your self" (Somé 1994: 203). The seeing exercise involved choosing a tree and staring at it. The initiates were not told what they were supposed to see, but they were to continue with the exercise until they had seen something. Malidoma chose a *yila* tree about ten meters high with thin and straight branches and a trunk less than a meter in diameter. He stared at the tree for five hours and nothing happened. The heat of the sun beating on his back began disturbing him. He began to feel helpless. Even after the whole day had passed Malidoma still did not see anything. One or two elders (who at times sang songs that penetrated his whole body) were watching him. Yet he could not see anything but the tree, and went back to the camp for the night. He resumed the tree gazing exercise the next day. With four of the five elders watching him Malidoma felt pressured to experience something, so he lied about seeing an antelope shape in the tree. The elders knew he lied and Malidoma began crying with humiliation. He began to speak to the tree sincerely and respectfully. His body suddenly felt cool and all trees around were "glowing like fires or breathing lights." Then he had an experience of the *yila* tree that broke through his ordinary vision. Malidoma's *yila* tree began to look like a green lady who lifted a veil from her face. Malidoma described her this way:

She was green, light green. Even her eyes were green, though very small and luminescent. She was smiling and her teeth were the color of violet and had light emanating from them. The greenness had nothing to do with the color

of her skin. She was green from the inside out, as if her body were filled with green fluid. I do not know how I knew this, but this green was the expression of immeasurable love.

(Somé 1994: 221)

*Plate 2.11* “Witch doctor.” In the 100 years since this picture was taken how far have we come in dealing with stereotypes? Perhaps Malidoma Somé’s story will help people of European extraction and others overcome preconceptions and see in this “witch doctor” just a human being who has a job to do. Malidoma means roughly “Be friends with the stranger/enemy” -- and he was sent by his elder to the West to live up to that name. The Dagara chief told Malidoma: The white man needs to know who we really are” (Somé 1994: 307).



Malidoma felt an intense, overwhelming love from the green lady. Only after the experience ended did he realize he was embracing the tree. He had been doing so for several hours, but the time felt very short. The immense happiness he felt from the energy of the tree was almost too much to bear. It taught Malidoma that there is a part in us that yearns for these kinds of feelings, but that part is not human. Reflecting on the experience in his account, Malidoma concluded: “If we ever understood the genuine desires of our hearts at any given moment, we might reconsider the things we waste our energy pining for” (Somé 1994: 222). That experience with the green lady of the *yila* tree opened Malidoma’s sight and gave him knowledge that differed from Jesuit learning.

It seemed to me that Dagara knowledge was liquid in the sense that what I was learning was living, breathing, flexible, and spontaneous. ... It was not fixed, even when it appeared to be so. For example trees are not immobile, they travel like us from place to place. ... The learning one gets from a book ... is very dif-

ferent from the living, breathing knowledge that an elder has to offer -- and different from the knowledge that comes from within, from the soul.

(Somé 1994: 203-204)

The Dagara elders determined that Malidoma should reenter the white man's world to transmit some Dagara knowledge. They said: "The white man needs to know who we really are, and he needs to be told by someone who speaks his language and ours. Go. Tell him" (Somé 1994: 307).

## ACCESSION: FON DIVINATION

Divination is a tradition common to many indigenous African peoples. [Divination](#) is a means to gain access to the unseen dimension of existence; hence it illustrates the expressive function of accession. The Fon people of Dahomey (now called Benin) in western Africa have three kinds of divination, ranked according to their level of reliability: (1) augury, (2) trance and (3) wisdom divination, known as Fá (or Ifá) divination (see Zuesse 1985: 206-222 and 1995).

- *Augury.* Augury is typically performed by Fon heads of families and is the least reliable. It employs nonhuman agents for divination, including kola nuts, fowl entrails, mirror-gazing, water-gazing or spinning eggs. The diviner expects that minor local spirits can be called to indwell in the nuts, entrails or eggs. A sign is revealed as the kola nuts are cast down, the entrails of a chicken "read" or eggs are spun around. The use of kola nuts is common among diviners in West Africa. Several stories are told to justify their special status: (1) they came from the "first" kind of tree, (2) they were originally the sacrificed body of a primal being or (3) they were a divine gift to humanity. Presently European-made playing cards are used for augury as well.
- *Trance divination.* Fon priests act as mediums for the purpose of divination. Ritual specialists are the "wife" of only one vodú (spirit). There are different types of spirits: (1) vodú of nature who can affect the weather, (2) spirits of specific localities that affect the condition of people according to their range of influence and (3) spirits of ancestors. Across the countryside are shrines dedicated to various vodú. If people ignore them, suffering will come in the form of bad luck, mental or physical illness and even death. Fon priests enter trances find out from the vodú, or from ghosts (*gbô*) about the cause of people's illness and death. The diviner might discover that a witch was responsible for a person's difficulties. (Witchcraft accusations sometimes pit one family or person against another.)
- *Fá wisdom divination.* Fá divination is the most highly respected form of divination among the Fon. The Fon ultimate divinity is Mawu-Lisa. Fá (Ifá) is Mawu-Lisa's messenger, and so is understood as the voice of divinity that brings harmony and wisdom. Fá is sometimes thought of as a weakling without arms and legs who cannot stand up. This amorphous Fá

is superior to the vodú. Fá knows the fate all creatures -- even the vodú. The Fon ritual specialist is a *bokónô*. The *bokónô* are highly trained in sacred lore, medicine and divination techniques. They learn proverbs and stories that help give the meaning of each sign revealed during the divination ritual. The most masterful *bokónô* have memorized some 600 verses per sign. The most accomplished African diviners who are involved in systems of wisdom divination travel throughout Africa to learn from other diviners.

The Fá diviner uses sixteen palm-kernels. In front of the *bokónô* is a rectangular wooden tray sprinkled with white powdered clay or meal. This is used to record the signs determined by the diviner from the palm kernels in the following manner:

In one hand he holds his sixteen palm-kernels, and with great rapidity brings the hand which holds them into the palm of the other one, leaving either one or two seeds for an instant before they are once more picked up and the process is repeated. As soon as he has glimpsed one or two kernels in his left hand, the right, with the palm-kernels, closes down upon it and the two clasp the seeds. The index and the second fingers of the right hand are, however, left free, and with these he describes marks in the white powder on the board in front of him.

(Herskovitz 1967: 210)

The result is a set of sixteen combinations of lines, each of which is associated with a vodú or group of vodú. The lines are interpreted along with a person's individual configuration of eight marks that serve as a life reading. Thus there are 240 major combinations of lines and the possibility for more permutations. After reading the signs the *bokónô* recites stories associated with the lines and sends the client to find various articles related to the prognosis. These will serve as the basis for a sacrificial offering and ritual healing. The articles may include such things as small stones, snakeskin, pieces of wood and chickens. African wisdom diviners sometimes provide quarters where people needing attention for physical or mental ills can come for healing. They even exert a calming influence on the vodú themselves.

## TRANSMISSION: THE LION KING STORY

In expressive traditions the history of a people generally is transmitted through stories. Griots are the oral historians in the African Republic of Mali who pass on the history associated with different social groupings including families, villages and clans. The griots play a key role in shaping the identity of their people. A key story that griots have told for some four hundred years is about Sundiata, the founding hero of the [Mali Empire](#) (ca. 1240-1500). The story of Sundiata reinforces the Muslim identity of the people of Mali by speaking of Sundiata as a descendent of Bilal, the son of an Ethiopian slave. Bilāl was the first black African whose heart was moved by the Qur'ānic message delivered by Prophet Muḥammad in Arabia in the early 600s CE. The griots say that Mali is linked to the Keita clan, which traces back to Bilāl.

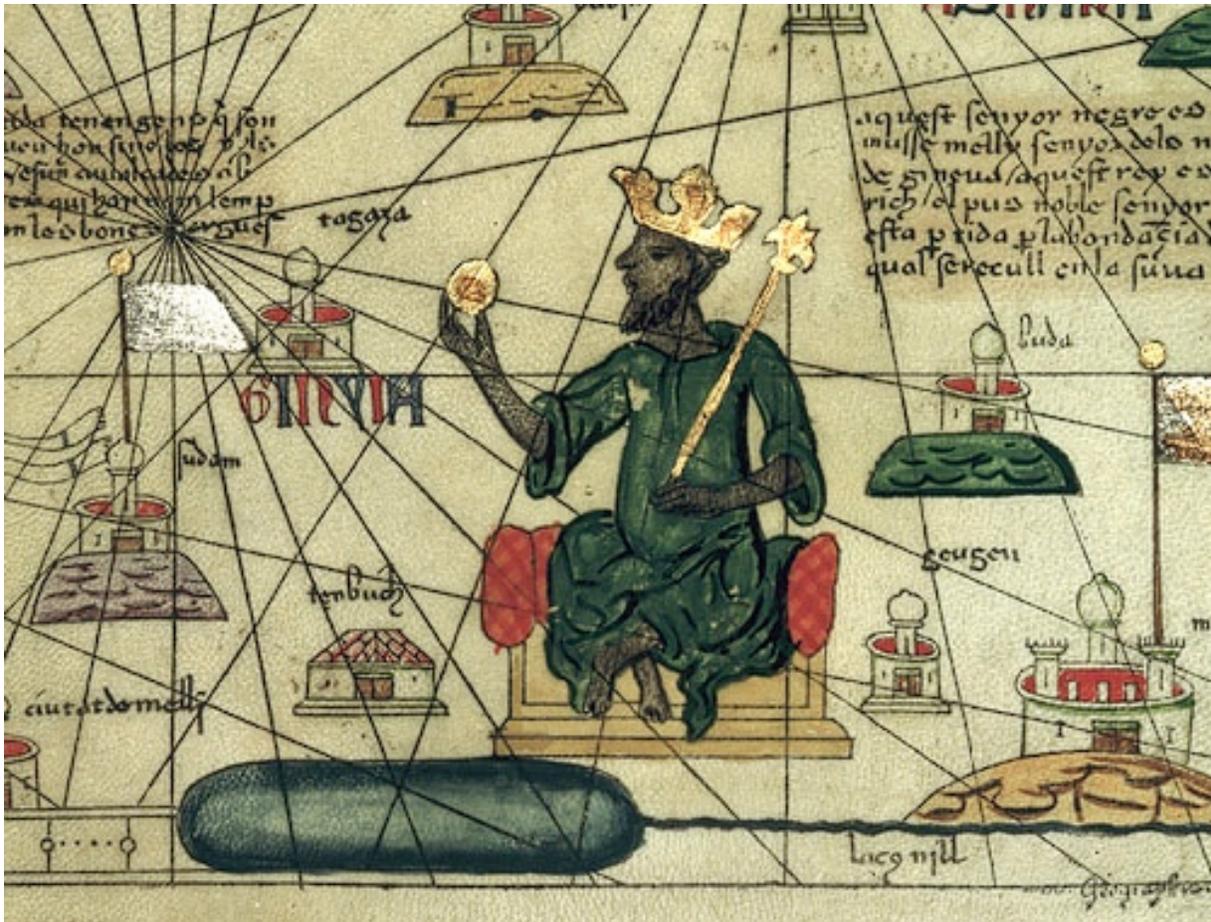


Plate 2.12 “Mansa Musa, ruler of the Mali Empire.” [\[Click here\]](#) to see a sculpture that was created around 1300 CE while Mali was at the height of its power -- about 200 years before the start of the modern age of exploration. The Mali Empire (*ca.* 1240-1500) covered territory close to the size of Western Europe, and Timbuktu became a key center for the study of Muslim law through the efforts of Mansa Musa (who ruled from 1312-1332). Today the Republic of Mali is among the poorest of countries. Most of its people farm without agricultural machinery and produce just enough to feed their families. Yet here we see Mansa Musa depicted at a time when Mali was the source of nearly half the gold known in the Old World. Gold was so plentiful that gold dust was the currency, and trade with gold nuggets was illegal. France gained control of Mali in 1895, and the country gained independence in 1960.

He had a voice so rich that the Prophet asked him to offer the Muslim calls to prayer. Thus he forever has the distinction of being the first muezzin. Tradition states that Bilāl had seven sons -- and the one named Lowalo left Mecca in Arabia to settle in Mali. Tradition states that just prior to the founding of the Mali Empire there were sixteen African leaders descended from Bilāl (Thobhani 1998: 5). Here follows the story of Sundiata in whose veins ran the blood of Bilāl’s lineage.

There was once a king of the Keita clan named Nare Maghan, who had several sons and daughters. One day a hunter from Do (a neighboring region) came to

offer the king meat from an antelope he had killed in the king's domain. The hunter was invited to remain in the capital for some days -- and in the course of conversation he told the king many things about Sumanguru, a neighboring ruler. This Sumanguru had obtained power through the mantic arts. He kept human skulls, sat on a carpet of human skin and used body parts from his enemies for black magic. The hunter said that Sumanguru was planning to extend his territory and thus would threaten the domain of the Keita clan. But after telling all these things, the hunter uttered a prophecy that gave Nare Maghan confidence. The hunter gave the following information: (1) Nare Maghan's successor was not among his living sons, but was yet to be born. (2) A hunchbacked young woman with bulging eyes from the kingdom of Do would come to visit with two young men who appeared to be hunters. (3) The king should marry her. (4) Their son would begin a great dynasty and make the Manlinke name live forever. (5) The king should sacrifice a red bull so that all this might come to pass.

The hunters of Do were renown for their ability to predict the future by reading the patterns shown by cowrie shells thrown on a mat. Thus Nare Maghan believed in the prophecy and made the appropriate sacrifice. Several years passed before a young hunchback named Sogolon Kedjou arrived in the capital. Two hunters brought her as a gift to Nara Maghan, informing him of an old woman's prediction that the ruler of Do's ugly daughter would become the mother of a great king. They had chosen her (among the ruler of Do's daughters) as a prize for killing a terrible buffalo. Nare Maghan took the girl as his second wife. Soon she had a son -- and because Nare Maghan's guardian animal was the lion he named the child Mari Diata, which meant "Lion King." (The boy later was called Sundiata.) The king's first wife was resentful and cruel to both the hunchbacked Sogolon and little Lion King who was still crawling at the age of seven because his legs were so weak. She mocked the boy for his bulging eyes, large head and crippled state. When it came time to appoint a successor, Nare Maghan chose Dankara Touman, the son of his first wife. But it so happened that after his father died the little Lion King gradually was able to stand on two legs. He began to excel at hunting and quickly learn all the Keita traditions about plants and animals. Fearing that Mari Diata (Lion King) would take power from her son, Dankara Touman's mother plotted to kill the boy. Thus the hunchbacked Sogolon Kedjou escaped from the royal capital with her family in search of safe haven. They finally settled at the court of Moussa Tounkara in a country north of Mali. The ruler adopted the Lion King as his own son and

educated him in the ways of a chief. After much adventure Mari Diata defeated Sumanguru in a bloody battle and became the first king of the Mali Empire.

The story of Sundiata is a culturally rich oral text preserves elements of Mali's culture and history. As always, stories like the one about the founder of the Mali Empire by the Lion King are a challenge to interpret because they mix legend and history.

## BETWEEN OLD AND NEW

Table 2.2 Where are they now?

Group / Person	Current situation
Trobian Islanders (Boyowans)	They famously adapted the British game of “cricket” to their own style. The tropical rainforest region is in need of conservation. There are 4 main islands: Kiriwina, Kaileuna, Vakuta and Kitava. Ceremonial gardening is still practiced.
Aboriginal peoples	These were many different groups that went through <a href="#">massive de-population</a> through disease and shootings in the 1800s. In 1788 the British start settling. In the 1940s almost all were missionized and assimilated; still face much discrimination.
Maori	There is pride in <a href="#">traditional culture</a> . Some people are undergoing <i>ta moko</i> (traditional tattooing) and have interest in woodcarving; Maori are pursuing land rights legislation with hundreds of claims going back to 1840.
Sioux (Dakota)	They are a <a href="#">confederation</a> of seven tribes that live mainly on reservations in Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana. They perform the Sun Dance and other rites. In 2002 they took steps to save the Lakota language.
Navajo (Diné)	This is the largest group of Native Americans in the USA with 17.5 million acres (beneath which is tons of uranium, coal, oil and gas.) The <a href="#">Navajo</a> language and traditions are active, and they are expanding territory due to growth.
Octavio Paz (1918-1998)	This Mexican writer, poet and diplomat received the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature. The <i>Labyrinth of Solitude</i> (1950) explored the Mexican identity. Paz studied Marxism, but was disaffected with it. Leftist Mexicans criticize him.

Candomblé	This has been called a “syncretic” religion with Yoruba and Roman Catholic components. Presently some practitioners are removing trying to go back to the African roots and remove Christian influences. The membership is growing.
Malidoma Somé (born 1956)	Somé teaches western people about his tribal rituals and makes necessary adaptations. The official language of Burkino Faso (Somé’s country) is French. Religion is 40 percent indigenous, 50 percent Muslim, 10 percent Christian.*
Fon peoples	The Fon lived in Dahomey, now Benin. In 1892 the French conquered the Dahomean kingdom. In 1960 the country won independence. Religion is 50 percent indigenous, 30 percent Christian and 20 percent Muslim.* Belief in Fá divination is widespread.
Mali storytellers	Traditionally the Sundiata story was recited in marketplaces. French is the official language. Religion is about 90 percent Muslim, 9 percent indigenous, and 1 percent Christian.*

---

\* Figures from *CIA World Factbook*.



Plate 2.13 “Octavio Paz.” Not everyone agrees with Octavio Paz’s interpretation of the nature of Mexican identity as presented in his *Labyrinth of Solitude*. How would you begin to critique Paz’s views?

Modern Western culture has had a penetrating (and often devastating) influence on indigenous traditions of Oceania, Africa and America. Yet it would be a mistake to think that any culture is purely “indigenous.” Human beings are creative agents of culture. They do not rest -- and their stories are filled with dynamic moments of culture contact due to migrations, business with neighboring peoples, encounters with foreign powers and even worldwide electronic communications. Nigerian poet [Wole Soyinka](#) (b. 1934), winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature noted, “There is a charge often raised against African poets, that of aping other models, particularly the European” (Soyinka 1975: 14). In defense he said, “I believe that society at all times is perpetually fluctuating and I don’t think that any society at any given time has ever been without the old and the new” (Jeyifo 2001: 71). Each of the indigenous peoples treated in this chapter continues to grow and change. Some have lost many traditions, while others are reviving traditions.

Colonization of Oceania, America and Africa by the Europeans had a devastating effect on all indigenous traditions from all three cultural areas. The European encounters resulted in a disproportionate loss of non-European life in the early modern period due to starvation, disease, forced relocation, enslavement and armed conflict. Beyond enduring such tragedies, the indigenous peoples of Oceania, America and Africa were subject to heavy-handed (though sometimes “good willed”) Christian missionizing. As a result of religious conversions and intentional cultural destruction, a great portion of their expressive heritage was lost. In return Christian converts gained education, social welfare and (arguably) other benefits. However ironic it may be, the early modern spread of English, French or Spanish languages into European colonies now serves to link indigenous peoples with one another and with the rest of the post-colonial world. Ever new opportunities for communication may prove to be a “silver lining” of in the cloud of past tragedies.

---

## Key Points

- Starting around 1500 CE for about 400 years the traditions of indigenous peoples around the globe were deeply impacted by European colonialism. Nowadays many native peoples of Oceania, America and Africa wish to reclaim portions of their heritage that were disrupted through economic, religious and political domination.
- The ten elements of performance play a pervasive role in the creation of religious and social meaning in expressive traditions. Thus the religious practices of small-scale oral traditions can be understood through a look at their use of lived time, lived place and lived objects as well as the seven expressive functions of donation, restoration, enactment, symbolization, transformation, accession and transmission.

- Oceania is home to many indigenous peoples each with local religious variants. Among the religious practices in this cultural area are: ceremonial gardening on the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea, *ta moko* (now stirring new interest), and wood carving among the Maori of New Zealand and mythmaking about Eternal Beings of the Dreaming among the Aboriginal peoples of Australia.
- Although Native Americans peoples were relocated to reservations by the United States government in the 1800s, many are resurrecting or strengthening aspects of their traditional religions. Among practices that survived their political defeat are the Sioux Sun Dance and Navajo sandpainting.
- Sometimes even seemingly small historical events create a huge psychological and cultural impact on a people. Octavio Paz sees La Malinche (mother of the “first” mestizo) who was abandoned by Hernán Cortés as a decisive figure in the formation of the modern Mexican identity.
- Indigenous Yoruba-based traditions from West Africa impacted neighboring Africans such as the Fon of Benin as well as New World cultures in Brazil, the Caribbean and elsewhere. Candomblé, for example, resulted from the transatlantic slave trade (which affected mostly West Africans).
- Some indigenous cultural elements are finding their way into non-indigenous populations. Examples are non-African Brazilians involved in orisha worship, North Americans fascinated with Native American rituals, and even Disney borrowing stories from Mali and elsewhere.

## Additional Online Material

[Study questions](#)

[Discussion questions](#)

[Comprehensive glossary of terms](#)

## Glossary of Terms in This Chapter

[Jump to glossary](#)

aboriginal

Black Elk

Cortés, Martín

divination

*babalawô*

Candomblé

Cuauhtémoc

DRESTAT functions

Eternal Beings of the Dreaming	Mali	People	ten elements of performance
Fá	mantic	Somé, Malidoma	three aspects of meaning
griot	mestizo	Soyinka, Wole	<i>towosi</i>
hogan	Moctezuma	Sun Dance	trickster
homology	moko	symbol	vodú
Ifá	native	syncretism	Wakan-Tanka
indigenous peoples	orisha	tapu	Wounded Knee
La Chingada	Orisha Child	<i>taytu</i>	Creek
	Paz, Octavio		

## Key Reading

Best, Elsdon (1924, 1977) *Maori Religion and Mythology*, Wellington, N.Z.: W. A. G. Skinner, Government Printer.

Carybé, Jorge Amado (1993) *Os Deuses Africanos no Canbomblé da Bahia - African Gods in the Candomblé of Bahia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Salvador: Bigraf.

Hultkrantz, Ake (1981) *Belief and Worship in Native North America*, edited by Christopher Vecsey, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Malinowski, Bronislaw (1935; 1966) *Coral Gardens and Their Magic: Soil-tilling and the Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands*, vol. 1, 2d ed., introduced by Edmund R. Leach, London: George Allen & Unwin.

Warlukurlangu Artists (1987) *Kuruwarri: Yuendumu Doors*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.