

The Transcendent in Indigenous Religions

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

There have been estimates that since the beginning of human life on the planet, there have been more than 100,000 religions. Most of these, as a part of preliterate cultures, have come and gone, but many of them have had a great impact on the major religions of the world. Since indigenous religions preceded Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, et cetera, they are called primal religions. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Origins](#)
2. [Native Alaskans](#)
3. [Indigenous People in Australia](#)
4. [The Maasai](#)
5. [The Lakota/Dakota](#)

1. Origins

Indigenous religions consider the physical world and the physical environment to be closely linked if not identical with origin and the source of all life. The Western term that describes this is **pantheism**. It refers to the belief that God or divinity is spread throughout creation. In this sense, the transcendent is always present.



TERM TO KNOW

Pantheism

The belief that God and/or divinity is spread throughout creation.

2. Native Alaskans

The different Native Alaskan tribes are an example of how indigenous peoples identify with the particular region where they live. Their access and communication with the sacred and transcendent realm are usually associated with the animals and the natural structures of that region.

IN CONTEXT

A story from the Inupiat People, one of the native tribes from northern Alaska:

Once there was a poor hunter. He always went out but never got anything. Finally one day, he saw a polar bear. As he crawled toward it over the ice, the bear said to him, “Don’t shoot me. If you follow me and do what I say, I will make it so you will always be able to get whatever animals you think about.” The bear told the man to climb on his back and close his eyes.

“Do not open them until I tell you to,” the bear said. Then the man and the bear went down into the sea a long way.

“Do not open your eyes,” the bear reminded him.

Finally, they came back up and the bear told the man to open his eyes. The man saw an igloo along the edge of the ice pack. When inside, the man saw another bear with a spear in his haunch. The first bear said, “If you can take that spear out of the bear and make him well, you will become a good hunter.”

The man broke off the shaft and eased the spear point out of the bear’s haunch; the wound began to heal. Then, the first bear took off his bear skin parka and became a man.

After the wound was healed completely, the bear man put back on his bear skin parka, told the poor hunter to climb on his back and close his eyes, and together they went back into the sea. When the bear finally stopped, he asked the man to open his eyes. Looking around, the man realized he had been returned to the spot from which he began his journey. He thought he had only been gone a day. But on arriving home, he found that he had been away a month. And from then on, the man was always a good hunter.

This story demonstrates the deep respect and reverence for nature that is characteristic of the primal religions. Life is lived in balance and harmony with the natural world and all its processes.

In the story of the polar bear, the polar bear is experienced as a spiritual being. This applies to all animals; plants, including trees; bodies of water and water itself in all its forms; landforms, such as mountains, hills, and desert buttes; and even rocks and rock structures. They are all understood to contain a spiritual essence.

This practice and belief structure is called **animism**. Nature, animals, water, and all-natural cycles constitute the idea of a place for the primal people and for the primal religions.

There’s no separation between spirit, land, and the people that inhabit the land. Through nature, daily life, and the daily world is imparted with the transcendent.



TERM TO KNOW

Animism

The belief that all living things (and sometimes physical objects) have a soul ("anima").

3. Indigenous People in Australia

Before Australia was colonized, many indigenous tribes were associated with different parts of the country. Each tribe had its own creation story that was specific to the land they inhabited.

The transcendent for the native people of Australia is called *the dreaming* or *the dream time*. It is the vital transcendent realm that inhabits all life, and it tells of how their people arrived on the land and provides guidance on how to live on and with the land. This eternal realm is present for the native Australian cultures in the surrounding life forms: tribal members, trees, the wind, animals, rocks, et cetera.

4. The Maasai

In Kenya, the Maasai are a monotheistic culture; they are a traditional people who call their god *Ngai*, which also means sky. In the beginning, earth and sky were one, but they were separated, and the work of Maasai spiritual guides and elders is to help bridge this gap and reintegrate the transcendent realm into daily life.

One way of doing this is to divine or transmit the mind and the intentions of God to people by reading stones that are thrown from a cow's horn. Nevertheless, in the Maasai culture, as in all indigenous religions, God is nature and is expressed in all-natural phenomena. The Western term for this that we mentioned is pantheism.

5. The Lakota/Dakota

This is a picture of an ancient tradition among many Native American tribes, including the Lakota/Dakota people historically known as "Sioux." It's called the sun dance:



Painting of Sun ceremony by unknown Lakota artist, 1895

On the summer solstice, they would gather (and still do, in some cases) to seek protection, request healing, and offer thanks to the creator, Great Spirit or **Wakan Tanka**.

Other terms that are associated with Wakan Tanka are “The Divine” and “The Sacred.” Wakan Tanka—the Great Spirit—is fully a part of the natural world, the land, and the people of the land.



TERM TO KNOW

Wakan Tanka

In the language of the Native American Lakota tribe, “the divine”—only rendered in English as “The Great Spirit”.



SUMMARY

Although most indigenous religions have been lost to history, they had major influence on modern religions. These religions have many things in common, including the belief that **origins** of their people are closely linked to the origins of all life. The transcendent in indigenous religions is related to nature, animals, plants, rock structures, natural cycles, et cetera. This is referred to as Animism. Many indigenous religions have a very intimate relationship with their immediate surroundings, and that is

imparted with the transcendent and the sacred. Pantheism is applied to primal cultures in the sense that they consider everything to be sacred and a part of the transcendent realm. This lesson looked at several examples of indigenous religions, such as a story of a **native Alaskan** tribe that shows their connection to the bear, the belief of transcendence or *dreamtime* for the **indigenous people of Australia**, the mysticism of **the Masaai** people in Kenya, and the sundance ceremony of the **Lakota/Dakota** people in North America.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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