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## Unit 2

# Indigenous Religious Ethics

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## Introduction

The subject of indigenous religious ethics is a vast one. We cannot possibly do justice to it in this unit. While in every unit of this course we face the dilemma of trying to condense highly complex and variable traditions into introductory and outline form, this unit presents a particularly daunting challenge: that of condensing a great many traditions, each one different from the others and complex in its own right, under a single label, “indigenous religions.” It has been relatively recent that scholars have begun to include indigenous traditions in textbooks and course manuals that discuss the world’s “great religions.” While we do not wish to omit these traditions from our consideration in this course, we must acknowledge that our discussion of indigenous traditions is not comprehensive. The goal of this unit is to introduce you to the study of indigenous religious ethics. The unit will follow your textbook, *The World’s Religions*, in taking the African Yoruba and North American Oglala Lakota Sioux as case studies.



Masai Man.

Photo by Angela Sevin.

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## Timeline

200,000 BCE	Homo sapiens appear in Africa
30,000 BCE	Migration of Aborigines from Asia to Australia
22,000 BCE	Potential date for migration of Native Americans across the Bering Strait from Asia

1200–400 BCE	Olmec civilization in Mesoamerica
1 <sup>st</sup> c. CE	Bantu people start migration to central and southern Africa
250–900 CE	Classic Maya civilization in Meso-America
616 CE	First Muslims arrive in Ethiopia
800–1100 CE	Viking settlements bring Norse religion to Northern Europe
12 <sup>th</sup> c. CE	Benin civilization in Nigeria
1100–1400 CE	Empire of Mali in West Africa
1325–1521 CE	Aztec Empire in Meso-America
1444 CE	Portuguese begin exploring sub-Saharan Africa
1492 CE	European colonialists invade indigenous cultures in the Americas
1531 CE	Inca Empire in South America

1550 CE	Slave trade introduces African religions into the Americas
1880 CE	US congress bans the Sun Dance
1889 CE	Wovoka revives the Ghost Dance
1890 CE	More than 300 Ghost Dancers killed at Wounded Knee, South Dakota

Following the unit structure, we will explore:

- indigenous religions and peoples
- the sources for indigenous religious ethics
- indigenous ethics: the African Yoruba tradition
- indigenous ethics: the Oglala Lakota tradition
- analysis of indigenous ethics: conduct, principles, foundation
- indigenous understanding of “virtue” and “the good”
- moral self and moral community

## Learning objectives

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

1. outline the historical cultural context out of which our understanding of indigenous religions emerged;
2. identify some of the main similarities among the world’s indigenous traditions, while noting their differences;
3. explain the sources for indigenous religious ethics with particular emphasis on the Yoruba and Oglala Lakota Sioux traditions;
4. analyze indigenous ethics on the levels of conduct, principles, and foundation;
5. suggest what are some indigenous virtues; and
6. suggest what indigenous traditions define as the moral self and the moral community.

## Assigned reading/viewing/listening

### Required readings

Read the following:

- *The World’s Religions*: chapter 2, Indigenous Religions

## How to proceed

- Step 1** Read through the entire unit to gain a sense of it as a whole.
- Step 2** Skim **chapter 2** in *The World's Religions*. Although this chapter is selective, considering only two indigenous traditions, it does introduce the ethical teachings and the concept of studying the indigenous ethics of these traditions.
- Step 3** Work through the unit carefully, one section at a time. Write notes in the margins or highlight what you think is important. As you work through each section, read the assigned page(s) in Young.
- Note that your Van Voorst text does not consider indigenous traditions.
- Step 4** As you work through the unit, complete the various **exercises**. They help you measure your comprehension of the material you have just read. They also promote the development of critical thinking skills.
- Step 5** Access the **discussion** area, and either begin a discussion or join a discussion in progress. In this unit, discussion may be particularly interesting and important.
- Test your knowledge of the terms listed in the **glossary**.
- Take note of the **additional readings** that are listed at the end of the unit.

## Instructional content

### Indigenous religions and peoples

In the context of world religions, the word “indigenous” can mean several things, “pertaining naturally to a region,” “original,” “pre-colonial,” and even “oral.” For example, North American indigenous traditions—and there are a great many of these—are oral traditions that flourished in various regions of the continent prior to the arrival of Europeans. Invariably, with the term “indigenous,” we are talking about traditions that are very old. For a long time such traditions were not counted among the “great religions” to be studied in university courses such as this one. Although, in the process of studying a tradition, such as Hinduism or Shinto, account was usually taken of the indigenous or “folk” traditions out of which the “great” tradition eventually emerged. Indigenous religions can be traced to all areas of the world.

Indigenous religions cannot be thought of as static entities. Each has its own history and each changed as time went on. In an introductory course, we can only provide a “snapshot” that captures specific moments in time of a particular indigenous tradition’s history. It is a good idea to begin, then, by stating our goal as that

of “introducing problems” associated with studying indigenous religious ethics.

Note, from the above reading, that your textbook outlines several of these problems: 1) The word “religion” is a Western term that does not belong to indigenous traditions and that often implies a separation between the sphere of “religion” and that of “non-religion,” a separation indigenous traditions do not admit. 2) Indigenous traditions have been referred to by some as “primitive,” implying that they are less developed or sophisticated than traditions that developed afterward, although this is not the case. 3) Other terms that have been used with reference to indigenous traditions, and that also suggest a bias, are “preliterate,” “nonliterate,” and “prehistoric.” 4) The terminology of “primal,” “tribal,” or “native” is not appropriate either as generally descriptive of indigenous peoples and traditions. 5) As we have noted, it is inappropriate to treat all indigenous traditions as if they formed one “group,” since each tradition is unique.



### Read

*The World's Religions*: chapter 2, “An Orientation to Indigenous Peoples and Their Religions.

Despite these difficulties, your textbook attempts to discuss “the worldview” that is shared by indigenous religions. Note that, with reference to indigenous traditions, your textbook uses the word “religion” in a very broad sense. Before we proceed to a discussion of the ethical teachings of two indigenous traditions, read the above selection in your text carefully.



### Exercise

With specific reference to the above reading, “The Traditional Worldview of Indigenous Peoples,” write out an analysis of the extent to which, in your opinion, the reading succeeds in avoiding the problem of treating all indigenous traditions as a homogenous group. Does the reading allow for differences among indigenous traditions?

Develop your analysis in two paragraphs of about ten sentences each. Remember to make specific references to the reading in your response.

## What are the sources for indigenous religious ethics?

Determining sources for indigenous religious ethics is somewhat different from other traditions, where scholars rely heavily on sacred texts as a starting point for ethical behaviour. That being said, there are many “indigenous” traditions that today have written accounts of sacred deities, events, and rituals, recorded in recent times as it was passed down through oral tradition. As your textbook points out, there is a vast oral collection of Yoruba poetry and prose, organized into collections called the *odu*, through which knowledge of the Yoruba way of harmony is passed from generation to generation.

Similarly, and still in use today, is the *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan book of the dawn of life and the glories of the gods and kings. Denis Tedlock, the English translator, dates the Spanish version somewhere between 1554 and 1558, during the time of the conquistadors. At that time, the Quiché version of the text (the Mayans did have a written language) only existed in fragments, and so the original translators used an oral recitation. Explaining some of the nuances of the *Popol Vuh*, Tedlock writes:

We tend to think of myth and history as being in conflict with one another, but the authors of the [...] *Popol Vuh* treated the mythic and historical parts of their narratives as belonging to a single, balanced whole. [...] To this day, the Quiché Maya think of dualities in general as complementary rather than as opposed, interpenetrating rather than mutually exclusive. (1985, 63)

Whether the stories of indigenous peoples were found in recorded texts or persisted through oral tradition, the numerous indigenous traditions that we find throughout the world remain indebted to the formative impressions and experiences of their ancient ancestors, who set the foundations for how to relate to others and to the natural world as a whole.

As anthropologists have long-noted, a *biocentric* worldview that recognizes all living beings (and often inanimate objects, such as rocks and mountains) as part of one big spiritual family is common to most indigenous traditions. While it is important not to assume the various traditions are the same, it is generally recognized that most of the traditions that we refer to as indigenous, shared a sense of reverence and respect for the natural world on which they are so dependant. This reverence was often expressed through worship of animal deities, who were alternately feared, coveted, and adored. Oral myths and legends that evolved in the ancient period, and continue to evolve to this day, were imbued with this sense of dependency on the natural world and stressed equilibrium with all life as a goal of primary importance. As Young notes in your text, the Hopi people of the American Southwest use the term *koyaanisqatsi*, meaning “life out of balance,” to indicate the fundamental problem of humanity. The restoration of this balance can be seen as one of the main, overarching ethical goals of indigenous spirituality. \*It should be noted that *Koyaanisqatsi*, is also the name of a film by American director Francis Ford Coppola, which explores the theme of “life out of balance” in the modern industrial world.

Also common to indigenous religions is a non-linear or cyclical conception of time. In reference to the Australian Aborigines, nineteenth-century anthropologists termed this idea “dream time,” which conveyed a sense of unbroken connection with the sacred past. Certain practices, such as the recitation of a myth or the experience of the hunt, are not seen as symbolic but as embodiments of sacred history being relived over and over again in the present. In this way, relations among people, animals, and nature are infused with a sacred dimension that is not diminished through the progress of time, thus retaining in the mind of the community a very personal and subjective connection with the entire living world. One common example of this can be seen with the consumption of meat, where the animal being eaten is perceived as part of a cosmic chain linking all of reality to a single spirit. Western interpreters have often labeled this notion *animism*, Latin for “spirit” or “soul.”





## Terminology Exercise

**Directions:** Using your text, *The World's Religions*, write out the definitions for:

- biocentric worldview
- koyaanisqatsi
- “dream time”
- animism

## Indigenous ethics: The African Yoruba tradition



### Read

*The World's Religions*, chapter 2, “The Yoruba of West Africa (Introduction)”

Serious consideration of African traditions within the scholarly field of religious studies is relatively recent. One of the initial tasks of such scholarship is that of dispelling the many distorted impressions that have resulted from a lack of understanding and misrepresentation of these traditions. Your textbook makes a start on this task by way of considering the Yoruba tradition of West Africa.

There are “new world” Yoruba traditions and cultures, some of which were brought out of Africa by the slaves, but the majority of the world’s fifteen million Yoruba live in West Africa, in the southwestern region of Nigeria. The tradition is very old, probably dating to about the fifth century BCE. Before the end of the first millennium, the tradition had developed a complex urban society, and it has been a highly organized urban tradition ever since.



## Read

*The World's Religions*, chapter 2, “Yoruba Religion: Harmony with the Orisa”

As noted in Young, the *orisa* are seen as projections of the power of the Supreme God *Olorun Olodumare*, whose name means “owner of the sky.” According to common legends, there are some 401 *orisa*, all of whom were at one time human beings and whose variety represents the diversity of needs amongst the Yoruba people. To understand the relationship between *Olodumare* and the *orisa*, one must consider the role that the supreme beings play in the lives of Yoruba communities. As Robert M Baum points out:

The Yoruba tradition suggests that Olodumare reigns but does not rule—just as the Yoruba kings are sacred symbols of the townships that they oversee but do not rule their city-states. Similarly, the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria have a saying—‘God is like a rich man, you approach him through his servants’—that suggests their supreme being is far removed from human beings and has created lesser spirits, divine servants, to handle specific types of problems. In both cases, the implication is that humans should avoid appealing to the supreme being except in matters of great importance or when appeals to lesser spirits have repeatedly failed. (2007, 19)

To further highlight this relationship, one might think of the Christian veneration of saints, though the analogy is far from perfect.

Some notable *orisa* are as follows: *Orisa-nla*, the one who forms babies in the womb; *Esu*, a trickster figure who deceives people into wrong actions and mediates between heaven and earth; and *Ogun*, the god of war and iron, who represents both creation and destruction.

The *orisa* each have a distinct personality, a specific set of duties, and expect certain behaviours from their followers. For this reason, the requirements of particular ethical practices can vary depending on which *orisa* are worshiped at a given time. The goddess *Shopona*, for example, who was traditionally associated with smallpox and, in modern times, with HIV-AIDS, requires a standard of cleanliness, along with an awareness of the risks of sexual behaviour.

As pointed out in your text, the *olori ebi*, or head of the family are responsible for the maintenance of the proper rituals, just as chiefs are responsible for the conduct of rituals in cities or towns. Large rituals are performed during festivals such as the *Gelede* festival at the dawn of spring in honour of the earth “mothers.” During this time, women elders and ancestors are paid respect for their creative powers and their role in the community. Ethical behaviour within the community is therefore entwined with their relations with elders, both living and deceased.

Rites of passage are also important in the Yoruba tradition, and healers are called upon to foretell a newborns’ destiny, to give medicines, and to tell their family what taboos they are to observe. It should be noted that the practice of taboos is highly variable, even within a particular tradition. While taboos don’t carry as much

significance today as they did during the formative period, their observance can have great effects on the character of ethical behaviour. Consider, for example, the following taboo amongst the Maori of New Zealand:

One of the ways in which differences in personal status were expressed behaviourally was in terms of relative height: physically high as opposed to physically low positions were regarded as equivalent to, or as metaphors for, high against low social status. [...] Thus it was strictly forbidden for a woman or girl to step over a man while he was lying down, or to step over a man's extended legs while he was sitting. To do so, it was believed, would be belittling or insulting to the man. (Bowden 1984, 90)

As with other indigenous traditions, the practice of taboos and the observance of rituals are seen to contribute to harmony with the natural order.



### Exercise

Answer the following questions:

1. What is the role of the orisa in the Yoruba religion? How does reverence for the orisa pertain to ethical behaviour?
2. How are taboos rendered in indigenous traditions? In what ways might they shape ethics within a community?

## Indigenous ethics: The Oglala Lakota tradition

As with African traditions, virtually all of our early information about the history, customs, and rituals of the indigenous peoples of the Americas came from European sources, whose influence and bias still persists to this day. Early relations with the peoples of the Americas were varied, sometimes hostile, and sometimes peaceable, depending on the context or situation. As European settlers began to colonize the “new world,” however, and establish forms of government, their relations with indigenous peoples grew more and more tense, as disputes over land came to heighten cultural and religious differences, thus breaking the fragile truce that had (in certain cases) existed between them. As is often the case throughout history, the more powerful and technologically advanced side became the ultimate victor.



### Read

*The World's Religions*: chapter 2, “The Oglala Lakota (Sioux) of the Great Plains of North America (Introduction),” and “A Brief History of the Oglala Lakota”

The Oglala Lakota (Sioux) were no exception to this historical pattern and suffered terrible losses after what appeared for a time to be a partial victory. As noted in Young, after several battles with the US government known as the “Indian Wars,” the Lokota were able to force the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, where they were ceded the Black Hills as their undisputed land. When gold was discovered in the Black Hills in 1874, the treaty was broken, and the Sioux were forced onto the Pine Ridge Reservation beginning in 1878. Since that time there have been various attempts to annihilate Lokota culture, such as forcing their children into Christian schools and the outlawing of the Lokota language. It has only been in recent decades that Lokota communities have been able to pick up the pieces and resume some semblance (however partial) of their former way of life.



**Read**

*The World's Religions*: chapter 2, “Oglala Lakota Religion: The Way of the Sacred Pipe”

As with our discussion in the first section of this chapter, and as we have seen with the Yoruba, the Lokota worldview is tied to with the fate of the natural world. As noted in Young, the Lakota creation myth speaks of a people living in harmony with the buffalo that inhabited the plains east of the Black Hills. When the Lakota start to forget who they are, either through dispossession or spiritual malaise, they begin to suffer. A typical Oglala prayer to Mother Earth brings this point to bear:

O you, Grandmother, from whom all earthly things come, and O You, Mother Earth, who bear and nourish all fruits, behold us and listen: Upon you there is a sacred path which we walk, thinking of the sacredness of all things. (Young 2013, 44)

Among the Lakota, there seems to be a central deity known as *Wakan Tanka*, who is said to represent sixteen powers and embody the entirety of existence. *Wakan's* presence, however, is not limited to the gods but is manifest in all of nature, from birds to buffalo, to the smallest creatures in the sky, sea, and land. All creatures are said to possess a *wochangi* or “sacred influence.” It is therefore imperative that humans be aware of this influence so that they might receive these powers from other beings.

An important ritual in Oglala culture is the *Giveaway Ceremony*, which is symbolic of renewal and thanksgiving, and is said to help prevent the concentration of wealth in any one family. During this ritual,

people are to give away their most valued possessions to others, as is described by Fools Crow in your text:

We [...] invited the poorest people in our district. Of our 183 horses, we gave away nearly half. We had 42 cows, and gave half of them away. We gave away half of all of our poultry. We gave away our clothing [...] all we kept of our furniture was the kitchen stove and the cooking utensils. (Young 2010, 42)

As with many other indigenous traditions, ethical ideals stress little distinction between self and community, and thus seek to embody the maxim that when one suffers all suffer.



## Exercise

Answer the following questions:

1. Briefly discuss how European colonialism has impacted the Oglala Lakota Sioux.
2. Discuss how the Giveaway Ceremony constitutes ethical behaviour in relation to the indigenous worldview.

## Analysis of indigenous ethics: Conduct, principles, foundation

### Yoruba

**Conduct:** as we have already discussed, proper conduct amongst indigenous peoples is intimately linked to their relationship with the natural world. Any sort of behaviour that is incongruent with this principle will contribute to what the Hopi's termed *koyaanisqatsi* or "life out of balance." In the Yoruba tradition, the *orisa* act as a kind of intermediary between human beings and the created order. As we have seen, the emphasis on particular ethical practices can vary depending which *orisa* are worshiped at any given time. In the case of *Ogun*, for example, the god of war and iron, certain behaviours are required in the realm of justice. As noted in your text, in court, traditional Yoruba will swear to tell the truth by kissing a piece of iron in the name of *Ogun*. In modern times, *Ogun* has become associated with the protection of metal workers, car mechanics, and chauffeurs.

**Principles:** As discussed in Young, the *olori ebi*, or head of the family are responsible for the maintenance of the proper rituals, just as chiefs are responsible for the conduct of rituals in cities or towns. Large rituals are performed during festivals, such as the *Geledefestival* at the dawn of spring in honour of the earth "mothers." During this time, women elders and ancestors are paid particular respect for their creative powers and role in the community. Respect for one's elders is a common theme to be found in indigenous traditions the world over, with the Yoruba of West Africa being no exception.

**Worldview:** The Yoruba trickster, *Esu*, serves as a messenger god who is bound with the task of summoning the other *orisa* to attend major rituals. *Esu* delights in changing parts of messages, or forgetting them altogether, just to see what will happen. He loves to play tricks on humans and encourages impulsive behaviour and the disruption of social order. When Christian missionaries came to West Africa, it was not uncommon for them to associate *Esu* with Satan, perceiving in his mischief the machinations of some evil spirit. *Esu* is not understood as evil among the Yoruba, however, thus highlighting a major distinction between the Christian and indigenous worldview. For monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, good and evil are seen as locked in eternal conflict, leading scholars to dub their foundations as one of “conflict” dualism. Most indigenous traditions, by contrast, tend toward what is commonly termed “complementary” dualism, which sees the cosmos as a balance between good and evil impulses and seeks harmony by confronting and working through these tendencies as they exist in human beings and in the natural world more generally.

## Oglala Lakota

**Conduct:** As discussed in Young, conduct among the Oglala Lakota is intimately linked to their relationship with the natural order. Proper relations with and respect for other people, animals, and inanimate objects, is framed in terms of human *attentiveness* to the world around them so that they might receive the sacred influence (*wochangi*) of other beings. The giveaway ceremony, as we have discussed, is an important ritual for the Oglala, as it helps the poor and maintains social and economic balance within the community.

**Principles:** The circle symbolism of the sacred hoop is representative of the principle of *wochangi*, as it highlights the connections and interdependence of all living things. This interdependence is further highlighted in the architecture of the Oglala’s traditional home, the tipi. The tipi, as seen from above, is in the shape of a circle and symbolizes, both figuratively and literally, a living embodiment of spiritual unity.

**Worldview:** harmony with the natural world for the Oglala Lakota Sioux takes on a regional character in their relation to and reverence for the buffalo. With their homeland situated in and around the vase plains of the mid-Western United States, relations with the buffalo serve as a sort of gauge for living in harmony with the natural world. The decimation of the buffalo by European settlers was therefore seen not only as a loss of livelihood and a source of food, but as a loss and separation from, on a much deeper level, a part of themselves.

As with many other indigenous traditions, ethical ideals stress little distinction between self and community, and thus seek to embody the maxim that when one suffers all suffer.



### Exercise

After working carefully through the last section of the manual and the accompanying readings, define the following terms, indicating how each relates to ethics:

- Ogun
- Esu
- *Wochangi*
- Sacred hoop

## Indigenous understandings of “virtue” and “the good”

Virtue for indigenous communities can be summed up in the notion of balance, which is always already present for those who learn to be attentive. Error or “vice” is caused by forgetting one’s place in the created order, and ignoring one’s membership in a large, all-encompassing spiritual family. Since indigenous peoples in the Americas have been relegated to reservations (particularly in North America), it is often said that vices such as alcoholism have been part and parcel of their physical disconnection from Mother Earth.

## Moral self and moral community in indigenous religions

As noted in your text, “imbalance” in indigenous communities is expressed collectively, where the problem of one person becomes the problem of all. Indigenous concepts of justice often represent this ideal, focusing on restorative rather than punitive measures. In such cases, the offenders will be brought before the community to atone for their crimes. In addition to their punishment, which usually involves some reconciliation with the offended party, the community is also made to atone for allowing one of their own to be lead astray. In this way, justice is restored collectively and not just between the direct parties involved. It is thus understood that since the spiritual imbalance of an individual undermines the harmony of the whole, moral concerns must be dealt with collectively or not at all.

## Conclusion

This unit discusses indigenous traditions as ethical systems boasting an oral history dating back many thousands of years. The unit seeks to define “indigenous” religions as a recent “category” amongst scholars and proceeds with necessary caution, speaking in general rather than in concrete terms. The unit considers some general commonalities amongst indigenous traditions and looks specifically at two case studies, that of the Yoruba of West Africa and the Oglala Lokota (Sioux) of the mid-Western United States. The unit analyzes the ethical teachings of the Yoruba and the Oglala Lakota as conduct, principles, and worldview, which are the principles that underlie their conception of balance and harmony with the universe. We discuss what these and other traditions consider virtues and vices, as well as what constitutes the moral community.

## Glossary of terms

**Animism**—the notion that the entire cosmos is imbued with a spirit or soul

**Biocentric**—a worldview that encompasses all of nature as related, equal, one and the same

**Black Hills**—the land of the Oglala Lakota until it was stolen in 1874

**Esu**—a trickster in the Yoruba tradition whose mischievous actions embody the notion of “complementary dualism,” which is common to indigenous religions

**Giveaway Ceremony**—an Oglala Lakota tradition where members of the community give up their possessions to those in need

**Indigenous**—can mean any of the following: pertaining to a region, pre-colonial, original, and oral

**Koyaanisqatsi**—a Hopi term meaning “life out of balance”

**Ogun**—in the Yoruba tradition he is the god of iron and war

**Orisa**—in the Yoruba tradition, orisa are projections of the ultimate god and serve as intermediaries on earth

**Wochangi**—literally meaning “sacred influence,” wochangi refers to the powers and influence inherent in all living beings

## Additional readings

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